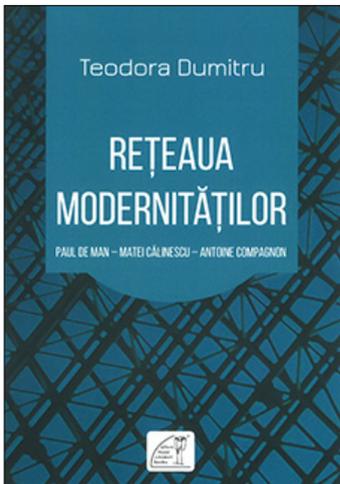


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The Restoration of the Dialectical Modernism

Review of: Teodora Dumitru, *Rețeaua modernităților: Paul de Man – Matei Călinescu – Antoine Compagnon* [*The Web of Modernities: Paul de Man – Matei Călinescu – Antoine Compagnon*], Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2016



In her study, *The Web of Modernities: Paul de Man – Matei Călinescu – Antoine Compagnon*, Teodora Dumitru assumes the theoretical challenge launched, but not fulfilled, by Matei Călinescu in *Faces of Modernity* (1977) and in *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987): namely conceptualizing Modernism by applying the “family resemblances” theory (“a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail”). Elaborated by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, this theory is interpreted by Teodora Dumitru as an anti-essentialist statement: “the ‘family resemblances’ metaphor proposes categorizing entities in a manner different from the essentialist model of genres and species, within which entities are defined by a common property (proximate genus) and by properties specific to each of them (specific differences). The association of entities on the basis of ‘family resemblances’ does not imply the existence of one or more common properties to all members of the family, but of similarities irreducible to a proximate genus”.

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This is the methodological approach that underpins Teodora Dumitru's research dedicated to what has globally become the most influential network of Modernism conceptualization: initiated by two essays (*Literary History and Literary Modernity*, respectively *Lyric and Modernity*) Paul de Man included in *Blindness and Insight* (1971), substantiated by Matei Călinescu's studies published at the end of the 20th century and having an epilogue in Antoine Compagnon's *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity* (1990) and *The Anti-Moderns from Joseph de Maistre to Roland Barthes* (2005).

Corroborating the reflections from the above-mentioned demanian essays, Teodora Dumitru identifies the origin of the definition of Modernity in its paradoxical coexistence/interdependence with time/history. In Paul de Man's view, literature, a creation of Modernity par excellence, is "inconceivable without" both "a passion for Modernity", and "a subtle resistance to this passion". "The anxious pendulation" of literature/Modernity between "dissociation and cohabitation" with historical time – which serves Paul de Man as the main argument for invalidating the relevance not only of historicist positivism, but also of formalism and structuralism – will exert a decisive influence on the research concerning Modernism conducted by both Matei Călinescu and Antoine Compagnon.

In his books, the Romanian-born American theorist develops an "infidel" reading of Paul de Man's ideas on modernity. Even though clearly showing his affinity with the perspective postulated in *Literary History and Literary Modernity*, Călinescu transparently distances himself from the demanian ahistoricism (Modernity perceived beyond any physical space and time, "as an essential impulse of the authentic literature of all times"), in order to value the role of history and sociology of literature within what will soon be widely regarded as a classical definition of dialectical Modernity: "At some point during the first half of the nineteenth century an irreversible split occurred between modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization – a product of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism – and Modernity as an aesthetic concept. Since then, the relations between the two modernities have been irreducibly hostile, but not without allowing and even stimulating a variety of mutual influences in their rage for each other's destruction". Consequently, Matei Călinescu revalidates a whole tradition of literary criticism and historiography compromised by Paul de Man's philosophical and ahistorical optics. The contingent history of positivists, sociologists and political scientists takes the place of history understood as abstract "duration". The ambivalent relationship between Modernity and history is substituted by the dialectic between social and literary Modernity. Modernist literature is therefore understood in direct interdependence with a specific historical epoch (19th and 20th centuries), the (capitalist, bourgeois) society and the (Western) civilization, in which it is produced and from where it extends its area of influence. The explanatory force of this analytical perspective is so broad that – as Teodora Dumitru demonstrates – Matei Călinescu ends by alienating

the methodological premises presumed in *Five Faces of Modernity*. The wittgensteinian „family resemblances“ theory is diluted and transformed into an essentialist model of defining modernity, since the dialectical reception of modernity becomes the “proximate genus” transforming the „faces“ of modernity (modernism, avant-garde, decadence, kitsch, postmodernism) into simple “species” with distinctive, often interchangeable features.

Precisely this manner of interpreting literary modernity has been soon enough canonized, Antoine Compagnon assuming it almost mimetically. *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity* follows *Five Faces of Modernity* not only in spirit, but sometimes also in style and even in letter. Moreover, Teodora Dumitru underlines that the change in critical approach imposed by *The Anti-moderns* is “important, but not complex, in the sense that the theory of Modernity from the first paper [*The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*] is grossly converted, without any further regulation, into a theory of Anti-modernity”.

That is why, despite the massive extent of the chapter *From the Paradoxes of Modernity to Anti-modernity*, Compagnon is rather the “antagonist”, not the “protagonist”, of *The Web of Modernities*. Teodora Dumitru notes that originality in *The Anti-Moderns* is barely simulated, since the French theorist’s arguments “weaken instead of consolidating” the concepts: “To sum it up, the ‘paradox’ of Antoine Compagnon’s theories is that, when they are original, they lack any sort of validity; vice versa, when they are valid, they lack originality”.

Although seemingly irreverent, such critical assumptions are only the result of a thoroughly conducted, not at all tendentious, comparative reading. Promoting an “ethic-psychological” and ideological perspective, applied, therefore, to the authors’ intellectual biography, but ignorant of their literary work, Compagnon imposes in *The Anti-moderns* a “terminological, formal reform”. Namely, the theorist only labels differently (by the term “anti-modern”) the aporia/dialectics configured in *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity* (in a similar manner as Paul de Man and Matei Călinescu). And when – for explanatory or delimitative reasons – Compagnon is trying to clarify his terminology, an (declaratively rejected) equivalence emerges between the “anti-modern” and the “passéist”, the “retrograde”, the “traditionalist”, the “conservative”, the “reactionary”, as if Baudelaire, Proust, Flaubert, Balzac had not been the great “innovators” and “winners” of the aesthetic modernity.

“The terminological inconsistencies and the false distinctions” (as a subchapter is entitled) – characterizing the six defining features of Compagnon’s “anti-modern” writers (“counter-revolutionary” and “anti-Enlightenment” attitudes, “pessimism”, reference to the “the doctrine of the original sin”, the aesthetics of the “sublime”, the adoption of “vituperation”) – are disclosed by Teodora Dumitru with a critical and uninhibited acuteness. For example, by labeling anti-modern writers “counter-revolutionary” and admitting that only stylistic considerations made him avoid using the term “counter-modern”, Compagnon merges and, therefore, disturbs salutary distinctions (made by political scientists and historians of ideas) between

“conservative”, “reactionary” and “anti-revolutionary”. In the case of the theoretical delimitation of the “anti-Enlightenment” attitude (legitimizing “anti-scientist”, “anti-positivist” or “anti-democratic” orientations), Teodora Dumitru proves the practices of the same abusive homogenization of concepts. Also, Compagnon’s interpretation of “pessimism” remains very restrictive, limited to the French literary space, so that the anti-modernity becomes a local product, “emanating exclusively from the French Revolution”. In fact, the entire religious component of the “anti-modern” (“the doctrine of the original sin”, theologically interpreted pessimism) is deeply indebted to a rather narrow idea of what Catholic Christianity means: “What then differentiates the traditionalist or the reactionary from the anti-modern? In order to gain his/her specificity, the anti-modern should act either as a secular/atheist critic of modernity rooted in the Enlightenment thinking, or as a Christian who believes in progress – if it were possible to illustrate such a combination without becoming, on the spot, modern”. It follows that Antoine Compagnon cannot configure a convincing metalanguage in order to identify the “anti-moderns”. Whenever the conceptualizations require rigor – Teodora Dumitru points out – the French critic invokes “the classical jargon used to define Conservative ideology, reactionary movements or right-wing radicals”.

In spite of the critical reading of Compagnon’s ideas, the polemical approach proposed by *The Web of Modernities* does not have a negatory, but rather an affirmative purpose: the non-ideological, almost traditional method enacted in Matei Călinescu’s *Five Faces of Modernity* is rehabilitated. Teodora Dumitru’s study pleads for a “counter-reform” in perceiving artistic modernity, aiming to expose the lower epistemological value of the new, more alluring theories.