NICOLAE MANOLESCU - CRITICISM AND LUCIDITY

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Abstract: Nicolae Manolescu is a critic who lucidly questions his own condition, reflection on himself and reflection on others being the relevant resources of moral self-scopy. For Nicolae Manolescu, criticism has an uncertain, anarchic status, as it approaches the meanings of the work asymptotically, without being able to reveal its inexhaustible wealth of semantic configurations, unable to dismantle the subtle mechanisms and the multitude of aspects that make it up. The global reading of the literary work is a chimera, exegesis assuming at best the role of approximating the meanings and inner workings. Situated at the intersection of opposing categories, between Apollonian and Dionysian, the writing seems weakened by an uncertainty derived from the steady exercise of lucidity, from mutations and "revisions" with a Lovinescian flavour, Manolescu's critical statements repudiating any categorical allure, the demonstrative air, the learned, sufficient bearing. The rejection of apodictic, learned, rigid and reductionist affirmation has the problematic allure of the phrase, the methodical doubt, the dilemmatic questioning.

Keywords: criticism, history of literature, essay, synthesis, analysis

The critic, of whatever kind and of whatever orientation, is confronted, once and for all, with the limits of his work, in an attempt to clarify his own condition and his own conception. By reading and living literature (as Dan Culcer would say), the critic thus questions his or her own reasons and foundations in an effort of self-contemplation, feeling as a deep need the voluptuousness of self-scoping, of defining his or her legitimate status. Nicolae Manolescu is a critic who lucidly interrogates his own condition, reflection on himself and reflection on others being relevant resources of moral auto-scopy, which reverberates from the "central point" of the text towards the shores, towards the watermark of the metatext, generating questions about his own destiny, about life and writing, about literature and about the confusing metamorphoses of existence, in a kind of "pathetic subtext" (Gheorghe Grigurcu).

Manolescu's reflections on the relationship between writing and reading are interesting. Reading and writing sum up the destiny of two categories of individuals: those who read from and for pleasure, from an imperative impulse, incapable of overcoming the boundaries between "producer" and "receiver". It is a primary reader who takes the literary work as a "witness" or "spectator". Writing starts from the condition of spectator, but the reader becomes an actor of writing, evolving freely on the stage of literature, initially contemplated. Nicolae Manolescu interprets with aplomb the aporias of distancing and approaching between reading and writing, in an autoscopic grid in which the imprint of the lived experience is alive and legitimate: "In my heart, even if not consciously from the beginning, I considered myself a producer. Reading books provided the pretext; writing about them mattered all the more. I was, and have remained for this reason, a mediocre reader. I did not see books as an end, but as a means. I did not plunge into reading with the voluptuousness of losing my identity, but kept myself on its surface, lucid and unselfconscious. I was certainly a critic before I knew exactly what that meant, for I unconsciously realised the essential paradox of the critic, which consists in devoting oneself to literature not by absolutising it but by instrumentalising it." What Manolescu is telling us is that reading and

writing are congruent instances of literature, consubstantial, a kind of communicating vessels that forge a demanding deepening of the self, with the prevalence of writing, which has the gift of "constraining", "disciplining" and edifying.

At the beginning, Nicolae Manolescu tends towards two models: G. Călinescu and Tudor Vianu, temperamentally and culturally antinomic models: one with a Dionysian tinge, with exaltations and turbulent impulses, with a tense, metaphorical and suggestive writing, the other apollonian, balanced, based on harmony, clarity and the poignancy of edification. Manolescu was marked in his youth by the model of the classic, the spectacle of man and critic with a dominating and fascinating presence. Later, as an adult, Vianu's reading seems to be modelling and exciting: "When we are young, we are necessarily dogmatic. Absolutising a way of judging things robs us of the possibility of sound judgement. Tolerance, which is a great joy of the spirit, is learned much later. Today, not only does reading Vianu no longer irritate me, but I find in it a source of pleasure that I would never have conceived of even twenty years ago. It is perhaps bizarre, but somewhat irritating has become for me the reading of Călinescu, through a psychological reversal. In youth, we have the psychology of the emulator, who accepts only what is within the sphere of his model and tends to deny the rest; in adulthood, we feel the need for a wider confrontation and turn away from what is too close to us."

There is, of course, in the critic's articles a certainty of assertions, precisely articulated and argued, there are forms of "self-recognition", but one can also identify moments in which the Olympian mask falls apart, leaving a glimpse of anxieties, approximations, awareness of one's own limits, in a kind of kathartic ardency of the exegete for whom the text reveals itself and refuses perception, opens itself to interpretation and hides itself in the intimacy of its structure. Questioning, searching, doubting accentuate the sense of authenticity and authenticity of the critical act: "But what do I do with the doubts that assail me moment by moment, with my petty, petty, absurd doubts all day long? What about the phrase that yesterday seemed accurate to me, but today sounds like an empty phrase; what about the judgement that I thought was flawless and that no longer convinces me at all; what about the whole theory under which I used to crush a book, an author, a literary epoch, and which now resembles mere sophistry? And how is it that I did not notice that the lines of the poet I wrote so severely about in the last article are nevertheless very beautiful?". The critic's consciousness is defined by self-awareness, but also by a repudiation of inertia, of pontifications, of "ready-made ideas", so that even the condition of criticism cannot ignore moments of crisis, successes and benefits, in a clarifying tectonics of metaliterature, for the revelation of the status of criticism becomes for the author of Critical History a major obsession, an essential meditation on literature.

For these reasons, for Manolescu criticism has an uncertain, anarchic status, as it approaches the meanings of the work asymptomatically, without being able to reveal its inexhaustible wealth of semantic configurations, unable to dismantle the subtle mechanisms and the multitude of aspects that make it up. A global reading of the literary work is a chimera, with exegesis at most assuming the role of approximating the inner meanings and springs: "Criticism does not explain the work, because, after all, the work does not ask to be explained. Can you imagine that the professor who bypasses it through history or sociology is more likely to explain it than the impressionist who goes straight to the point? Like the bewitching Meka in Macedonsky's poetry, the work floats ghostly in everyone's imagination; but, unlike her, it cannot be conquered either by the emir who faces the desert's edge or by the traveller who prefers the detoured roads... An opera is only such an appeal, a hymn that disturbs us. Hegel states that nature is not itself beautiful or ugly, in that it does not exist only in itself, whereas beauty characterises the products of the spirit, meant to reveal itself to the spirit".

Criticism, however, is also perceived from the angle of objectification, the fascination of the work being diminished by recourse to method; the "illusion" of the text is demonstrated by dismantling expressive procedures and techniques, the emphasis of exegesis being placed on the "accuracy" of admiration: the work is evaluated as "craft", not excluding the empathetic factor, identification ("We must, leaving the lyrical stage of pure admiration, learn to look for the springs that provoke the illusion, the often invisible technique that sustains art; to try to see the craftsman, where we are blinded by the creative force of the demiurge; to point out the artifice, where everything appears as pure nature"). This shows the "demystifying" role of criticism, which moves beyond the stage of admiring fascination, breaking down the fascination of aesthetic illusion by stripping away the processes and analysing them. There are also inadequate, opaque critical methods that ignore the specificity of the literary work, attempting to lock the creation into a scheme, a pre-established pattern, which violates its specificity, the literary work being treated as an artificial, inauthentic, mystified construct. Nicolae Manolescu sketches the observation thread of a pathology of criticism, pointing out, for example, a kind of amusement ("We also recognize amusement in the language of criticism: how often a critic cannot say more than he can fit into a scheme, a poncif, a ready-made expression. In the end, the claim to study the work "scientifically" is nothing but an attempt to compensate for a congenital amusement").

Incriminating reductionist, inefficient and irrelevant interpretations, Nicolae Manolescu seems attracted by a utopia of criticism, which would bring together the analysis of the detail and the whole of the work, in which "reading" and "quoting" would complement each other, in a firm balance, in which reading, interpretation, critical theory and the practice of writing seem to be convergent impulses of the same hermeneutic vocation: "I dream of a book of criticism in which the constitution of the critical text is simultaneous with the reconstitution of the literary text, the birth of the one with the rebirth of the other, synthesis with analysis, critical theory with a specific writing practice; a book that is at once a study and an anthology, familiarizing readers with a work and its explication; selection to reveal the whole and the idea of the whole to motivate selection; reading and citation."

Nicolae Manolescu has, as is well known, practised his interpretative talent in literary reviews, studies of criticism and literary history, and in essays with generous ideological openings. Beyond the critical forms adopted, Manolescu's texts have retained their mobility, appropriateness, the necessary distance from the text, and their empathetic predisposition. Inspired by the moving avatars of current events, the history of literature and theoretical construction, Nicolae Manolescu has the allure of a "total" critic, in the classical sense of the term. Metamorphoses of Poetry, Treacherous Readings, Maiorescu's Contradiction, Sadoveanu or the Utopia of the Book, Introduction to the Work of Alexandru Odobescu, Noah's Ark, On Poetry, The Critical History of Romanian Literature are reference books illustrating an ambitious and rigorous critical programme, re-evaluating writers from new angles of reading, conceptually systematising certain genres of literature, or exploring Romanian literature diachronically.

A special, singular place is occupied by the essays in the cycle of Themes, through which the critic reveals his "dual nature, playful and serious, 'frivolous' and profound" (Gheorghe Grigurcu). There is in these essays a disturbing effect of "topicality" of the proposed subjects and an uninhibited presence, ethically, aesthetically, of the author, for here is revealed a sum of "interior portraits", a succession of moving portraits of the author, gradually configured from fleeting readings and impressions, from direct notations or from the empathic reverberations of the ego in the perimeter of the "subject" approached. Some of the titles of the books that make up the Themes series are significantly metaphorical (Julien Green and my great-great-grandmother, A Door Barely ajar, The Drawing in the Carpet).

The autobiographical pact, whether camouflaged or assumed, is to be found in A Portrait in Paradoxes, where the metabolism of the writer betrays a succession of antinomies through which they are fixed: "My mind readily employs abstractions, but only memorizes images. My intelligence surpasses my sensibility, but only engages on sensible things (...). By nature, I am lazy, lax, indecisive, but my writing has given some people the impression of industriousness, tenacity, energy and decision (...). My spontaneity is the result of an exhausting effort, physically and emotionally, which often takes me away from the table and makes me look with concern to the future when I will no longer have the will of today (...). I am a very staid man, although I like to move from one thing to another. I love precision (in ideas, in expression), but, unfortunately, I notice its lack more readily in others than in myself. I grow attached to people much more easily than I grow apart. I'm both constant and humorous. I don't like to be contradicted except by myself (...)". From the meanders of the confession a psychological and temperamental portrait emerges, made up of contradictions, ambivalences, experiences and readings legitimised by the prerogatives of authenticity, for the essays are defined by the availability and spontaneity of the writing, by the rejection of ostentation and rigidity, the essay as a species being, in the critic's view, provocative, polemical, fascinating, available, freed from any thematic and stylistic constraints.

The essayist is therefore immune to pontifications, to pre-established models or to canonized "truths", aesthetic truths being rather relative, prone to revisions, to new "readings", from new perspectives and forms, through which new valences, meanings, symbolic configurations are discovered. In general, the starting point of the essays is an accepted truth, subject to revision, beneficial revisitation, relativisation, as in the text devoted to Andersen's fairy tales, which, reread at the age of maturity, under the spectre of lucidity, lose their utopian allure, the patina of illusion or the iridescence of the fantastic, because the 'rereading' of the fairy tales provides the grotesque spectacle of a world dominated by evil and dishonesty, by hallucinatory visions. Andersen's narratives thus seem to be the work of "a lonely and fearful man, haunted by obsessions like those he blames on his heroes, a misanthropist who sees coarse bourgeois everywhere, a romantic nature terrified of the pitfalls of practical existence". Through shifts of emphasis, shifts of perspective, successive readings and re-readings, the physiognomy of a "theme" is reshaped, the essayist redistributing and modifying aesthetic, ethical, existential, etc. angles in order to suggest as authentic an image as possible of Andersen's work. The Themes are fragments of a spiritual autobiography, distinguished by the suppleness and fluency of their writing, they are also a "history" of readings successively appropriated and overcome, in which fiction and experience, disturbing questions about the world and the self, and moral dilemmas are interwoven in a discourse of genuine ideational breadth, in which prejudices and pre-established patterns are always subject to revision.

In an interview, Nicolae Manolescu reconstructs ironic and self-mocking images of his childhood: "Unfortunately, I don't have a very clear picture of my childhood, except insofar as it has two halves, namely a first half, from when I became aware, so to speak, of myself, during the war and immediately afterwards, which I can say was very happy: at that age, not doing politics, not having a sense of history". Images, moments, sequences from childhood and adolescence, stages of adulthood, intellectual training, teaching and political careers are developed. Heterogeneous data emerge from the flood of gestures, facts, events, ideas and attitudes. The reader learns something about "childhood verses and magazines", "failed political careers", "what and how people read in the 1950s", about the beginnings of writing, the condition of the literary critic "in the period of the recovery of modernity", about the books written or read, about the personalities with whom the critic was a contemporary. Some portrait sketches are eloquent: Tudor Vianu, G. Călinescu, Paul Cornea, Crohmălniceanu, Al. Piru, Matei Călinescu, Alexandru Ivasiuc, etc. Vianu's portrait, sketchy in appearance, is

made up of apparently disparate gestures, examples of which reveal the scholar's sadness and erudition ("With Vianu I took a normal course in foreign literature, in fact more theoretical, as he did, I don't know in what year, I think in the fifth. That's when I met him, I wasn't on close terms with him, but we knew each other like that, just a little... Then he impressed me with a terrible sadness. Later I found out that he had already had several heart attacks, had recovered from them, had had all sorts of problems in college... He had one of the saddest looks I've ever seen in my life... He'd come, sit down at the desk and with that very pleasant baritone voice, extremely pleasant, he'd talk very naturally about the most complicated things possible.").

Acknowledging his systematic allure, the literary critic does not ignore his analytical vocation or his portrait-like verve, for when he places two formative models (Vianu, Călinescu) in the mirror, he reveals their temperamental and psychological foundations ("Vianu was a teacher: he trained you, he guided you, he gave you courage, he was extraordinary. Călinescu was a showman, he was a brilliant histrion who didn't do classical theatre performances, he made literary history in his histrionics. What he said was extraordinary, as was the style of saying it. Let's not forget the time: the late 1950s, when everything was spoken in a monotone, wooden language. And suddenly Calinescu would come along and say things about literary history, banal in fact, but he would say them in a way that made them exceptional"). The critic's assessments of his own books are revealing, revealing a stage in his career, marked by his first volumes (Lecturi infidele, Metamorfozele poeziei), the critic managing to "recognise himself" only in monographs (on Maiorescu, Odobescu, Sadoveanu), Noah's Ark being "the result of reading naratology studies", while Istoria critica appears to him, post factum, as a "monstrous project".

Paul Cornea describes Nicolae Manolescu as a scholar, noting his "sharp intelligence", "balanced and clear mind" and "innate ability to speak without emphasis": "I was struck by Manolescu's sharp intelligence, which allowed him to plunge straight into the heart of the works under analysis or the issues under discussion, his balanced and clear mind, his ability to look at reality in cold blood, recognising its irreversible nature. I liked his innate ability to speak without emphasis and to always find, in orality as in writing, a natural and simple way of speaking that makes the most abstract ideas accessible without trivialising them, and evokes symbols palpably without destroying what is destined to remain enigmatic. His lucidity made him immune to illusory solutions, and his spirit of independence, ever awake beneath his mannered and urbane manner in dealing with others, always pushed him to non-alignment." Seen under the spectre of the "seducer", as a "rational and solar spirit" by G. Dimisianu, under the sign of "cordiality as a modus vivendi" by Dorin Tudoran ("Nicolae Manolescu always preferred to see the glass half full, but not to deny the existence of the empty half"), Nicolae Manolescu is an intellectual whose dominant character trait is, as Marta Petreu observes, "rationality, a lively, prompt, precise rationality". But Manolescu is also a critic "without unconsciousness" (Cristian Moraru), "a great spirit in a normal man" (Călin Vlasie), "our godfather of spirit" (Magda Cârneci), "a professional of literary criticism" (Mircea A. Diaconu), "modesty, fireside and serenity" (Andrei Bodiu) - characterizations that aim at the figure of the creative spirit fascinating in simplicity, excellence, rationality and balance.

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