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Roland Barthes and the Reception of French Structuralism in Socialist Romania*

Abstract. This article discusses French literary structuralism following the perspective of the history of ideas and the problematic of cultural transfers. The interest in structuralism is here primarily political/ideological, in so far as, during the 1960s, the structuralist approach to literature played an important role in the advent of a new generation of literary theorists and a new doctrine in Romanian literature which lasted till the years 2000 and is still dominant. The ambivalent attitude of the Romanian intellectuals living under the socialist regime towards the French structuralism is symptomatic: upstream, of political views typical for the "Eastern intellectual", and downstream, of an intellectual background which could manifest itself only once some of these intellectuals went on to pursue an academic career in the United States. Insisting further on Roland Barthes as a figurehead of French literary structuralism, the article intends to show why the double-sided approach to structuralism (in France, on the one side, and in Romania, on the other) rendered structuralism as an impossible mental practice in Socialist Romania.

Keywords: French structuralism, Roland Barthes, literary theory, Eastern European intellectuals, Virgil Nemoianu, Mihai Botez, Thomas Pavel.

What purpose did structuralism serve for the Eastern European literature of the socialist era? Was it the effect of a literary fashion trend, as trends spread from the center outwards, meanwhile reinventing themselves anew in the center? Was it a work method intended to modernize an intellectual field that was submitted to harsh ideological constraints, in the immediate post-Stalinist era? Was it an outlet for a time marked by heavy censorship? And, after all, what is structuralism actually about?¹ We set out to give partial answers – but impartial, we hope – to these questions, following a study which focused on

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the reception of the “structuralist” work of Roland Barthes in Romania, particularly with the publication of a little book called “Structuralism” (*Structuralismul*) by Virgil Nemoianu, in Bucharest, 1967, and later, through Toma Pavel’s interest in French Theory and Roland Barthes’ work. To explain the mixed reception of structuralism in the 1960s, we will turn our attention to a study conducted in the early 1990s by Mihai Botez (1940-1955), Romanian mathematician and futurologist, and Romanian ONU Ambassador in 1994, which bears the title “The Intellectuals of Eastern Europe” and the subtitle “A Romanian point of view” (*Intelectualii din Europa de Est. Un punct de vedere românesc*²).

The Structuralist Barthes

Eric Marty opens his presentation of the second volume of Roland Barthes’ *Complete Works* (*Oeuvres complètes*) with the following paragraph:

Was Barthes a structuralist? Without a doubt. Barthes had been a prolific and effective structuralist, as shown by the appetite and energy with which he based articulated semiology on structural epistemology, which can be summarized as follows: reality can be described entirely in terms of pure difference. (Marty: 2002, 9)

The consensus has been that the articles published in response to Roland Barthes’ work in other countries (Yotova: 2003; Susam 2006; Matei: 2017) prove the international circulation of Barthes’ texts, particularly in Eastern Europe, was owed to the fervor aroused by a certain concept of structuralism launched in France in the 1950s, which became the subject of intellectual debate in the 1960s.

We also know that the theoretical work of Roland Barthes was clearly marked by a certain idea of structuralism, mostly derived from F. de Saussure and Lévi-Strauss³. On one hand, in his *Essais critiques*, Barthes reprises and “vulgarizes”, so to speak, the theoretical propositions put forth by Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss (Barthes, II, 376), and this was the decisive moment for his “structuralist” development. The term first appeared under Barthes’ quill in the essay “Myth Today” (*Le Mythe aujourd’hui*) as part of the *Mythologies* (Barthes I, 825), and later in the methodological article on “The history and sociology of clothing” (*Histoire et sociologie du vêtement*), where he declared he did not want to get involved in the “quarrels of structuralism” (idem, 898). But starting with 1962, Barthes, being a Lévi-Strauss’ reader, began to embrace a rather personal notion of structuralism, and it is this adhesion that makes us raise the question of how the French “structuralism” was evaluated in socialist Romania during the 1960s. In “Myth Today”, the closing essay of *Mythologies*, Saussurean structuralism is overtly subjected to the critical interpretation of the new consumerist French society: it is seen as a political weapon, and not the instrument of a theory.

From this point of view, Barthes was perceived to a certain extent as a “critical theorist”, in Turkey for instance, where one third of the translations made of his works up to 1990 came from *Mythologies* (Susam 2006, 193-195), but this dimension

of his work was almost completely silenced in Romania. No wonder: In June 1968, in the third most important Romanian newspaper, *Scinteia tineretului*, as an answer to a general survey on *What is structuralism?* Virgil Nemoianu stated that: “what pleasantly distinguishes structuralism from other past philosophical trends is the fact that it does not oppose anything and anyone. Structuralism is, in fact, a calm and modest movement which goes its way without looking too much aside, neither on the left nor on the right. [...] But all these Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, deform structuralism towards the setting up of a false ideology, reactionary, at the disposal of a possible totalitarian technocratic regime.” (Nemoianu 1968, 3) Nemoianu tried to show in his extended answer that Marxism and structuralism may well work together, but only after having cautiously emptied each one of the two “philosophies” of all their political content: a reasonable “Marxism” (taken as a given and inexorable reality) could take advantage of a quietist and spineless “structuralism”.

Structuralism was never a doctrine or a philosophy for Barthes, instead – as he puts it later on – it was the name of a practice and the suggestion for an ethic. His article, “The structuralist activity” (*L’Activité structuraliste*) is fundamental for the understanding of Barthesian structuralism, first published in the magazine *Nouvelles littéraires*, edited by Maurice Nadeau, and later included in his 1964 *Essais critiques*. In this article, Barthes assigns structuralism to an ethos, a way of thinking – in a very broad sense – by no means reducing it to a scientific methodology:

But structuralism being neither a school nor a movement, there is no reason to reduce it *a priori*, even in a problematic fashion, to a scholarly approach, and it is better to try and find the most encompassing description (if not definition) on another level than that of the reflexive language. We can indeed presume there are writers, painters, musicians, in whose eyes the *practice* of structure (and not just the idea of it) represents a distinctive experience, and that one should place analysts and creators under the common sign of what could be called *the structural man*, defined not by his ideas or his languages, but by his imagination, or rather his *imaginary*, meaning the way in which he mentally experiences structure. (Barthes II, 467⁴)

We find this idea fundamental on several accounts. Firstly, it becomes evident that Barthes had never been the proponent of a literary science – neither of science, nor literature specifically, even though he had always been considered a literary critic (Angermüller 2015, 21). Furthermore, the description of “structural activity” summarizes a theoretical approach on cognitive and experimental sciences that Jean-Marie Schaeffer focuses on in her “letter to Roland Barthes” (*Lettre à Roland Barthes*): “The Structuralist activity constitutes the clearest and most just representation of the issues involved in the structural approach of the facts of verbal creation, and more broadly, of symbolistic facts.” (Schaeffer 2015, 61). The mental modeling which forms structural activity produces a “homeomorphic enactment model of the reality from which it is extracted” (idem, 67), and it is one of the operational processes in cognitive psychology, “which is currently, without a doubt, the most fascinating discipline

with regards to the study of narrative discourse" (idem, 106). Certainly, these epistemological intuitions will have been developed thereafter, but they remain the source of a research methodology in the vast field of what we may now call digital humanities.

It is true that Barthes does not claim to make a systematic appeal to this. Schaeffer also does not attempt to describe Barthes as a Parisian "father" of cognitive science, but perhaps tries to silence the echoes of criticism issued by the dilettantism of a literary theoretician with presumably questionable skills. However, it is not the results that matter: what were the "results" of structuralism is a question to which it is difficult to give a direct answer.

What matters is rather the redistribution of reality, establishing new modes of intelligibility, and subsequently the revision of an intellectual *imaginaire/imagination*⁵, with its prize of faiths, prejudices, and practices. Thirdly, it was Eric Marty who made a prominent remark, which is the starting point of our investigation into the reception of French literary structuralism in Romania, in its Barthesian version:

The most significant text of this period with respect to the change of perspective it brought is without a doubt the *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of the Narrative* (1966), in which the first paragraph ends with the famous phrase: *The narrative is unconcerned with good or bad literature: international, transhistorical, transcultural, it is there, just like life*. Barthes' intuition is eminently structural: the analysis model of the narrative will be the sentence, the theory being that nothing can be found within the functions of the narrative that cannot be observed on the sentence level and examples will be taken from James Bond, Flaubert, and Proust, respectively. With the emergence of the modern upper middle-class, an approach to literature based *solely* on its aesthetic value no longer makes sense" (Marty in Barthes II, 13).

Eric Marty's remark is in tune with Jean-Marie Schaeffer's argument: for the structural analysis of the narrative, the phrase is a "scale model" whose elements can be generalized at text level. Certainly, the extrapolation remains functional and we are entitled to describe a function of the dimension itself, operating beyond the text. The "minimalism" of a certain part of contemporary French literature is indicated, most notably by American researchers who were interested in it (see Motte, 1999). At the same time, Marty clearly expresses a criticism that, for reasons we will discuss further on, no Romanian literary critic could bring to traditional literary criticism: that of an axiological approach of the "aesthetical value" of literature; because this value, like any social value, is not only variable and marked by the politics and ideologies inscribed in a certain story – and, in broader terms, by the perceived habits that can be called "cultural" – but especially because, as evidenced in the phrase "aesthetical value", it is subjected to a process of metaphysical abstraction rooted in the concept of "spiritual culture" escaping the caprices of secular time.

The diffusion of French literary structuralism into socialist Romania created distortions, the effects of which persisted after 1989. I would like to summarize the

history of these distortions and formulate some hypotheses regarding their causes, thus reprising some aspects of my study on the reception of Roland Barthes' work in Romania and eliminating others (Matei 2017). The importance of the "stylistics" undertook by Tudor Vianu before 1945, one he miraculously practiced during the Stalinist 1950s, was highlighted in the article above-mentioned, but also by Adriana Stan in her excellent *Structuralist bastion*. We are going to focus more on the reasons which made Barthes one the most informally known – but officially criticized – French intellectual. We are building our analysis around a Mihai Botez' crucial argument in understanding the distortions inherent to the distribution of various western theoretical discourses in the social sciences throughout Socialist Europe.

The Eastern-European Intellectual

Cautious about defining the profile of the "Eastern intellectual" during the Stalinist and post-Stalinist era, Mihai Botez presumes a longtime interaction between the communist system and the societies where it was implemented, without acknowledging the two extremes that were either absolute repression, or the choice of total opposition against the system.

In most cases, it is a matter of "adaptation", which is by no means condemnable, but which created, on the way, specific "reflexes" that marked the conduct of Eastern-European intellectuals.

Among these newfound "reflexes", I would like to address the strange custom of "depoliticization" – in the sense of giving up any trace of active involvement with the political scene, this only being accepted as an inevitable, but in fact ignored, ritual. (Botez 2016, 26)

As a corollary of the long-term interaction between the system and society, Botez warns the reader that the sublimation of the communist regimes (according to the original 1988 version of the text, as mentioned above) would not "heal" intellectuals, as if it were a disease that could be eradicated completely, restoring them to a "healthy" state. In other words, an Eastern intellectual settled in the West would, for the rest of his life, evince a different behavior compared to a Western intellectual who had never lived in the East. (idem, 27) In addition to these reflexes, superiority and inferiority complexes typical of "small culture" intellectuals come into play, setting them apart from Soviet intellectuals, for instance (because the latter had the conscience of belonging to a larger culture, in direct competition with the American "super-power"). The intellectual born into a small culture would willingly choose to pursue a national career whose local success would compensate for its international marginalization (idem, 35), while the small culture copied, in a scaled-down version, the active elements within the "core" culture. The "small culture" thus acquires a life of its own; it cultivates its own idols, prophets and "mandarins" – even though these are not accepted as such in the international "large culture" community (idem, 124).

My intention is not to bring corrections to this model, from a globalized perspective, but to limit its validity for the Eastern intellectual in the context of the Cold War.

Botez projects two other secondary traits that outline the figure of the Eastern intellectual born before the Stalinist era: a certain sense of “uniqueness” (idem, 31), the disdain against the militarization of culture, and the frustration of seeing other intellectuals with superficial training, but more willing to practice obedience, climb up the social ladder (idem, 33). This disapproval could however sway during the nationalist decline in certain communist states, especially after Stalin’s death. Its staggering manifestation in the case of socialist Romania prior to the death of Gheorghiu-Dej in 1965, reestablished a fragile balance between the prestige of intellectuals within a democratic society not yet affected by the structural changes undergone by “consumerist societies”, on one side, and the authority of high-level politics, on the other. “My belief is that national-communism offers intellectuals a much more interesting contract than the classic version of the purely communist state wherein professional life is constrained” (idem, 56), not least because their work would since then no longer be considered representative on a political level – binding – but most importantly on a national level.

These intellectuals would consequently not serve the single party, even though the single party continued to exercise its influence on the public opinion, but rather the nation. Such a service would be harder to refuse in the name of opposing political beliefs, on the condition that the balance between national and political leverage would be maintained.

All these traits of the Eastern intellectual could be found, to various degrees, in the first Romanian humanist intellectuals who, during the 1960s, imported and tried to exploit French literary structuralism within institutions – the Academy, specialty press, even literature in general – in which the freedom margin in discourse practice increased significantly after 1965. This was the moment when, in a symbolic fashion, the newly appointed General Secretary, Nicolae Ceausescu, proposed to rename the Romanian Workers’ Party in power as the Romanian Communist Party. This name change might not say much, but the comparison ought to be made against the first name of the Romanian Communist Party, the one before 1944: the Communist Party of Romania (see G. M. Tamas 2017, 16). The path of a “Romanian” brand of communism was thus paved.

A Lack of Seriousness

In 1998, Bremond and Pavel made a critical retrospective of structuralism, particularly focusing on *S/Z*, one of the Barthesian books most influenced by structuralism. From the beginning, they noticed an “epistemological standstill” in the French humanistic sciences at the end of the 1950s, which was later validated by Angemuller in 2015. (Angemuller 2015, 45-46). As a consequence, reference was made to theories that were only partially understood and questionably applied. We

say questionably, on the one hand, because the lack of tradition in the analytical study of literary texts in France gave Barthes plenty of room for maneuver, at the same time urging him to fill this gap as soon as possible.

Unlike the German philological practice, or the “Russian” formalism, or even the English, and later American New Criticism movement, text analysis and literary history had evolved very little since the end of the 19th century: “The urge of catching up” exposed a glimpse of the fantastical dimension of epistemological solutions found by French intellectuals, Barthes included, as far as the French “universalist spirit” let itself be infused with the “spirit of the avant-garde” after the War (Bremond, Pavel: 1998, 26). Also questionable because, always in contrast with what was happening on the other side of the Rhine, while taking advantage of the avant-garde practices, the study of literature in France could not remain unharmed by the ideological utopianism that, for an entire century, had fed its conquerors and conquests alike.

In an article anticipating the book published in 1998, Pavel observed and criticized the – rather subtle – manner in which Barthes introduced progressivism into the theory of “readerly versus writerly” discussed in *S/Z*:

The first pages of *S/Z* ought to be read as the condemnation in historical terms of “readerly” texts, irredeemably obsolete, in favor of the avant-garde “writerly” texts, the only acceptable form of contemporary writing. Just as Marxists considered they had the authority to claim, for philosophically driven reasons, that certain practices belonged from then on in the junkyard of History, Barthes underhandedly introduced, among the transient play of infinite differences, the heavy rhetoric of historical progress, along with all its anathemas, exclusions and abusive promotions. Although it is no longer appropriate to talk about totality out loud, it continues to quietly orientate the theoretical choices of the *S/Z* author. (Pavel 1996, 163)

According to Pavel, in his effort to create and impose a new literary paradigm Barthes sunk into the “heavy rhetoric” of totality. This is how the so-called Barthesian structuralism was quickly discredited on account of his methodological imprudence: the intention of moving away from the beaten path, making science, could not hold up in Barthes’ work, due not only to an epistemic inconsistency, but perhaps most of all due to a lack of seriousness: tainted by traces of progressivist utopias, this form of structuralism failed to bring anything new to the field of literary criticism. However, this Barthesian rhetoric of the readerly and the writerly does not proceed from a Marxist discourse (orthodox or heretic) as it is suggested. The integration of literature in modern history after the 1789 Revolution is undeniable, for whoever decides to put it into perspective, and ignoring its connection to history does not make said connection any less relevant: it is only a matter of finding a modulation that can be validated. Yet, although Pavel is right in pointing out that the Barthesian discourse itself does not fall within the “writerly” category, he does not find it important to underline the extent to which Barthes assumes the utopian feature, thereby refuting the utopianism accusation.

Throughout his work, Roland Barthes references “the utopia of the Text” without actually intending to do so (he admits having “seen” it but does not claim to have achieved said utopia). What he refers to is the joy, namely the affect that engenders the idea of utopia. For example, in a small article published in the Bompiani Encyclopedia in 1974 bearing the very name “Utopia”, he stated: “Utopia is always ambivalent, it ruins the present, it ceaselessly draws from the wrongs of the world, and at the same time, it also projects images of happiness: it projects them in their color, precision, luster, absurdity even; it displays the rarest form of courage: joy.” (OC IV, 531)

Barthes’ rhetoric stint is thus double-sided, and Pavel only seems to acknowledge the first part: because, as soon as the opportunity of historical “condemnation” presented itself to Barthes – shun the harmful utopias! – he did not take advantage of it. While unearthing it, he overturned “the heavy rhetoric” and dissolved it into a finer one – the rhetoric of affect.

As with Baudelaire and Benjamin, History is to Barthes an aesthetical scene, rather than a political arena. This does not “exclude” the *readerly* from literature but moves it into an opposition (that is aesthetical rather than political) with the *writerly*, thus following a line of literary thought started in the 19th century (much like Stendhal, for instance, had contrasted prose drama to Alexandrine verse drama, cited in Jean-Yves Tadié 2007, 387). Later, in “Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes” (*Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*), its author reprises the antithesis *readerly/writerly* to specify its meaning. This is where Barthes, “the structural man” is unveiled, and where structuralism, as a practice and product of imagination, becomes *creative*.

How does *writing* work? – Undoubtedly, through language movements sufficiently repeated and formalized to be called “figures” (...) Behold another one of these figures: the *forgery* (in the jargon of graphologists, forgery is the imitation of writing). My discourse contains several couples of notions (denotation/connotation, *readerly/writerly*, *writer/writing*). These oppositions are artifacts: (...) My text is in fact *readerly*: I am for structure, for the sentence, for the phrased text: I produce in order to reproduce, as if having a thought and representing it by means of materials and rules: *I write classically*. (OC IV, 669)

Literary Structuralism as Read by Eastern-European Intellectuals

In 1994, Virgil Nemoianu remembered the heyday of structuralism in Europe and his own position towards it in the 1960s: “The structuralist episode was a form of auto-defense, fleeing in a protected area, relatively autonomous. It was for me part of some dilettante but benevolent attempts to find a rational idiom through which I could communicate my traditional-sentimental values” (Nemoianu 1994, 328). For the Romanian intellectuals bred by the school of Tudor Vianu, who were its first receptors, structuralism – with all its different approaches, as depicted in Nemoianu’s work – was nothing but a toolbox, to be opened in case of necessity by a discourse whose guiding principles remained “the aesthetic value” (term used by Nemoianu

in the aforementioned interview, but also throughout the ensemble of Romanian literary studies published during the 1960s-1980s) of the work and the ontological commitment towards recapturing the essence, the center – namely the structure – of the work in question. Breaking these two principles entails a double deficiency of the critical discourse: an “absolute” structuralism (which relies on the technical aspects of a literary work) misses the dynamic of the text and fails to recapture the essence, while a “positional” structuralism, relativistic, non-ontological, becomes *eo ipso* a null discourse: to what use?

Yet Barthes was not fooled by this double pitfall: thus, despite some of his texts being renowned as difficult, such as “The Fashion System” (*Le Système de la mode*) or *S/Z*, he never relied on quantitative data, even if it meant not shying away from producing it for the rigor of discourse, and perhaps to cater to the needs of institutionalization⁶. At the same time, he possessed an astute historical and aesthetic conscience, which prevented him from approaching the literary text according to the method and borrowing the style of the professors who were teaching it as example at the Sorbonne. Pavel is thus right in pointing out Barthes’ “underhanded” insertion of the historical dialectic – hence progressivism –, since it was his way of understanding social time (but also the aesthetic dynamic: it is the exact opposite of what Nemoianu ascribed to orthodox structuralism).

However, Toma Pavel abandons or perhaps forgets the advantage of linking literary analysis to the analysis of all other discourse and placing it in a historical context: by entering this dialogue with each other, the analyzed discourses are brought back to life. Secondly, the approach of a text that does not follow the path of philological analysis, but one that “writes” itself, renders an ever-changing text: in a way, the texts are thus “updated”, to use a term made famous by Yves Citton (Citton: 2007).

It remains to be determined whether rejecting the singularity of literature – declassifying literature as an area of discourse governed by (ineffable) aesthetic principles inherited from the German Romanticism – clashes with Nemoianu’s intellectual and moral principles: arguments can be made both for and against, since it is true that putting literature side by side with cinema, visual arts, music, even “mass culture”, arouses either disapproval or enthusiastic support.

In this regard, structuralism reveals its “rational” ideological or political dimension, from the point of view of the types of discourse produced, as well as the skills that need to be mobilized to acquire the expertise. Consequently, it would appear that the Romanian perception of “French” and “literary” structuralism obeys the criteria by which Mihai Botez defines “the Eastern intellectual”, more so because in his essay, the author often distinguishes between the countries in Central Europe, where the national culture is considered more lucrative, and those in the South-East (Bulgaria, Albania, Romania).

First of all, “depoliticization”, as the acquired mentality of the Eastern intellectual, in fact seems to be the first process undergone by structuralism in socialist Romania.

Here, the structuralist approach possesses the essential virtue of ideological purity: it is the main reason for its quick “importation” by the group of researchers gathered around Tudor Vianu. We can certainly adopt an apolitical perspective on science and assimilate structuralism into it as a way to reach “the universal language of science”. (Nemoianu 1967, 31) The scientific character of structuralism is not just apolitical, according to Virgil Nemoianu: he presents other virtues in the eyes of the “traditional” intellectual forced to publish in a medium dominated by Marxist “bricks” (term used by Barthes to refer to the catchphrases used in the official Maoist discourse in China). On the one hand, the “universal science” fantasy is not that different from the myth of the socialist society standing under a “scientific” pedestal, so that an intellectual interested in structuralism would not be suspected of “subversive” behavior by the political authorities of the regime. On the other hand, and this issue is not to be ignored, we can criticize structuralism from a presumably dialectical position, while having defined the epistemological limitations of structuralism as awareness of a static reality: “The static nature of all structure is constantly asserted” by experts, Nemoianu affirms. In a footnote, he in turn references linguistics vocabulary (synchronic versus diachronic) to highlight the same idea: “emphasis is [placed here] on the synchronic” (Nemoianu, 39). This denunciation seems to remain crippling in the Romanian vulgate of structuralism. Structuralism and literature cannot work together due to an incompatibility of character: science is cold and quantitative, while literature espouses the “warmth” of humanity and the “qualia” of reality.

Nemoianu neglects the *structural dynamic*, which is different from the dialectical one, but definitely not absent. This dynamic was discussed in a brilliant article by Patrice Maniglier:

So what is the problem with the dialectical image of history? To being with, it assumes that elements pass one into another, as if having some kind of continuity within the system, as if each element were equipped with an inner core in which totality is reflected. But a symbolical system does not present itself as such. A language is rather a jagged ensemble of possibilities devoid of a proper interiority, separated and unified by the steep ravine of differential gaps, forming a unit that has no profound necessity in itself, as it can be recaptured in a unique act of intellect. (...) These different systems that represent the practical universes in which we live, the ones that determine what we can and cannot do, say, and desire, do not deny each other and therefore, should not be considered integrated totalities on a higher level; they are simply distinct from one another, on the same plane, no more and no less global. They are new distributions of the possible and impossible within each situation that are connected to each other through *lateral gliding* and not by *dialectical integration*. (Maniglier 2005, 439, the author stresses).

Maniglier, who was in the course of publishing a thesis on the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (Maniglier 2006), demonstrated – employing the example of language as a practice endowed with social value, as represented by Saussure – how the dynamics

of reality cannot espouse the (post-) Hegelian historical dialectic, regardless of its political orientation, be it idealistic, or in Marx's case, materialistic. What appears to us as stasis is merely an optical illusion created by our representational habits and our limited ability to relate to the different dimensions of reality: progress is not mandatory, neither is the all-encompassing image of an ultimate, fundamental "structure".

That which changes does not "progress", that which is "one" is elusive as it is, and it is undoubtedly what a humanistic intellectual born in the European outskirts would not have the means to accept, and even less so, to presume.

In any case, the static nature of structuralism worked for Nemoianu, who was thus able, all while projecting it as the "original sin" of structuralism – and reveling in including this religious phrase in his text – to enumerate philosophical, aesthetical, and psychological names and theories that were close to his heart. By being depoliticized, structuralism is concurrently de-idealized: it is merely a moment of total awareness, conceived vertically, and attributed, in somewhat Bergsonian terms, to the "consciousness movement" (idem, 38).

Moving on from Nemoianu's criticism of structuralism in 1967, onto the more extensive one done by Pavel during 1980-1990, is going from an intellectual analysis wherein the arguments are often strategical, to an epistemological and moral critique that draws a comparison between "true" science and Barthes' spectacularly vulgarized version of it. What remains intact in both cases is most importantly *the myth of scientific objectivity*, the *scientific realism* which Barthes, and the entire French Theory with him, fail to address, or at best, understand and apply poorly. In the 90s, Pavel could finally expose the harm that the French Theory, derailed by many ideological hold-ups, brought to the concept of scientific objectivity: the "irresponsible" descent into the ideological scope of 1968 caused the advent of a "hedonistic" and superficial approach to the linguistic theories elaborated elsewhere in the 20th century ("irresponsible innovation and needless innovation", in short, according to a report by Akard Michael 2002).

These critiques display alternative superiority and inferiority complexes, possibly explained by the different academic statuses of the two authors in different moments of their respective careers: Virgil Nemoianu, a young assistant professor at the University of Bucharest, eager to publish and gain recognition, while distancing himself from the "socialist" social sciences, and Toma Pavel, literature professor in Chicago, USA, a position of authority recognized internationally, achieved by a brilliant intellectual who had fled from a socialist regime in course of crystallization.

But by dwelling too much on the subject of cultural complex, we risk venturing unsustainable speculations: it would perhaps be better to address the myth of the "grand culture" that made Nemoianu reject the structuralism which had not been achieved by the resolve of reaching the essence of a literary work.

This type of argument is ever-present throughout the Romanian reception of Roland Barthes' work, either explicitly ("Roland Barthes, J. P. Richard or Georges Poulet have abandoned their initial role as critics, who express judgements of value, and have dedicated themselves exclusively to explaining the internal mechanism of literature" (Romul Munteanu 1973, 218)), or implicitly, wherein the New Criticism is taken as a model of "subjective criticism", whose author, the literary critic, "must call a spade a spade and learn how to read" (Manolescu, apud Goldis 2011, 185). We thus reach the idea of the Eastern intellectual, who gladly accepts his role as representative of the nation and his subsequent mission of emancipation under a national-communist regime. In 1969, when socialist Romania was celebrating its 25th anniversary – since August 23rd 1944, when Romania turned its weapons against Hitler's Germany – Nicolae Manolescu, the most influential Romanian critic before 1990, wrote, in reference to the main traits of contemporary Romanian literature ("contemporary" meaning "post-Stalinist" rather than post-war literature): "We shall put the rediscovery of national tradition above all else. The conscience of tradition signifies the intuition of the deep spiritual community that highlights the internal cohesion of a people's culture". (Manolescu 1969,3)

Nevertheless, as far as literary studies were concerned, it did not matter what structuralism really meant, as long as it seemed like an option of reading literature free from the shackles of University (in France; in Romania: the shackles of the ideological Cerberuses of the 1950s).

What Remains of the Eastern Literary Structuralism?

The progressive de-Stalinization during the 1960s allowed Eastern European national cultures to reclaim their traditions and sources of Western inspiration, but the dogmatic parenthesis of the 1950s still had an impact on these reunions. It was not so much a matter of regaining the right to have free exchanges, but rather the liberty of making carefully verified choices. Hence, Romanian intellectuals to whom political authorities had finally given permission to study: linguistics first of all, after the permission given by Stalin himself, as he contends language is not a superstructure, but an objective scientific object (see Stalin, 1950 and the interpretation of Stan, 2017). In the aftermath of linguistic research and approaches, European and comparative literature could be approached as well: these are the auspices of the activity – all across the 50s and the early 60s – of Tudor Vianu's stylistic criticism (and of his students). Still under the influence of the severe censorship from the 1950s, what mattered most to these intellectuals was to reinstate the stock exchange of literary values from before the instauration of the Stalinist dictatorship. Above all, irrespective of the critical method used, they needed a way to put literary works "back in their place", along with all the conceptual devices allowing them to sustain an "aesthetical" criticism.

Interrupting the exchanges with the Occident, distancing from the official socialist realism promoted by the Soviet Union, even during the Thaw Era, and – of course

– the already marginalized state of the Romanian culture as compared to Western Europe, consequently contributed to a distinctive reception of French structuralism. Right from the start, the interest of young Romanian intellectuals in structuralism – primarily Virgil Nemoianu and Toma Pavel, and others that followed along the way – could not have been anything other than strategic: they profited from the new approach to language and literature, especially in order to produce and distribute their own intellectual convictions in the context of a relative ideological dictatorship. At the same time – this is mostly the case Nemoianu – they tried hard to import a redacted version of “structuralism”, free from any subversive charge which could make one remember the past “revolutionary” dogmas. By doing this, these Romanian scholars, most active during the 1960s, when Socialist Romania took a markedly nationalist path, sought to keep the balance between any ideological explicit commitment: French structuralism had thus to keep a low profile and it was relegated most of the time as a fashion. The attempt to assimilate literary structuralism into a version of “stylistic criticism” was doubled several years later – by the time Nemoianu and Pavel would have already started their Occidental academic careers – by the sharp criticism of an intellectual movement undermined by ideological biases that were considered harmful. These tendencies engendered the disregard for the major stakes of French structuralism, specifically those that did not pertain to actual literary criticism, during a time when traditional literary criticism earned a remarkable degree of autonomy compared to the general discourse of human sciences.

Most of the specific arguments put forth by Thomas Pavel against the French Theory discourse remain valid, as well as the manner in which Barthes chose to spread a certain version of structuralism in order to mold the French social sciences in particular. Even so, they fail to address a number of essential intellectual issues: the connection between society and literature, on the one hand, and the understanding of reality dynamics beyond the vertical model leading the various structures of reality towards their common essence to be compressed into a comprehensive image-structure. In other words, the Romanian critical works on French structuralism – which we have discussed in its Barthesian version – move past the rapport between aesthetics and society, which is fundamental in (post)modern societies. Once the socialist regimes were overthrown in 1989, “the structural man” depicted by Barthes, already nonexistent in the Eastern scene, had no chance of being (re)born in a post-communistic context, haunted by moral maximalism and witch hunts.

Notes

- * This article is a slightly revised and rewritten version of an article published in 2017 in *Knjizevna Istorija*, 49, no 161/2017, pp. 233-250, in French: Roland Barthes et la politique du structuralisme en Roumanie socialiste.
- 1 To all these questions, an ample and since then, pivotal answers was provided by Adriana Stan in her book, *Bastionul lingvistic. O istorie comparata a structuralismului in Romania* [The

- linguistic bastion. A comparative history of structuralism in Romania, Stan, 2017]. The title also alludes to the *The spell of language* [*Le mirage linguistique*], Thomas Pavel's 1988 book (Paris, Minuit) which discusses the (mis)adventures of structuralism and post-structuralism in France.
- 2 An English version of the text was published by *PRAXIS International*, issue: 3 / 1988, pages: 350-359, to be found at the Central European University Library: *East-European Intellectuals and the National-Communist State: A View from Bucharest*.
 - 3 Barthes quotes Lévi-Strauss beginning with *Mythologies*, in 1956. See OC I, 721.
 - 4 I want to thank my former student Alexandra Barsan for the translation of the excerpts taken from *Oeuvres complètes*, as well as for the translation of the French version of this article into English.
 - 5 One of the most important notions in Barthes's theoretical vocabulary, it is charged with ideological and, later, psychoanalytical meaning. In English, the notion was also translated with imagination: "The bourgeoisie is constantly absorbing into its ideology a whole section of humanity which does not have its basic status and cannot live up to it except in imagination, that is, at the cost of an immobilization and an impoverishment of consciousness". (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, The Noonday Press, 1972, p.140. Translation by Jonathan Cape).
 - 6 For more on Barthes' institutional marginalization, see Tiphaine Samoyault's autobiography, Samoyault: 2015. Barthes has never submitted a doctoral dissertation, but he did serve as supervisor.

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