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THE FOUNDING FATHERS OF STYLISTICS, A DOUBLE PORTRAIT: LEO SPITZER AND DUMITRU CARACOSTEA

ABSTRACT

The present paper aims at throwing some light on the way in which stylistics as a new literary science emerged, in the studies of two significant literary theorists of the 20th century. Both their theorizing positions are derived from the experience of World War I. D. Caracostea and Leo Spitzer were doctoral colleagues, in Vienna, in the department headed by the great linguist W. Meyer-Lubke, prior to WW I. War was to separate them forever. Nevertheless, it was also the war that caused them to reflect along similar lines on the necessity of devising a new scientific basis for literary studies. His experience as a military censor in prisoner camps provided Leo Spitzer with the most "concrete" materials for defining expressive stylistics, a new discipline in literary research. Likewise, D. Caracostea's interest in folklore prompted the young Military Academy professor in the 1920's to search the recent memories of peasant soldiers for the stuff that could help reestablish a collective psychology, actually foreshadowing modern anthropology.

KEY WORDS: D. Caracostea, WW1, collective psychology, Leo Spitzer, expressive stylistics.

The history of ideas (and disciplines) always encounters some difficulties when it comes to identifying the precise moment when a current, a field or a (new) science was born. We can give a very detailed picture of how ideas travel, of how various areas of research developed of how currents blend (be it in a polemic, explicit or undeclared manner) as easily as we can deconstruct the primacy claims of some or the misreadings of others. Whenever those very "first moments" are at stake, the situation is similar to what happens in the field of astronomy: hard to grasp, those first minutes are the subject of several working hypothesis or they are often wrapped up in the triumphant rhetoric of major narratives pertaining to various fields that – given some obvious difficulties – eventually decide to ignore them. One hypothesis concerning the birth of literary stylistics, a few decades after World War I, that I wish to develop in what follows, is based on a few "scraps of certitude". I will refer to: 1) the possibility of documenting the actual meeting between Leo Spitzer and Dumitru Caracostea during their doctoral years (each one of them would later independently establish a stylistic perspective on literature); 2) the possibility to demonstrate the similarities between their first "post-war" writings which, given the experience of the battle field, as it was depicted by peasant soldiers,

come very close to the problematic of style (and expressivity) of the language, and respectively; 3) the possibility to demonstrate the similarities between their understanding of the notion of style (…and literary art) on the basis of some of the studies that brought each one of them the title of "founding fathers" of stylistics.

Even though their meeting during the doctoral years is a curious coincidence of history, it fails to explain everything. Documenting it (even if such a task does not concern these following pages) would add "concreteness" to the historic material needed for the burdensome reconstruction I mentioned earlier when referring to the "first moments" of the new (oncoming) literary discipline. Leo Spitzer and Dumitru Caracostea actually met at a (Austro-Hungarian) seminar for doctoral students: they were colleagues and shared the same academic space. They lived in Imperial Vienna, attending a university that represented both a conservative forum of education as well as a genuine melting pot of ideological and scientific transformations,[1] which would mark the following decades of the century. They participated in the Romanistics seminar, which at the time was conducted with an iron hand by W. Meyer-Lübke. Leo Spitzer (Jewish, a second rank citizen of the Habsburg Empire and a prodigious polyglot) and Dumitru Caracostea (born in the province of Oltenia, a Romanian citizen, student at the University of Bucharest, holder of a state scholarship at the University of Vienna and an impenitent francophile) were two young doctoral students with very different backgrounds, who would follow very different paths after 1914. Nevertheless, for a few years they worked together and they were equally dissatisfied with the scientific dogma they had conform to in the study of Romance language and literature (this dogma mainly consisted in neogrammar, linguistic geography and positivist literary history). Apart from this type of encounter we do not know anything else about their relationship. The beginning of the War sets them apart: one is summoned in the imperial army while the other one returns home, to Bucharest; there is no evidence as to whether they stared or resumed, in times of peace, any epistolary relationship. History would turn Leo Spitzer into a wandering scientist, unlikely prone to travel with an archive or be easily traced by letters. Much later, after the World War II, another type of history would turn the archive of the Romanian literary historian (who was under the investigation of the Communist *Securitate*) into ashes.

At a closer look, we can see that they both developed similar answers to the challenges that their fields of specialization were exposed to. Another coincidence may be the fact that, for both of them, the catalysing element of their first innovative theoretic attempts stemmed from the experience of the First World War, from the way in which it was metabolized by the popular conscience of the peasant soldier, of the anonymous hero, of the inglorious victim, sacrificed on the altar of the first war of the century. In this respect, their first important scientific writings are surprisingly complementary. In Spitzer's case, I would mainly refer to two studies (*Die Umschreibungen des Begriffes „Hunger" in italienischen*, Niemeyer, 1920 – which is in fact his doctoral dissertation and which relies on the documentary material he gathered up during the war, when he worked as censor, examining the correspondence of the war prisoners of the Austro-Hungarian army, and,

[1] For a description of the general atmosphere in the empire at the break of the First World War, see Christopher Clark (Clark 2013: 73): "Prosperous and relatively well administered, the empire, like its elderly sovereign, exhibited a curious stability amid turmoil. Crises came and went without appearing to threaten the existence of the system as such".

respectively, *Italienische Kriegsgefangenenbriefe. Materialien zu einer Charakteristik der volkstümlichen italienischen Korrespondenz*, ed. I, 1921, Bonn, Hanstein Verlag). In the case of Caracostea, I will resort to one of his academic courses, which practically remained unknown to the present date, *Aspectul psihologic al războiului*, Bucharest, 1922 (Caracostea 2015; all references relate to this second edition). What can we say about these titles today? If we take a look at the evolution of the bibliography of Romance studies in the last decades, we have to salute the fact that Leo Spitzer is making a praiseworthy comeback, especially after the new edition of his fundamental volume on the *World Harmony*. *Semantic History of an Idea* (Spitzer 2006). Back in the '80s, the French edition of his studies had set him – with the courtesy of an illustrious commentator such as Jean Starobinski – on the orbit of "non-structuralist" literary criticism. Nevertheless, present-day specialists have little knowledge about the philological studies of the author, especially the ones produced during his youth. They should be rediscovered, especially at a time such as ours, when we are short in conceptual instruments that would help us build an accurate perspective on the stylistic effects of censorship on the European literature written under communism. Ultimately, his doctoral work (on the expressions used by Italian war prisoners for the word "hunger" – Spitzer 1920), as well as other related studies that revolve around the experience of World War I, still bear a methodological inventiveness and a clairvoyance that are more than interesting.

Needless to say that D. Caracostea is a figure who was put on the side-lines of the Romanian history of ideas. On the one hand, this situation is mainly due to the communist's "zeal," who not only imprisoned him at Sighet after the War (sentenced without a trial, he was in prison from 1950 to 1955) but blacklisted his work, too (most often than not with no obvious ideological arguments). On the other hand, another major factor that cast him into oblivion was his fellows' opportunism; during the '50s, some of his more charismatic and more "realist" colleagues rapidly transformed their adversity towards Caracostea in a statement of loyalty to the "revolutionary" causes of the new postwar political order.

In what follows, I would like to approach the third point from my initial "scraps of certitude" list, meaning the issue of the conceptual similarities between Spitzer's and Caracostea's theories. Each of them would independently – and most probably without any knowledge of the other one's work – become founders of stylistics. Consecrated during the interwar period, their work is quintessential to the implementation of linguistics as a "trial-science" in the field of literary studies and to the emergence of the new field of literary stylistics. If we focus on the situation of the first decades after 1918, we can easily see that both Spitzer and Caracostea spend their youth and, later on, their mature age during fortunate times and, in spite of the various crises that affect them, enjoy a period that was culturally *blissful*. It was an age of research, of fertile debates and a time when different streams of thought, with distinctive backgrounds, would meet and fundamentally follow the same goals or have the same obsessions. For the entire European culture at large, the interwar was the last age of unrestrained blossoming of the spirit: a world in perpetual change, where crises and conflicts of ideas were nothing more than the signs of the troublesome (and joyful) birth of a new episteme.

When speaking about "the future of criticism," Caracostea always insisted on the high priority of its "scientific discipline." The Romanian theoretician acknowledges a

crisis of credibility of critical voices, a crisis of authority and he denounces the constant degradation of "Maiorescu's posterity". In order to respond to such a crisis, he sets the ground for a new discipline, which could be seen as both a borderline and a synthesis of other disciplines. While he spends a long time trying to find the suitable name for this new discipline, only one name (and *stylistics* is not on the short list) stands out due to its comprehensive and, as we would say today, contemporary definition:

> in fact, the study of psychological phenomena, the insight that we can have on social facts, the historic study of grand cultures and literatures and, if need be, the use of linguistic data, in an insignificant quantity for the poor work of impressionist criticism, are decisive means of orientation for an aesthetician, because they can procure him a much needed perspective for any intellectual endeavour. Any type of criticism that disregards these various points of view lacks precisely those elements that give life to literature – it lacks a feeling of time differences and, by overseeing many things, the circle of its understanding and sympathy will get narrower and narrower. (Caracostea 1986: 1)

Caracostea's attitude towards the emerging formalism of the early years of the interwar period and his effort to renew the science of literature in the spirit of a major synthesis (between literature and language, between the historical and aesthetic perspective) signal his interest for the circulation of ideas in the European space and his attention for its critical, vulnerable and nonetheless fertile aspects. An encyclopaedic intellect, the Romanian scholar is fascinated by the European literary ideas not because of their dogmatic adaptability, but for their potential to be progressively "tested" and creatively integrated to his own theoretical constructs. Thus, it is not his eclecticism, but his restlessness that acts as a defining feature of his personality.[2]

It is nevertheless true that the study of literature, as Caracostea understood it, is hard to retrace, as the author incessantly postponed the systematisation of his theoretical ideas. Even from this perspective, Spitzer and Caracostea are very much alike. What best describes their conceptual pursuits, their unrelenting curiosity and most of their intellectual features, is a description made by one of their generation colleagues who outlines, in my opinion, the generic type of "the pathfinder," specific to interwar academic milieux. It is the portrait of Roman Jakobson, signed by Tvetan Todorov:

> Jakobson is not the man of an obsessive idea, a man who would spend his entire life defending it, having disciples who would identify with it, he is not the author of a dogma, but rather that of numerous and diversified discoveries which were, undoubtedly, not always compatible with one another. Instead of watching over the purity of the doctrine, he practices an immense intellectual fine workmanship, with fecundity as its prime feature. (Todorov 1985: 2)

From the beginning, his new perspective on the study of literature was a plea for "psychologism"; his option echoes the emblematic advancements of the beginning of the 20th century, a time when psychology becomes a social science *per se*. At the dawn of the century, the same atmosphere influences Saussure's "mentalism." For both of them, the "acts of language" can be explained through "acts of thought." This type of judgment is also at the core of Caracostea's thought when he attempts to reshape the psychology of the peasant soldier, as seen in the study quoted earlier, by relying on the language acts

[2] I have discussed the profile of the Romanian scholar in Bot, 2001.

of the soldiers (their various accounts of the war, etc.) in order to extend his demonstration to "acts of thought".

One of the most natural questions that arise in this context is: what particular factors determined Caracostea's typological configuration (if we agree that World War II and the communist regime put an end to a destiny that unfolded mainly before 1945)? "The spirit of the epoch" could offer a generous, yet vague, explanation. More so, the theoretic options of the Romanian scholar – formulated in terms of renewal and synthesis, but which can also be seen as answers to a crisis that Caracostea apprehends in all its complexity – benefit, very early in his career, from the "prerequisite apprenticeship" aside Meyer-Lübke and the neo-positivist grammar school. He was not the only one in this situation. Leo Spitzer gave a very similar account, using approximately the same words. Rebellion is often a mirror for the rebel himself and just like Caracostea, Spitzer will experience, in Starobinski's terms,

> a feeling of dissatisfaction and revolt [...] in front of Meyer-Lübke's positivist prudence, who's works seem to refer to the prehistory of the French language and not to its real history; the feeling of revolt grew in front of the conservative studies of literary historians, which seemed ridiculous in their attempt to avoid the live core of a literary work, in their digressions on secondary issues, minor details and futile annotations. (Starobinski 1970: 73)

Still, whenever we consider Caracostea's and Spitzer's apprenticeship years with Meyer-Lübke, we generally tend to forget (and Starobinski's study is no exception, in this respect) the impact of the scientific and cultural climate of Vienna during World War I, we fail to address the effervescence of that "*fin de siècle*" atmosphere, developing under the auspices of a new world, its tolerance and openness towards a vast array of ideas, theories and systems – which were all brought together in this declining centre of the old imperial Europe. For the Eastern and Western world, Vienna was the epicentre of the European culture and starting from 1919 this role (in a different political context, nevertheless significant for the polarized geography of Europe) will be partially played by the city of Prague (and, in this respect, the advent of the Prague Circle, is another effect of this phenomenon). In other words, given the fact that Vienna reunited under the same roof both the exemplary "dogma" and the possible strategies for its abolition, for Caracostea and Spitzer "Vienna" was the embodiment of a blissful initiatory experience, it set up the apparition of congruent visions of the two scholars and, we dare say, of an identical spiritual *pattern*. It was a *pattern* of... agitation, of unrelenting pursuit.

If in Romania, Caracostea's theorizing agitation faced public distrust, Spitzer was read in a completely different manner, although in the eyes of the interwar academic milieux he was confined to a somewhat hyperspecialized field of Romance studies: Starobinski sheds a new light on this typological "agitation":

> I see something quite exemplary in this impossibility of the scholar to remain within the boundaries of his own science, in the exaltation that makes him break disciplinary confines, in the impetus that turns a linguist into a stylistician, then into a literary critic and eventually into a poet of ideas. Limits suffocate him: for him there is always some sort of isolation he has to defeat, a glorious openness he has to find, a contact he has to make. His lucidity, his passion is partially explained by the fact that he has the status of a stranger. (Starobinski 1970: 13)

In fact, what Starobinski sees in Spitzer is equivalent to the essential ineffable that Caracostea – himself a "poet" – describes by using a shocking expression for a theoretician of the "new scientific objectivity".

> Anyone who has no other gift than the one of patient observation can be an excellent philologist: no one can accomplish the mission of being an interpreter of literary life without this particular synthetic emotional property, a creative property, nevertheless, an ability to sympathise with and rebuild the lives of the humble, a gift for vividly sharing all that we were able to see after a long endeavour and due to a special literary intuition. *Should there be a territory were these deep words science is love speak the truth, that is the territory of literature* (u. I.B.). (Caracostea 1944: 22)

There are many aspects where Spitzer's and Caracostea's theories overlap. All general aspects considered, I would like to conclude this "double disquiet portrait" by suggesting a parallel reading:

a) Caracostea in *Clasicismul stilisticei poporane* [*The classicism of folklore stylistics*]:

> In opposition to the ones who, locally or throughout the world, dealt with the study of folkloric epic creations, we have become more and more convinced that the fundamental images, the great symbols, their formal organisation and tension say more about the essence of imagination than any of type of investigation. It enables us with a clear perspective on the centre of metamorphosis, securing us from any doctrinal intrusion. [...] By being able to look at a work from the very centre of its formal crystallisation, the researcher occupies the same position as the artist, having in addition a much required objectivity. (Caracostea 1969: 355)

b) Spitzer, in *Études de style*:

> to travel from the surface to «the vital inner centre» of a work of art: first, observing the details on the visible surface of every work of art […] and then bringing these details together and trying and integrate them to the creative principle that must have been present in the spirit of the artist and, eventually, returning to all the other fields of observation and finding out whether «the inner form» that you have tried to build gives a full understanding of the whole. (Spitzer 1970: 60)

Such statements actualize, in fact, the key elements of an extended theoretical program and enact a series of reactions to the European context. They refer to the configuration of the object of literary studies and they acknowledge its relationship to the critical subject. Caracostea's memento, "securing ourselves from any doctrinal intrusion" is revealing for his distrust of the risk of doctrinal transformation and ideological subordination of literary criticism. Also, the theoreticians' focus on "the centre of formal crystallisation" (of a literary piece), meaning on its inner form, anchor their ideas in a humboldtian line of thought.

During the interwar period, when he explicitly pleads for an association of stylistics to literary studies, Caracostea formulates his opinions in a manner that is convergent to the theories developed by Spitzer. Inside Caracostea's theoretical vision, the primacy of the aesthetic in linguistics, the formalist idea of the *aesteme*, the neo-humboldtian idea of a dynamic of the inner form of the language (with an aesthetic objective) are, in

fact, distinctions and elaborations of a fundamental postulate, formulated in very clear-cut terms by the author in his book, *Expresivitatea limbii române [Expressivity of the Romanian Language]*.

> By showing how the structure of the language determines the literary expression, which is similar to the way in which, from a distance, great works shine their light on the essence of the language and on its specificity, it has become *necessary that the two disciplines, linguistics and literature, seen as two forms of expression, remain strongly connected* (u. I.B.). (Caracostea 1942: 236)

The linguist should have the possibility to think from a literary point of view, while the researcher should have the possibility to think from a linguistic one. In fact, Caracostea does not digress from the original formalist postulates of his time, which aimed to reconfigure the field of literary criticism with the help of linguistics, making use of all its instruments. In this context, stylistics would act – in Spitzer's terms – as a "bridge between linguistics and literary history" (Spitzer 1970: 54). In agreement, once more, with Spitzer, the Romanian theoretician considers that a synthesis between literary criticism and linguistics would be one the most unquestionable ways to overcome the "epistemological cut" and the crisis that affects them. If Spitzer considered a "more scientifically rigorous definition of an individual style: a linguist's definition that would replace the occasional and impressionistic remarks of literary critics" (Spitzer 1970: 54), Caracostea's ambition to offer a positive ground to the analysis of a literary work is, in fact, a polemic response to the same type of impressionistic criticism.

In exchange, the two theoreticians have divergent opinions in their understanding of another fundamental concept of stylistics – the *écart*. Caracostea aims to counterbalance the "paradox of the *écart*" by redefining its *context*, in terms of an "inner form." His work on folklore gives him the opportunity to observe the phenomenon of "information spreading" and forces him to reconsider the category of "the innovative individual" from the perspective of the (historic, social, cultural) context which accepts the innovation, in conformity to a set of mentality and language universalia. Caracostea's guarded position concerning the problem of the *écart* separates him from Spitzer, who

> does not deny the existence of the immanent laws of language altogether, but rather shows a more acute interest towards expressive variations, that bear the trace of the locutor's intention. In doing so, he attempts to touch the matter of the speaking subject (singular or collective) with the help of neologisms, deformations and innovative syntactic structures. Consequently, it is not impossible to link Spitzer's thought to the position adopted by the Romantic linguistics, who tried to identify the distinctive signs of a *genius* of the time or those of *genius* of the peoples at a linguistic level; also, we have to add the fact that, beyond all positive investigations and mechanical systematisations, Spitzer was in fact returning to the root of linguistic *science*. (Starobinski 1970: 8)

As long as this concerns a "national genius," that reigns over every linguistic creation (and over their dissemination), Caracostea is once again on a similar path as Spitzer – a path that leads to the origins of the old science of language – which the modernity of his theoretical constructs tried to dismiss.

In addition, "the spiritual" (used by Caracostea as an attribute of an act of style) can be compared with Spitzer's interpretation of the figure (of innovation, of the *écart*) as

"sign of the psychological" expressed through language. However, as Spitzer's preoccupation was the realisation of an individual stylistics, of languages and writers, he privileges the relationship between individual psychism and the figure (although, according to positivist criteria, the latter is incommensurable), which he sees as a univocal and reflecting relationship. Stylistics, says Spitzer,

> such as I have been reflecting on it for years, by putting the rosslerian thinking into practice (*another mutual interest for him and Caracostea* – n. I.B.), relies on the postulate according to which every emotion, and even every break from our normal state, is echoed, on an expressive level, by a break from the normal *linguistic* use; also, every break from the usual language discloses a singular psychological state. In a word, a singular linguistic expression is the reflex [...] of a particular condition of the spirit (a.u.). (Spitzer 1975: 46–47)

In reality, both Spitzer and Caracostea refuse to see the "expressivity-innovation--aesthetic" as a superordinate function of the language (analogous to Jakobson's poetic function) and especially as a function that entails the folding in of language upon itself, reflecting its *selfreferentiality*. For them, *language expresses something* (even if this *something* is, eventually, of a metaphysical essence) and *it does not express itself*. In conclusion, this is one of the core ideas on which both of their theoretical projects are built. For both of them, this idea appears at the same time as their first research dedicated to the testimonials of the peasant soldiers (prisoners) during World War I. Their letters (for Spitzer) and their *post festum* testimonials (for Caracostea) search and eventually find linguistic means to express the inexpressible of a borderline situation: violence, death, pain, hunger, cold and fear serve as a sort of genuine expressive challenges, that the speakers of a language, no matter how low their level of education was, manage to overcome in a creative way. Creation inside the language. This is a first step towards a different understanding of literature, a first step that echoes the battleground of World War I, demonstrating to what extent the birth of a science can be influenced by factors external to its area of inquiry, and, respectively, to its own object.

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