



Antonio Patraș

The Anecdote in *The History* of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present

Abstract: Călinescu's method of critical inquiry is based on biography and psychoanalysis. Thus, in his capital work *The History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*, portrayal techniques have an essential role in conveying ideas. Nevertheless, his interest in anecdote has usually been ignored because it has been considered only the residual, unserious part of his critical vocation. What I aim in the present article is to prove that the anecdote represents not only the very engine of Călinescu's ideas, but also the incentive of the creative process. Taking into consideration the anecdote's mediation and remediation role, I aim at analyzing the subtle exchanges between the book's "matters" (enchaining a series of monographs/portraits) and the book's matter (Călinescu's choice of book illustrations and paper) in the process of building a monument of petty things.

Keywords: Anecdote; Portrait; Biography; Monograph; Monument; Matter; Book Illustration.

ANTONIO PATRAȘ

"Alexandu Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania
patrasantonio@gmail.com

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1. A Monument of Petty Things

Being passionate about history and archeology since high school years, G. Călinescu had always admired the great Renaissance personalities on whose models he tried to shape a humanist profile that could go beyond the narrow-cut domains of knowledge. After a profitable apprenticeship with Vasile Pârvan and Ramiro Ortiz, he consecrated himself as a brilliant critic by publishing a biography, *Viața lui Mihai Eminescu/ Life of Mihai Eminescu* (1932), which would put a decisive stamp on his artistic destiny. The book reconfigured from scratch the biographic genre (which had been indebted beforehand only to pure archival skills), by reviving Eminescu's myth in a revolutionary manner, in terms of both ideas and argumentation levels. Here everything was reeled out in an epic, breathtaking, novel-like form. To Al. Rosetti goes the merit of grasping the nature of Călinescu's creativity. In fact, he is the first editor who suggested that the critic should deliver a history of Romanian literature, knowing that Eminescu's young biographer could definitely manage



such a difficult job. From that moment on, Călinescu channeled his creative energies toward the accomplishment of this purpose. Besides, he completed Eminescu's biography with a minute analysis of the poet's work, then he published an exceptional monograph on Ion Creangă's prose. The latter celebrates the storyteller from Humulești as an exponential writer, as a *sui generis* expression of the Romanian people "caught in a moment of genial expansion."

Along with these two monographs that enhance the ties between the aesthetic dimension of the writer's work and personality, Călinescu was also enhancing his theoretical knowledge in view of his future history. This was done through a series of explanatory studies (published in 1939 under the title *Principii de estetică/ Principles of Aesthetic*) that elaborated and cleared up his conception on both literature and criticism. Influenced by Benedetto Croce's line of thought, the critic challenges here the legitimacy of the aesthetic and proclaims criticism to be a form of creation in itself, albeit one that is essentially linked with literary history. The latter is regarded as "the ineffable science and epic synthesis," briefly, as the most complex type of criticism. According to Călinescu, literary history should be a history of values; hereby, hierarchies are accredited by a configured tradition and by an evolutionary script conceiving aesthetic phenomena as the natural offspring of culture. After a gradual emancipation from culture, literature becomes an autonomous institution; writing is as honorable as any other profession. It is for this reason that old Romanian literature is discussed rather fragmentarily as a cultural artifact, while from the age of the Classics on (late nineteenth century) Călinescu focuses on individual works.¹

Beyond the overall image, which might just turn coherent, a competent commentator of Călinescu's work such as Andrei Terian has explained the contradictions within the critic's system: his idealism, which generates the obsession with the ineffable, is irreconcilable with the historian's determinism, with the historian's way of imagining a line of evolution and establishing value hierarchies.² Derived more from mythology and less from positive science, Călinescu's history befuddles the relationship between history/ race/ aesthetics, which actually leads to a novel-like projection starring those writers that are perceived as representative from a racial viewpoint. Where it is acknowledged, value seems to be conditioned by belonging to race. This is why Călinescu reiterates several times that Jewish writers cannot create as monumental and long-lasting as the autochthonous ones.

Călinescu's method of critical inquiry is based on biography and psychoanalysis. It should come as no surprise that his chief purpose is the *portrait* (collective and individual). Obviously, *The History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present* is not structured as a history of literary forms but as a *history of personalities*. Accordingly, all writers are dealt with in a monographic manner, being integrated in a certain historical period on the grounds of each work's dominant and distinctive trait. Mapped this way, Romanian literature is introduced by the critic as a series of micro-monographs puzzled out within the frame of a legitimizing meta-narration. Calling forth Hayden White's famous book, Andrei Terian calls Călinescu's text a "meta-history," "an ethno-centered romance" whose plot can be detected only in the final chapter.



Indeed the chapter devoted to the “national specificity” represents only the intrigue of Călinescu’s history, and not the denouement, as many readers might be led to believe.³ What links all these figures is their belonging to a common psychic and moral ground. The anti-formalist approach (narration justifies here only the relationship between the individual and race) enables Călinescu to escape the distinction between life and work, between the author and his/ her characters. Literature is nothing but an extension of one’s personality. One’s value certifies the value of one’s work. Hence, the significance of the anecdote for Călinescu’s critical discourse.

2. Călinescu, the Great Gossiper

In what follows, I endeavor to point out some aspects of Călinescu’s *History*... that have usually been ignored because they have been considered the rubbish, the residual part of this work. What I aim in the present article is to prove that the anecdote, with its specific ingredients, represents not only the very engine of Călinescu’s ideas, but also the incentive of the artistic process. In fact, anecdotes quicken ideas by bringing them down to the unpredictable level of sensorium. “Anecdotal theory,” Jane Gallop suggests, “would cut through oppositions [humorous vs. serious, short vs. grand, trivial vs. overarching, specific vs. general] in order to produce theory with a better sense of humor, theorizing which honors the uncanny detail of lived experience.”⁴

Read in this manner, that is, as a collection of anecdotes, history unveils itself as “a monument built of petty things.” Splendor shows up only when these petty things

are zoomed in on, like one has to do when looking at the bas-reliefs of Indian Temples. And this is perfectly natural, because the critic’s brickwork is always doubled by an irrepressible artisanal vocation. Set up as such, the perspective is fully loaded with seductive details and scenes without a cognitive or ideological content, sometimes all for naught, for art’s sake.

In *Dicționarul de termeni literari* coordinated by Al. Săndulescu – and in all other dictionaries – the anecdote is linked with its Greek etymon, designating an “unhackneyed thing.” In Romanian, the term was imported through the French filiation and it is defined as “a brief story, most of the times, joyful, with a moral ending and with a picturesque air, inspired from everyday life or attributed to a famous character.”⁵ The stories reported by Procopius of Caesarea in his *Secret History* (actually subtitled “Anecdote”) represent the archetypal forms of the anecdote. During the Middle Ages, the collections of brief moral and jocular stories increased the circulation of fragments that had previously been transmitted orally. Indeed, anecdotes ingrain a subversive potential with respect to authority. Compared to the other forms of rebellion or authority contestation, anecdotes are admitted because they unveil despicable but wanted details, kept secret from the public.⁶ This is how the tremendous popularity of this literary genre should be explained. Detecting its deep cultural roots, some scholars also refer it to the Bible. Marion C. Moeser, for instance, places anecdotes – along with sacred legends, heroic legends, myths, riddles, sayings, exempla, memorabilia, fairy-tales and jokes – in the category of “simple forms,” as does Andreas Jolles.⁷ The “simple forms” make the transition



between language and literature. The mobility of the genre and its adaptability is actually illustrated though a diversity of forms already defined and ranked taxonomically. Nevertheless, due to concision, the anecdote acts like a volatile genre that cannot be recognized easily. "Anecdotes," M. C. Moesser admits, "are too varied, too indistinct and too widespread to constitute a recognizable genre."⁸ Therefore, because it is a borderline genre (unveiling unhackneyed things, easy to remember because of their summarizing and obvious character), what is specific in the way the anecdote functions can be enhanced only when it is related to literature and history.

On the one hand, literature (art, in general) observes Horatio's principle *ut pictura poesis* and uses anecdote in order to mirror reality with precision: "anecdotes can serve as the link between a lived experience and its literary representation."⁹ Due to its anecdotic content, literature becomes a precious research material not only for literary critics, but also for historians.¹⁰ On the other, the interactions of history and anecdote during Romanticism led to the establishment of a cult of heroes, whose personalities raised the public's curiosity. In this respect, Călinescu turned out to be a Romanian Francesco De Sanctis who, through his idealism and Hegelianism, was closer to Michelet and Hasdeu than to Ranke. In fact, the positive school used to discredit anecdote for its lack of scientific ground.

Given his taste for anecdotes and his personality, Călinescu guessed how important private life was. "Small histories," as the Annales School terms them, build the background on which "great historical narratives" are told. Accordingly, beside the

great Romanian writers, the critic inserts in his history a lot of minor writers, endowed with spectacular biographies, full of sensational events, informing not only individual life but also the horizon of past life and habits. Chosen by Călinescu himself, out of a desire to enhance certain ideas that the text merely suggests, diverse illustrations provide the reader with other features of the writer's context. For instance, side by side with kings that had their share of glory in both Romanian history and literature, Călinescu placed the portraits of quasi-anonymous rulers, princes, boyars and ordinary people, lithographs and engravings that sample the atmosphere. The anecdotic intention of both text and illustrations is obvious; the critic looks at his authors not only through the lens of aesthetic excellence, but also through their relationship with society in general and family in particular. Scholars have already remarked Caragiale's picture from his house in Berlin: the Romanian playwright is dressed in an Oriental costume, legs crossed like a Turk, with his library in the background.

All sorts of juicy intimate details are brought to the fore with gossipy pleasure. Exhibiting the private space has an essential role; in all likelihood, it humanizes the critical discourse, the anecdotic elements and the portrait, raising the idea to a higher level of clarity.¹¹ The portrait, in Călinescu's opinion, is a form of idealized and schematic art developed from an in-depth knowledge of the portrayed man.¹² Thence, involving anecdote and can-can within critical discourse does not cause the alteration of the portrait's ideal lines; on the contrary, they can enhance the dominant features with the indefinite colors of life.



The anecdote functions as a secondary, minor and distorting layer of discourse and, at the same time, as a catalyst. By assuming a humanist's posture, the critic manages to relativize his judicial and normative role, which eventually leads to a rehabilitation of marginality, imperfection, and impurity¹³. On the level of expression, the contraries are brought together within one and the same sentence. The essayist Alexandru Paleologu asserted that, unlike Baudelaire and the ensuing modern authors, G. Călinescu belongs with the spiritual family that "approves the Cosmos" in the same fashion that Goethe, Balzac or Hugo did. The preference for anecdote gives evidence of the critic's interest in life and its trivial parts. It is not by chance that new historicism proposes the term "counter-history" in order to illustrate the double function of the anecdote with respect to literature, on the one hand, and to history, on the other.

The anecdote could be conceived as a tool with which to rub literary texts against the grain of received notions about their determinants, revealing the fingerprints of the accidental, suppressed, defeated, uncanny, abjected, or exotic – in short, the nonsurviving – even if only fleetingly... The histories one wanted to pursue through the anecdote might, therefore, be called counter-histories, which it would be all the more exhilarating to launch if their destination was as yet undetermined and their trajectories lay athwart the best traveled routes.¹⁴

3. Anecdote and Biography

Let us stop now at several aspects that theorists have neglected so far. Turning back in time, we can notice the conventional character of the anecdote, its codification at all levels. The classical age favored the proliferation of anecdotes, albeit in an *underground* and oral area. Within the Junimea circle, for instance, the praise of anecdotes also conveyed the adherence to Classical values, as well as, on the social level, to aristocracy. Being "orifices" within the historical background,¹⁵ base stories would be squeezed into the official discourse only in therapeutic doses and only during a ritual assumed by all the community members. "The anecdote would open history, or place it askew, so that literary texts could find new points of insertion."¹⁶ This is the reason why the popular storyteller Ion Creangă was acclaimed by Junimea members; his literature was appreciated as the utmost expression of folklore, or as a product engendered by a collective mentality without any individual contribution.

And yet, the anecdote tends to be assumed as an integrative element of upper-class modern literature, especially in memoirs, which employ it as a technique of portrayal, as a way of dramatizing recollections on society. It is noteworthy that this "simple figure" is programmatically opposed to the elitist aesthetic that enforces the autonomy of literature, proclaiming the segregation of literature from life. From Edgar Allan Poe to the symbolists and surrealists, modern writers rejected anecdote (and anecdotic spirit in general) because they associated it with the bourgeois spirit and lifestyle, with a raw and unsophisticated mentality that ascribed literature only a



mimetic role: that of mirroring Life in a form that was as concrete and as dramatic as possible.

The context of G. Călinescu's activity, that is the Romanian interbellum period, did not seem to favor the anecdote from an aesthetic viewpoint. The critic himself would treat very harshly the abundant production of authors who used to pass for masters of this easy and comic genre before the World War I (N.T. Orașanu, George Ranetti and Theodor Sperantia). Conversely, superior accomplishments are found in Al. O. Teodoreanu and Ion Neulce's works. Unlike the former, the latter were able to integrate the anecdotic elements into a larger narrative structure. Neulce, for instance, is highly praised for his gossipy and inquiring temper, for his special ability to stage picturesque fine points and sensational happenings. Overall, there is a clear indication in Călinescu's history that anecdotal predisposition signals – in a variety of cases spanning from Neulce, Pitarul Hristache, Anton Pann, and G. Sion to Creangă, N. Gane, Sadoveanu, and Cezar Petrescu – a fundamental *ingenuity* that would be soon turned into the story's psychic environment. An unknown writer such as Pitarul Hristache possesses, according to the critic, "the ineffable talent of volubility" – all the more remarkable given that "this talent is engendered by ingenuity," "which is scarce, being something that springs from felicitous hazard."¹⁷

Călinescu himself is prone to anecdote and confession. But can this psychological trait be interpreted also as a sign of candor? Considering that, basically, the anecdote is an aid to portrayal techniques, the critic rejected both subjective literature (confessions, diary and so forth) and

romanced biography. "What is anecdote?" asks Călinescu. "A memorable gesture or word, captured or reported, that sums up or seems to sum up a man's nature." Contrary to his own inclinations, Călinescu does not recommend the use of anecdote for two reasons:

1. morally speaking, "the indiscretion of this genre rather discredits the critic";
2. aesthetically speaking, "the anecdote is an ineffective portrayal technique. It is not the man but his circumstances that the anecdote captures; it is, otherwise, a quick form of criticism, which can be transmitted easily even when it is thoroughly authentic. Whoever would dare picture humankind through anecdotes would undertake something that is doomed to fail."¹⁸

Thereby, the anecdote's fault is its "lack of delicacy" and sheer incapacity to individualize personality. Without forbidding completely the use of anecdotic elements, the critic only insists that the portrait should not be shrunk into pure anecdote or into "a combination of anecdotes." Being the result of a narrative and descriptive development, the portrait relies more on creation than on observation: "[the portrait means] in-depth intuition of man and showing the results on a fully ideal level"¹⁹. Based on such principles, the portrait relates only partially to contingency. While "the object is always probable and the gesture is invented within the framework of possibility," the portraitist "sometimes has to create fictitious situations in order to endorse his object's personality." In fact, he does the same as playwrights and painters when, in order to prove their verisimilitude, they "experiment with their heroes



and nudes by placing them in various moral and anatomic postures.”²⁰

Asserting that the artist has to express himself/ herself only under the aegis of Universal values, Călinescu evinces the importance of the transfiguration moment. It is not the anecdote as such that he actually rejects, but its claims to existential reality and “truth-to-life” delivery. In several articles he wrote in his youth, the critic attempted to prove that anecdotes did not reveal their authors’ personality, “because the real anecdote is a scholarly product,” borrowed from “scholarly tomes.”²¹ If this idea is taken into account, it is clear that the novel should not accommodate the anecdote because its purpose is to depict a standardized, typified version of mankind. Nonetheless, reliance on anecdote is mandatory in biographies because the biographer illustrates himself through an archeological and mythological work entirely devoted to one purpose alone: to build up an exceptional personality. Taking into consideration the arguments presented above, the biography of an ordinary man is, for Călinescu, useless and nonsensical.

According to Călinescu’s definitions, the anecdote should not turn critical discourse into “anecdotal theory”; however, biography relies on it, because the anecdote’s fictional character serves paradoxically to enhance the text’s verisimilitude. For this reason, we can define Călinescu’s monographic method as a process of construction guided by the liberty of choosing and inventing (if necessary) the significant detail. Biographical accounts and interpretations become thus the pitch and toss of the same exegetic endeavor; literature and life are, symbolically and fictionally, on the same side.

Călinescu must have sensed the risks entailed by this type of approach since he used to warn audacious imitators as follows:

The critic has to avail of a great finesse, of a great intuition of souls in order to know what exactly in one’s work genuinely reflects life and what the defining traits of one’s personality are. The danger lies everywhere as life can turn artificial if simplified according to certain schemes or if romanced through conventional gestures.²²

Biography is as fictional as the literary work as such. Since biography had been acclaimed as a legitimate form of creation, the critic did not avoid the referential interpretation of literature, even though this would suggest the failure of aesthetic transfiguration. Irrespective of its aesthetic accomplishment, a writer’s work represents the most faithful record of its author’s life experience. The critic must be able to interpret it adequately, that is, to preserve the impression of authenticity and spontaneity and cast out the aids of artifice and romance.

And yet, there is plenty of artifice and romance within the *History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*. Because of systematized and magnified portraits, clichés are unavoidable. As long as the aim of Călinescu’s criticism is the portrait itself (in whose mirror the work can be magnified), Romanian writers are, above all, related through blood ties. Romanian literature is the product of a big family of writers. Foreign influences are generally minimized, as the critic always aims to establish filiations from the past toward the present.²³ The inquiry is not assisted by the sensibility



for present issues, but by Călinescu's nineteenth-century passion for lists and genealogies, probably inspired by the works of the contemporaries Radu R. Rossetti or Octav George Lecca. Eventually, these brief forms of capturing large contexts of life reflect a way of dramatizing endless information, of reacting to virtually inexhaustible sources.²⁴ Being specific means being Romanian. From this viewpoint, Eminescu, Maiorescu, Creangă, Coșbuc, Goga, Rebreanu, Sadoveanu and Blaga ("the pure Sub-Carpathian writers") are the most representative; they are followed by Alecsandri and Odobescu ("the Southern," "Greek" spirits) and by "the Thracians" – Bolintineanu, Caragiale and Macedonski. Within this framework, the Jewish writers' role is to open the national ground to the Universal.²⁵ Typologically, there are three mentalities that root our writers' psychology: *a boyar mentality* (illustrated by Alecsandri, Kogălniceanu, Odobescu), *a rural mentality* (Eminescu, Coșbuc, Rebreanu) and *a Balkan mentality* (Caragiale, Arghezi, Ion Barbu). Each of these characterizes, in a cliché manner, a different region of the country: the Moldavians are boyar-like, the Wallachians are clownish, and the Transylvanians are rural. All the other figures that populate Călinescu's *History*... illustrate more or less individualized variations within this general mindset.

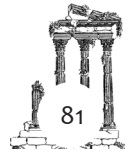
4. A Way of Conveying Materiality. Illustrating the History...

As mentioned before, a special function is fulfilled by the portraits provided as accompanying illustrations for the critic's descriptions. Since all writers are related through blood ties, *The History*... turns out to be a family album. There is enough

documentary information regarding the issue of choosing the proper illustrations for the critic's endeavor (see also the critic's correspondence with Al. Rosetti). Indeed, pictures, sketches, caricatures, paintings, manuscript facsimiles, old books snapshots, mortuary masks, and suchlike gain special emphasis in Călinescu's history. Their chief functions are "to comment on the text and to provide the foreign reader with an image of the Romanian civilization and physiognomy."²⁶ The cases where writers are caught in informal or family postures, while fishing, hunting or writing, are favored. In the same fashion as anecdotes, illustrations punctuate and open holes within the paginated text. Hence, the reader is presented with "an occasion for individuation,"²⁷ with an invitation to squeeze in imagination and pour Life into the critic's discourse. Meant to be both perused and contemplated, the critic's commentary also embeds its instructions for use, its manner of being read.

I have to stress the fact that such criticism, focused on text and image at the same time, relies primarily on suggestion. As a result, it touches the reader's sensibility to a greater extent than common books do, orienting attention by looking for hidden meanings. On the one hand, the critic's commentary can be considered an explicit interpretation of illustrations. Thus, Călinescu's literary portraits appear as fictional extensions of the photographs included within the book. On the other hand, the reverse is also true: illustrations are what the text has been unable to convey, what the critic is dreaming of.

Printed on expensive paper, Călinescu's *History*... dazzled readers not only through its contents, but also through its



material aspect. The critic was convinced that not only human beings, but also books carried their souls and passions outwardly, on their faces and bodies.

Materially speaking, says the critic in the preface, the present book, so simple after all, cost us an effort that has exceeded our expectations and kept us immobile, in the strictest sense of the word, for a very long while.²⁸

The link between the book's body and the book's soul can also be reflected in the relationships anecdote-idea and icon-idea, which breaks open the everlasting debate on the reality of ideas held between Realists (Plato's followers) and Idealists (Aristotle's followers).

5. Idealists and Realists

In monographic sequences, the critic emphasizes the most significant moments definable through the fundamental myths of our people: birth (family, social class), social position (jobs, wealth), man's cosmic circumstances (attitude toward death), creation (culture in general), and sexuality.

It is clear that most of Călinescu's purported anecdotes concentrate around uncanny details of private life, which in most cases are connected with sexuality. Călinescu's own life – biographers say – was not without juicy episodes. However, they have been redacted from literary texts, which, paradoxically, exalt matrimonial love and procreation. An attempt at sketching a typology of sexual issues would appear later in the essay “Poezia realelor” (1948),²⁹ where Călinescu avouches that the mystique of love did not have echoes in Romanian literature because woman is perceived only physically (she is useful phenomenally) and not metaphysically. Hence,

the typological Romanian writer epitomizes misogyny. This, in turn, draws on a rural mentality that permeates the whole domain of literature. Petrarca's followers were rather few and could be found only among the boyars from the families Văcărești and Conachi, who absorbed culture via French or Greek routes and who could celebrate platonic love as purely ideal.

There are thus two large categories of writers: “the realists” and “the idealists.” “The realists” are Plato's followers, monists who look at phenomenal reality as an emanation of ideas, of prototypes. “The idealists” are dualists incapable of sensing the links between physics and metaphysics, soul and body, this world and the other world. Accordingly, Romanian writers are mainly “idealists,” that is, misogynists who despise woman by default, albeit often being lured by women's charms. This category is illustrated by Călinescu through plenty of examples. Iordache Goleșcu was a dilettante graph-maniac, married twice: the first wife dumped him immediately after the wedding, while the second gave birth to no less than 23 children. Eufrosin Poteca was a womanizer eremite who passed away because of “ill-humor.” Al. Hrisoverghi fostered “a cult of the fair sex.” Kogălniceanu “loved glamour” and, like Rabelais' Gargantua, used to eat well and much. Anton Pann had “a tumultuous love-career.” Bolintineanu was “a great aesthete on feminine matters” and his “eyes used to chase after young, flighty women.” Alecsandri was a notorious “lover of the fair sex.” Odorescu was “a squanderer and a Lovelace.” B. P. Hasdeu was a prodigious genius with “an obvious erotic vocation,” while Pantazi Ghica “developed a taste for German and French variety actresses.”



A particular class is formed by writers diagnosed with tuberculosis, seemingly more libidinous than healthy people. One finds in this category the name of the philosopher Vasile Conta, “le libidineux Conta,” who “due to his illness, had the face of a sad sheik, which certainly increased his worldly successes.” Similarly, Traian Demetrescu almost “fainted when petticoats passed by.” Cincinat Pavelescu is said to have decided to marry again in his old age, yet to a younger woman, but unfortunately “splotched his bathroom with blood” before doing that. In the series of fierce lovers comes also the Apollonian Titu Maiorescu who, because of an early marriage, preserved his inclination towards beautiful women. Encouraging love experiments and having a great talent for courting women, Titu Maiorescu is not sided with; on the contrary, Călinescu described him as a social climber, endowed with a peasant’s mentality (“terian ardelean”), a flat didactic acuity and eloquence, which made him think everything in terms of efficiency. Of course, Maiorescu despised women on the grounds that their brains were lighter than men’s. So, after his first wife got sick and consequently was unable to raise her partner’s physical interest anymore, the Apollonian critic divorced her in order to marry, before long, a younger, more attractive woman (Ana Rosetti). Maiorescu, Călinescu concluded bitterly, was an “Idealist” who searched only for success and thus devoted himself to politics rather than to literature, which was only a circumstantial occupation, which he kept out of patriotic impulse, but without any true vocation.³⁰

Only a genius such as Eminescu – Maiorescu’s literary brand, to put it bluntly

– could project an ordinary feeling such as love into the Absolute. The interpretation of Eminescu’s erotic nature as something springing from elemental instincts should draw our attention. What Călinescu suggests is that the mechanics of sex is transferred into the rhythm of poetry; the critic also appreciates the poems inspired from Romanian folklore because they are touched by “the sublime *impersonalism* of the people.” Also, Călinescu detects in Eminescu’s poetry the religion of love next to his “peasant” mentality (woman is seen prototypically as “the young widow”), which can be deciphered in “erotic automatisms.” Eminescu conceived love, like nature, as a metaphysical and archetypal entity. Hence, his being featured as “the national poet” turned him into a writer whose biography had already become a myth. The literary historian’s interpretation finds the perfect balance between life and work; only exemplary aesthetic fulfillment can lead to a perfect fitting between anecdotal tales, life and work.

Some details of the poet’s life and illness betray the critic’s gossipy spirit. For instance, Eminescu’s Viennese affairs are supposed to have caused his health problems that are known to have caused his death.³¹ The circumstance bears some relevance as all the other pieces of information concerning the poet’s behavior to women during his illness. The critic’s innuendoes are meant to prove the race’s actual strength, therefore the poet’s fundamental sanity. Simplified to the same extent as Eminescu’s biography from 1932, the poet’s portrait confounds with “the mask of the genius.” Exposed *in aeternum*, the mask provides the previous anecdotal insertions with a figural, higher meaning. The same



goes for Creangă. He himself is an epitome of the Romanian race, practically having no biography because the classics – says Călinescu – are anonymous. Unsurprisingly, the anecdote vanishes completely from the entries Călinescu devotes to his own contemporaries. In this case, the critic is cautious and proclaims the following: “the artist’s biography does not start with his/ her birth date, but with his/ her death date.”³²

As mentioned before, free anecdotal information abounds in the first part of *The History*... In this sequence, all men of letters are taken for writers. Therefore, *The History*... mentions a certain Daniil Scavinschi, “Daniil, the short and sad one,” who decided to commit suicide because, out of mercury intoxication, he had lost his moustache. Next comes the anonymous A. Hrisoverghi, even if his sole literary glory was a translation after a melodrama written by Dumas-father. The “philosopher” I. Zalomit has his share of attention, even if his only philosophy – the critic concedes – “is a simple way of passing through life.”³³ Anyhow, even in the case of a historian such Nicolae Bălcescu, who had been already appreciated for his contributions, the author of *The History*... has to ascertain that the man is superior to the work.³⁴

How is it possible that so many writers were declared “geniuses” in absence of a consistent work? In a remarkable book published recently, Adrian Tudurachi has drawn the attention to the inflationist use of the term “genius” from 1825 through 1875. The figure of the Genius, notices the scholar, designates the creative spontaneity of a people of figurants. Genius does not refer now to outstanding exceptions. For instance, Heliade Rădulescu was prone

to acknowledge his collaborators’ “genius” (he even styled the phrase “a people of geniuses”), refusing instead to grant them the status of authorship too, which he reserved for himself.³⁵

The truth is that Călinescu likes the virtual qualities of Heliade Rădulescu’s writings and not his work as a whole. Alongside, the critic notices the unbalance between the man and his work, which is signaled through a profusion of anecdotal details. To mention only one of these, I will refer to Călinescu’s insistence on the *litterateur’s* constrictive matrimonial engagement. Before he left into exile, “his wife and daughters... kneeled before the icons... and chanted prayers asking that the husband be safe from women’s temptations.”³⁶ The poet endured his wife’s jealousy with a tint of stoic resignation; eventually, he witnessed her death, got mad and could not survive any longer. The chapter devoted to Heliade Rădulescu’s role in the 1848 Revolution restitutes the poet’s revolutionary posture through an amassment of intimate details; sympathetically, the critic catches his character’s megalomania, as a mixture of venom and candor, of cowardice and courage, of common sense and madness, the dominant being the poet’s quixotism, his aspiration to the ideal.

Coming back to the typology sketched above, we find out that the second category of “realist” writers also has a bent for the fair sex. Yet their poetry is not only confession, but pure transfiguration, which is perfectly opposed to a “libidinal” manner and “undainty concupiscence” developed lately by Alecsandri’s followers.³⁷ Conachi and Ienache Văcărescu come in this second category. The latter is introduced as “a most loving man with three wives,” who cultivated a



poetry inspired from the songs of the slums but harnessed by a cultivated style and “sententious concision that can enthral memory.”³⁸ Moreover, Al. Depărățeanu is “a poet with an instinct for the ineffable,” “the only substantial Petrarchan of our poetry,”³⁹ was deceased – what an ironic twist of fate! – due to a bowel occlusion. Conachi had a “follower” in the fiery C.A. Rosetti, the author of lyrics imbued with troubadour elements. Despite the legend of his loyalty to Maria, Călinescu suggests that C.A. Rosetti – like Heliade-Rădulescu – actually got married too soon, and only “because he liked all women and could not have them all.”⁴⁰ Towering over all are Heliade Rădulescu and Macedonski. They formed a sort of “company of visionaries” fascinated with the Absolute, yet with a Dantesque twist. In his critical assessments, Călinescu places the two writers in Eminescu’s proximity.

In his turn, the critic abhorred idealists and thought of himself as a “realist,” able to celebrate woman in a poetical, diaphanous manner, with grace and candid fervor (see Călinescu’s poems dedicated to Otilia in the volume *Lauda lucrurilor/ Praise of Things*). But unlike the Petrarchan realists, Călinescu was not a boyar offspring, but a bastard with mixed blood (his natural father was a Greek), a social climber, a tyrannical

husband with a Medieval mentality turned into sheer misogyny, a restless and clamorous “Balkan spirit,” a pathetic histrionic man, always prone to exaggeration. If his critical judgments were applied to the critic himself, we could state that Călinescu’s mixed blood imprinted his personality with a quixotic air. This is why Călinescu could not be the way he wanted to be. Instead, he was a “a realist” and “an idealist,” “an ataraxic” and “a petulant,” abstruse like a hermit but always looking for the people’s entourage, philosophically despising the world but being pushed forward by an unfathomable penchant for life and worldly pleasures.

To give a sample of his spirit, it is perhaps appropriate to end this study with an anecdote. The man who felt the calling of Life so intensely died on a bleak March day, before he turned 65. It was a Friday – Venus’s day – and he abhorred going out on Fridays because he thought the Ancient goddess brought him bad luck! Nevertheless, he passed away under the sign of love and fanatic admiration. Decidedly, his fabulous work, anecdotal and philosophical like a Halima, was to put a spell on future generations of critics and influence their style to such an extent that all of them would end up by imagining themselves as spontaneous improvisators, as a “people of geniuses.”

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NOTES

1. Mircea Martin, *G. Călinescu și "complexele" literaturii române*, Bucharest, Albatros Publishers, 1981, p. 159: "Distincția dintre cultural și estetic, așa cum e operată de Călinescu, permite o anumită selectivă continuitate. Apariția literaturii propriu-zise e greu de explicat fără antecedente culturale care, într-un fel sau altul, au pregătit-o. Mai mult, chiar înăuntrul amalgamului cultural există un filon estetic subiacent, adică subordonat altor obiective și altor valori. Criticul urmărește acest filon înainte de a deveni independent și autoritar, înainte ca valoarea estetică să fie cultivată în sine" (p. 159). For a more in-depth analysis, see chapter 5 ("Cultural și esthetic") and chapter 6 ("Organicism și estetism").
2. Andrei Terian, *G. Călinescu. A cincea esență*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească Publishers, 2009, pp. 195-197. Terian calls this contradiction "Călinescu's paradox."
3. Hayden White, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1963. An analysis on all conceptual issues implied by Călinescu's project, in Andrei Terian, *op. cit.*, ch. III, "Sinteza epică," pp. 278-310; cap. IV.1, "Proiectul etnocentric," pp. 313-339. In another context and with lesser theoretical support, Dumitru Micu noticed that G. Călinescu "n-a scris propriu-zis o istorie, ci o lungă serie de micromonografii" (Dumitru Micu, *G. Călinescu – între Apollo și Dionysos*, Minerva Publishers, Bucharest, 1979, p. 385).



4. Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory*, Duke University Press, 2002, p. 2.
5. Al. Săndulescu (ed.), *Dicționar de termeni literari*, Bucharest, Academia RSR Publishers, 1976, pp. 35-36.
6. "From the inception of the word, the *an* of anecdote serves as an expression of determinate negation, not as an indication of a zone of indetermination. What the *an* of anecdote negates is authority. Under no condition *auctoritas* express itself anecdotally," in Peter Fenves, *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (ch. 5, "Anecdote & Authority: Toward Kleist's Last Language"), Stanford U.P., 2001, p. 153.
7. Andreas Jolles, *Forme simple. Legenda sacră. Legenda eroică. Mythos-ul. Ghicitoarea. Zicala. Cazul. Memorabilul. Basmul. Gluma*, translated into Romanian by Iulia Zup and revised by Grigore Marcu, Iași, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Press, 2012.
8. Marion C. Moeser, *The Anecdote in Mark, the Classical World and the Rabbis*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, p. 154.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 155.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 156: "Anecdotes are of such great significance to the historicization of the literary that efforts to show the relation of literary works to the epoch of their formation often touch on the anecdotal – from early romanticism to new historicism."
11. *Ibid.*, p. 32: "Anecdotes humanize individuals and turn abstract concepts into concrete ones. They make complex ideas immediately clear." Anecdote is defined as a "brief story" or as "the gleaming toy of history" that captures the atmosphere of private life or one's portrait, being characterized by "a connotation of gossip or humor."
12. G. Călinescu, "Portretul," in G. Călinescu, *Opere. Publicistică, vol. X (1960-1962)*, edited by Nicolae Mecu, notes and commentaries by Alexandra Ciocârlie, Alexandru Farcaș, Nicolae Mecu, Pavel Țugui and Daciana Vlădoiu, Bucharest, Academia Română-FNSA Publishers, 2010, p. 321: "fundamentală însușire creatoare este de ordin intelectual și constă în iluminarea experienței printr-o idee. Marile creații se nasc din idei și stărnesc procese de idei."
13. See Gianni Vattimo, *Sfârșitul modernității*, translated by Ștefania Mincu, Constanța, Pontica Publishers, 1993. Virgil Nemoianu's works offer the best picture on the rehabilitation of the "secondary" (*O teorie a secundarului, Elogiul imperfecțiunii* and so forth).
14. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, ch. 2, "Counterhistory & the Anecdote," Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 52.
15. Joel Fineman, "The History of Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," in H. Aram Veesser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, London and New York, Routledge, 1989, pp. 49-76.
16. Catherine Gallagher & Stephen Greenblatt, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
17. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent*, second edition, revised and appended, edited and prefaced by Al. Piru, Bucharest, Minerva Publishers, 1982, p. 53.
18. G. Călinescu, "Între portret și anecdotă," in G. Călinescu, *Opere. Publicistică, vol. I (1920-1932)*, edited by Nicolae Mecu, notes and commentaries by Nicolae Mecu, Oana Soare, Pavel Țugui and Magdalena Dragu, Bucharest, Romanian Academy-FNSA Publishers, 2006, pp. 531-533.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 532.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 533. A similar creed can be found in an article entitled "Scriitorul și viața," in G. Călinescu, *Opere. Publicistică, vol. V (1940-1946)*, edited by Nicolae Mecu, notes and commentaries by Nicolae Mecu, Oana Soare, Pavel Țugui and Magdalena Dragu, Bucharest, Romanian Academy-FNSA Publishers, 2008, p. 276: "Cine nu se distanțează de evenimente spre a le citi semnificația vitală, cine nu se depărtează de oameni pentru a scruta în ei umanitatea nu este un artist. Absența de la evenimente este condiția însăși a creației."
21. G. Călinescu, "Autenticitatea anecdotei," in G. Călinescu, *Opere. Publicistică, vol. V (1940-1946)*, p. 227; see also "Anecdotică marială," pp. 228-229; "Anecdotică," pp. 535-539.
22. G. Călinescu, "Între portret și anecdotă," p. 531.
23. Mircea Martin, *op. cit.*, ch. "Cucerirea tradiției – de la invenție la descoperire", pp. 209-238.



24. Roxana Patraș, "The Critic's Lists and Tops as Quick-Mapping Methods in Literary History: A Case of 'Periods' and 'Topographies' in Algernon Charles Swinburne's Criticism," *Euresis. Romanian Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies: Canons and Values. Literary History in Movement, New Series*, Institutul Cultural Roman, 2013, p. 237.
25. Andrei Terian, *op. cit.*, ch. 5.1, "Proiectul etnocentric," pp. 311-339.
26. G. Călinescu, *Istoria...*, p. 5.
27. Marielle Macé, *Façons de lire, manières d'être*, Gallimard, Paris, 2011, p. 18.
28. *Ibidem*, p. 4.
29. G. Călinescu, "Poezia realelor," in G. Călinescu, *Opere. Publicistică, vol. IX (1958-1959)*, edited by Nicolae Mecu, notes and commentaries by Alexandra Ciocârlie, Alexandru Farcaș, Nicolae Mecu, Pavel Țugui and Daciana Vlădoiu, Bucharest, Academia Română – FNSA Publishers, 2010, pp. 356-392.
30. Roxana Patraș, "Consecvență doctrinară și libertate estetică în dezbaterile publice românești din a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea," in *Repere ale comunicării interculturale*, edited by Irina Frasin & Daniel Șandru, Bucharest, ProUniversitaria Publishers, 2015, pp. 192-194.
31. G. Călinescu, *Istoria...*, p. 444.
32. G. Călinescu, "Despre biografie," in G. Călinescu, *Opere. Publicistică, vol. IX (1958-1959)*, edited by Nicolae Mecu, notes and commentaries by Alexandra Ciocârlie, Alexandru Farcaș, Nicolae Mecu, Pavel Țugui and Daciana Vlădoiu, Bucharest, Academia Română – FNSA Publishers, 2010, p. 28.
33. G. Călinescu, *Istoria...*, p. 123.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
35. Adrian Tudurachi, *Fabrica de geniu. Nașterea unei mitologii a productivității literare în cultura română. 1825-1875*, Iași, Institutul European Publishers, 2016.
36. G. Călinescu, *Istoria...*, p. 139.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 233.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 167.