The Sovietization of Creative Writing in Romania. The Role of the Mihai Eminescu School of Literature and Literary Criticism (1950–1955)

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ABSTRACT:

Within the paradigm of socialist realism, one of the means of introducing new models of producing literature in Romania and other neighbouring countries was the Soviet idea and practice of literary training. In the Romanian context, the Mihai Eminescu School of Literature and Literary Criticism from Bucharest was intended to produce the new, young generation of writers that would articulate the new system of values. Reports about the School show that the social origin of the students was carefully monitorized, and ethnic diversity also played a role in the process of the sovietization of the whole Romanian literary field. The personal level of experiencing the cultural and political practice of the School shows the possibilities and also the limitations of the project. The paper examines the history of the School through official party documents and also personal accounts, in order to analyze the particular strategies and also the difficulties of adapting certain Soviet institutional models within the Romanian context.

Keywords: *creative writing, cultural shift, literary training, Mihai Eminescu School of Literature and Literary Criticism, socialist realism*

Socialist realism as an adapted literary paradigm

Intellectual labor came to be seen in post-WWII Romania, after entering into the period of socialist realism, in terms of physical labor, the common denominator being that of production: this view established in the cultural field the principle of the writer as worker among

workers.¹ Therefore writers, critics, painters all talked about the “five-year plans” of their own after 1948. But another necessary step besides this paradigmatic shift of reconceptualizing intellectual labor consisted of making the East European poets the “engineers of human souls,” just as they were in the Soviet Union. The social origin of an author was not enough to legitimize his or her works: writers had to become able to design in detail the fiction of the communist utopia. They needed specific training to be able to do this—therefore the institutional organization of literature became more and more important. Lucia Dragomir argues convincingly that the “implantation” of socialist realism into the Romanian context meant first of all a reorganization of the Romanian literary field through creating new literary institutions like the new Writers’ Union, the new press, the literary circles and a new educational system. (Dragomir 9) This is an important example of adapting a globally relevant paradigm into a national or rather regional cultural field.

The idea and the practice of literary training in Romania, as in other socialist countries, was modeled on the pattern described in Evgeny Dobrenko’s book *The Making of the State Writer*. (Dobrenko) In 1950, the Mihai[1] Eminescu School of Literature and Literary Criticism was created in Bucharest, following the model of the Gorky Institute from Moscow. (Later, in 1955 another such Institute was founded in Leipzig, GDR.) The students admitted to the School of Literature lived together, in isolation from the outside world; they were supposed to leave the School only with the purpose of documenting the new reality, and this, too, only in groups and in an organized way; and through their texts they were expected to describe and promote the fiction of communist Romania.

As such, creative writing programs were not a product of the new socialist reality. The very idea of such workshops as a core of educational process can be linked to the American principles of progressive education in the 1920s and the 1930s. (McGurl 87) After the fall of communism the director of the Leipzig Institute for German Literature mentioned among his models the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow, but also the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. (Haslinger) Writing parallel histories of Eastern and Western creative writing programs could be an enlightening endeavour. However, because our case study refers for now to an institution that existed for a relatively short period of time, the comparative analysis here will be limited only to the similarities that were promoted by the founders of the institution themselves — similarities between the Mihai Eminescu School and the Gorky Institute. The conflicts within the School will also be discussed

1 In the Soviet Union this terminology was already at work during the thirties. Evgeny Dobrenko quotes Mayakovsky’s *In the Poetry Workshop* that uses the very term ‘production,’ and discusses Soviet handbooks where writers are described as using tools just like shoemakers do. (Dobrenko 2000, p. 297–301.) A similar process can be documented in the GDR, see David Clarke (2006, p. 90).

in connection with similar types of conflict documented at the Institut für Literatur Leipzig.

The methodology of the present study is adapted to the characteristics of the topic and of the researched period. Studying the institutions of the Stalinist period should be based besides official documents related to institutional activity also to materials that reveal the everyday life and attitudes of people attending such institutions. The first type of sources is represented in my article by documents coming from the Communist Party Archives, "Secția de Literatură și Artă" (Department of Literature and Art), in the subordination of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party being responsible for the management of the School. The documents referring to the activity of the School in this archive were published during the postcommunist period. (Mocanu) It is essential however to document also material and opinions that could circulate only within the "secondary public sphere", specific for Eastern European countries. (Jones 382) Memoirs, interviews are necessary for such research not in order to provide facts about the projects and objectives of the authorities, but rather to provide facts about the lived experience of the school life, and pieces of information that had no chance to enter the official, primary public sphere of the period.

The School in Party Documents

According to the official documents, the Mihai Eminescu School of Literature and Literary Criticism from Bucharest was founded in order to train young writers and literary critics with roots in the working class, to offer them a Communist education and to bestow upon them the necessary knowledge to create a new type of literature, serving the working class. (Mocanu 209) In the Romanian context, the more specific goal was to produce a new generation of writers that would make the contribution of "fellow traveler writers" of bourgeois origin irrelevant, so that the generational shift was intended also as a cultural shift. The idea of a "young writer" meant therefore much more than just a difference in age. (Selejan 158–234)

The young generation's loyalty to the new regime seemed easier to achieve, so young people and the emerging social classes were groups that the new, communist power could rely on. Reports about the School show that the social origin of the students was carefully monitored, and the gradual growth of the workers' percentage among them was considered as a success of the institution. A report written in 1954 speaks of 46,15 % of the students coming from either proletarian or poor peasant families, or families of intellectuals – quite a change compared to the 35,38 % at the time of the creation of the School (Mocanu 210).

As far as the organization of the School is concerned, a report written in 1954 offers the following information: the School was created

in 1950, the duration of the courses being 1 year in 1950/1951 and 1951/1952. Beginning with the academic year 1952/1953, the students were recruited for 2 years (Mocanu 209). In 1954, the School had a total of 58 students, 26 of them being first year students and 32 of them being in their second year of study.

At first, the selection process of the students did not include an entrance examination, being based only on recommendations of various political or cultural organizations and on reports concerning their involvement in social and political activities. When discussing a similar method of the selection process in the GDR, David Clarke argues that this recommendation meant also that the students of the Leipzig Institute were expected to return after completion of their studies to take up a cultural function at the institution that recommended them – maintaining a strong relationship between the fields of “production.” (Clarke 90)

Later on, in the Bucharest case, a requirement for recommendations from professional organizations like the Writers’ Union or editors of different literary magazines was introduced. Besides this, the applicants also had to take an entrance exam (Mocanu 211).

In spite of some students’ reported success on the literary scene, some organizational problems could not be solved although in the autumn of 1953 a new director, Petre Iosif was appointed. As a consequence, the reports written in 1953 and 1954 already mention the recommendation of transforming the School into an institute of higher education with 4 years of study – in fact, this transformation was actually carried out in 1955, the School being incorporated into the University of Bucharest.

The School’s curriculum covered: Romanian grammar, Russian grammar, Marxism-Leninism, literary theory, history of Romanian literature, history of Russian literature. Besides these, there were creative writing seminars, taught by professional writers to small groups of 7-8 students. In 1954, the disciplines were slightly changed, made to resemble a university curriculum. The subjects now included the history of the Soviet Communist Party, the history of Romania, dialectical and historical materialism, introduction into the theory of literature, history of Romanian literature, history of Russian literature, Soviet literature, history of universal literature, theory of literary genres, introduction into linguistics, grammar of contemporary Romanian language, Russian grammar, history of literary language (Mocanu 209).

The reports themselves, as well as the reorganization, both indicate that the ruling power was not fully content with the activity of the School. Criticism was voiced at the official level, in the reports, but also unofficially, by the students themselves, as their memoirs suggest. An inside report on the School’s general atmosphere showed an “improper” attitude towards the literary traditions of bourgeois decadence. This attitude (described in detail in the books of memoirs related to the experience of attending the School) shows that the young Romanian writers still saw the older generation of writers as models that tended to

shape their mentality but also their lifestyle and behaviour. The reading of interwar modernist Romanian authors like Tudor Arghezi, Ion Barbu, George Bacovia, or Sergei Esenin's melancholy poems testify to a certain autonomy in the literary tastes of the students (Mocanu 200–201). Apparently the main objectives of the School – to create obedient authors who prefer socialist realism to all other literary currents – had not yet been achieved by 1953. Worryingly, an all too independent thinking was demonstrated by Nicolae Labiş, the best known young poet among the students of the School. (Mocanu 214–215). This type of nonconformist attitude is analysed within the institutional framework of the Leipzig School as an inherent paradox that implies a “Nischenöffentlichkeit”, an opportunity for an inner space for free debate which on the other hand cannot go fully public. (Clarke 91–92)

To identify a general pattern behind the criticized aspects, we have to consider the question of available human resources. In Eastern European countries of the period the lack of qualified and reliable specialists was a general issue. (Scheibner 54, 246) According to the reports concerning the School, members of the teaching staff were either not fully qualified for their jobs according to the reports, or their main position was outside the School, at other literary institutions like literary magazines, the Writers' Union or at the university.

An important role was assigned in the reports to newly trained leaders coming from Moscow: it was hoped that their presence would make the necessary transformations possible. In 1954, it was expected that Petre Iosif, the current director of the School, would concentrate his activity exclusively on the matters concerning the School, with no other obligations within the Writers' Union, and at the same time, George Toma Maiorescu, then in his final year at the Gorky Institute in Moscow, was to become an associate director of the School (Mocanu 217). In her article about transferring the Soviet models of organizing culture and politics into Romania, Lucia Dragomir identifies the prototype of “cultural ideologists” – militants of the clandestine Romanian Communist Party either imprisoned in Romania for their activities, or forced to emigrate to the USSR, returning to Romania only after the Second World War – as the key figures of this transfer. Their role, as she argues, was chiefly organizational, they never produced a corpus of critical or literary works of their own. (Dragomir 320) The recruitment of the new managers of institutions continued during the 1950s according to the same logic, via Moscow, with the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute being an important source for recruiting new staff. (Kántor 12)

From the official reports we may conclude that the deficiencies in the activity of the School were mainly caused by organizational issues and lack of human resources. However, when analyzing the following personal narratives about the School experience, we may find additional reasons that contributed to the failure of introducing the model of the Gorky Institute.

Personal Narratives about the School

The most detailed description of the everyday life in the school is offered by Marin Ioniță, who published *Kiseleff 10: the Writer Factory* in 2003 and in a second edition in 2011. (Ioniță) Although Ioniță had not previously enjoyed the reputation of an established writer, his book of memoirs, first published when the author was 74, was a genuine success, and it is one of the main sources for an analysis of the School's activity, however subjective it may be.

In many ways, living in the building of the School, at Kiseleff street Nr. 10, was a privilege, at least for some of the students. They inhabited a sort of artificial reality, a fictional world that was isolated from the rest of Bucharest. For Marin Ioniță, the three regular meals with rich white bread and additional snacks, the general atmosphere and the living conditions seemed a luxury, compared to what he had left behind in his small hometown, Găiești, and in the house of his peasant family. (Ioniță 35). The price he himself had to pay for this luxury was submitting to the excessive control over the students, who were obliged to live in the building of the School even if they were residents of Bucharest.

It appears, however, that there were indeed some interesting, motivating courses at the School. Ioniță mentions attending guest lectures given by outstanding professors of the University of Bucharest like Tudor Vianu, or classes of George Călinescu at the University. Creative writing seminars were taught by established writers—in Ioniță's case, Petru Dumitriu. One exercise that Ioniță remembers was the following: he received a copy of the novel *Gobseck* by Balzac, with the last chapter of the book sealed with glue. After reading the book, the student had to "finish" the novel as he deemed best (Ioniță 53). This example shows that the practical side of writing was not neglected in the training process, offering real possibilities for talented students to develop their writing skills. There was, however, an excessive amount of theoretical and political reading material to work through, as Ioniță recollects.

Another student of the School in the period 1950–1951, Dumitru Micu, also published a series of articles about his personal experiences at the School.² He offers individual portraits of the teaching staff and directors, and also describes his personal relationships with his colleagues. Of special interest are his references to "Cluj group identity," which was remarked upon both by professors and students on his track. Although the "Cluj group" was rather heterogeneous (two graduates of the Faculty of Letters, two students of the same Faculty, a student of philosophy, a journalist and a worker) (Bilbâie 355), they were perceived in the following terms:

"At the School, peer groups were formed that took no notice of principles of hierarchy. At first, these ties

2 The series of articles (*Școala de literatură* / The School of Literature) originally appeared in the literary magazine *Literatorul*, in 1994, issues 20–37. They were republished in the notes of Bilbâie 355–378.

were superficial, based more or less on shared dormitories, but later they came to be associated with elective affinities of an ineffable nature. At the two extremes of this range of groups there were the 'workers' and 'those from Cluj.' (...) 'Those from Cluj' would have preferred not to form a specific group, (...) but the fact that the majority of them were intellectuals, having therefore a certain type of education, made them appear different, (...), and some of the students recruited from factories or building sites saw in them, without any reason, 'gentlemen' that were only capable of despising 'hammermen.'" (Bîlbîie 365–366)

This gives another dimension to the stratification of the student groups at the School: what marked some of them as 'different' was not just the level of their education and their background, but also the region they came from. Micu recounts how some students were singled out because of their accents or dialects – a tendency which the students themselves apparently welcomed, as it allowed them to become more individualized within the 'melting pot' of the School. (Bîlbîie 368–370) Micu's account complements Ioniță's comments on the 'privileged' status of the students as he notes that, besides the stipend that all the students received, those who had worked prior to being admitted to the School continued to receive half of their salary throughout the period of their studies. (Bîlbîie 356)

Minority Reports: Koch, Panek, Portik

The presence of minority students who were 'marked' by their accents, or who were native speakers of other languages, is relevant because it broadens the variety of sources for studying the history of the School. Thus, Iosefina Koch, of German origin, recalled in 1952 in a magazine article published in the literary magazine *Tînărul Scriitor* her difficulties of studying in Romanian, and her gradual, slow integration into the Romanian literary field. She recalled how frustrating it was to be able to understand but a small portion of the material at first, but also how proud she was when by the end of the first term she could understand Eminescu's poems just as easily as verses of Goethe and Schiller. The article obviously makes use of the politically correct clichés of the mutual understanding of nationalities in communist Romania, advertising a transcendence of national and cultural boundaries. (Bîlbîie 198–199)

Iosefina Koch's testimony, and also the consistent (but not proportional) presence of Hungarian minority students in the School show that in this respect, too, this institution was envisaged as a symbolic mirror of the multi-ethnic Romanian society. Recruiting new, reliable authors who could promote the intended transformations in minority

media in Hungarian and German language was also an objective for the Party leaders charged with monitoring the cultural field.

Although a full record of students of the School is still missing, we know about at least three important students of Hungarian nationality who attended the School: József Hornyák (1950–1951, an author of several volumes of short stories), Zoltán Panek (1951–1953, award-winning author of novels, short stories and volumes of poetry) and Imre Portik (1952–1954, a journalist, best known for his close friendship with Nicolae Labiş, and his book of memoirs dedicated to Labiş).

Hornyák, who came to the School as a journalist, and was already an insider of the Hungarian literary milieu in Cluj, did not dwell in his later interviews on his time at the School, although he published an article in the literary press of the time about his first impressions at the school. (Hornyák) From Dumitru Micu's accounts we know that he stayed in the same dormitory with other students from Cluj, and he seemed to keep a distance from his peers (Bîlbîie 373), possibly, like Iosefina Koch, because of language difficulties. Zoltán Panek, who later on became a major novelist of Hungarian literature from Romania, discussed his experience related to the School from the perspective of an already established literary author in a late memoir. He felt he had to defend the idea of literary training itself. Let us not forget that this text was published in 1996, during the years of postcommunism when ideas of aesthetic autonomy prevailed in the literary discourse, and the literary institutions of the fifties generally had a bad reputation:

“I have never understood the stupid grin on the face of a well-known literary critic when he heard about the ‘school of writers.’ Beforehand, in America there was a college where writers of pop songs were trained. Oh yeah, that’s quite different... I believe that you can and you should learn things from anyone, anywhere, under any circumstances. Mihail Sadoveanu said at the opening ceremony of the School: ‘the number of writers graduating from this school will not differ from the number of writers that we admitted to study here.’ This was because the students were recruited on the basis of their previous publications and after an interview – so the students were more or less well-known young writers already. The training staff at the University of Bucharest was not better than ours at all! We met almost all foreign authors coming to visit Romania in separate discussions, we attended theatre shows, concerts, we visited factories and the countryside for documentation. The School itself and our college was located in a beautiful building of Bucharest. (...) I soon became a trainee at the department of literary theory at the school. But the

truth is that I would have agreed happily to this adventure even under different circumstances—I would have left happily to work on the fields in China for example, because I had just been drafted into the Romanian army, and most of my military service was still ahead of me.” (Panek, “Soha jobb/kor”)

As we can see, the image of the School is rather positive here—of course, we can feel behind it the self-confidence of an author who, during the decades that came after his graduation, participated in the neomodernist renewal of Transylvanian Hungarian literature, and who, as he was writing these words, was looking back at a successful literary career. While attending the School, minority students were allowed to, and expected, to produce their own literary works in their mother tongue, although they attended the same courses as their Romanian colleagues. Panek’s poem *Coborîştea* (Descent), for example, was published in the internal literary magazine of the School, *Anii de ucenicie* (3/1952) in translation. Panek’s accounts about his school experiences are constant in their positive attitude – in 1952 he praised the school in an article because of the opportunities it offered to its students to meet foreign writers from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary, but also from Finland or Denmark. (Panek, „Külföldi írók”)

Another valuable source material about the School is Imre Portik’s posthumous volume written in Romanian, dealing chiefly with his memories about Nicolae Labiş, whom he met at the School. (Portik) Imre Portik’s pieces of poetry, published in *Anii de ucenicie*, were, like Panek’s works, translations from Hungarian. The translations were made by Horia Aramă³ and Nicolae Labiş.⁴

Portik’s testimony sheds light on the students’ interest in the works of “bourgeois decadence” which was one of the points of criticism in the official reports discussed above. From his account we know that Labiş was a frequent visitor to the home of a second-hand bookseller who provided him with books that were not available either in bookshops or in public libraries of the period because of their “dangerous” contents. The volumes bought by Labiş were often simply pre-war editions of classics like Eminescu, available from the communist press only in selected editions. Portik even recalls meeting at the bookseller’s place the members of the teaching staff who explained to their students that they were looking for materials that were simply not available even at the university library. Around these chance meetings there was always an aura of conspiracy, some of the books bought by Labiş having been later confiscated by the School management. (Portik 25–31)

Portik’s friendship with Labiş began in the School, but it did not end there, the two of them remaining in close contact and visiting each

3 Portik Emerik, *Stalin*, *Anii de ucenicie* nr. 3, May 1953.

4 Portik Imre, *Ostaşului sovietic*, *Anii de ucenicie* nr. 3, May 1953.; Portik Imre, *Drum*, *Anii de ucenicie* nr. 6, May 1954.

other also after the graduation from the School. While Portik became a librarian in the Transylvanian countryside, Labiș pursued his literary training at the University (though he never completed it). Labiș's training projects made Portik compare the usefulness of the School and of the University: "Our School, as an institution of art training, helped us develop the skills that were necessary for creative activity. All the courses we took served this goal, while at the department of Philology, everything was geared to training future professors." (Portik 154–155) Portik even ventured into an inventory of the writers who had been through the respective programs and went on to develop a notable career. His conclusions were that among the young, well-known authors graduating between 1951/1954 from the School of Literature there were 15 poets, 9 novelists, 1 literary critic, while among those graduating from the university there were 10 poets, 12 novelists, 9 literary critics. (Portik 154) However subjective this data may be, the image that Portik offers seems trustworthy if we compare them to general critical remarks of the official reports.

We can conclude that seemingly subjective accounts can add important elements to the image of the School's activity. The lifestyle of the students, their intellectual and social background and the implication of all these at the practical level show exactly what kind of effort would have been needed to transform these individuals into the „new men” needed by the communist regime.

The School of Literature integrated into the university structure

The most detailed account of how the School was integrated into the structure of the University of Bucharest, was offered by Stela Covaci (Ivănescu–Covaci), who was a student of philology in the autumn of 1955, when the School (by then already called the Institute of Literature and Literary Criticism) was dissolved as a separate institution and integrated into the University:

“In that year, the Mihai Eminescu Institute was made into a section within the Faculty of Philology, this section being called ‘The Section of Literature and Literary Criticism.’ A group of some 25 or 30 future writers joined the university, each of them attending one of the three workshops of creation: prose, poetry and literary criticism. I was an aspiring poet, eager to know the new peers, so I asked for a transfer from the section of Romanian literature to their programme, for the second year of study. (...) I shared the bench with Labiș, and had a great time with him when Brătucu [the creative writing teacher] asked us to

come up with completely unrealistic plans, promising not only to deliver "artistic production" on schedule, but also to "overfill the norm." Labiș's plan looked like this:

- one piece of heroic epic in verse (about Vasile Roaită [a Romanian proletarian hero]), proposed deadline: 1st December 1955
 - two pieces of dramatic poems inspired by the history of underground fighters. Deadline: 1st October.
 - five socialist-realist poems. Deadline... etc."
- (Ivănescu–Covaci 241–242)

In the university, Covaci, Labiș and the others continued their bohemian lifestyle already known from the narratives of Ioniță and Portik – and implicitly, their resistance to the models imposed on them by the School. (Ivănescu–Covaci 244–245) Another student who was transferred to the University from the Institute was Paul Goma, who later became an important member of anticommunist opposition in Romania. In the interviews he gave Lucia Dragomir, he spoke about the rigorous entrance requirements in 1954: this was the year when the School became an "institute." His favourite professor was Tudor Vianu (Dragomir 318) – the same one who was admired by Marin Ioniță. He was expelled from the university in 1956 for anticommunist activity.

As part of the university structure, the Section of Literature and Literary criticism soon lost its special character and left no other memorable traces in the history of Romanian literature. (Bilbiie 207)

Conclusions: Failure or Mission Completed?

In his monograph about the institutions of young Romanian literature in the fifties, Radu Bilbiie speaks about a "failed experiment," (Bilbiie) but he does not offer an explanation for how and why this institutionalization project failed. In fact, in his book, the dissolution of the School is seen in itself as a failure.

Although the Mihai Eminescu School of Literature did not belong initially to the Romanian system of higher education institutions, it had a precise role to fulfill. The new, Communist power needed a new generation of intellectuals and writers to support its goals. The initial training period within the School was one year precisely in order to accelerate the generational shift. The changes within the training structure show however that a greater connection to the higher education system was considered necessary. (Mocanu 209.) The gradual growth of the program meant also a more precise adaptation of the Gorky Institute model, where the curriculum was designed for two years from the beginning. (Dobrenko 342.)

From the official Party documents and from the personal narratives we have seen that organizational issues resulted from the lack of human resources, but also unforeseen elements of the training process (like the students' bohemian behaviour and personal attachment to literary models outside the school) made this effort a partial failure. The main arguments in favour of the failure of the School would be: 1. unresolved differences in the students' previous training level, and huge differences in their integration into the society after graduation; 2. organizational problems, lack of staff, lack of discipline; 3. talented "problem children" at the School – Nicolae Labiş etc., who did not accept all the rules that the directors of the School tried to impose.

We cannot claim to have among the graduates of the School the majority of the masters of Romanian postwar literature either—in this sense, as the data presented by Evgeny Dobrenko shows, the history of the Moscow Literary Institute is far more successful. (Dobrenko 342) However, we should reconsider the short history of this institution also from the perspective of its short-term objectives. Once accessed from this point of view, the School can be seen as at least a partial success. There emerged, after all, a new, "reliable" generation of writers, graduates of the School, with jobs at the Writers' Union, literary magazines etc., and the generational change facilitated a reorganization of the political elite. In this period, young writers were seen by many as capable of taking on the role of "fellow-traveler writers" like Mihail Sadoveanu, Tudor Arghezi and other masters of Romanian literature of the inter-war period.

It seems that young writers were important for the regime, but the Mihai Eminescu School of Literature and Literary Criticism was not the only way to "produce" them. Most probably this is the main reason why this project was finally abandoned, and the control over the literary production was carried out in Romania through other institutions: universities, the monopoly of literary magazines and publishing houses, censorship, and literary circles for younger people, where literary debates continued to flourish during the next decades.

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