

## WITH CONSTANTIN NOICA, ON LITERATURE AND LITERARY CRITICISM

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**ABSTRACT.** *With Constantin Noica, On Literature and Literary Criticism.*

This study analyses the views expressed by Constantin Noica in the articles he published on literature and literary criticism during the interwar period. Somewhat reserved towards the literary-artistic phenomenon in general, the philosopher proved nonetheless to be an avid critic, an excellent essayist and a brilliant polemicist. In fact, his entire work was to be appreciated, both by literary critics and by philosophers, for its literary qualities, at a time when philosophical discourse itself displayed a penchant for literariness.

**Keywords:** *Constantin Noica, literature, literary criticism, philosophy, modernity, art, generation, negativity.*

**REZUMAT.** *Cu Constantin Noica, despre literatură și critică literară.* Studiul de față analizează opiniile exprimate de Constantin Noica în publicistica sa din perioada interbelică pe marginea literaturii și a criticii literare. Rezervat față de fenomenul literar-artistic în genere, filosoful se dovedește totuși a fi un critic avizat, un excelent eseist și chiar un polemist redutabil. De altfel, întreaga sa operă va fi apreciată, atât de criticii literari, cât și de filosofi, pentru calitățile sale literare, într-un moment când discursul filosofic însuși tinde a-și asuma chipul literarității.

**Cuvinte cheie:** *Constantin Noica, literatură, critică literară, filosofie, modernitate, artă, generație, negativism.*

“Alright, then, but a deep spirit must go beyond the boundaries of criticism, it must take a higher stance and regard the phenomena of literature through more abstract lenses”, Constantin Noica told Eugen Simion when he was asked what his concerns were, aside from criticism (Simion, “Gâlceava

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înțeleptului” 3). This is not the only remark of this kind made by the philosopher, known for his reluctance towards criticism and literature in general. Discussing, in 1934, Mircea Eliade’s novels, he wondered what literature had to do with his serious, science-focused spirit, and why the world appreciated him solely for his literary works: “But literature remains sinful in comparison with thought, however rich it may be. Eliade sinned through literature to get some respite or to have fun, or for the sheer voluptuousness of sin” (Istoricitate 203–204). He looked at the critical and essayistic endeavours of N. Steinhardt, who admired his literary qualities, like many others of his confrères, with amusement and reproach, calling them “scallywag business” (Roatiș 246–247).

From an early age, the philosopher cherished that was beyond the world and beyond “spirit with an expiration date”. He loved ideas, logical schemes, and shapes, aspiring to a geometric culture, a *Mathesis universalis*: “Instead of the historical spirit, in which destiny, limited duration and death prevail, let’s bring in the mathematical spirit, in which free creation, generality and eternity prevail. Let’s replace that which is born with that which is made” (Mathesis 34). A reflex of “that which is born” might be today’s humanist culture, a true failure of modern times, philosophy, an uncertain and contradictory discipline, and art - altogether devoid of transcendence. As for literature, it “belongs to fools, not to us”, as young Noica claimed in the title of an article he published in the 1930s (Între suflet și spirit 135). Writers, he said, sometimes do harm to humanity, forgetting that they write for others, and they circulate ideas that may have a devastating social impact (341–343). Moreover, even when it is not altogether harmful, literature as an undertaking is almost entirely devoid of purpose, because it does not teach you anything but simply tells stories. Noica came up with this idea as he meditated on the theme of resurrection in literature and philosophy, starting from Tolstoy’s novel with a homonymous title. Therefore, it is not literature, but the philosophy within literature that carries, in itself, the hope of a spiritual resurrection, attainable, in fact, only through religion: “Literature dreams, philosophy proposes, and religion alone transforms” (21 de conferințe radiofonice 55–62). Noica the philosopher, who had a penchant for logical schemes, looked down on this “dreaminess” of literature, even though, much later, in his philosophical journal, he suggested that literature might have a mystical sense, if we consider its blend of sameness and otherness; however, a few pages further, he resumed the argument, emphasising the reverse of that negation: “I admit that literature is a great waste of time. But it is one of the great wastes of time that can also be a gain. While the others...” (Jurnal 24; 85). Like Nietzsche, the philosopher who wrote *We Philologists*, Noica regarded the philologist’s work with contempt. Our life, he said, can be spent in narrow but essential spaces; it’s just that

when they are not essential, for instance, the life of a clerk, a philologist or a factory worker, you could scour that surface as long as you wished without finding the essence (72).

If philology, literature and, above all, literary criticism (a trivial species by definition) were, in his opinion, completely irrelevant, and sometimes even harmful, how come the young philosopher began by being a poet and later published literary journalism in magazines? An author of lyrics printed the magazine of "Spiru Haret" High School in Bucharest, he signed with a pseudonym, driven perhaps, as N. Steinhardt sensed, by the "cautious reticence of a man who had an early intimation that he would become a philosopher" (Roatiş 235). Not long after that, he gradually abandoned his poetic vocation in favour of his journalistic aspirations. Young Noica dreamed of becoming the polemical spirit of his generation, despite his declared aversion to the spirit with an expiration date. Indeed, few literary problems were approached by Noica in a positive way or at least leniently. The writers he truly appreciated were even fewer. If we were to reread the articles he published in his youth, we could draw a statistic of negativity, twice as consistent compared to that of his other texts, as Dorin Popescu notes (122). Under other pseudonyms, the journalist sometimes positioned himself against the very practice of journalism, against the "proverbial superficiality of the journalist" and "opportunism as artistic fuel" (Semnele Minervei 49–50). He denounced the "vitiating, cynical and sad face of professional literature", "falsified by interest and defiled by immorality", a literature whose illustrious representative was Tudor Arghezi, as he thought (95–96). Although Noica only referred to the journalistic activity of Arghezi the poet, it was enough to attract the opprobrium of G. Călinescu, a critic of the "bombastic generation" and of the adolescents' invasion of literature: "But when a young man comes to say that Mr Arghezi's writing irritates by abundance, I start to doubt the future of Mr Noica, a high school student, who will probably be glad that I have quoted his name, even though I would have liked to quote his work" (Dur 48). The impenitent journalist answered the critic, engaging other representatives of the younger generation in this polemic, such as Petru Comarnescu or Octav Şuluţiu. But Noica was far from being emblematic for the condition of anonymity. He was not at all flattered by that mention of his name, nor did he acknowledge his being a member of the "bombastic" generation. He himself believed, like Călinescu, that "young people want to surprise the audience and appear as they are in fact: jejune. This is the time of the high school student with a cigarette in his mouth, or the tantrum of one who is less than five years old but wants to ride a bicycle" (Semnele Minervei 177). The Manifesto of the White Lily awakened in him undissimulated disgust, and he found the notion of literary generations to be

one of the most tedious issues discussed in the press in recent years. This was the case even though he was among the followers of *trăirism* (a trend of thought based on *Lebensphilosophie*), despite his omission by G. Călinescu.

According to Noica, the entire post-war generation was undergoing a process of spiritual dissolution, given the collapse of the national project. From this perspective, the ideals that deserve praise are those of *sămănătorism* (a literary trend alert to the peasants' grievances), "this admirable spiritual arsenal" (*Semnele Minervei* 202–204), but not those of the Orthodox *gândirism*, promoted by Nichifor Crainic. Criticising, elsewhere, the "*sămănătorist danger*" and "*rural romanticism*", he unequivocally pronounced himself in favour of intelligent, urban modernism, with its utmost liberty of expression, definitely superior to all the other literary formulas (436–438). The appraisal was nonetheless accompanied by a series of critiques: modernism as a general vision and, in particular, as a response to obsolete ruralism was commendable, but here its only manifestation consisted in the "humiliating polarisation of forces around the personal interests or ambitions of those who professed it" (401). Answering a survey conducted by *Cronicarul* magazine, concerning the literary trends of the time, he noticed that literature was better than a few decades before, but only from the point of view of form. In other words, "literature is written more unscrupulously, more dryly, more easily than ever before". "Many modern literary attempts are acts of maddening words, of inciting one word against another, or all words against ideas". Our modernism is sheer "libertinage" (*Între suflet și spirit* 19–21). Surprisingly, Noica was not against surrealist poetry, but only against the modernism practiced by the younger poets, whose sole concern was to compete in inventiveness. However, he would prefer religious art to secular art, and related artistic concepts, if possible, to Platonic Ideas, because "the truth of science is ugly, while the beauty of secular art is untrue. Science kills the soul, while art darkens the mind" (*Semnele Minervei* 115). Young Noica could not take a very modernist stance on literary phenomena. Meditating on different trends and orientations, he performed a selection of different hypostases of negativity. He liked neither obsolete traditionalism, nor hurried modernism, insufficiently assimilated in our literature, nor art for art's sake and proletarian art. When he appeared to be on the side of a trend, he did it for the sake of rejecting another. Most of the reviews he published between the two world wars evince an independent, non-conformist spirit, difficult to sum up in a formula.

For example, talking about Camil Baltazar, Noica praised and accused, at the same time, Romanian lyrical poetry of the time and the poetic works of Tudor Arghezi: "Whoever is surprised that we give so much importance to a poet's intensity will have to remember all contemporary Romanian poetry -

most of all, the poetry of Tudor Arghezi - a poetry that is external, metaphorical, substanceless, comprehensive yet uninteresting (though brilliant, almost, in Arghezi's case)" (Semnele Minervei 319). Eugen Lovinescu was deemed either to lack objectivity or to be our only critic with "complex personal views", with a "well-established critical sense" and with the necessary vigour for capturing the essence of the Romanian literary phenomenon (306). In other cases, rejection was expressed curtly, either through brief phrases or in the form of pamphlets. Adrian Maniu "writes exhaustively much, but it seems, without being favoured by the stars, like Tudor Arghezi (57); Mihail Dragomirescu was the "happy father of most literary scoundrels" (133); Nichifor Crainic was a "minor poet of the common place and expression" (168); Mihail Sadoveanu's fantasy was "nothing if not sound" (179). Gib Mihăescu suffered from excessive imagination, Sandu Tudor - from intellectual "cyclopism", Anton Holban would have a brilliant career in literature although he did not have a definite penchant for the novel. Camil Petrescu, a moderate enemy, was "this sprightly and interesting character of Romanian journalism" (Între suflet și spirit 27), and Ion Minulescu was the protagonist of some polemical exchanges, echoing Noica's debate with Călinescu. Among the writers he admired were Lucian Blaga, Cezar Petrescu, George Bacovia, Al. Brătescu-Voinești, Mateiu Caragiale, Ion Barbu, Al. Philippide, Tudor Vianu, Mihail Sebastian, C. Fântâneru, Mircea Eliade, Emil Cioran, Petru Comarnescu, and among the classics - of course - Mihai Eminescu, I. L. Caragiale, Titu Maiorescu, Hașdeu. Generally speaking, however, the philosopher's appreciation of the literati was permeated by a visible negating élan. Here, for example, is his review of George Topârceanu's Ballads, Merry and Sad "The reader, deafened by the metaphysical lamentations of professionals aspiring to godliness, obsessed with the stupid-modernistic technique of all pretentious minors, can only taste the simplicity, ingeniousness, the swaying, easy pace of Mr Topârceanu's poetry" (Semnele Minervei 151).

If literature was a great waste of time, a sin unto thought, things seemed to be even more serious in Romanian culture. We lived in a patriarchal country with a minor culture, obedient to the French, and barely in its infancy: in literary history, almost everything was there to be researched, critical editions and translations were almost absent, and original creations were just starting to emerge. Commercial writing, our dislike for pure art, our servility towards Western culture, and, last but not least, our neglect of Romanian language were symptoms of general artistic precariousness. Like Cioran, Noica was against so-called Mioritic culture. Unlike the nihilist philosopher, for whom negation was the very substance of discourse, young Noica oscillated between a demolition drive and an affirmative natural inclination. His dream was not universal extinction, but a school where nothing was taught... Thus,

his idiosyncrasies were confined to the sphere of contradiction rather than in the area of nihilism. Among the texts he published in periodicals, there was also a “tribute to our literature”, where he noted that readers were then much more “refined” than in the past, that authors wrote more and better than a few decades before and that, finally, our culture had become respectable (Între suflet și spirit 408).

As for literary genres, the philosopher hesitated between an affirmative spirit and the undeniable pleasure of negation. Dramatic art was a minor genre, travelogues remained, in the hand of the best writer, tedious literature, the confessional genre was falsifying by excellence, and the essay - a manifestation of “fiddling”, a “weakness of great spirits” (Despre lăutărism 33). Instead, poetry was a pure act, a myth, a transfiguration of insufficient reality, which expressed what neither science nor philosophy, nor all prose, nor whole music and all the other arts put together could say (67). That is why organising a “week of poetry” was an act of unnecessary violence to the public: “Poetry cannot attack your consciousness in daylight, like any novel of adventure, like any description of ‘passion’ and ‘luxuries’ on Calea Victoriei St., for example. Poetry awaits you discreetly, far from the beaten road /.../” (Între suflet și spirit 23). The praise of lyricism takes place in the subtext of a critique of literary trade, of Romanian readers’ indifference to this genre and, last but not least, of the vulgarity of the novel. He himself was a translator of novels, which he regarded as a heavy genre, as it demanded a lot of discipline. Noica regarded reluctantly the preference of young writers for the novel, especially those who had made a name for themselves in literary criticism, prose, or essay writing. This was primarily because they lacked love for things, for the “vulgar concreteness” that novelistic creation entailed.

Noica was much more reserved towards the “easy (but, in fact, terribly difficult) genre of criticism (Despre lăutărism 33). Again, he was referring mainly to Romanian literary criticism, still at the beginning, clumsy, without objectivity. Conceding that G. Călinescu was a “genius”, the philosopher expressed his belief that “a critic should provide not only assessments, however refined, but true syllogisms about the destiny of literature, if not about entire literature and culture” (68). From the work of G. Călinescu, for example, one could extract admirable quotes and judgments, but not a unitary view of culture or of the other topics under discussion. Thus, literary judgment should respect the desiderata of logic and provide a comprehensive philosophical vision in order to be truly valid. Despite these ideas, Constantin Noica the critic owed much to impressionism in his literary judgments. Here is, for example, a portrait of Liviu Rebreanu in a true Călinescian style: “Mr Liviu Rebreanu appears to possess an enormous will. His blue eyes and his perpetually laughing figure of

a satisfied child conceal the tenacity and perseverance of an Englishman. I have experienced that sense of a self-made man in relation to none of his glorified confrères. Mr Liviu Rebreanu became a writer but he could easily have become a bridge builder or an automobile manufacturer" (Semnele Minervei 432).

The philosopher's many considerations against literature and criticism could be regarded as circumspect, as mere dissociations from the spirit of that time, in keeping with the ideology of the generation to which he belonged, without necessarily liking it. But Noica did not seem to love much of foreign literature either, especially modern literature, approaching the crises afflicting contemporary man. André Maurois was "dry", "emaciated" (305); Miguel de Unamuno was a kind of Don Quixote, a mere animator, not a creator (425); Paul Valéry's "tired" writing was perhaps "the least hopeful in the world of our European culture" (Moartea omului de mâine 248). The essayist was fond of neither Aldous Huxley and Eugène Ionesco, nor of Montaigne and Voltaire.

Analysing literature as a world of surfaces, Noica seemed to explore what he himself called, in a text titled "Reconciliation with the World", "the negative consciousness of limits" (Echilibrul spiritual 93). His thought penetrated what the artistic world was not in order to acquire a taste of what it might be. If faced with a choice between the realm of the possible and the universe of the real, he went for the former, and literature itself was an ever open possibility, a profitable waste of time, at least as a negation of that spirit with an expiration date.

Constantin Noica's "literary" destiny was, ironically, that he was appreciated, from very early on, for the artistic qualities of his writing. Critics point out that his lexical range owed much to Ion Creangă, Petre Ispirescu, Mihai Eminescu, and the chroniclers (Roatiș 226), remarking the "novelistic" nature of his ideas and the literariness of his discourse (Simion, Fragmente 125). An actual critic, Șerban Cioculescu, recommended Noica, the philosopher who watched bemused the trivial literary preoccupations of Mircea Eliade, to try writing a novel (Aspecte 712). More recent studies suggest that most of Noica's oeuvre should be regarded as works of literature, noting the influence his writings have exerted on contemporary Romanian poetry and prose. Philosophers have also noticed, almost without exception, the lyricism of Noica's writing, his unmistakable artistic style, despite his repeated pleas for pure reason. "Noica", Ion Ianoși states, "is an artist despite his own intentions. His philosophy is "artistic" even where he despises "art" (253). In contradiction with the model of his philosophy, *Mathesis universalis*, stand Noica the philosopher's predominantly literary devices, as Gabriel Liiceanu shows. His writing followed the romantic, widely accessible line of modern speculation, aimed at "taming the face of philosophy" as a last possible chance for his

survival in modernity (40; 48). Seeking philosophy inside literature, Constantin Noica found literature inside philosophy, in an attempt to discover essences in a world of surfaces.

(Translated into English by Carmen-Veronica Borbely)

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