

# Sociological Approaches of an Interwar Romanian Literary Critic:

ANTONIO PATRAȘ

**E. Lovinescu**

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*“Wherever they arise,  
ideological phenomena  
spawn, by means of  
contagion, new social  
forms.”*

*(E. Lovinescu)*

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**E.** LOVINESCU (1881–1943) is generally considered as the main representative within Romanian culture of the interwar aesthetic criticism that advocated the necessary modernization of our literature by means of imitating salient Western models. Although his image with posterity is a compound of mere clichés, the critic proves to be at close scrutiny quite a complex theorist (even though, quite often, a rather contradictory one) who aimed to assess literature from a psycho-sociological point of view and articulate a consistent personality theory focusing on the rendition of inner development processes. I shall refer here to only one of the key-concepts of his literary theory and criticism system, namely, the “theory of forms without content,” whereby Lovinescu was certain he would be able to account for the emergence of modern Romanian civilization.

Before proceeding we should state that, after prodigiously working as a literary reviewer over the first two de-

caedes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Lovinescu succeeded in establishing himself as an outstanding figure in Romanian letters no sooner than the end of World War I, when the launch of the *Sburătorul* review (in 1919) and the starting of the eponymous literary circle provided the opportunity for him to crystallize his own theoretical concepts and put together along with his current work a coherent program that matched the openness of the literature of that time to modernizing influences as well as the ever stronger tendencies to radically split the aesthetic from any other values, under a uniformizing pressure that demanded synchronization with Western literatures. For practical reasons and as he imperiously had to back up his program with a theoretical platform solid enough to keep his ideological opponents at bay, Lovinescu works for several years in a row on his doctrinal book, *The History of Romanian Civilization*, on which he will afterwards base his further comprehensive and synthesizing historiographic works. Sociologically speaking, the study relies on an idea previously stated by Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea (1855–1920), according to which in capitalist societies social forms actually express social contents as a direct consequence of their evolution in time, whereas in economically underdeveloped nations the social content continuously adapts to social forms. As one can easily notice, Lovinescu's study takes off from Maiorescu's<sup>1</sup> older theory of "forms without content" (only in reverse, that is, by describing the opposite process), which had been scientifically argued against by Ștefan Zeletin (1882–1934), a redoubtable specialist who was keen on shattering all the speculations of Romanian literati, from the Junimea members to the most recent ones.

*That is how the critical spirit was born in our culture, whose representatives have managed to talk the Romanian audience into believing that our culture—nay, not only that, but our whole modern society—resides strictly in imitating foreign civilizations, in forms with no content, mere outer polish, and many other similar things. Such critique of our bourgeois society, conducted by a number of reactionaries, has been so persuasive that it even overwhelmed C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea himself: since he was not able to dismantle it and while also feeling obliged, as a sociologist, to explain the phenomenon, he especially concocted a brand new sociological law, one regarding the evolution of forms into content.<sup>2</sup>*

In his self-effacing manner, Lovinescu does not claim to have any other competences than those of a literary critic and thus labels his study as nothing more than an "essay in social and cultural psychology." And indeed, his *History of Romanian Civilization* does not aim to correct any of the specialist approaches to the matter, but rather to unify and systematize his own critical thought which had not yet crystallized into a definitive version (and that is why, as we shall see below, Zeletin's objections are actually only partly valid). Yet, as one can

note by following the critic's personality development, it is evident that his urge towards establishing himself always superseded his genuine thirst for knowledge, the latter never being as strong as to really get in the way of the steady feuilleton reviewer (since it is barely possible to dedicate oneself to systematic research when one has to regularly submit sundry contributions here and there). Whence the eclecticism and at times even inconsistency of the aesthetic ideas he would entertain in the alertly sophistic manner of an accomplished one-time apprentice of Faguet and Anatole France. The dogma of hedonistic impressionism was therefore a must, since it came along naturally from the psychological postulate regarding the necessary reduction to unity of all spiritual processes that otherwise would face the risk of total dissolution, for outpouring intelligence into inextricable nuances and dissociations.

Trying to capture the process of his personality's becoming by a concept as accurate as possible, Lovinescu actually arrives, within a necessary preamble to his self-fulfilment (as described in the *Memoirs* published in 1930), at analyzing the genesis of our culture and civilization supposedly in view of the organic bond between the individual and the "race." Therefore, once we have clarified the psychological motive for articulating the theoretical program meant to effectively support the militant work of the *Sburătorul* critic, we need to make it clear that his study, irrespective of the reasons it was written for and the contradictions it may be entrapped in, is not as shallow as certain professional sociologists would suggest. But let us go back, for now, to Zeletin's objections.

An accomplished connoisseur of the sociological research methods based on collecting and empirically checking factual data, the ideologue of neo-liberalism contests, on very good grounds, the alleged "law" of the evolution of Romanian society after getting into the high-speed orbit of imitating superior forms of civilization. Thus, the birth of modern Romania was not as much the outcome of the mimetic enthusiasm of a handful of false revolutionaries spellbound by the Western lights, but rather the effect of commodity circulation and of the presence of British capital on the Danube. Ergo: it was not the French Revolution ideology (about which the vast majority of Romanians did not have a clue), but the capitalist economy which triggered the spectacular evolution of our culture and civilization. Let us not forget that, likewise, Tocqueville (1805–1859) discovered the origins of the revolution not so much in Voltaire's ideas but rather in the excessive centralism of the Old Regime, while Norbert Elias (1897–1990) would later on describe the civilizing process as an outcome of the decay of nobility (the representatives of which were more inclined to spontaneity and naturalness, moral traits that were not without an audience in terms of social realia) and the triumph of the middle-class (which can be credited with the advent of capitalism seen as the result of surveyed and mimetic behaviour, codified as "good

manners” and respect for discipline). Anyway, Zeletin’s arguments are based on a comprehensive subject-matter bibliography and a truly modern vision on social dynamics grasped as manifestations of certain complex objective structures which cannot be accounted for in terms of mere psychological motives, like they used to be in the past.

Lovinescu, on the other hand, seems more connected to the sociology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, since he claims to have borrowed his theory of imitation from Gabriel Tarde (1843–1904) whose vision he revises only in details, without contradicting the latter’s psychologism in describing the formation of human societies. Consequently, although he does not break with psychologism, the Romanian critic attempts to switch the terms of the equation (whose natures are actually the same) along the lines of an already established evolution, from content to form. Hence, while for Tarde social phenomena are basically “reiterated individual acts,” and society is seen as the expression of individual free will, Lovinescu does not set out from the individual but subordinates the latter, from the very start, to society and race, and then redraws the trajectory from general to individual by following a causal type of logic. Ultimately, Lovinescu’s sociology thus proves indebted to ethnopsychology, a science abounding in positivist features and guilty of sins that had once tempted Eminescu himself (1850–1889). The Romanians’ national poet was revisited at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in his newly discovered capacity as a prophet of the nation and reactionary ideologue who while working for the conservative magazine *Timpul* exalted a peasants’ mystique and a *passéism* of the purest Romantic stock. But while the brilliant poet was an advocate of the organic state, in light of a physiocratic vision, the modernist critic Lovinescu shows more interest in the rationality of the social contract, in the footsteps of Enlightenment political thinking.

A rationalist spirit who would typically restrain his temperament in order to think without being disturbed by affects, but categorically and in accurate concepts (“everything beyond logic is not of interest,” he once stated), Lovinescu intends to explain the formation of our modern civilization as a revolutionary process, along the lines of historical becoming provisioned by the progressive principles of liberal ideology. In view of that goal he collects an impressive amount of historical data which surpassed by far the (prevaingly literary) sources of G. Ibrăileanu’s (1871–1936) *Spiritul critic în cultura românească* (The critical spirit in Romanian culture, 1909). Moreover, in spite of his scarce sociological knowledge and his occasionally sophistic arguments, the literary master of *Sburătorul* cuts a convincing figure by dint of pungent style and seamless elegance, having the courage to even propose a number of extremely interesting hypotheses, which I was surprised to come across later on in the works of certain systematic thinkers in the field. For instance (as maybe also wanting to answer Zeletin’s objections to the theory of forms without content), Lovinescu ascribes the modern-

ization of Romanian civilization almost exclusively to the ideological factor while minimizing the role played by economy in the matter (“national aspirations do not reside in mere commodity circulation,”<sup>3</sup> states he somewhere), a tenet confirmed later on by Karl R. Popper (1902–1994) who criticizes in his *Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) the anti-individualist theories and credits ideas, seen as the main agent of change, with an essential role in configuring civilizations.

But, in fact, Popper confirms the Romanian critic’s ideas only inasmuch as they represent a liberal-democratic thinking case in point, relevant for a form of wholesome rationalism and in the spirit of individualism, a clean ideology to which the advocate of open societies opposes Marxism, blamed for being a reactionary doctrine of Gnostic and Manichean descent. Yet, since he misses the specialization background—although he refers to Durkheim (1858–1917), for instance, he does not seem to have actually realized the importance of his works—Lovinescu thought that by overrating the economic, Zeletin (at a superficial glance) was a purebred Marxist, since the latter believed that the organic evolution of Romanian society should start with developing the means of production. In reality, Zeletin just recorded the meagre condition of Romanian society significantly changed for the better not so much by imported ideas but rather by foreign capital, while worriedly noting the pending economic reforms which stumbled on local mentality hurdles. Likewise, Lovinescu himself stays assured that Romanians have a “gregarious spirit” (a phrase previously coined by Constantin Rădulescu-Motru) and that they are not mature enough for democracy<sup>4</sup>—which still does not prevent him from endorsing the idea of the necessary revolutionary leap and conceiving the idea of an independent state built on a rational basis.

In Popper’s vision, the process described by Lovinescu would signal nothing else but the transition from the closed society, based on a biologic-organicist model, to the open society founded on the liberal ideas that triumphed during the French Revolution. But, as it is well known, the principle of reason brings about contractual relationships between individual and society, on a mutually agreed upon basis and by means of reciprocal agreement, and not under the fatality of biological laws that turn humans into unfree beings. Therefore, the shift from the traditional hierarchical pyramidal society to the much more dynamic and unpredictable forms of modern life inflicts a real trauma on society by dislocating the individual from the compact bloc of the collective being and the stereotyped mentality which previously stood in for thinking. But it is only now that, along with the establishment of the human being as an individual with a distinct personality of their own, the existence of a major culture becomes actually possible as something irreducible to the anonymous expression of a primitive sensibility wherein differences are solely ethnographic in nature.

Under such assumptions, Lovinescu explains the formation of our modern civilization as an effect of the discovery of the Occident, of the contact with its institutions, which we may have indeed adopted out of necessity, true, but at the same with admiration for what we sensed as being superior to ourselves. In the critic's view, synchronizing with the Western civilization was demanded both by the pressure coming from the law of modern life inter-dependences, which levels down all differences and ties peoples' destinies together, and by the collective mind's will to adapt after centuries of hieratic life and corresponding reflexes. Coming out of the millenary inertia is a process prompted first by foreign factors that require reaction, and if the collective psyche is responsive to such factors, then we shall speak of a natural penchant for imitation, and if not, then it will take more for imitation to gain ground and the process of individual emancipation from the psychic automatism of the race shall definitely be delayed (while still inevitable). Only in inferior peoples with unsubstantial psyches—says Lovinescu, proving that even our most tolerant ideologue got somewhat infected with racial preconceptions or, to put it more mildly, political incorrectness<sup>5</sup>—will imitation stay sterile and not succeed in awaking the instinct of self-affirmation. But the Romanians (unlike the allegedly inferior race of the Black people of San Domingo) prove themselves more willing to valorise their creative potential once the unified state has emerged and the nation has become independent. It is true, though, that modern Romanian culture is mostly a mimetic one, still in progress, and this only makes sense given that our people is not yet a homogenous race, with a clear-cut identity. Such delay would be solely due to foreign causes, such as an adverse history, things that have thwarted the shaping of a national conscience and a specific tradition.<sup>6</sup>

More specifically, what has postponed the emergence of a Romanian *pedigree* race in Lovinescu's views was Orthodox Christianity, a religion foreign to our people's spirit. Orthodoxy allegedly imposed on us "a foreign liturgical language and alphabet (Latin thought cast in canopied Cyrillics!) which did not help out at all with giving birth to national culture and arts."<sup>7</sup> Yet, not mysticism/Orthodoxy is truly typical of our people's psychology, but Latin rationalism and its pragmatic mentality—whence the reading of the renewal of ties to the Western World as "recuperating the true ethnic and ideal continuity" which once "unchained from only social bonds, presently, shall later on cut us free us from the invisible spiritual chains of Constantinople, Mount Athos, or Kiev, that is, from the ancestral forces of obscurantism and inertia."<sup>8</sup> As the critic notes while approaching one of Eminescu's older statements, the assessment above could amount to an explanation why all peoples in civilized Europe are or were for a long time Catholic (the poet once extolled the figure of the medieval Prince Alexander the Good for his religious tolerance and admiration of Catholicism). Consequently, the discovery of the Western world does not bring

about any spectacular shift from form to content (as it should have happened, according to the critic's theories), but rather calls the Romanian soul back to its source, after having been long estranged from its authentic origins by foreign factors (namely, Orthodoxy) that have perturbed the organic evolution of our culture and civilization. For that reason, getting in contact with the Occident would actually mean no less than self-discovery—but that obviously only if European Enlightenment-related mentalities, confidence in progress and the power of reason would also be characteristic of the Romanian people too.

In other words, the imitation of Western forms, according to Lovinescu, stemmed from a psychological motive that involves both assimilating new ideas (but only on condition that those ideas have been accepted by the race's temperament in the first place!) and the emergence of the competitive spirit, arising from typically bourgeois mentalities. The critic thus identifies the conditions for the genesis of Romanian civilization as being of a psychological nature, and therefore the phenomenon appears to be not as much an echo of certain revolutionary ideas that were forcefully imposed on us, but the fruit of enthusiasm for those ideas which were in fact very familiar to Romanian spirituality. However, feigning forms does not always stimulate the content (and this is the case with inferior races)—which is an important revision, indeed worth noting!

Moreover, if for Lovinescu the Romanian psyche enters again, as a result of its contact with the Western civilization, into an orbit of organic progress and continuous evolution that has been hindered for a long time, there follows that the birth of modern Romanian culture and civilization is nothing else but the logical natural outcome of that process. But the critic still avoids drawing such a conclusion that could render useless any argument in favor of modernization, that is, in favour of a revolutionary attitude that welcomes novelty and is the very opposite of ethnic conformity as an equivalent to fatalism and to the Moldavian shepherd's epitomizing passivity in our folk ballads. And indeed, if the Western influence resulted in our discovery of the source of our ethno-psychological identity, that would entail the fact that our race's genuinely typical mentality is a dramatically different one, maybe even bourgeois, to match the Latin spirituality and its abovementioned penchant for the power of reason and progress. But Lovinescu, in stark contradiction with all that, would always identify as typical of our race a set of completely different traits (such as tenderness, inertia, and passivity) ascribed as we have already noted to the ill-fated influence of Orthodoxy and to a philosophy of life originated in Eastern and Slavic cultural areas. Therefore, if the Latin element is a crucial factor within the Romanian ethnotype along with its respective ingredients (i.e. the urge to imitate Western models), then it is not traditionalism that we should define, psychologically speaking, as an expression of conformity, but... modernism itself.

On the other hand, the spirit of competition as begotten by imitating accomplished forms of civilization (the Protestant ethics originates from nowhere else than Catholicism, as an effect of excessive heretical rationalism, since St. Augustine's doctrine was so ingeniously twisted by the followers of Luther) is only possible in an open society, where individuals are given the opportunity to affirm themselves freely. In spite of that, Lovinescu does not grant individuals any more freedom than what is inscribed within the limits of the race's psychology! And thus, although he reiterates Ibrăileanu's tenets according to which since there wasn't any Romanian middle-class, our bourgeois revolution was supported by extraneous ethnic groups and bankrupt lesser boyars, Lovinescu completely erases all mention of economic causes and ends up explaining the liberalism of 1848 and the Junimea school's conservatism solely from the race's psychology perspective, assessing the two trends as expressions of Wallachian and Moldavian temperaments, respectively. In his opinion, the 1848 revolution was no more than expressing admiration for a certain humanitarian ideology "with no economic grounds"<sup>9</sup> and the enthusiasm to rediscover the enlightened virtues of the race. And thus, in proceeding from racial matters in explaining the revolution, the critic credits the Wallachians, and more specifically the Wallachian temperament (an economically and politically agentive factor), with the major role in the events, while the Moldavians were acknowledged in compensation as having artistic creativity and being responsible for adjusting the object of imitation (be means of the critical spirit) to our specific mentality. Likewise, the existence of certain distinct temperamental predispositions determines the emergence of a middle class which establishes itself in a more significant social and political way in Wallachia than in Moldavia.<sup>10</sup>

**I**N LIGHT of all the above we might conclude that social evolution does not depend in any way on economic factors or on updating the means of production—which obviously cannot be true. Therefore, even if he admits that "certain ideas, namely the ones our knowledge consists of, are more fundamental than the means of production,"<sup>11</sup> a thorough thinker like Popper will not ignore the importance of economic development. In reality, there is an obvious "interaction between economy and ideas" as Lovinescu himself remarked as well, but it is subordinated in his vision to psychology, the only actually fundamental one. As a consequence, ideas and the economy "do not produce identical outcomes" because "as they work on different human matter they are distorted by the quality and permissiveness of that very matter they have to pervade."<sup>12</sup> The influence (racial) temperament plays on society remains, to the Romanian critic, capital, although it cannot be, as he once hinted, the only cause of change: "societies are not made solely of forms from the past, just as they are not determined by commodity exchanges alone. Under the strict law of synchronicity, they



are shaped in accordance with the current conceptions of their time” and “wherever they arise, ideological phenomena spawn, by means of contagion, new social forms.”<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, let us note that Lovinescu does not consistently endorse the idea of interdependence between social-economic and affective traits. He is inclined to credit psychology with the essential role while the social is either seen as subordinate or even totally ignored, in spite of the contrary declarations of intent. Thus, while describing the genesis of our civilization as a revolutionary process that is based on synchronizing with the Occident by means of imitating its outer forms and not its organic evolution from content to form, the critic should have actually subordinated the psychological (the collective and individual psyche) termed as “content” to the social (the “form”). He would have arrived at the same concept by following the Marxist postulate which states that society (the economic factor) determines individual conscience (which is unconceivable beyond social structures). But Lovinescu attacks Marxism (which he thinks is to be found in Zeletin’s works) as typical of a reductionist thinking, anti-individualist and anti-psychologist, which relies on an organic evolution assumption, that is, on the idea of an evolution from, again, “content” (capitalist economy) to “form” (modern society).

As for the issue of Romanian capitalism as civilizing force, well, it is something of the sublime, but utterly non-extant—whence the need to “invent” it by massive importation of foreign forms (the corresponding social institutions); being brought about by means of imitation, in a revolutionary way, Romanian capitalism found itself preceded by the ideological revolution. And thus, both out of firm determination to distance himself from Marxism and his intention to provide a more refined explanation for the process described by Ibrăileanu in *Spiritual critic în cultura românească*, the master from the Sburătorul sees imitation in purely psychological terms, as admiration on the part of the inferior for the superior, a sentiment that also triggers, along with the respective mimetic inclination, the will to affirm oneself. In consequence, the imitation of outer forms is seen as coming out of an inner urge, as stemming from the “content”—just as in the process of personality crystallization the will is not a counter to temperament, as one may think, but is actually meant to make the most out of it.

To put it otherwise, hollow forms (assimilated by imitation) are not capable of generating any content, they just challenge the latter to break free from its own inertia (Lovinescu spoke of a certain law of “simulation-stimulation”), and manifest in an original way (by means of “differentiation”) and in compliance with the law of synchronism and interdependence. Form is therefore neither the expression of some extraneous agents nor a pure manifestation of the content, although the former “tends to uniformize European life” and to “more or

less level the psychologies” especially in the case of young peoples, with a revolutionary background, where one may speak of a greater proportion of imitation than proper tradition.<sup>14</sup> However, the content (of the psyche) still remains the dynamic factor, unlike form! That is why the difference from Maiorescu’s theory is a surface one, for Lovinescu, very much like his illustrious predecessor, also develops his argument from assuming the existence of a Romanian soul, an unquestioned reality taken for granted which both in the case of organic evolution as well as in spectacular mutations remains the decisive vector in the configuration of a cultural identity and a distinct civilization. Let us remember that although on a theoretical level he viewed society as a rational project adopted by consensus, and free of constraints, for individuals to embark on, when he comes to analyzing the emergence of our modern civilization, the critic’s thought stays clouded by the symbolic logic of an organicist vision that congeals once again the dialectics of form into the immutable and the biologically inherited.

Moreover, by the exceptions he points out (the existence of certain inferior races and sterile imitations), Lovinescu proves himself once more inconsistent in applying his own sociological “law” which he reads in a psychological key and also discretionarily, in accordance with his own temperamental predispositions and his vision on personality. Therefore, Lovinescu’s explanation regarding the genesis of modern Romanian civilization cannot but be accepted as mere speculation for proving some often contradictory opinions—which only goes to show that the “impressionist” Lovinescu remains even now, in the stage of doctrinal syntheses, an analytical dissociative spirit who is more into nuances rather than impeccable systemization. But beyond the abovementioned inconsistencies between the theory proper and its specific applications, between the sociological enquiry and the psychological observations, Lovinescu actually remains consistent with himself, referring to certain documents only in order to pick from them what interests him as a critic, militant, and defender of modernist values. It is at this point, at his pragmatic motivation that his sociological ambitions stop.

As we have already seen, while explaining the emergence of Romanian modern civilization as a revolutionary process, Lovinescu resorts to the theory of imitation and bases his argument on Gabriel Tarde’s psychologist views and on the biologist Hugo de Vries’s (1848–1935) “mutation” concept. The French sociologist advocated the two-stage evolution hypothesis (“integral imitation” followed by “differentiation”) whereby “after revolutionary eras open to any kind of novelty come epochs in which a civilization is consolidated and settled.”<sup>15</sup> Once the issue of “adapting” imported forms has been solved, what is left to explain is the revolutionary process of “content” synchronization—and the “mutation” concept which Lovinescu quotes from the famous biologist<sup>16</sup> seems to have worked as a perfect match to the critic’s doctrinal intentions.

Yet, unfortunately, the two theoretical sources cannot conjugate without contradictions: the law of psychological determinism does not approve of the logic of the “revolutionary leap,” of the “mutation” that will launch the content/collective soul by dint of imitation, directly into the orbit of modern social life. Focusing on the continuity of psychological phenomena (be they conscious or unconscious) and on the organic roots of affective life totally dismisses the possibility for the psyche to be shaped by outer agents. However, this fact did not elude G. Călinescu’s (1899–1965) attention, who deemed the theory of “imitation” to be absurd and accused his senior colleague of confusing between “idea” and “act”—a quite serious logical mistake residing in equating the “form” with the proper “act” (which is always “specific,” “differentiated,” since it presupposes adapting a borrowed idea to a given reality), as well as with the ideas themselves, for only the latter can be philosophically defined as “empty” forms, immutable and impossible to differentiate, as expressions of a *sui generis* abstract thinking.<sup>17</sup>

Probably sensing the contradiction but without giving up the binary “content–form” concept, Lovinescu cannot make up his mind as to which one he should grant priority as the active element within the imitation process: the content or the form? Imitation begins in outer forms anyway, from top to bottom (the other way round than Tarde believed) and sometimes remains in such forms alone (the case of inferior races).<sup>18</sup> But if the people doing the imitation have a complex soul, then the adjustment of content and form “is carried out by a twofold process whose two components progress in opposite directions: the process of the descent of forms into content” and the one of “content evolving into form, which is much slower.”<sup>19</sup> Consequently, since the ascent of the content to form happens (if it does!) so slowly, it follows that the concepts of “mutation” and “revolutionary leap” do not hold water anymore. Like nature, the soul takes no leaps. Therefore, we have to accept the idea of evolution on a social level, but refine it as being indeed determined by outer factors while still *pre-determined* by the race’s psychology.

At the same time, on the grounds of distinguishing between “civilization” and “culture”—two terms that according to Norbert Elias<sup>20</sup> only in German signify a qualitative difference between, on the one hand, material living conditions (an outer factor, hence a second rate value) and on the other, purely spiritual goods (the supreme value, the expression of a people’s creativity)—Lovinescu does not consider civilization (understood as the totality of material goods) as the ultimate stage in the organic evolution of a culture (as Spengler or our Orthodox ideologues did, for instance). Since culture is “the totality of spiritual goods,” the critic grants civilization the role of “form,” which, once it has been borrowed from abroad shall elevate the “content” (culture/the collective soul) to an expres-

sion typical of modern life, by means of the same twofold process (of evolution from form to content, and then from content to form).

**T**HE GENESIS of modern Romanian civilization is thus considered to bring about the emergence of a new culture as well—but not by way of a spectacular mutation (as the critic would have wished) but by a slow process of gradual adaptation of borrowed modern forms (civilization) to the sensibility and soul of the race (culture). Besides, although he lays stress on the diminution of the role played by the ethnic factor (race) in the formation of modern Romanian civilization along with emphasizing the “time” element with its function of levelling (by means of “synchronization”) the ethno-psychological differences, Lovinescu does not suppress the organic link between tradition and modernity, but bestows on the new cultural and civilization-related forms a psychological significance too, as “values of the soul,” typical of the respective ethnic temperament. In his opinion, “as they become part of our life, these material goods work their way into our habits and gradually evolve, by means of adapting to our temperamental identity, into values of the soul.” Yet this observation does not entitle Lovinescu to extrapolate and jump to the conclusion that “civilization turns into culture,”<sup>21</sup> since this is not always what really happens—sometimes, when the imitation is sterile (in inferior races), civilization does not evolve into culture but remains mere outer appearance, with no actual echo in the people’s soul. Briefly put, “the path from culture to civilization is not irreversible,” and neither is the one from civilization to culture, that is, it is not obligatory.

Lovinescu would have escaped easily from the jaws of contradiction if, along with reverting the scenario of organic evolution from culture to civilization (and the other way round) he had also given the terms involved a sensibly different meaning (since again, only in German, where the semantic difference has gone down in history as numerous major trends of thought, “culture” and “civilization” designate a relationship of opposition and subordination of “material goods” to the “spirit”). The current scientific vocabulary defines civilization as the expression of certain “large superior culture assemblages” that unfold during one variable historic cycle, while culture would illustrate only one particular side of civilization, a “vertical and local” ethnically differentiated cross-section.<sup>22</sup> Or, to go back to Călinescu’s argument, culture is to be translated into “acts” by adaption to the ethnic data (the content), an abstract behavior model and certain “ideas” that are formally labeled as “civilization.” In fact, had he adopted this terminological correction (culture as not only the spiritual factor), Lovinescu would have managed to explain in a more convincing way the genesis of modern Romanian “civilization” as a process of gradual adaption (not by “mutations”)

to European spirituality of our traditional culture compelled to affirm its ethnic identity amid other nations.

In other words, cultures illustrate by their very nature a certain kind of civilization, while all the modernization process does is just highlight the ethnic “difference” in a more evident way, against a mutual spiritual content. Unfortunately, although he was inclined to overlook the culture-civilization distinction (irrelevant from a psychological point a view, since the Romanian psyche, due to its “Latin” component, is part of the European one) and to view modernization as a natural self-affirmation process of the Romanian spirit in the context of European civilization, Lovinescu chose to apply the “mutation” theory to this issue as well and sacrifice the truth (of the content) for the sake of consistency (in form) in his own system.

□

## Notes

1. Titu Maiorescu (1840–1917) was the most important Romanian cultural leader in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and he is also considered to be the founder of Romanian literary criticism and the theorist of the autonomy of the aesthetic. His aesthetic thinking was influenced by Schopenhauer and Herbart, while his conservative socio-political ideas are very close to those of the historian Thomas Buckle (1821–1862), whose critique of the French Revolution was met with wide reactions in those times.
2. Cf. Ștefan Zeletin, *Burghezia română: Originea și rolul ei istoric* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 168. And further on: “Ever since the Junimea circle established that our bourgeois revolution was carried out from the top to the bottom of our society by means of instigation coming from just a few people who tried to change the face of our world by importing some *hollow forms* from abroad, this preconception has apparently threatened to become eternal” (ibid., 208). And then comes the conclusion: “In the process of modern Romania’s coming to life there are two trends to be distinguished: a boisterous shallow one, which involves the liberal ideas disseminated from Paris to Bucharest and Iași; and a deeper noiseless one flowing all the way down from London to Constanța, Galați, Brăila: the tide of British capitalist economy” (ibid., 95).
3. E. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, ed. Z. Ornea (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică, 1972), 179.
4. “The Romanian people’s governing principle has been an absolutist one” (ibid., 187).
5. For Lovinescu, “every people’s destiny has been irrevocably instilled in their ethnic features.” Consequently, “democratic institutions are sure not to elevate the mentalities of the San Domingo Blacks, and neither do they bear any fruit in any inferior races” (ibid., 439).

6. Ibid., 459: “The Romanian race, we believe, is not yet coagulated. In order to have a homogenous popular soul, with a certain set of communal features, we would have needed a communal development too; the unity of the psyche presupposes a unity of historical life that the people have not actually experienced.”
7. Ibid., 68.
8. Ibid., 76.
9. Ibid., 147.
10. “There definitely exists a Moldavian temperament, contemplative, traditionalist and, thus, dream-like and unadapted, which in the field of poetic creation reached the most elevated artistic expression, while in economic and political life, due to its reserved and inactive nature, placed itself in an obviously inferior position. This temperament is responsible for the rather passive and criticizing role played by Moldavia in the developments that led us out of the Middle Ages and into of modern life” (ibid., 114). Cf. also E. Lovinescu *Istoria literaturii române contemporane*, vol. 2, *Evoluția criticeii literare* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1981), 201. The existence of a more systematic and better organized criticism in Moldavia “should not be explained by the absence of any middle-class there, but rather by the existence of a certain Moldavian temperament—a contemplative, traditionalist one that in the field of poetic creation reached the most exquisite artistic expression, while in economic and political life, due to its reserved and inactive nature placed itself in an obviously inferior position. This temperament is responsible for the rather passive and criticizing role played by Moldavia in the developments that led us out of the Middle Ages and into of modern life. These are the bounds within which we should place the critical spirit in Romanian culture.”
11. K. R. Popper, *Societatea deschisă și dușmanii ei*, trans. D. Stoianovici, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 142. “The more we try to go back to the heroic tribal ages, the surer we shall be to run into the Inquisition, the secret police and various forms of romanticized crime. Thwarting reason and truth cannot lead to anything else but the most brutal and violent destruction of everything human. There is no return to the harmony of nature. If we do that we will have to go all the way back and return to beastliness” (ibid., 1: 267).
12. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, 150.
13. Ibid., 151.
14. Ibid., 326.
15. Ibid., 430.
16. René Wellek states in his *Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) that De Vries’s mutation theory left a strong imprint on an author like John Matthews Manly who came up with the proposal to apply it in literary history. But the idea of evolution as a continuous smooth development—says Wellek—cannot be abandoned without some very serious logical consequences that shall strictly favor the production of some special literary works under the special mutation principle.
17. G. Călinescu, “Cauze imperceptibile... în strânsă interdependență,” in *E. Lovinescu interpretat de...*, an anthology edited with an introductory study by Florin Mihăilescu (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1973), 101–106.

18. "At the foundation of any imitation lies a gesture of love and admiration. . . . the imitation process usually starts from outer forms, from attitudes, clothing, little gestures, in one word, no matter what the psychological motive, in its realization, imitation begins by being formal and sometimes stays that way for good" (Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, 433).
19. *Ibid.*, 441.
20. "In German, though, *Zivilisation* means something extremely useful, while it still is of no more than second-rate value: something that resides solely in the outer manifestations, only on the surface of human existence. Besides, the German word for self-definition, for foremostly taking pride in one's own accomplishments and one's being, is *Kultur*."
21. Lovinescu, *Istoria civilizației române moderne*, 371.
22. "Civilization would preferably refer to the largest superior cultural assemblages; the term culture would thus be kept for designating any organized society with self-awareness, different from others, irrespective of its magnitude or duration. Thus, *culture* could signify the array of technologies, mores, institutions, beliefs, arts, and other spiritual works of a certain ethnic group, and it could very well be applied to a major culture as well. To French, German, British cultures as well as Inuit and Pueblo cultures, and the culture of the Australian aborigines. Civilization would mean large assemblages with certain mutual features and dynamics over some specific periods of time. . . . If civilization tends more and more to stand for a large historical assemblage in its specific evolution, culture may mean a local, vertical cross-section through the former at a given moment in time." Neagu Djuvara, *Civilizații și tipare istorice: Un studiu comparat al civilizațiilor*, trans. Șerban Broché, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, rev. and enl. (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2006), 15.

## Abstract

### Sociological Approaches of an Interwar Romanian Literary Critic: E. Lovinescu

The straightforward lines of E. Lovinescu's critical system should be put to trial by confronting the dogmatism of his thinking with the inner psychological significance of his key concepts. After delineating a few incongruities of the critic's theories regarding the process of formation and modernization in Romanian culture and civilisation, the present study argues that Lovinescu, inspired by nineteenth century sociology (Durkheim, Tarde), insists upon the process of imitation as the main means of crystalizing a culture with specific features and differentiated individuality. Against his anti-Marxist ideology and liberal bias, the Romanian critic is drawn toward a psychological understanding of modernization: he stresses imitation as an actualization of psychic virtualities, preferring to elude the economic factors. In his criticism the psychological insight has the last word in the process of interpretation. Lovinescu mingles in the well-known "aesthetic mutation" formula a great amount of psychological understanding which corrupts the system from the inside.

## Keywords

imitation (sociological theory of), cultural interdependence, modernity, mutation, ethnopsychology