

Report on Mr. G. Călinescu's *History of Romanian Literature from Its Beginning Until Today*

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I think that the real question about these facts should address the correctness of the information as well as, more importantly, the real reason why the author used them in his work.

THE MINISTRY of National Culture,

By Order no. 96856/1942, I am requested to make an investigation within determined limits of Mr. G. Călinescu's *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* [History of Romanian literature from its beginning until today], a work that was published in Bucharest in 1941 by the Royal Foundation for Literature and Art.

Mr. G. Călinescu's *History of Romanian Literature*, which aroused such lively debates in the Romanian media, is undoubtedly a work that equally combines great qualities and great faults. Although surprisingly lacking in conceptual unity and historical information, displaying certain obsessions and an aesthetic analysis constantly modified under the influence of social conceptions, it sometimes bears witness to an exceptional artistic intelligence, thanks to which its major flaws are compensated to a large extent. It was only natural that these attributes would make

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some enthusiastic and others discontented. Originating foremost in a marked dialectical spirit, the work reveals its author in struggle not only with his colleagues but also with the writers themselves and, quite often, with established values. Because the study cannot be followed in all its details—this would mean to completely recreate it—I shall limit my considerations to the two chapters incriminated in Ms. Perticari Davila’s complaint, which were the reason for the reaction of the Ministry and for this report. Both chapters are suitable for illustrating the author’s method.

In the preface, Mr. Călinescu claims that his study aims “to separate the cultural from the artistic, to apply the same strictly literary methods to the whole textual substance” and that it deals only with the “artistic conscience.” Due to this conception, he feels entitled to transcend “that pious confusion between culture and literature” and hence eliminate Coresi and present the writers of the Transylvanian School only superficially. Strictly enforced, this principle should have required the author to also leave out a writer like Dinicu Golescu whose activity mostly concerns cultural and not literary history. Indeed, to what extent is the cultural separated from the artistic in works such as: *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, *Collection of Ecclesiastic and Philosophical Parables* or *Collection of Treaties between the Mighty Kingdom of Russia and the High Porte*, which Mr. Călinescu finds necessary to record and, for the *Collection of Parables*, to even track its sources? His analysis of Dinicu Golescu’s famous *Însemnare a călătoriei mele* [Notes of my journey] is characterized by the absence of a historical background and by an obvious minimizing tendency. If here, however, his position is debatable, Mr. Călinescu disregards the truth completely when he portrays the writer in a fundamentally arbitrary manner. For Mr. Călinescu, the great boyar was merely “a boyar like all boyars, humble with the powerful, taking money from the needy, according to his own confession, living a lazy life and whining away from hardship” (p. 85). This portrait is based on certain passages from *Notes of My Journey* whose spirit is completely falsified. Despite his russophilia Golescu is one of the most devoted sons of his country and one of the most demophile spirits in Romanian culture. I shall not dwell on his support for the great cultural initiatives of that time: thanks to him, the Literary Society was born in 1827 and the first Romanian newspaper, the *Curierul românesc* [Romanian Courier], appeared. The work analyzed by Mr. Călinescu reveals us a man of a totally different moral stature than what the Jassy critic attributed to him. Far from being “a boyar like all boyars” who takes money from the poor, Golescu is a harsh critic of boyars and of public servants, a fearless defender of the needy. Consequently, I find it necessary to present the texts used by Mr. Călinescu to partially ground his study and which will gainsay every one of his convictions:

“Therefore I am forced to present the reasons why the Wallachian taxpayer, inhabiting that rich and beautiful land, lives in such poverty and infamy that

any foreigner would find unbelievable. And tallage was followed by punishment to force people into giving what they didn't have and couldn't collect. Oh! The mind shudders when it realizes that the work of God, mankind, our brothers, were forced to lie on the ground by the dozen with their eyes into the sun and a large, a heavy bar on their abdomen so that they couldn't avoid the bites of flies and mosquitoes. If no one did this, then I have shamefully written a lie; but if a Romanian did it to his fellow Romanians to show his master that he did his job well and collected a lot of money, then he, on reading this and recalling what he did, should be ashamed of it and should not continue doing it, otherwise the pen will be put to paper. And things of this kind shall not remain confined to confessors and sufferers; the pen shall divulge to the community what was good and what was bad for the people. Other Christians, also for money related reasons, were hanged head down, and still others were locked and smoked in cattle sheds, and there were many other similar punishments. And let those public servants beyond the Olt who fear God inquire into these punishments and let them present them to those who wish to find out when they happened and who was so kindly opened to work and good will." (Op. cit., ed. *Prietenii Istoriei literare*, pp. 83–84)

"The reason is that the Lords and we, the boyars, never get to see them face to face but they are only to be seen by those who constrain, punish, and push them into fulfilling their duties, by those whose souls are poisoned and whose conscience is unaware of its obligations towards men." (Id., p. 86)

"Oh! I remember well and I must confess that I have done much wrong. For not only have I not done any good to my country in gratitude for having fed, enriched, and honoured my ancestors, but, in every high office that I have held, I kept taking unlawful tribute from the people, who don't even have their daily bread." (Op. cit., p. 92)

It is true that Mr. Călinescu goes on to take note of Golescu's "transfiguration" during his journey and concludes that "the boyars were the first to do the revolution" which goes against his reproof of all boyars from the beginning of the article. Had Mr. Călinescu given consideration to history, he would have realized that the concerns for enlightening the people were not initiated in the Golescu family by Dinicu, but that they were inherited from the previous generation. He would also have realized that some of Dinicu's self-accusations must be interpreted as an urge for good and must not be taken literally. On the whole, Golescu seems to be not quite the people's oppressor of Mr. Călinescu, but an "Aufklärer," a precursor of militant socialism.

The second passage incriminated in Ms. Perticari Davila's complaint concerns Alexandru Davila. In Mr. Călinescu's book, he is analyzed at pages 579–580. Obviously, the complaint could not be caused by the favourable evaluations

of *Vlaicu-Vodă* but by the introductory biographical statements on the author and his father, General Davila. In general, Mr. Călinescu brings to light only the information that, according to nowadays morals, can be regarded as negative and only briefly presents Davila's great qualities. The passage in its entirety sounds like this:

“General Carol Davila, Al. Davila's father, was an adventurer. His name has a Spanish flavour. Carlos Antonio Francesco Davila (= D'Avila) was born in Parma, had a cosmopolitan mother, Countess d'Agoult, and grew up in Germany. He pursued medical studies in France and came to Romania as a Frenchman. It is suggested (and it may also be true) that his father was Franz Liszt, the musician; his mother, known as a publisher under the name of Daniel Stern, was the Jewish or semi-Jewish daughter of a French emigrant and of the daughter of a Frankfurt banker, von Bethmann. This blood mixture made Carol Davila uneasy and pushed him to find a motherland. In Romania he founded medical education and was in all respects an exceptional man. He married Ana Golescu, leaving some of the oldest Romanian blood to his children. However, remote echoes and some restlessness came from his father's blood line.

Born on February 12, 1862, Alexandru Davila went to highschool here and in Paris; he worked in diplomacy, journalism, and then, in suddenly, theatre, and became a company manager, an author and director. The times when Davila ran the National Theatre were exceptional; a peak of performance was reached then that has yet to be equalled. A sudden murder attempt by a valet in 1915 disclosed scabrous things in the playwright's life. He died forgotten in 1929.”

Some statements from this passage are questionable and I shall discuss them further on; it has to be said however that Mr. Călinescu captured in them a great deal of the current data on the Davila family. The fact that he left his country and came to Wallachia meant that he couldn't have been an “adventurer.” His strong attachment to his new country proves him to be anything but an adventurer. Countess d'Agoult, the general's mother, is however an adventuress. It is true that it has recently been stated that Davila is not Countess d'Agoult's son (G. Oprescu, “A Few Unknown Episodes from Franz Liszt's Life,” *Revista Istorică* 27, 1–12), but this goes against indubitable contrary testimony (see also Al. Davila's memoirs in the *Rampa* of Oct. 23, 1929). In Mr. Călinescu's opinion, Countess d'Agoult was a “cosmopolite.” This opinion is undoubtedly justified: her father, de Flavigny, was a French aristocrat who had fled the revolution and her mother was the daughter of a famous Frankfurt banker, von Bethmann. The Countess was a cosmopolitan in blood and in spirit as well. Her writings prove it. It is likely that her maternal ascendancy and her literary pseudonym, Daniel Stern, made Mr. Călinescu claim that she was Jewish or semi-Jewish. Because it is extremely difficult to find the truth in this respect,

I deemed it necessary to refer the matter to an expert on the Jewish issue in Germany, Mr. J. E. Gyurgyevich, whose research proved Mr. Călinescu's statement to be false. I attach his conclusions to this report. The anti-Semitic attitude of the Countess would seem to support Mr. Călinescu's claim (see evidence in the article quoted from Mr. Oprescu, p. 104), if it did not originate in jealousy and if history did not teach us that the Jews, as in numerous other cases and similarly to other peoples, can completely lose awareness of their ethnic origin in specific circumstances. In a detailed study entitled "Le Romantisme," published in Paris in 1932, Pierre Moreau states at page 235 that:

"La femme de 1830 est cette comtesse d'Agoult, qui signe du nom de Daniel Stern des romans, des études esthétiques ou sociales, des souvenirs où se traduit son caractère original: voyageuse, qui voulut s'évader de la société régulière, se donner à l'art, associer son esprit d'aventure et d'indépendance au génie de Liszt; amie de George Sand qu'avait grisée le destin de Lélia; reine d'une société brillante, qui sentait l'amertume de sa vaine royauté."

Within the Romantic Movement she is defined as a "lioness" ("une lionne"). At page 235 of the same study there is a description of Countess d'Agoult which has the added benefit of including one of the Countess' characteristic written texts:

"Elle aspire à la vie intense, étale une élégance cavalière, soutient virilement les plus solides repas, le punch, le champagne; comme George Sand, elle porte un habit de rapin, fume comme un bousingot, jette son défi aux convenances, déconcerte les naïfs par son extravagance. M-me d'Agoult la décrit dans ses *Souvenirs*, 'Cavalière et chasseresse, cravache levée, botte éperonnée, fusil à l'épaule, cigare à la bouche, verre en main, toute impertinence et vacarme.' La mode des faiblesses reveuses et poétiques est passée: la lionne n'aime pas les faibles."

The image of the "lioness" was pictured in detail by Louis Maigrion in his study called *Le Romantisme et les mœurs* from 1910 published in Paris. Next to her—and equally paradoxical—was Vesuviana, "la Vésuvienne." Craving for free love they make the following statement in their *Chant du départ*:

"Par un décret tout neuf supprimons nos époux!" (Maigrion, op. cit., p. 429, note 1).

The illnesses that these women suffered from were called "Adriaticism," "Florentine" and "Vénisite" (id., pp. 22–23). Mr. Călinescu inclines to believe that the general's father was the musician Franz Liszt, Countess d'Agoult's long time lover. This opinion is shared by many and also by Ms. Perticari Davila herself (see *Despre viața și corespondența lui Carol Davila* [Of the life and correspondence of Carol Davila], Bucharest, Foundation for Literature and Art Regele Carol II, 1935, p. 17). All the evidence we have supports the statement that Davila is Countess D'Agoult's son but not the one according to which he is Liszt's

son. He is said to have been born on April 8, 1828, in or near Parma (see also Dr. G. Z. Petrescu, “Viața și opera lui Carol Davila, 1828–1884” [The life and work of Carol Davila, 1828–1884], *Mem. Ac. Rom.*, Secția Științifică, S. III, T. VI). The year 1831, mentioned in some documents, is not endorsed by the official documents. But even if he were born in 1831, the situation would still be the same. Countess d’Agoult got married in 1827. In his documented study entitled *Listz*, published in Stuttgart and Berlin in 1924, Julius Kapp states that, before the marriage, “genoss sie eine ungetrübte aber auch eine ungebändigte Jugend” (p. 39). It is likely that this “ungebändigte Jugend” was responsible for the birth of the future doctor Carlos Antonio Francesco, a name that reminds us of Spain and maybe of a certain Spaniard. She met Liszt in the winter of 1833/1834 when he was brought in her salon by Berlioz. Although she faced the death of a child around that time, the Countess was charmed by the musician whose mistress she became in the fall of 1834. In 1835 she left her home and went to Switzerland, where Liszt joined her shortly thereafter. They lived together for many years (Kapp, op. cit., pp. 38–39). The information presented here leads us to conclude that Davila couldn’t have been conceived in the course of that relationship. All their biographers agree that they had three children: two daughters and a boy. The latter, Daniel, died at an early age. The information given by Mr. Călinescu on Al. Davila is exact to a much higher extent. It is known that the playwright was the victim of an attempted murder by his valet, Jean Dumitriu. This occurred on April 5, 1915. The perpetrator who was caught in Brăila disclosed information about his intimate life so that the journals, which covered the topic extensively during the first days, were completely silenced. Photos of him were given out with the clear intent of showing he was a handsome boy. I deliberately followed the journals *Adevărul* and *Universul* of April 1915 and they did just that. On September 3, 1915, while in a sanatorium, Davila confessed to A. De Herz that he was getting ready to squelch the defamations at the trial that was approaching (*Rampa* 1, 2). Did he squelch them? We think not. At his death in 1929, as was proper, most of the articles about him elegantly avoided this embarrassing matter. Some articles, like the one written by Enescu in *Rampa* in 1929, mentioned both the glory and the “blasphemy” experienced by the playwright. His name hasn’t yet been restored, but, provided that the family is in possession of the necessary documents, it is now time to do it no matter how delicate the situation is.

This is the moral context concerning Al. Davila and this is the information on his family. In some way, Mr. Călinescu captured the public view but he did not verify his statements. Although they partially match reality we must admit that reality is hard to grasp in all its details. I think that the real question about these facts should address the correctness of the information as well as, more

importantly, the real reason why the author used them in his work. Preoccupied only by the “aesthetic conscience,” as he confesses in his preface, Călinescu does not use in any way this information for the analysis of *Vlaicu-Vodă*. The part about the drama contains its summary and a few quoted lines in the selection of which the author was terribly uninspired. The author himself underlines the uselessness of the biographical notes in the following chapter on G. Diamandy, where he leaves them out completely. The answer to the abovementioned question can only be given by taking into account the general character of Mr. Călinescu’s work. Above all, it is characterized by its author’s thirst for publicity; hence the need to exploit the dark biographical corners; hence the invasion of the anecdotal under the shape of illustrations. Mr. Călinescu thus proves that he has a rare ability for understanding the masses: prepared by detective novels and romanced biographies, the masses should enthusiastically welcome a study that, systematically separating the cultural from the literary and capitalizing only on the aesthetic criterion, was designed around the commercial advantage of divulging alcove secrets. This is one of the weaknesses working against the unity of this study, which, as I mentioned at the beginning of this report, also has indisputable qualities.

In conclusion, I feel that I am not entitled to make any concrete suggestions to the Honourable Ministry, either about the study or about his author. □

Abstract

Report on Mr. G. Călinescu’s *History of Romanian Literature from Its Beginning Until Today*

We present here the English translation of the report drawn up by university professor D. Popovici (1902–1952), following a request made in 1942 by Ministry of National Culture and Religious Denominations (which had received a complaint from Ms. Elena Peticari Davila), regarding the book *A History of Romanian Literature from Its Beginning Until Today* by G. Călinescu, who was by then a professor at Iași University. Ms. Peticari Davila complained to the Ministry that in his book the literary historian had insulted her brother, the writer Alexandru Davila (1862–1929). The report made by Professor D. Popovici presented the strengths and the weaknesses of Călinescu’s book, but did not include any concrete suggestion for the Ministry.

Keywords

D. Popovici, G. Călinescu, Alexandru Davila, literary criticism, literary theory