

Adrian Marino and the Critique of Literary Ideas

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*“The life of literary ideas is
as captivating, real, fecund,
as any other form of life.”*

Adrian Marino

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(Science fiction and postmodern culture: Cyberpunk fiction) (2005).

ADRIAN MARINO'S critical work, although elaborated during several decades, presents a thematic and conceptual coherence hard to equal in Romanian literary criticism. Having returned to Romanian culture after years of absence, Marino started by taking leave of his former preoccupations in the field of literary history, having completed a project begun before his arrest, which focused on the figure of the poet Alexandru Macedonski. Thus he parted not only with a critical line in which he distinguished himself in his youth, but also with a master dear to him: G. Călinescu.

The first work of literary criticism conceived after 1966 (the year when he made his second debut as a writer), *Introduce în critica literară* (Introduction to literary criticism), published in 1968 as a critical methodology, proved to be more than a lucid analysis of the age's literary criticism; by imposing a systematic and methodological rigour of concepts, it became a theoretical framework for the real "lite-

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rary science.” As Marino stated in the introduction-manifesto of this book, *Introduction to Literary Criticism* was published for at least two good reasons. Firstly, because its author wished to offer in it a rigorous answer to the debates on literary criticism of the years 1965–1967, debates marked by different polemics, as well as by improvised and dilettante (even though well-meaning) considerations, but which, considered Adrian Marino, nevertheless, did not succeed in outlining and coagulating a coherent critical direction. The second motive, which answered the “inner feeling of discontent” provoked by the lack of content in the critical debates Marino also participated in, was his personal need to make “a general survey of and to settle by a thorough systematization the basic principles of literary criticism.”²¹ Therefore, Adrian Marino planned “a study as complete as possible on critical problems, laying the foundations, reorganizing, and analytically investigating the main theses from a uniform perspective.”²² This synthesis of the principles, critical methods and basic concepts had the role to demonstrate that problems such as “the lack of principles” or “the emptiness of critical concepts” could be left behind by means of a rigorous research and a methodical and systematic analysis of literary criticism as “the science of literature.”

The starting idea of the critical synthesis planned by Marino was the return to the “literary work.” Any critical analysis, he stated, must start from defining and understanding the literary work as an autonomous unit. The return to the texts or “settling down” in the work should represent the basis from which any substantial critical attempt must start, affirmed Adrian Marino.

Dicționar de idei literare (Dictionary of literary ideas), vol. 1 (A–G), published in 1973, represented the most striking application of the critical methodology elaborated five years earlier. It was followed, in 1974, by the volume *Critica ideilor literare* (The critique of literary ideas) already heralded by the programme article “Pentru o ‘nouă critică’: Critica ideilor literare” (For a “new criticism”: The critique of literary ideas) published in the introduction of the *Dictionary*. The critique of literary ideas was born, affirmed Marino with conviction, from a decisive personal experience, from the desire and “necessity to assume, in another way, the critical act, to develop, and, at the same time, to transcend a series of premises and reference points established in the *Introduction to Literary Criticism*.”²³ Detecting in the field of literary history as well as of traditionalistic aesthetics a terminological disorder and disorientation, Marino tried, in the spirit of a scientific and rigorous “new criticism,” to reopen, from a modern perspective, the discussions aimed at the clarification of concepts, and through a systematic discipline to define the notions and concepts, and to confer to the literary domain an additional consequence and methodological rigour. The critique of literary ideas proposes, affirmed Marino, to combat “semantic fatality, determined by approximation, gaps, and contradiction.”²⁴ The critique of

literary ideas, considered its enthusiastic adept, is situated “at the confluence of criticism, aesthetics, literary history, and history of literary ideas, in the general framework of the history of ideas.”⁵⁵ This proximity to disciplines which, each in its own way, analyze and interpret the literary work, requires from the part of the person who practices the critique of literary ideas “a manifold and well organized competence.” Thus the critic of ideas ought to be, according to Marino, a “total critic,” in whose personality the delicacy of a *man of taste* should combine with the vision of an *ideologist*, the refinement of an *aesthete*, and the competence of a *historian*, but, at the same time, that critic must be able to perform “classical and modern readings, without pedantry and without superficiality.”⁵⁶

These abilities and requirements of the critic of literary ideas, fully possessed by Adrian Marino, can be easily observed in his work method. Rejecting “nominalism,” Marino considered that literary ideas are not simple *nomina* (“conventional signs for artistic realities”), sustaining that, before a concept is imposed on one’s consciousness, there are phenomena and ideas which precede it, and which, afterwards, when the concept (the literary idea) has been fixed, enter the critical language as well: “It is not the concept that institutes the literary idea, but the literary idea institutes itself in the concept, which only fixes, clarifies, and intensifies a moment in a long process of aesthetic-literary maturation.”⁵⁷ All the more, argued Marino, as this is also proved by the fact that it can be observed “how, even after the appearance of the concept, its content continues to be modified.”⁵⁸ The example through which Marino explained this observation is the concept of realism. There had been, of course, before the emergence of the trend itself at the end of the 19th century, elements of realism in literature and art. Besides, the new tendencies of the continuously reaffirming realist aesthetics in literature must also be mentioned. A similar idea, demonstrated through an impressive bibliography, was expounded by Auerbach in his *Mimesis*.

How did Adrian Marino proceed when defining a literary term or concept, the *literary idea*, in this case? What is, in fact, a literary idea? The literary idea, affirmed the critic, presents itself as “a *system* constituted from a nucleus, its central, programmatic sense (the *archetype* of the idea), of maximum density and semantic potentiality, and a group of convergent, derived, associated, or marginal meanings, ever more flexible and inevitably interwoven with other neighbouring or associated ideas.”⁵⁹ Thus, in order to define as precisely as possible a literary concept, Marino proceeded to an *archaeology* revealing it, elaborating a kind of *biography of the idea* (a phrase which would appear some years later in Marino’s writings), and, trying to exhaust all the senses of the term, tried to reach its “system” of significations. Marino rejected the idea that, for example, regarding the concept of avant-gardism, despite the affirmation of the principle of novelty (as characteristic to avant-garde aesthetics) before the avant-garde as

a separate movement there had been avant-garde ideas and phenomena, which preceded other artistic currents as well. For the first time, the concept of avant-garde, Marino pointed out, occurred in 1830 in France with the Saint-Simoniens, then, with precise aesthetic connotations in 1845 at D. Levardant. In the 19th century, as a term, *avant-garde* had a powerful military (the term originates from the military domain) and, by extension, *militant* note; thus before constituting an autonomous poetics, the term represented a certain attitude towards life, a way of perceiving and understanding existence. Retaining the idea of “militantism” and of being situated “in the first lines of the offensive,” Marino proceeded in the *biography* of the term by progressively accumulating the specific qualities, clarifying the origin of avant-garde radicalism and its negativistic spirit through a series of manifestations/counter-manifestations, which preceded and gave force to the current itself. A literary idea (in this case the *avant-garde*) seems to have at least three *chronologies* which are not superposed, but interconnected, and which, as Marino later pointed out in *The Critique of Literary Ideas*, presuppose three operational levels in the concept: *the universal, permanent level*, *the level of nominal circulation*, and *the theorized-individualized level*.¹⁰ These levels correspond therefore to some distinct “histories” or chronologies: an “eternal” chronology, one which has as a reference point the first lexical occurrence of the term, and another, the proper one, which can be dated to the first manifestations of the trend.¹¹ Thus, there is an “eternal” avant-garde spirit, then a first start (when the term was used for the first time, nevertheless, only in the initial meaning of the word), and, finally, the moment when an avant-garde sensibility affirmed and asserted itself in spirit and consciousness. In the same manner, as a recurring literary and artistic view, concepts such as baroque, mannerism (Ernst Robert Curtius, Gustav René Hocke) or realism (E. Auerbach) are discussed at a European level; these reveal, according to all interpreters, the way in which a literary invariant or constant functions in European cultural history.

Marino, however, did not allow himself to be seduced by all these discoveries of conceptual archaeology, and, going beyond the description of the features of an exiting and controversial current (avant-gardism), discovered the real “existential drama” of avant-garde artists engaged in the search for and the recovery of original purity, torn between the opposite poles of absolute and relative, freedom and necessity, purity and corruption, action and passivity.¹² From the avant-garde as an attitude and a way of life, Marino arrived to the affirmation of the avant-garde as a cultural paradigm of the age. He analyzed the relationship between the avant-garde and political matters, and, finally, acknowledging how difficult it is to delimit the literary avant-garde from the rest of the avant-garde movements, he nevertheless tried to define it through one of its most suggestive and significant manifestations: Dadaism. It is difficult to define the style and

literary programme of the avant-garde or Dadaism, recognized Marino, all the more so as Dadaists rebelled against any style, denying at the same time one of the features specific and characteristic to literature: imagination. Nevertheless, paradoxically, despite their negativism, Dadaists revolting against poetry tried to reach *real* poetry, poetry which had been killed by art and style, they believed, and made to disappear. There was, therefore, an eminently positive sense in this nihilist movement,¹³ sustained Marino with various arguments, convincingly defining the avant-garde poetics/anti-poetics. Looking through the bibliographical list at the end of the volume, one can appreciate the vastness of the documentation and research work carried out by Adrian Marino—plenty of foreign studies dedicated to the investigated phenomena—creating the (otherwise true) impression that nothing was left out or to chance.

Each term, out of the 28 comprised in the first volume of the *Dictionary*, was subjected to the same minute analysis. Unfortunately, for more or less obscure reasons, the other two volumes of this work the author planned have not been published. The abundance of notes found in the Adrian Marino Documentary Collection of the Lucian Blaga Central University Library in Cluj amply proves that the author of the *Dictionary* was greatly interested in the completion of this work. Moreover, a series of articles in the literary press, mainly published in the column “The Chronicle of the Literary Idea” of the journal *Cronica*, demonstrate that a part of the documentary material had been used by Adrian Marino in some dictionary entries, which were to be given a final form and introduced in the following volumes. Similarly, the articles published in *Iaşul literar* or *Cronica* under the heading “From a Dictionary of Literary Ideas” demonstrate the intention to continue and finish the dictionary. Concepts such as *Reading, Language, Modern, Critical spirit* are analyzed here, terms which were to be given a complete discussion in the consecrated form of an entry in the dictionary of “literary ideas.” These anticipated volumes, however, have never been published. We consider it probable that in the future these documents will be reconstructed and edited on the basis of Adrian Marino’s working principles, using the whole corpus of extant notes or already published articles.

THE *DICTIONARY* issued in 1973 represented a pioneering work for Romanian culture, and not only. It was the first such work in Romanian literary criticism. Moreover, it demonstrated that by rigorous and disciplined work such synthetic studies were possible, but, mainly, that they were necessary. The publication of the *Dictionary* raised numerous discussions and a series of chronicles or reviews were published. Mircea Martin welcomed with reverent enthusiasm the appearance of the *Dictionary*, the achievement of a single man representing “le triomphe d’une ascèse intellectuelle et d’une production à ca-

dence régulière en passe de devenir, sinon exemplaire, du moins notoire.”¹⁴ The *Dictionary of Literary Ideas* was among the first Romanian attempts of this kind. The *Dictionary of Literary Terminology* published in 1970, edited by a group of researchers, or the *Dictionary of General Aesthetics* from 1972 did not reach the theoretical and systematic scale of Marino’s *Dictionary* and could not be compared to its documentary and cultural dimensions. For critics such as Florin Mihăilescu, the *Dictionary*, although one of the “crucial works of our intellectual discipline,”¹⁵ had to be, however, received and analyzed with lucidity: “From here, however, to falling into an annihilating apologetic ecstasy there remains a distance which is rejected on principle by the lucidity of the critical spirit.”¹⁶ Assuming this critical distance towards the *Dictionary*, Florin Mihăilescu analyzed both the conception and the working technique of the author. Regarding the conception, Florin Mihăilescu found the dictionary too encyclopaedic, the author too much of a scholar (for such a task), considering that “the interest in the investigation and in the ideological dialogue should shift towards the system of thought and interpretation,”¹⁷ meaning that the accumulation of data presented the risk of obscuring the interpretation itself. Florin Mihăilescu pointed out Marino’s polemic spirit as well, recognizing in his implicit or explicit polemics an attitude towards that which Marino had upbraided Romanian literary criticism for, namely, journalistic “neo-impressionism.” In short, Florin Mihăilescu “criticized” exactly the principles firmly upheld by Marino (critical professionalism, theoretical erudition and width).

Otherwise, it must be mentioned that in those years of slight “cultural easing” (as we retrospectively see things today) it seemed necessary, mainly in literary criticism, to recover some cultural traditions, and, implicitly, to come in line with the new European cultural trends. The new generation of writers and critics intended to be up to date with the new readings and to get acquainted with the new critical tendencies directly from the source. Also in this period, Matei Călinescu wrote essays on such concepts as Realism, Classicism, Romanticism, the Fantastic, or the Baroque. The volume *Classicism, Baroque, Romanticism*, published by Dacia Publishing House in 1971, a volume which gathered studies by G. Călinescu, Matei Călinescu, Adrian Marino, and Tudor Vianu, was dedicated to the literary trends named in the title of the work. Individually, Romanian critics published studies analyzing some literary notions or concepts. Matei Călinescu, for example, published *Essays on Modern Literature*, Marino himself published the study *Modern, Modernism, Modernity* (1970). Or, some years later, Edgar Papu’s book on the Baroque as *a type of existence* came out (1977). The necessity to clarify concepts represented therefore a priority in literary criticism and not only there.¹⁸ Therefore, Marino’s interest in the criticism of literary ideas is not at all foreign to the visible efforts made by the intellectuals of the age, who,

beyond the confines and limits of ideological censorship, tried, as far as possible, to generate a real movement of ideas both in criticism and art. Adrian Marino's singularity originated from the fact that, without detaching himself from his contemporaries, and continuing the critical or polemical dialogue with them, the critic from Cluj followed his own path, undertaking, without hesitation and weariness, to carry out his own projects.

Thus, Marino's project of critical synthesis, announced already at the publication in 1968 of the *Introduction to Literary Criticism*, proved to be a vast and large scale undertaking. He planned to elaborate an *Ethics of Criticism* and a *Dictionary of Literary Ideas*. If the *Ethics of Criticism* has not been published, though the problem was discussed by Marino in different articles in literary press, the *Dictionary of Literary Ideas* appeared, as we have shown, in 1973. One year later *The Critique of Literary Ideas* or the "short methodological discourse" on criticism was issued in Cluj. Marino did not hide his intention to elaborate a real "critico-theoretical construction," a "system" which, were it to fail,¹⁹ would nevertheless demonstrate that only through such attempts great syntheses, rigorous syntheses, and systematic works, which would go beyond the critical improvisation or obsolete empiricism still present in Romanian criticism, could be achieved. Al. Călinescu, reviewing the volume, expressed the same conviction that, together with the *Dictionary*, *The Critique of Literary Ideas* represents a theoretical manifesto: "le manifeste théorique d'un critique dont le système est constitué, clairement défini."²⁰ Marino was convinced that in Romanian criticism there was a need for the "extension and deepening of the theoretical basis, for an ever increasing ideological and speculative passion, for the reformulation and perfecting of the entire technical system of principles."²¹

The starting point in the elaboration of this critical system (which is perfectly logical, coherent, and functional) represented the definition of the *constant or the invariant* (the element of unity, stability, permanence, and universality in time and space).²² In the following chapters, Marino defined the literary idea, analyzing its specific features in relation with its constituting elements, such as: constancy, recurrence, circularity, model, autonomy, historicity. Thus, arriving to chapter 8, the critic of ideas revealed the fact that the most appropriate method for exploring and defining literary ideas was *the hermeneutics of literary ideas*. Once arrived to this point, Marino took a step forward towards that which would represent his critical system: exhausting all the methods and norms of literary criticism, without however repudiating them (on the contrary, inserting them in a new vision), he reached the vaster and more complex domain of hermeneutics. Understanding the *literary idea as a model work*, and accepting the fact that any model is the result of a hermeneutical process, Marino then proceeded in the opposite direction: he reconstructed, from the inside, through

the hermeneutical method, the characteristics of the process through which the literary idea is constituted. The criticism of literary ideas recognizes the existence of only one sense, the sense of the model. Therefore, functioning in the same sense, the risk of “conflicting interpretations” is removed. On the other hand, the hermeneutical model presupposes, at least initially, the possible existence of several meanings, the interpretation of which would lead in the end to the “most probable” interpretation.

The problem which rises before the critical system elaborated by Marino is to relate the unique sense of the model (considered to be the essential element in the criticism of literary ideas) and the hermeneutical sense (latent senses) of the text. Thus, asserted Adrian Marino, the criticism of literary ideas “elaborates a new type of hermeneutics.”²³ What does this new hermeneutics consist of? It is not a new method, but, argued Adrian Marino, a new principle of approach, the principle of *circularity*, a principle which governs the functioning (*unfolding*) of the literary idea, being, at the same time, constitutive to the mechanism of hermeneutical interpretation which is essentially creative. Marino accorded special attention to the creative aspect of the hermeneutical process, insisting on the fact that, without seeking originality, literary hermeneutics is essentially pre-occupied with “the truth.” On the other hand, any critical or hermeneutical act leads to the “stimulation of the critic’s self-creative ability.”²⁴ Marino himself, at the end of his work, confessed that on his part, he never conceived literary ideas as abstract or theoretical realities, but as being *concrete, vital, existential*. For the true critic, he stated, “the life of literary ideas is as captivating, real, fecund, as any other form of life.”²⁵ Delusion or not, Adrian Marino passionately believed in the spiritual joys of cognition, continuing in the following years the hermeneutical adventure of understanding and interpreting literary ideas.

This synthesizing effort was later crowned by *Biografia ideii de literatură* (The biography of the idea of literature). With this work in six volumes, published in the course of several years (1991–2000), Marino wished to exhaust completely, from a hermeneutical perspective, the problems related to the idea of literature. □

Notes

1. Adrian Marino, *Introducere în critica literară* (Bucharest: Ed. Tineretului, 1968), 5.
2. *Ibid.*, 6.
3. Adrian Marino, *Dicționar de idei literare*, vol. 1 (A–G) (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1973), 1.
4. *Ibid.*, 10.
5. Adrian Marino, *Critica ideilor literare* (Cluj: Dacia, 1974), 21.
6. *Ibid.*

7. Marino, *Dicționar*, 35.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Marino, *Critica ideilor literare*, 53–54.
11. Ibid., 54.
12. Marino, *Dicționar*, 185.
13. Ibid., 201.
14. Mircea Martin, “Adrian Marino, *Dicționar de idei literare I, A–G* (București, Ed. Eminescu, 1973),” *Cahiers roumains d’études littéraires* (Bucharest) 1 (1973): 91.
15. Florin Mihăilescu, “Adrian Marino: *Dicționar de idei literare*,” *Viața românească* (Bucharest) 26, 7 (1973): 143.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. We mention, randomly, Alexandru Duțu’s book, *Eseu în istoria modelelor umane* (Bucharest: Ed. Științifică, 1972), or the volume dedicated to the Renaissance by Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga, *Renășterea* (Bucharest: Albatros, 1971).
19. Marino, *Critica ideilor literare*, 7.
20. Al. Călinescu, “Adrian Marino, *Critica ideilor literare*,” *Cahiers roumains d’études littéraires* 3 (1975): 121.
21. Marino, *Critica ideilor literare*, 25.
22. Ibid., 52.
23. Ibid., 255.
24. Ibid., 253.
25. Ibid., 254.

Abstract

Adrian Marino and the Critique of Literary Ideas

The starting idea of Marino’s critical synthesis is the return to the “literary work.” Any critical analysis, claimed the Romanian scholar, must start with the definition and understanding of the literary work as an autonomous unit. In the present article we proposed to investigate the critical system elaborated by Adrian Marino in order to understand the essence of literary works. Two essential characteristics can be described during the analysis of this theoretical interpretative system of literary works: coherence in the principles of the theoretical basis and the methodological expression in which the entire critical attempt is completed. Through his studies, Marino helped consolidate the prestige of a discipline considered, given the lack of a system, empirical and impressionistic: literary criticism. Conferring it theoretical amplitude and methodological support, Adrian Marino transformed this discipline into the critique of literary ideas.

Keywords

critique of literary ideas, critical methodology, hermeneutics