

THE EUROPEAN DIMENSION OF ROMANIAN CULTURE IN CONSTANTIN NOICA'S PHILOSOPHICAL WORK

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Abstract:

After joining the EU, the concept of European cultural identity became a much debated issue in all the new member states of the Union, alongside with the "old" EU members. Our paper aims to present the contribution brought by Constantin Noica to preserving the spirit of Romanian culture alive during the totalitarian period that our country underwent from 1945 to 1989. We also intend to point out that Constantin Noica's attempt to define the particular profile of our country remains a current topic nowadays. In fact, this topic should be tackled more frequently by students, professors, research workers in order to help us rediscover the European vocation of our culture.

Key words: Romanian culture, European culture, cultural identity, history of Romanian thinking, European cultural model.

"...s-a ivit de vreo 1500 de ani o cultură europeană care a împânzit, a exploatat, e drept, dar a și educat, cu valorile ei restul umanității/.../ așadar aproape tot ce se întâmplă azi pe glob și se va întâmpla mâine chiar în cosmos poartă pecetea Europei, oricât ar pretinde altfel etnografii și istoricii, care descoperă alte lumi, în fond pentru a le scoate din letargie și a le jefui de comorile lor spirituale. Suntem pirați, conchistadori și corsari în continuare, dar conchistadori ai spiritului – și asta schimbă totul."³

"Orice coborâre în infern poate fi suportată dacă paradisul culturii e cu putință"⁴

Constantin Noica (1909-1987) was one of the most famous and a prolific Romanian philosopher, whose work widely enjoys the appreciation of contemporary intellectuals both in our country and abroad. Constantin Noica manifested interest for a various range of philosophical directions of research: gnoseology, ontology, axiology, logic, the philosophy of culture and the history of philosophy.

Perhaps at present Constantin Noica's name is mainly linked to the School of Păltiniș, basically to the closest collaborators of the philosopher – Andrei Pleșu and Gabriel Liiceanu, as well as to the research workers that tackled the famous thinker's philosophical work (e.g. Laura Pamfil, Sorin Lavric – to mention only two of the most important specialists who undertook this difficult attempt).

The repeated publication of Noica's volumes, especially after December 1989, has brought into evidence the philosopher's continuous strain to define the specific features of Romanian

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³ Constantin Noica, *Modelul cultural european*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1993, pag. 7: "... for about 1500 years a European culture has evolved and it has widespread, exploited, it is true, but also educated with its values the rest of mankind /.../ thus almost all that is happening in the world at present or that will happen tomorrow, even in the outer space, bears the mark of Europe, no matter what ethnographers and historians, who are discovering other worlds to take them out of lethargy and to deprive them of their spiritual treasures, would pretend. We are sea robbers, conchistadors and corsairs, but corsairs of the spirit – and this makes the whole difference." (our translation).

⁴ G. Liiceanu, *Jurnalul de la Păltiniș*, Editura Humanitas, București, 1991, pag. 124 ("One can face up to any decent into the inferno, should the paradise of culture be possible" – our translation).

spirituality, to outline a history of Romanian thinking, as well as to highlight the main characteristics of European culture, of which our country has always been part (see the posthumous volume *Modelul cultural european* – initially published in German under the title *De dignitate Europae*, 1988, and later on translated and published in Romanian, in 1993).

The particular features of our culture – outlined by the Romanian philosopher in a large number of volumes (*Pagini despre sufletul românesc*, 1944, *Rostirea filosofică românească*, 1970, *Creație și frumos în rostirea românească*, 1973, *Sentimentul românesc al ființei*, 1978, *Spiritul românesc în cumpătul vremii*, *Șase maladii ale spiritului contemporan*, 1978) – must appear to the nowadays reader as worth being praised because they were meant to preserve the spirit of our culture alive during half a century of totalitarianism. Consequently, Constantin Noica's merit was basically to re-establish and consolidate the connection existing between Romanian culture and the European one. Our spiritual values – which were either denied or permanently reinterpreted from a political perspective as the one-party state dictated – found in the famous philosopher a real defender, whose voice made itself heard despite of the harsh censorship which functioned at the time. From this perspective, Noica's attempt to outline and promote the spiritual profile of Romanian culture, as well as of the European one, during the communist regime, was an effort aimed to recover and preserve our cultural identity alive and to oppose the spiritual annihilation of our nation.

Now, after 22 years since the Romanian political regime was changed, a discussion about Romanian cultural identity is still an isolated issue, which draws the attention of a small segment of the population. Normally, such an issue should have concerned most of the Romanian citizens not just after December 1989, but also before this year. However, the attitude of indifference towards essential issues (such as preserving and enriching cultural values, enhancing the level of civilization) that one can notice today in Romania can be regarded as an indicator of their superficial relation to collective past. Education and culture have been for too long a secondary existential problem in Romania. Today we ask ourselves why the effort made by Romanian intellectuals (among whom Constantin Noica) to preserve these values during the restrictive communist period is now not widely discussed and valued by the majority of our co-nationals. The question can be answered in several ways: the fundamental value and respect for culture has been either "deleted" (see the 1950's when the most important men of culture were interdicted in schools, universities and were forbidden to be mentioned in any kind of publications) or constantly attacked by ideological slogans or even replaced with the allowed political clichés of the time. Culture became not just a target to be assaulted by oppressors, but also a shelter, in which citizens tried to preserve their freedom of thinking. It was against such a background that Constantin Noica strived to become a mentor for a young group of promising students and, in fact, to make his conationals aware of their duty to cultivate the spirit of Romanian culture and transmit it to the new generations.

Constantin Noica supported with arguments the originality of our culture and tried to bring into evidence its identity by approaching complex subjects such as: proposing the creation of a history of Romanian thinking, identifying representatives of our cultural elite who could be regarded as real voices of their centuries (Neagoe Basarab, Dimitrie Cantemir, Mihai Eminescu and Lucian Blaga). In fact, the famous philosopher continued to manifest a particular interest in Romanian spirituality as other important Romanian thinkers did during the interwar period (see Mircea Vulcănescu, Lucian Blaga, Emil Cioran, Dimitrie Gusti and others).

During the interwar period the obsession of cultural identity was a normal consequence for Romanians whose country had just become united (on the 1st of December 1918).

So far we have used terms like *identity* and *culture*, but we have not explained them in order to reveal the multiple connotations that these terms involve. For defining *identity*, we are going to quote Professor Ion Goian, who gives the concept of identity the following fundamental connotations: "In order to understand the whole complexity of this topic, it is necessary to sum up all the meanings attributed to the notion of identity. The term itself is borrowed from Latin: *identitas* is the quality of being equal to oneself or the same (*idem*, *eadem*). /.../ Identity might be understood as

similarity, according to which something is regarded as wholly similar to something else /.../ but, analyzing the term from a different perspective, one could understand it as the quality of a subject to remain unchanged as time passes and to be <<identical to itself>>, while escaping the universal ceaseless change and transformation, which affects all undermoon realities, as the antique people used to think. Consequently, the second meaning confers a temporal, historical, and basically, dialectical meaning to the term which is, in fact, the main characteristic of the notion of identity."⁵ (our translation)

Nevertheless, as Ion Goian points out, the problem of a European cultural identity is an old issue, characteristic of ancient times, when it defined itself under the influence of two major cultures (the Roman and the Greek cultures): "Undoubtedly, the European identity issue is even older and it naturally appears in connection with the contacts existing between cultures and civilizations. Since the Mediterranean was the place where several cultures and civilizations met, it was natural for the notion of cultural identity to appear during ancient times and, within the Greek and Roman worlds, there is no important antique historian who has failed to write about this subject. That is why, once the antique thinkers were rediscovered, the Renaissance authors rediscovered the European identity issue, too."⁶

According to Constantin Noica⁷, European culture began in 325 at Niceea, when the first religious Congress was held here. The seven religious Congresses that were organized in Niceea (325-787) are in the Romanian philosopher's opinion the starting point for the problematic philosophical spirit of Europe. The Christian perspective of Divinity – as a Unity of three Parts (The Father, The Son and The Holy Spirit) – reflects the matrix of European culture, as a unity in diversity. However, according to Constantin Noica, this unity in plurality is not static, but expansionist and it tends to cover other cultural areas and to assimilate those influences that are assumed to be akin to it. Through the tolerance and universalist spirit of the Christian faith, as well as through prospective philosophy and science, European culture is an open structure which refuses stagnation and pre-established/commonly shared beliefs.

Like any minor culture, within the European one, Romanian culture has strived to correlate its creative directions to the ones introduced by the major cultures of the world. However, a minor culture, as Constantin Noica points out, is not necessarily an inferior one. On the contrary, the philosopher's conviction is that Romanian culture – basically founded on the popular anonymous creations – will be surpassed in time. Like Lucian Blaga, Constantin Noica appreciates that a minor culture needs continuity in order to become major. It is, in fact, this problem of lack of continuity that interrupted the smooth evolution of culture during the years of totalitarianism, when severe censorship brought with it the denial of Romanian valuable cultural heritage (except for the years of *ideological thaw* – from 1964 to 1971).

⁵ Ion Goian, *Eseu despre identitățile culturale*, în *Revista de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale*, VI, 4, p. 95–105, București, 2009, pag. 96: "Pentru a înțelege întreaga complexitate a acestei teme, este necesară o sumară trecere în revistă a sensurilor atribuite noțiunii de identitate. Termenul însuși este preluat din limba latină: *identitas* este însușirea de a fi egal cu sine, același sau aceeași (idem, eadem). /.../ Identitatea poate fi înțeleasă ca însușirea similarității, prin care ceva anume este arătat a fi întru totul asemănător cu un altceva /.../ dar și, privind lucrurile din altă perspectivă, drept însușire a unui anume subiect de a rămâne neschimbat odată cu trecerea timpului, de a fi „identificat cu sine”, salvându-se, într-un fel, din fluviul eternei schimbări și transformări universale, la care sunt supuse toate realitățile sublinare, cum credeau anticii. Prin urmare, acest al doilea înțeles se deschide asupra unei perspective temporale, istorice, dialectice, în fond, în care se integrează noțiunea complexă de identitate." (original text).

⁶ Ion Goian, *Revista de Științe Politice și Relații Internaționale*, VI, 4, p. 95–105, București, 2009, pag. 98: "Fără îndoială, tema identității europene este mult mai veche și ea apare, firesc, legată de contactele dintre culturi și civilizații. Cum în bazinul mediteranean s-au întâlnit mai multe culturi și mai multe civilizații, era de așteptat ca ideea unei identități culturale să fie elaborată încă în lumea antică și nu există niciun istoric important al antichității greco-romane care să nu fi scris, într-o măsură sau alta, cu privire la acest subiect. De aceea, odată cu redescoperirea anticilor, autorii din epoca Renașterii au redescoperit și tema identității Europei." (original text).

⁷ Constantin Noica, *Modelul cultural european*, București: Editura Humanitas, 1993.

It is interesting to notice that Constantin Noica's optimistic vision (identifiable in the volume entitled *Pagini despre sufletul românesc*, 1944) – as to the faith of Romanian culture – was not lost during the totalitarian regime, but, on the contrary, it determined the writer to concentrate all effort for continuing his mission of prophet for his people's cultural rebirth.

The above mentioned book (*Pagini despre sufletul românesc*) outlines – by means of three symbolical figures (Neagoe Basarab, Dimitrie Cantemir, Lucian Blaga) – three main directions of development in Romanian spirituality: the religious stage (Neagoe Basarab), the stage of self-awareness and criticism as to improving the character and education of the autochthonous population (Dimitrie Cantemir), and, last but not least, the stage of conceiving a stylistic profile of Romanian culture (Lucian Blaga).

In this volume, Constantin Noica depicted Romanian culture as a particular presence in the European context, no matter about what century we discuss: the XVIth, the XVIIIth, the XIXth or the XXth. For the XVIth century, the book written by Neagoe Basarab – *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul lui, Teodosie*⁸ – is regarded as a landmark in our culture. The book reveals the subjection of Romanian spirituality to Christian dogma, which encourages the cultivation of all religious virtues and points out the uselessness of searching another form of truth outside faith in God.

As far as the XVIIIth century is concerned, Constantin Noica regards Dimitrie Cantemir as the prominent voice of Romanian culture of the time, not just for the philosophical and history books written by the famous scholar, who became a member of the Academy of Berlin, but also for the well-documented description of Moldavia – *Descriptio Moldaviae*⁹. Regarded as a half bitter-critical, half objective presentation of Moldavia, Constantin Noica appreciates that this book is the first attempt of a Romanian ruler to compare the Romanian spiritual profile with the Western European one, offering accurate information about his country's geography, politics, social classes, traditions, history, religion and approximate information (not very praising) about the particular features of the Romanians' character.

An impressive approach to the philosophical dimension of Romanian language can be found in *Rostirea filosofică românească*, 1987. In the philosopher's opinion, Romanian language reveals an unexpected capacity to create words whose connotations lead to an original interpretation of existence. It is Constantin Noica's conviction that: "If our language really tells us things that have never been uttered before in other languages and that could determine these languages to mould themselves according to our word, then, if there exists a Romanian component in thought, we owe to share it with the world."¹⁰

In *Modelul cultural european* (1993), Constantin Noica attempts to identify the inner mechanism of the European culture, which he deciphers linguistically, by applying morphologic parts of speech to the morphology of spirit. In the author's opinion, before becoming a model, a culture has been a scheme and a structure. Thus, one could narrate the history of European culture by using parts of speech to describe it. Cultural epochs are attributed a part of speech: e.g. the Renaissance is analogous with the noun, the Baroque with the adjective and so on.

Besides the conferences gathered in the volume *Pagini despre sufletul românesc*, besides discovering the philosophical dimension of Romanian language in *Rostirea filosofică românească*, Constantin Noica had the merit to publish Mihai Eminescu's 44 manuscripts in 17 facsimile copies (known as *Caietele Eminescu*). The philosopher made a huge effort to have these manuscripts copied

⁸ Neagoe Basarab, *Învățăturile lui Neagoe Basarab către fiul său Theodosie*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 1998.

⁹ Dimitrie Cantemir, *Descriptio Moldaviae*, Editura Litera, Chișinău, 1998.

¹⁰ Constantin Noica, *Rostirea filosofică românească*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1987, pag. 8: "Dacă graiul nostru spune într-adevăr lucruri ce nu s-au rostit întotdeauna în alte limbi și care le-ar putea îndemna pe acestea să se mlădieze după cuvântul nostru, atunci, în măsura în care există un rest românesc în cele ale gândului, suntem datori lumii cu acest rest".

and offered to the public and research workers for reading and analysing. For ten years Constantin Noica asked persons with important positions in Romanian cultural life to support him in accomplishing this project. Finally, after continuous hard work, the philosopher made the impossible possible.

Constantin Noica regarded these manuscripts as the laboratory of our absolute poet's creation. The approximate 9,000 pages that are included in the manuscripts contain accurate translations from Kant, unknown poems, everyday thoughts and notices, pages written in German Gothic, prose writings a.s.o.

In Constantin Noica's opinion, Mihai Eminescu represents the prototype of the European universal spirit through his permanent search for knowledge in a large and diverse sphere of foreign cultures: Indian, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and German.

Not only did Constantin Noica praise Eminescu's wide culture and ceaseless thirst for knowledge, but he also praised the poet's incredible historical intuition. For exemplifying this aspect, Constantin Noica quoted Eminescu's comments regarding the role that the Germans were about to play in history during the second half of the XIXth century: "He loved, admired the German people and, still, for the period 1870-1871, he has this intuition; in a letter sent to Negruzzi, in the unused manuscript 2[2]91, he wrote: "Oh, the silent thinkers, the German humanitarians... Where are they? I confess you that you cannot find them anymore." And he says this thing, which must make us ponder today: "A part of the world's historical faith is today, in 1871, when the clock of their forgetfulness has struck, in their hands. You will see what they will do." This man – who puts an end to his manuscript with the thought that "Every existing thing bears in itself its measure, the trees cannot grow up to the sky" – was a visionary. We cannot either grow up beyond our measure and our measure is Eminescu. We shall not grow more than that. But I would we grew that much! Because our soul must be fertilized in the same way in which land is. And unless we feed our souls with Eminescu – but not with an idealized Eminescu, not with Eminescu isolated in his geniality – but with this Eminescu of the germinative chaos, unless we feed our souls with this Eminescu, then we shall remain hungry in culture."¹¹ (our translation)

Constantin Noica's books on Romanian culture, language and history of thinking, as well as his attempt to identify the fundamental characteristics of European culture still represent a current issue for our society.

As a man of spirit, Constantin Noica understood that nothing valuable can be built outside spiritual evolution and permanent cultural progress.

The prophecy that one finds in Constantin Noica's books points out the right path that we should follow as Romanians and European citizens: the cultivation of spirit, the nurture of mind and souls with culture and knowledge. This permanent contact with ideas and spiritual values is not only a means for progressing as human beings but it is also a form of preserving our identity as Romanians.

¹¹ *Eminescu – Omul deplin al culturii românești*, Conferințele Bibliotecii Astra, nr. 2/2007, pag. 43, ISSN: 1843 – 4754: "Iubea, admira poporul german și totuși, în '70-'71, are intuiția aceasta; într-o scrisoare către Negruzzi, în manuscrisul 2[2]91, nefolosit: „O, tăcuții, gânditorii, umanitarii germani... Unde sunt ei? Vă încredințez că nu-i mai găsești.” Și spune lucrul acesta, care trebuie astăzi să ne pună pe gânduri: „O parte din soarta lumii e azi, în '71, în ceasul uitării lor, în mâinile lor. Veți vedea ce vor face.” Avea simț istoric omul acesta, care încheie manuscrisul de care vă vorbesc cu gândul: „Fiecare lucru poartă în sine însuși măsura sa, arborii nu cresc până în cer.” Nici noi nu putem crește dincolo de măsura noastră și măsura noastră este Eminescu. Nu vom crește mai mult decât atât. Atât însă să creștem! Pentru că sufletul trebuie hrănit ca pământul. Și dacă nu ne vom hrăni cu Eminescu – nu cu un Eminescu idealizat, nu cu un Eminescu trimes în genialitatea lui –, cu Eminescu acesta al haosului germinativ, dacă nu ne vom hrăni cu Eminescu acesta, atunci vom rămâne, în cultura, mai departe înfometaji.”.

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