

**PAUL CORNEA. HERMENEUTICAL PERSPECTIVES.
INTERPRETATION AS PLURALITY AND DIALOGUE**

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***Abstract:** In Paul Cornea's view, the problem of interpretation is structured in a theoretical discourse for which the critical relevance is given by rigor and analytical pragmatism. The critic doesn't hesitate to meditate on the epistemological dimensions of literary criticism and history, revisiting the illusions, chances and methodological perspectives of these disciplines. The work of art, as an autonomous individuality, is also perceived by the literary critic from the perspective of its contextualization and of the historical and social horizons where it develops, while literature itself is systematically circumscribed or seen as a "collective" field, commented through some defining concepts (success, influence, concordance, genetic criticism, etc.). In the theoretician's view, the interpretation is the result of a hermeneutical relation in which the explanatory vocation meets the ability to comprehend the meanings of the text. If the reading may be seen as a first stage in the assumption of the text, the interpretation is related to the intimate comprehension of it, as well as to the recovery of the meanings that have a privileged status in its more or less complex structure. On the other hand, the passing to the moment of interpretation is catalyzed by a crisis of the meaning, a crisis that any interpretation attempts to solve. The relativization of the points of view, the nuancing of the opinions, the refusal of any pre-established conception, of any methodological prejudice represent, in fact, the essential features of the type of rationality employed and illustrated, in his books, by Paul Cornea.*

***Keywords:** theory of reading; literary criticism; literary history; interpretation; contextualization; epistemology*

One of the most important contemporary literary critics and historians, Paul Cornea has established himself through epistemological openness and by assuming a demanding "lesson of plurality" (Nicolae Manolescu) impeccably acquired and applied in his books. Moreover, in a note with programmatic accents, the critic confesses: "I am attracted to criticism, in its free and uncodified aspect, of dialogue, commentary, encircling a meaning, essentially retractive and relative. But I am no less passionate about transferring the ontology of the work and the author to collective contexts (the literary system, the system of conventions, the history of forms and styles), which makes possible a literary science based on conceptualization and inter-subjective consensus." In *Studii de literatură română modernă* (1962), Romanian literature is explored from a sociological perspective, through the prism of influences, determinism and confluences. The studies in this book hermeneutically highlight important figures of pre-modern or post-modern Romanian literature (I. Budai-Deleanu, Costache Conachi, Heliade-Rădulescu, Bălcescu, Alecsandri), in an approach that combines monographic treatment and analysis of a particular feature of the work. The monograph Anton Pann (1964)

examines controversial aspects of Anton Pann's biography, analyzing the work of this representative of Romanian literary Balkanism in an evocative style, also based on the writer's contextualization in time and space, with an emphasis on the color of the era. *De la Alexandrescu la Eminescu* (1966) includes studies that reveal the Enlightenment resources of the Pashoptic ideology, the biography and work of Grigore Alexandrescu and Cezar Bolliac, the influences of Pashopticism on Eminescu's work, as well as some problems of translation and translators in the 19th century. În *Originile romantismului românesc* (1972), Paul Cornea refers to some epistemological landmarks of literary history, revisiting the illusions, chances and methodological perspectives of the discipline. The work, in its form of autonomous individuality, is perceived at the confluence between its contextualization and the evolution of the historical and social horizon, literature being circumscribed systemically or as a "collective side". The book is, in fact, a documented, useful synthesis of "the public spirit, the movement of ideas and literature between 1780-1840". The critic is also interested here in some problems of the theory of reception, in a comparative spirit, considering that Romanian romanticism, militant and national, must be separated from the Western one which is internalized, melancholic, nihilistic. Premodern Romanian literature is studied from a dual perspective, from the angle of "mentality" and the literary "current", but also from the perspective, synchronic, of the dominant ideology and diachrony. Thus, Romanian Romanticism is analyzed in a European context, delimiting three distinct periods (Romanticism before 1830, after 1830 and Eastern Romanticism), periods united in the "common fund of Romanticism". Formulating a necessary balance between national particularities and foreign influences, Paul Cornea analyzes Romanian pre-Romanticism from the perspective of the coexistence of Enlightenment and Romanticism, with many filiations, convergences, correspondences between historical events and literary creations of the era. The evolution of Romanian Romanticism in the period 1830-1840 is represented from three perspectives: the dimension of the "national idea", as a fundamental element in the structuring of Romanian Romanticism; the dimension of Romantic expansion and that of Romantic aesthetics.

Oamenii începutului de drum (1974) explores Romanian literature from the period 1840-1860. In the first section, the profile of the Păsoptist generation is commented on, with convincing arguments and motivations, and the typological diversity of the writers who compose it, based on a common feature, the binomial dream-deed, in correlation with two other privileged antinomies (civic-specific artistic militancy and artistic originality-artistic influence). In the second section of the book, Paul Cornea inventories several controversial elements of the generation, outlining micromonographic, credible and plastic portraits (Bălcescu, Heliade, Hasdeu), refers to romantic titanism, the final grouping bringing together studies supervised by a comparative horizon (on pre-romanticism in the Balkan region, the evolution of the term "romantic", the echoes of Lamartine's work in 19th-century Romanian literature, etc.). *Regula jocului* (1980) is a book with a pronounced theoretical aspect, in which general categories of literature (literary current, genre,

literary concepts, etc.) are nuanced, problems related to the tectonics of social discourse in an intra- and extra-textual perspective, or the relationships between text and context in the creation and reception of literary works. The "collective side of literature" is commented on through relevant concepts (success, influence, concordance, genetic criticism, etc.). The beginnings of the Romanian novel are perceived as a result of the evolution of market relations, Alecsandri's work being commented on from the perspective of the concept of literary myth. Ioana Em. Petrescu observes that Paul Cornea "oscillates between the plenitude of criticism and the altitude of the theoretical approach, postulating their necessary coexistence and achieving this coexistence not through critical-theory interference, but through their alternation in successive works /.../. In the subtext of *The Rule of the Game*, the reader feels another game – that between reality and concept, which the author experiences (as involvement and distance) with delight and lucidity, in a dialogical manner". Also in this volume, the role of the audience in configuring the theatrical repertoire in Romanian literature of the first half of the 19th century is revealed. In *Itinerar printre clasici* (1984), referring to the functions and role of historical-literary analysis, Paul Cornea considers that it "responds to a pressing need for the study of literature and, more than that, to a strong and irresistible inclination of our spirit: that of not disarming in the face of the apparent disorder of the imaginary, of trying to detect its structures, regularities and mode of functioning, of transforming it into an object of knowledge". However, historical-literary analysis also has another role, for it "educates in the spirit of method, objectivity and good faith, constituting a school of intellectual discipline that we have an immense need for". Heliade-Rădulescu is viewed here through the prism of the theory of reception. *Introducere în teoria lecturii* (1988) is a synthesis work, with extensive documentation, in which the reading is analyzed in a nuanced way from an interdisciplinary angle through concepts, theories and ideas from the perimeter of sociology, psychology, text theory or literary criticism. The theorizing spirit prevails, to the detriment of the necessary exemplifications and illustrations. In *Semnele vremii* (1995), the author brings together various articles, reviews, and contributions about books and authors, the book being completed with a group of interviews (*Pro domo*), in which biographical episodes, stages of intellectual formation, methodological options, and significant epistemological landmarks are recorded.

Intellectualitate și raționalitate (2006) has as its dominant starting point the idea of communication, of dialogical intellectual communion between author and reader. It is an important book in terms of scope, theoretical dimensions and conceptual language, being "an erudite, competent and personal synthesis of the problems of hermeneutics of yesterday and today". Sanda Cordoș notes the conceptual scope and hermeneutical availability of the volume: "It has been decades since, 'in our sublunary world' (with a favorite expression of the author), a book of its theoretical scope and humanistic openness has appeared. Although, of course, more affinities can be established, I believe that, through the acuity of attention, through intellectual availability, ideological creativity and capacity for

synthesis, through the elegance of expression, as well as through the restless trust in reason, Paul Cornea comes closest, in the area of Romanian thought, to Tudor Vianu. *Interpretare și raționalitate* can be considered a treatise on the philosophy of culture, unless we prefer a more current expression, that of the archaeology of knowledge." In the theorist's view, interpretation is the result of a hermeneutic relationship in which the vocation of explanation meets the capacity to understand the meanings of the text, as Paul Cornea observes: "What interests me here (...) is the study of interpretation as a hermeneutic instrument, its functioning at the level of language, in the field of interpersonal relations, the human sciences and literary criticism." Considered by Mihai Zamfir as "the first Romanian treatise on hermeneutics", Paul Cornea's volume extends, in many respects, the author's concerns in *Introducere în teoria lecturii*. If reading can be considered a first stage in assuming the text, interpretation is linked to its intimate understanding, to the recovery of meanings with privileged relief from its more or less complex structure. On the other hand, the transition to the moment of interpretation is favored by a crisis of meaning, which any interpretation aims to resolve. On the other hand, the theorist considers that interpretations of a concrete nature "are difficult to elucidate, because they refuse the strong light of the concept, they appear to us in roundabout and evanescent forms". Obviously, such a privileged emphasis placed on the concept, to the detriment of the example or concrete approach is, in a certain sense, questionable. Interpretations have come to enjoy a remarkable interest, in the most diverse cultural and social spheres, a fact underlined by Paul Cornea: "Interpretations play an important role in the public sphere of democratic societies, based on pluralism of opinions, where we happen to be asked by competing discourses, between which it is difficult to decide, due to the asymmetry of advantages and disadvantages. Usually, we decide according to interests, personal sympathies or animosities, momentary whims, the advice of an authoritative friend, without sufficiently reflecting and weighing the alternatives. Without a doubt, it is not easy to make a good decision, because we are all influenced by prejudices and interests, guided more by emotions than by reason." Paul Cornea's book "triumphantly resumes the Romanian interwar tradition, that is, the tradition of the era when broad-mindedness and rich information were allied with the exercise of writing without any kind of constraint", so that the issue of interpretation, which Paul Cornea approaches in a theoretical discourse in which critical relevance is given by rigor and analytical pragmatism, but also by fluency and expressiveness of the diction of ideas. She also refers to the schizophrenic discourse of the communist period, in which the intensely ideologized language impressed on speakers a traumatic awareness of an utterance inappropriate for communication: "In any case, in a society like ours, where the communist dictatorship imposed lying as the rule of the game for half a century - on leaders to camouflage their failures, on intellectuals to save their freedom of spirit, on the masses of the people to manage their relations with the authorities - it is not surprising that a generalized suspicion has been reached. No one trusts others anymore, everyone suspects dark plots behind well-intentioned statements, every

banal coincidence is explained in terms of conspiracy theory, everything seems to be read in the perspective of a formidable hidden meaning. We must accept, at the same time, that the world of late modernity promotes on a large scale, due to the media frenzy or the mixture of languages, stylistic registers and different rhythms of evolution, an indirect use of speech that affects the chances of good understanding".

The hermeneutic perspective that Paul Cornea outlines in his pages derives primarily from the renowned studies of Gadamer, Wittgenstein, Popper, or Ricoeur. The link between interpretation and understanding is, moreover, underlined by the Romanian theorist on several occasions: "interpretation appears to us (...) as a performative component of understanding, which completes its action and perfects it" or: "Interpretation (I spell it with a capital letter here) remains an awareness and a problematization of understanding, characteristic not so much of reading as of systematic rereading, most often concluded with an escort discourse". On the other hand, interpretation is characterized precisely by its consciously assumed character, by the rational and logical pretension that determines and dominates it. However, an interpretation with any degree of truth and semantic relevance is not possible outside of an intimate consonance of the receiving being with the text, outside of an empathetic relationship with the structures of the work. Understanding thus implies resonance of the other's thought with one's own, implies folding on the other's intentions, affective reflection of otherness in interiority: "Interpretation always remains, beyond the existence of more or less solid points of support, a personal and creative act. It is a gamble, namely, insubordinate to rules established once and for all, it falls entirely under the interpreter's responsibility. The only possible thing is to put our authentic feeling above the will to shock, the desire to serve the foreign work above that of highlighting our personal merits. Interpretation requires meticulousness, but also generosity. It is not born from indifference or routine, but from a sensitivity capable of vibrating and a supple and noble intelligence, ready to recognize talent, even if it does not correspond to one's own taste preferences." On the other hand, it doesn't seem like much to say that it is "one of the major stakes of Romanian culture after 1989", insofar as it truly essentializes some of the most significant articulations of Romanian hermeneutics.

Especially concerned with theories on language and hermeneutic approaches, Paul Cornea also asks himself questions about the destiny and chances of rationality in a world dominated mainly by deconstructivist, postmodern perspectives on the world and human knowledge: "The general feeling of those who have stepped into the 21st century is that things are not going well, that the tragic lessons of the past do not seem to have taught us any lessons, that the balance of power and consent on which the current world order is based is fragile and threatened to fall apart. What is truly worrying is not the fact that more and more objects, behaviors, feelings tend to transform into "problems", and therefore to become interpretable, but that an increasing number of interpretations seem to be commanded by fear, frustration, paranoia, irresponsible hedonism, the desire for

power. (...). Has rationality become an obsolete, worthless commodity?" It could be said that, sometimes, the theorist introduces the grid of rationality even where it would not have easy access, somewhat overbidding the importance and presence of the rational factor ("Thus, we all arrive, more slowly or faster, at a pragmatic and permissive way of understanding literature. Roland Barthes' famous quibble, namely that «literature is what is learned in school as literature», is no longer relevant; the truth is that school has lagged far behind life and not only because, out of inertia and routine, it keeps its distance from innovative expressions, but also because it is very reluctant towards the selective assimilation of mass culture").

The balance of assertions is combined, in Paul Cornea's book, with the diachronic perspective on various cultural phenomena or theories of language. The incessant appeal to "origins", to foundations, the frequentation of primary sources gives the text accuracy, conceptual relevance, and clarity of demonstrations. Obviously, Paul Cornea is not limited to the hermeneutics of the literary text; his investigations also penetrate into related fields or into spaces that transcend literariness, as the author confesses, in a fragment: "What interests me here (...) is the study of interpretation as a hermeneutic instrument, its functioning at the level of language, in the field of interpersonal relations, of the human sciences and of literary criticism". Referring to this book, Al. Călinescu emphasizes, in a synthetic spirit, the dominant qualities that support Paul Cornea's hermeneutic and heuristic approach: „*Interpretare și raționalitate* it is, in itself, an example of progressive and patient appropriation of meanings, of lucidity and rigor, of clarity and care for nuances, of critical spirit and ever-awake intelligence. The author carefully examines each concept, turns it on all sides, starts from etymology to reach its current meanings, summons famous and less well-known names, multiplies the references, but each time signals the essential, expresses his agreement without restraint or, on the contrary, rejects - elegantly and firmly - the opinions he considers inadequate. There is no doubt that, when, during his approach, he encounters theories, conceptions or ideas that require amendment, Paul Cornea does not hesitate to sanction them, firmly exposing his own point of view, the perspective that seems to him the most appropriate, the optimal point of view on a certain issue. For example, Paul Cornea criticizes the harmful role of "hermeneutic ubiquity", but he also opposes the fetishization of science, to the extent that the performances of contemporary technologies "are counterbalanced by perplexities and disturbing questions". The social and cultural model to which the author adheres is that of "open society", based on liberalism, democracy, pluralism of points of view and polysemanticism of values. When he refers to the "endless confrontation between the rational and the irrational", Paul Cornea firmly defines himself on the side of the values of reason and lucidity, specifying that it is not a dogmatic rationality, frozen in its own patterns, but rather a "flexible, open, inventive, aware of its own limits". It is a type of rationality that knows its own limits, always evaluates its epistemological perspectives and chances, negotiates its points of view also depending on other opinions considered legitimate, at the same time contributing "subjectivity, randomness, contradiction, ambiguity". The

relativization of points of view, the nuance of opinions, the refusal of any pre-established conception, of any methodological prejudice, these represent, in essence, the essential features of the type of rationality that he Paul Cornea exploits and illustrates it in his book. A book that relies on exhaustive documentation, on a significant theoretical background, *Intellectualitate și raționalitate* is one of the editorial appearances of the greatest conceptual scope in recent years. The didactic cadence of the demonstration is always nuanced, relativized by the insertion of an empathetic breath, through which texts, authors and ideas find themselves in a space of complementarity and beneficial correspondences. One of the assertions that remains imprinted in the mind of the reader of the book can be placed as an emblem of the entire hermeneutic approach of Paul Cornea: "To be rational means to combine principles with pragmatism, common sense and the escape from routine". *Intellectualitate și raționalitate* invites readers to precisely such creative freedom, consisting of the refusal of routine, of clichés, and the demystifying openness to otherness, to the opinion of another. *Apariția Jurnalului* lui Paul Cornea (Edited edition, notes and index by Petruș Costea. Foreword by Mihai Zamfir, Polirom Publishing House, 2024) is a true editorial event, Mihai Zamfir noting that the diary captures "memorable moments" of personal history, but also of "great" history, through a fascinating and vivid perception of the world, people and events, but also through the attraction of ideas, availability, intellectual curiosity and the initial sincerity of the confession: "We also admire the sincerity in Paul Cornea's book. Sincerity regarding the social projects he embraced throughout his life; sincerity regarding the narration of the events he went through; sincerity regarding his relationships with others, likeable or unlikable characters, described without complexes and without pretense; finally, sincerity regarding close people, family and friends, never exalted or placed on a pedestal. We revisit our everyday world as we have known it from the middle of the last century until today, that is, ordinary, modest, but sometimes heroic through the suffering endured." The length of time transcribed in the diary text (1933-2017) is remarkable, but also the quality of a human and historical document of a text that combines immersion in intimacy and dialogue with others, in a text in which, however, sincerity is limited, the tone tamed, the accents subdued. In fact, Mihai Zamfir rightly observes that Paul Cornea had sketched an autobiography in the book of dialogues with Daniel Cristea-Enache *Ce a fost – cum a fost* (2013) in which "he revealed to the public everything he wanted to be known about his life and work." *Jurnalul* is, however, something else, being made up of "direct notes, written in the heat of the event, which do not seem to have been written with a view to publication". However, the boundaries between the diary, seen as a privileged way "of not letting the moment evaporate", and memoirs are, in the case of this text, relative, fluctuating, against the omnipresent, insinuating political background, in which the destiny of a Romanian intellectual attracted first to literary history, then to the theory of reading, the sociology of literature and hermeneutics is outlined. Captivating are the travel notes, in which cultural habits (museums, libraries, concert halls, etc.) are recorded, but also the reading notes that mark the author's intellectual evolution,

his development, passions, biases, or the fixation of human silhouettes, portrayed briefly or in detail, in motion, through descriptions of conduct, moral stance, or affectivity. Of course, the diary is, as Mihai Zamfir notes, “reconstructed, belonging both to its author and to the one who took care of putting a difficult text on the page”. The author’s misgivings about the diaristic genre to which his text would be subsumed is revealed in one of the self-referential notations: “This notebook is not a diary. It is anything but a diary. It is a collection of notes for future works: it is a series of miniature essays written with the visible intention of impressing; it is an amalgam of confessions belonging to the heroes I will create and the undigested thoughts that I offer in primary form, awaiting the broad understanding of the reader. However, it is in no way a diary. That is, a naked and direct expression of my real self.” We find in the pages of the diary meetings with important people (Arghezi, Iorgu Iordan), with friends, students, with teachers from pre-university education, notes about concerts and plays, reading lists and critical reactions, with interest in the critics of the latest generations (Ioana Pârvulescu, Corin Braga, Ruxandra Cesereanu, Carmen Mușat, Sanda Cordoș, Mihai Iovănel, Andrei Terian, etc.). Paul Cornea’s diary is truly an editorial event of the last years, through its scope, ideological scope, style and the erudition calmly absorbed in the confessional text. “Ingenious stylist and voluptuous taster of appearances” (N. Manolescu), Paul Cornea is one of the first-rate literary historians and theorists of current Romanian culture.

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