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EAST EUROPE

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● RUMANIA

23 March 1967

RUMANIAN CULTURAL LIFE SINCE THE 1965 PARTY CONGRESS

In spite of all its rather contradictory features, the Rumanian cultural scene since the Ninth Party Congress of July 1965 has had one common thread: the search for new forms and a healthier spirit of innovation, following a long period of dogmatic stagnation. The main impetus for this development clearly seems to have been the changes which took place in the policy of the Party itself on culture and the arts. One of the most significant of these changes was the abandonment of socialist realism as the supreme guiding principle of cultural-artistic life. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, socialist realism had demonstrated its bankruptcy, even from the limited viewpoint of agitprop effectiveness, but in the Rumanian case another stigma perhaps made the doctrine seem even more suspect under present conditions. It was, namely, one of the symbols of the imposition of Soviet cultural hegemony (in the cultural sphere, in this case), and as such was ill-suited to the current nationalist policy of the regime. It is by no means accidental that its place has been taken in the last year or so by such principles as the "national specific features" and "spiritual make-up of the Rumanian people." These are the criteria which Rumanian critics have been using as a starting point in appraising works of art, and in the process Marxist-Leninist doctrines on the class character of art and literature have definitely retreated to the background. This is particularly evident in the broad campaign to reappraise the culture and cultural personalities of pre-Communist Rumania, which has rehabilitated important figures who were formerly condemned as "bourgeois."

To be sure, with the introduction of these changes, the Party did not relinquish its direction and control of cultural and artistic activity in Rumania; it merely shifted to more flexible, subtle and up-to-date methods of guiding this activity.

But it cannot be denied that Rumanian artists now enjoy considerably more freedom of movement than previously. The very fact that the RCP has sought an expansion of contacts with the culture of the non-socialist countries and with the cultural heritage of the past has substantially enriched the country's cultural horizons and, therefore, the whole range of artistic activity conducted as well. The green light given by the Party to diversity of style has led to a significant quantitative -- and qualitative improvement in artistic "production." (1) At the same time the Party has turned the detailed tasks of supervising literary-artistic output over to the critics; in other words, the first line of direction of cultural activity is no longer manned by "illiterate" apparatchiks, but by intellectuals -- ideally, in the Party's view, those with a sound Marxist-Leninist background.

One important result of all these various changes has been a far greater diversification of the permissible themes and forms of artistic expression, many of which used to be strictly "taboo." Thus, for the first time in Communist Rumania works have been allowed to appear which deal with erotic themes, with men who do not exist solely within the sphere of production and "socialist competitions" but also have a private life, and with lyrical and other subjects that are totally devoid of any social (let alone Communist) message. Under the convenient label of "experiments," moreover, a number of important works, which would have been dismissed as "decadent" in the past, have appeared. This concept of experimentation has been deliberately broadened by artists and critics who are interested in introducing new elements into the country's artistic life. In view of this extension of the bounds of permissible creative work, it is not too surprising that heated debates and differences of viewpoints between artists and critics may now be encountered in the columns of the Rumanian literary press. Conflicting opinion on the merits of unorthodox paintings, plays, novels, short stories and the like, though still microscopic by Western standards, is nevertheless in the Rumanian context, a refreshing change from the monolithic "criticism" of the past.

The General Setting

To better grasp the meaning of recent events in Rumania's artistic life, it would be useful to discuss the general setting within which this activity has developed. It can safely be concluded that the RCP has substantially revised its views of how the arts should be guided, taking into consideration the results

(1) EERA/Reed Background Report "Rumanian Cultural Life on the Eve of the Party Congress: A Survey" of 17 July 1965.

of nearly two decades of heavyhanded Stalinist-like control. It has, among other things, evidently reached the conclusion that the arts are far too complex an affair to be left in the hands of persons who are eminently unqualified to cope with them. In any event, it appears that writers and artists are no longer subjected to the interference of the blundering Party activists who in the past had prescribed how they were to write and paint. The Party now sets only the general guidelines -- in this case, mainly nationalism -- on which artists should focus their attention. The appraisal of their works, as mentioned above, is left to the critics, who are more competent and endeavor to be more objective than in the past.

A concomitant development has been the greater role played by the writers' and artists' "unions," and here it should be stressed that important changes in their leadership have taken place. One of the most important was the removal of Mihai Beniuc -- perhaps the most eminent representative of literary Stalinism in Rumania -- as head of the Writers' Union in February 1965. His successor, Demostene Botez, lost this job only a year later to the opportunist Zaharia Stancu, undoubtedly the right kind of man to carry out a policy that is as much characterized by compromise as the one now followed by the Party. (2)

The diversification of cultural and artistic activity has also found expression in a striking increase, over a relatively short period of time, in the number of cultural and artistic publications in Rumania. Magazines have appeared in almost all areas of the country which, while bearing the names of old pre-Communist publications (a reflection of the general aspiration to continuity with the past) are aimed mainly at stimulating current cultural activity. The most important of these reviews are Familia (The Family), Astra, Amfiteatru (Amphitheater), and Colocvii (Colloquia). Literary production has grown accordingly some Rumanian critics even speaking of an "outburst" of young poets and writers who can express themselves freely by virtue of the growing number of magazines. Now and then Scanteia has stepped in to urge the editorial boards of these periodicals to exercise more exacting standards in deciding which young poets and writers should be promoted. But the fact remains that there are now greater opportunities for publication in Rumania than in the past. New measures designed to facilitate the printing of literary works are being worked out, and proposals have been advanced to reappraise copyright procedures and to stimulate the

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- (2) EERA/Rumanian Unit Background Report "New President of the Writers' Union" of 22 February 1966.

material interest of authors in the sale of their books.

The reappraisal of the national cultural and artistic heritage, in the course of which the Party has increasingly shifted from a Marxist-Leninist to a nationalistic position, has already been mentioned. The sole criterion applied now in evaluating this heritage is whether or not the artist or work in question has in any way served Rumanian interests. The starting point, the basic outlook is only of secondary importance, as was perhaps most convincingly shown by the rehabilitation of Octavian Goga, one of the leading spokesmen of extreme nationalism in Rumania between the two World Wars. Nevertheless, the essentially positive nature of this development should be emphasized, for it offers for the first time the younger generation an opportunity to acquaint itself with the whole spectrum of the cultural and artistic life of pre-Communist Rumania. The "decadent" dadaistic and abstract trends of this period have also been reappraised in recent months. Suffice it to recall here the success scored by the retrospective exhibition of Ion Tuculescu's abstract art. Considering Rumania's long Party-imposed isolation from the national heritage -- and from all the important trends of world contemporary art -- it is not surprising that many young Rumanian artists are vulnerable to the charge that they are merely imitating styles which have long waned elsewhere. The rising generation has much lost time to make up for, and for the young those trends still represent a fundamentally new approach to art.

Part and parcel of the reconsideration of the past has been the re-emergence of a number of writers and artists who were kept on the sidelines of the country's cultural life during Stalin's lifetime. Some of them have even become heads of university departments, or members of magazine editorial boards (for instance, Serban Cioculescu, editor-in-chief of Viata Romaneasca). Until only recently rejected by the regime, these personalities have apparently been assigned prominent roles in the national revival, set in motion by the Party. An article by Vladimir Streinu, one of the patriarchs of Rumanian literature, on the specific national features of the Rumanians, which appeared in Luceafarul, (3) is a good case in point.

The major stimulating influence on the Rumanian cultural scene played by the growing contact with the cultural and artistic activity of the West, should not be overlooked here. This contact has been expressed in various forms: more Western literature

(3) No.18, 1966. See Rumanian Press Survey No.631 of 20 May 1966.

and films are available than in the past, and foreign tourists have easier access to the country than previously. The role of the periodical Secolul XX (The 20th Century) publicizing Western literature in Rumania cannot be overestimated. Growing contacts among artists, holding of important exhibitions of major Western artists (such as Henry Moore), Rumanian participation in international exhibitions and competitions -- all these reflect the great change in atmosphere.

In the last two years, without entirely making up for the impact of almost 20 years of isolation, a great deal has been done in the direction of achieving Rumania's reintegration into contemporary world culture. One of the effects of this has been to reduce substantially the gap between what was viewed as fit for cultural export (for prestige reasons) and what was suitable for domestic consumption. Formerly, Rumania showed as much of an avant-garde face to the outer world as it does today, but the difference was that at home extremely orthodox views held full sway. To be sure, traces of this discrepancy are still evident, but to a far lesser degree. (A recent example of this kind of selective cultural policy was a survey of Rumanian literature by Ovidiu Crohmalniceanu broadcast by the Bavarian Radio, in which extensive excerpts of D.R. Popescu's "The Blue Lion" were presented; in Rumania, Popescu's story was first severely criticized then ignored altogether.)

After this brief outline of the setting in which Rumanian cultural and artistic activity is taking place, the main developments in the various fields can now be examined.

Literary Criticism

It was mentioned earlier that under the Party's new cultural policy, criticism, above all literary criticism, has been called upon to play a larger role in the guidance of the arts. This enhanced responsibility has engendered a degree of discussion among the critics that was wholly lacking in the past. There have thus been a number of debates on major themes of artistic life in recent issues of the literary magazines of Rumania.

One of the most noteworthy was that which appeared in several issues of the weekly Luceafarul. In this discussion, a great many critics expressed their views on the need for what was termed "an artistic creative method." This subject was in fact the occasion for a clash between young critics and those of the old guard over the issue of socialist realism -- a clash in which the arguments of the proponents of the perpetuation of

socialist realism were convincingly demolished. (4) There were also disputes over the issue of the positive and negative hero, and the problem of the absence of conflict in literature and here too the socialist-realist position was severely shaken. In a long article entitled "Realities and Possibilities" (5) which appeared in Luceafarul of 8 October 1966, the writer Ion Lancranjan rejected socialist realism in severe terms for falsifying reality, by presenting it an adorned, prettified form. Lancranjan was attacking here what he termed the "theory of rejoicing." In a similar vein, Rumanian playwrights showed that it was impossible to create comedy, drama or tragedy under the conditions imposed by socialist realism, since the various aspects of life had to be presented not according to the truth, but according to the Party's will. (6) A notable development in the field of Rumanian criticism, is what could be described as a revolt of the writers against the critics, which has forced the latter to break with many of the dogmatic tenets of socialist realism. A good illustration of this revolt was an article by the playwright Horia Lovinescu, entitled "Opinions About the Problems of the Rumanian Theater," which appeared in the No.5, 1965 issue of the Party magazine Lupta de Clasa. (7) Lovinescu pointed to the growing gap between the increasingly demanding experts in the theatrical field and the dilettantism of the critics.

A broad debate on the mission and role of criticism, which has also dealt with the question whether or not criticism itself is a literary genre has also been going on in the Rumanian periodicals. The recent death of G. Calinescu and T. Vianu, two cultural figures of international stature who, with their strong personality, exerted considerable influence on Rumanian criticism, was a severe loss for this section of Rumanian literature, but a number of young and gifted critics have also appeared on the

- (4) Gh. Achitei. The Idea of an "Artistic Creative Method." Luceafarul, No.12 of 5 June 1965. RPS No.553 of 26 June 1965; V. Moraru "Without Quotation Marks," Luceafarul, of 19 June 1965, RPS No.555 of 21 July 1965; I. Balu "The Method of Artistic Creation," Luceafarul, 31 July 1965, RPS No.569 of 21 August 1965; L.Rusu "The Method of Artistic Creation, an Aesthetic Category," Luceafarul, 11 September 1965, RPS No.589 of 19 September 1965.
- (5) See Rumanian Press Survey No.663 of 24 October 1966.
- (6) P. Everac: "The Difficulties of Playwriting," Contemporarul, 14 May 1965, RPS No.551 of 8 June 1965; T. Mazilu: "The Heights of the Comic," Teatrul, No.4, 1966, RPS No.630 of 18 May 1966.
- (7) RPS No.553 of 26 June 1965.

scene, most notably Eugen Simion and Nicolae Manolescu. These new critics have recognized and reported the advent of such young talents as Ion Alexandru (in poetry), Nicolae Breban (the novel), and Stefan Banulescu and Ion Baiesu (the short story).

The critics have been given the important task of reappraising the country's literary heritage. They are at present engaged in "reconsidering" such cultural figures of the past as Lucian Blaga, Ion Barbu and Octavian Goga, and previously rejected trends such as Rumanian symbolism. Controversial issues have been raised in the process, particularly as far Blaga is concerned. A heated discussion has been going on between those who attempt to present Lucian Blaga as a Marxist (no small task indeed, considering that it is common knowledge that this poet and philosopher was one of the main spokesmen of an essentially anti-Marxist philosophy) and those who insist that Blaga should be taken for what he is, without distortions of the truth. Thus two articles in Gazeta Literara by a relatively unknown critic, Monica Lazar, severely criticized a recent edition of Blaga's poetry by George Ivascu, a prominent spokesman of the regime on questions of art and literature. The author took Ivascu to task for omitting 11 philosophical poems by Blaga, thus presenting a picture of the poet "purged of metaphysical sins." (8)

The Short Story

The most interesting new literary work to appear in Rumania in the last year or so -- with respect to both content and artistic form -- has been in the field of the short story. D.R. Popescu, Stefan Banulescu, Ioan Baiesu, Ion Lancranjan, Alexandru Struteanu, Romulus Vulpescu and others have depicted in their stories a real world which is totally devoid of the imprint of Party propaganda. Their short stories seem to have been enthusiastically received by the Rumanian reading public, something quite unusual for Communist-ruled Rumania, where original literature was in little demand during the era of socialist realism, due to its commonplace, trivial themes.

A milestone was a story entitled "The Blue Lion," by Dumitru Radu Popescu, which was published in three installments in the Writers' Union weekly Luceafarul (October 30 and November 6 and 13, 1965). This marked the first time that a story had appeared in Rumania directly criticizing conditions in the early years of Communist rule. Popescu's story also had some caustic points to make on the lack of moral integrity in the present-day Rumanian cultural community. A few strong attacks on "The Blue Lion" were published, but, significantly, the criticism was aimed at its strong dosage of "shockingly vulgar," language, with no reference at all to the substance of the story, aside from some indignant protests in Gazeta

- (8) H. Lazar: "Review of the Edition of Lucian Blaga's Poems," Rumanian Press Survey No. 668 of 9 September 1966.

Invatamintului about its highly unflattering picture (apparently based on the author's personal recollections) of Rumanian school-teachers in the early days of the new regime. (9) Less than a week after the final installment of the story appeared, a plenum of the Writers' Union Executive Committee was held for the purpose of discussing "current matters of the literary press," and both Luceafarul editor Eugen Barbu and Popescu (himself an editor of the Union's Cluj weekly Steaua) attended it. Though this was never confirmed, it seems safe to assume that the question of "The Blue Lion" was at least raised at this meeting. At any rate, what gave promise of developing into a campaign of severe criticism stopped suddenly after this meeting; the Party evidently felt that the best approach was to do nothing to help create a major public "affair."

In September 1966, almost a year after the appearance of "The Blue Lion," the weekly Gazeta Literara printed a short story called "Solar Eclipse," by Ion Lancranjan, which described the disastrous plight of an agricultural production cooperative. The story had a pronounced anti-Soviet and nationalistic tinge, presenting, for the first time in Communist Rumania, an ex-kulak in a favorable light, as the only true patriot of the story. (10) For two months, the critics completely ignored the publication of this story. Then the influential Eugen Barbu spoke highly of it in the daily Scanteia (8 November 1964), calling it one of the biggest literary successes of the last few years. (11)

An encouraging sign in the short story field is the recent emergence of a number of new writers, such as N. Velea, A. Buzura, I. Calian and Sinzeana Pop. These young talents have boldly and critically dealt with themes that were once taboo, such as the question of alienation under socialism, and they have drawn the fire of Scanteia for spreading pessimism and anxiety.

The Theater

Next to the short story, some of the most interesting work in recent Rumanian cultural creation has been in the field of the theater. Three recent Rumanian plays in particular have aroused some discussion in the columns of the cultural magazines and publications. Of the three Horia Lovinescu's "The Man Who Lost his Humanity" appears to have drawn especially severe fire from the orthodox critics. The play, which is symbolical in character,

(9) Rumanian Press Survey, No. 592 of 3 December 1965.

(10) Rumanian Press Survey, No. 659 of 10 October 1966.

(11) Rumanian Press Survey, No. 673 of 1 December 1966.

deals in philosophical terms with the ruler of a state who sacrifices everything to achieve his fanatical goal -- the construction of a "Moon Tower," in this case, only to lose his humanity, without reaching the cherished goal. What exasperated the critics most about Lovinescu's play was his failure to identify the society in which the action was taking place. Quite rightly, they recognized that this ambiguity could create the impression that the context was that of the socialist system -- a point which surely did not escape the sophisticated viewers. (12) But what is perhaps most important of all, in spite of these attacks, the play was not withdrawn from the repertory. This is indicative of an important development not only in the theater, but in the entire artistic life of the country; in contrast to the past, criticized works of art and their authors are as a rule no longer subjected to "administrative measures." Another recent play, "Saint Mitica the Meek" by the dramatist Aurel Baranga, was taken to task for not depicting the outlook of the new man. (13) Ecaterina Oproiu's play "I Am Not the Eiffel Tower" also evoked lively discussion, some critics charging the author with excessive modernism and lack of substance. In fact, this play, which deals in a refreshingly new manner with the life of Rumanian teenagers, was enthusiastically received by the audiences both at home and abroad. (14)

There is still an acute lack of new plays on topical themes in Rumania. As a rule, dramatists still endeavor to avoid such themes, for fear of exposing themselves to charges of incorrectly solving, from the ideological and political viewpoint, questions pertaining to socialist construction. The endless discussions which have been going on in Rumania over the structure of the repertory, reveal that the regime is concerned about the relative lack of stress on Rumanian themes, and is anxious to redress the balance, in large part by introducing plays on historical themes or plays by dramatists who were banned from the stages in the past.

A group of young and gifted stage managers has succeeded, after a long up-hill fight, to achieve the introduction into the repertory of the country's leading theaters, of significant works of the modern theater, presenting them under the guise of "experiments." All of Eugen Ionescu's plays have been included in this category. As Paul Everac, one of the talented young dramatists of present-day Rumania remarked, the fact that Rumanian theaters have presented contemporary Western drama has obliged Rumanian playwrights

(12) Rumanian Press Survey, No. 605 of 1 February 1966.

(13) Rumanian Press Survey, No. 619 of 25 March 1966; Situation Report of 30 March 1966.

(14) Rumanian Press Survey, No. 636 of 13 June 1966.

to "compete" with them. The audience, now being in a position to make a selection, will naturally prefer the best plays, Everac noted. (15) This is another demonstration of the salutary impact of the contact between Rumanian and world culture. However, as in all other fields of art, contact with the modern work being done in other East European countries appears to be relatively limited; very few plays originating from these countries have been performed on Rumanian stages.

Poetry

In the period under discussion in this paper, poetry has clearly been freed to a great extent from the vise of themes linked to politics and to Communist propaganda. The first positive results of this development have also appeared, with the emergence of a body of lyrical apolitical poems, written by such young poets as Ion Alexandru and Marin Sorescu (these two poets were awarded the 1965 prizes of the Writers' Union). However, along with this positive aspect, it must be stressed that a rather large number of poets -- including even many young ones, such as Adrian Paunescu, Ion Gheorghe and others -- have created more than dubious verses on the bloody heroes of the Dacian ballads and legends, as well as the valor of the Rumanians' ancestors. Such naive "historical" poetry is gaining ground, having as it does the open blessings of the Party. In addition to this nationalistic poetry, numerous poets, even several older ones, are writing symbolistic and hermetic verse. A wide range of poets of the interwar period are now being held up as models for this kind of poetry. The favorite such model at present is the poet-mathematician Ion Barbu, whose verse has reappeared after long years of suppression and is apparently exerting considerable influence especially upon the younger generation.

Conclusions

A survey of Rumanian literature since the Ninth Party Congress reveals several clear signs of significant change. In a word, literature, freed from the straitjacket of socialist realism, now has many more possibilities for development at its disposal than in the past. Some of these possibilities have been used, as can be seen by examining a few short stories, plays and poems which have appeared since mid-1965. In the field of the novel, however, the breaking of some of the narrow restrictions of the past has not as yet led to any significant works (except perhaps for Nicolae Breban's Francisca, an account of the life of a family in the early years of Communist rule).

(15) Rumanian Press Survey, No. 551 of 8 June 1965.

Without question, the abandonment of the old dogmatic Party theses on art has been a most positive factor for the development of the arts in Rumania. The growing strident nationalist tones in the arts are, to be sure, a less encouraging sign for the future.

It has, finally, been mentioned above that the Party's guidance of the cultural sphere has become more supple and more subtle. It would, in fact, appear that many of the new developments in the literary field have been tacitly or openly encouraged by the regime rather than being the fruit of any literary opposition. For the artists and writers, however, what matters is that they now have a larger scope for expression than previously. To what extent the Party will in the future be able to channel artistic inspiration along the lines of its own interests remains, of course, to be seen.

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