ABSTRACT

My dissertation attempts to define the aesthetic from a historical and functionalist perspective in the light of the current debate about the profile of the concept, which takes place in the United States and East Central Europe. The opening chapter addresses the multifaceted nature of the category of the aesthetic, which can be regarded as a philosophical field, as a manner of reading and interpretation, and as an identity-building strategy. Due to the fact that during the past six decades the aesthetic concept has often been misconstrued by its opponents and has acquired reactionary connotations, one of my goals is to provide an alternative perspective on this debate. Instead of seeing the aesthetic as the quintessence of the formalist, apolitical, Eurocentric, male-chauvinistic, imperialist, and colonialist mode of interpretation, my study pleads for a reevaluation.

In the first two chapters, my dissertation focuses on the post-1947 evolution of the aesthetic in East-Central Europe, characterized by an intense exploration of the ethic and utopian potentialities of the concept. Philosophically speaking, there are two positions characterizing the aesthetic debate in the United States and East Central Europe. The first attitude grounds its argument about the possibility of bridging the gap between aesthetics and ethics in re-reading Kant from an Adornian perspective. The second position
originates in Nietzsche and challenges the Kantian, hierarchical relationship between reason, morality, and art, proposing instead a new aesthetics, free of any constraints.

Finally, there are scholars who do not belong to either orientation and try to found an alternative, globalizing perspective on the aesthetic, grounded in its anthropological, liminal functions, and also in its trans-national potential. Such studies are presented in my dissertation as the alternatives that the field should follow if it is to escape the sometimes, sterile polemics that shaped the debate so far.

INDEX WORDS: East Central Europe, the aesthetic, modernism, cultural criticism, communism, postmodernism, revalidate, Kant, Nietzsche, Adorno.
THE FUNCTION OF THE AESTHETIC IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

by

LETITIA ILEANA GURAN

B.S., University of Bucharest, Romania, 1991

M.A., University of Georgia, 2001

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by

LETITIA ILEANA GURAN

Major Professor: Mihai I. Spariosu

Committee: Ronald Bogue
Thomas Cerbu
Betty-Jean Craige
Katarzyna Jerzak
Marcel Cornis-Pope

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
University of Georgia
May 2005
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I began preparing this study on the function of the aesthetic after the Second World War, I was aware that I was going against the grain of mainstream scholarship in literary criticism today. What drove me forward was both the fact that the category of the aesthetic has recently returned to the forefront of the North American debate in the humanities\(^1\) and the fact that in East Central Europe\(^2\), the polemic about its paradoxical role during communism was in full bloom.

Both instances suggested that the category of the aesthetic, far from being inconsequential in today’s world, was instead carrying an impressive potential for cultural and theoretical reconceptualization. On a more personal note, my interest in the theme was sparked by my upbringing and education in Romania, one of the East Central European countries, where the belief in the “resistance through the aesthetic” was quite popular until 1989. Understanding the extent to which this cultural stratagem was the result of a myth, a strategy of surviving communism, or a legacy of a much older tradition still active in Western cultures, had existential significance for me.

Since my topic demanded a comparison between the functions of the aesthetic in East Central Europe and the Western world, I first chose as a structuring principle of my approach a perspective focused on the semantic and functional variations of the concept. Later I realized that addressing the aesthetic today implied engaging in equal respects its well-known history and its controversial aspects that led to the post-World War II
opposition between traditional aesthetics and postmodernism, cultural studies, and postcolonial criticism.

The fact that the aesthetic continues to spark controversy is due not only to its multifarious profile of category/philosophical field/manner of reading and interpretation, but also to the fact that during the past six decades of polemics the concept has often been misconstrued by its opponents. Most misconceptions were the result of simplistic assimilation of the aesthetic with certain excessive formalist phases of modernist aestheticism, with the alleged failure of the critical project of modernist high art, and even with that of the “project of modernity.”³ Also for a while cultural studies identified the aesthetic with a mindset defined by a dominant preference for a high art-centered canon, while postcolonial criticism saw the same aesthetic as synonymous with the oppressive Western paradigm. Over the past decades, the aesthetic has become either un sujet passé or the representative of academic establishment, the enemy par excellence of any attempt to challenge the modern canon of high art, and the hypostatization of the Western-male-centered canon.

Given the fact that the field has been exiled from its central position in the humanities since postmodernism became a center stage cultural category, its revival in the mid-90s is somewhat surprising. The demographic changes together with the pressures for social reform and inclusion of minority students and faculty in the mainstream academia and job market during the mid-80s, led to further devaluation of the traditional aesthetic view. Seen as the quintessence of the formalist, apolitical, Euro-centric, male-chauvinistic, imperialist, and colonial mode of interpretation,⁴ the concept has recently been under permanent attack and in a state of crisis. If one compounds the
transformations of the faculty and student corpus with the replacement of the stylistic and imaginative/poetic model of literary interpretation with sociologically, historically, and politically-centered methods, the picture of the post World War II decline of “the aesthetic” in North America begins to take shape.

On a larger scale, it should come as no surprise that changes in the paradigm of knowledge and in the methods of self- and community-formation affected the field of the aesthetic as well. As a concept designating the doctrine of beauty, a certain philosophy and ideology of art,5 a mode of reading literary works and texts in general, or of shaping national and regional identities, “the aesthetic” has been involved in all major battles of modernity since the 18th century.

To get a good measure of the presence of “the aesthetic” in our lives, it is enough to execute an Internet search for this keyword. Apart from the impressive number of traditional volumes on the philosophy of art published since the 18th century, an even larger number of particular aesthetics overwhelm the researcher. From the aesthetics of art theory, education, architecture, baroque music, criticism, to those of ambivalence, built form, chaos, clothing, comics, communication, discontent, disease, disturbance, economics, environment, excess, failure, fantasy, film, grace, graffiti, horror, Indian folk-dance, Italian renaissance art, junk fiction, landscape. From the aesthetics of mimesis, modernism, murder, music, New Criticism, to those of organization, play, pornography, power, printing, rock, sport, static stairs, survival, Japanese lunchbox, natural environment, novel, Renaissance, total serialism, virtual poetry, psychobiology, politics, ideology, history, education, language and revolution. And the list could continue, given that there seems to be an “aesthetics” for every aspect and mode of our existence.
This extraordinary proliferation of the term proves that the field has grown at a rather fast pace since Baumgarten coined its name and launched the domain, and Kant granted it an autonomous status comparable to that of Reason and Morality. Its recent and dramatic redefinition, revamping, and recontextualization that generated a lot of new studies were in part the result of the pressures exerted by an increasingly globalized and interdisciplinary paradigm of knowledge and social interaction. At this point, any scholar interested in the history of the concept would encounter cross-disciplinary studies that attempt to explain it in terms of the history of ideas and civilization, rather than in the terms of history of arts or philosophy.

As a key concept in the debates aiming to define the sense of contentious terms like “modernity,” “high-modernism,” and “postmodernism,” the role of the humanities and literature within the current paradigm of knowledge, when not the profile of our age, the aesthetic is an amphibolus category, more prone to cause further theoretical debates than to act as a heuristic tool. Its polemic potential springs from its deep entrenchment with the “project of modernity,” but also from its function as a counterpart to the analytical philosophical discourse, as a challenger to the domination of the current model of knowledge acquisition through scientific methods, and from its role in nation and identity building during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Given its connections with the modern affirmation of the Western self and consequently with the emergence of modern philosophy, arts, psychology, and history, the aesthetic has become an inseparable ingredient of all these domains and by and large, of the European and American cultural identity as well.
To reevaluate the aesthetic today, taking into consideration all these connections, borders on the impossible. As such, the present study will limit itself to addressing the particular manner in which the cultural and ideological dimensions of the aesthetic relate to the literary material on which my approach is based. Instead of offering a strict (and, for that matter, impossible) definition, my study will consider a wide semantic area of the concept, unified by what Wittgenstein calls “family resemblance”. Instead of defining “the aesthetic” based on common properties of various phenomena, I prefer to call by this name those functions of the arts, the cognitive attitudes, the identity-related constructs, and methods of literary reading that relate to each other as objects belonging to the same semantic class.

The history of the functions of the aesthetic begins with those circumscribed by the original use of the Greek term aisthētikos, of sense perception that made Plato consider it inferior to philosophical contemplation and thus relegate it to a secondary, even dangerous status. It continues with Aristotle’s pragmatic treatise of rules of good composition and theory of cathartic experience that rescues the aesthetic for the first time from the insignificant role of mere sensory experience. It returns to a Platonic inferior position under the pressure of the medieval dichotomies of body and spirit, emotion and mind.

As an autonomous field, aesthetics comes into being in the 18th century with Baumgarten and Kant, and is later developed by the German and British Romantic Schools, mostly Schiller, Shaftesbury, and Coleridge. In the 19th century the profile of the area is investigated by Baudelaire, John Ruskin, Oscar Wilde, Hegel and Nietzsche. In the 20th century Martin Heidegger, T.S.Eliot, Ortega y Gasset, Ernst Junger, H.
Vaihinger, and Paul Feyerabend are among its theoreticians, but the list is, in fact, much longer.

Judging only by these early references, it becomes clear that due to its origin in the 18th century and its theoretical allegiances to German Idealism, aesthetics is a clear product and symptom of modernity. When we consider other characteristics of the age such as the fragmentation of the traditionally unified mindset, the separation of various disciplines into distinct, specific and autonomous fields, each with its own requirements and perspectives, the modern bearings of aesthetics become even more evident.¹⁰

Luc Ferry’s *Homo Aestheticus* provides a well balanced, non-revisionist cultural and philosophical contextualization of the concept by relating its development within Western cultures to that of modern subjectivity and thus to the development of Western modern consciousness and society. According to Ferry, the fact that such seminal thinkers as Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche have defined the modern subject through the category of the aesthetic explains the latter’s centrality in the humanistic discourse of 18th, 19th, and 20th century and justifies a non-revisionistic reading of its functions. By regarding the aesthetic as a transcultural mode of subjectification instead of a cognitive and existential category, Ferry manages to avoid the pitfalls of engaging in the polemic against high modernist aestheticism and the idealist tradition as undertaken by certain representatives of the Frankfurt School and postmodernism.

My position is that, while the insistence of such investigations on the political and ideological leanings of literature was the result of post-World War II analysts’ determination to disentangle the aesthetic from the Romantic, idealistic presuppositions underlying its beginnings, the consequent labeling of the aesthetic as a mere instrument
of modernization was a simplification. In view of its alleged support of dominant, Western, capitalist, male-chauvinist ideology, literature was called to account for manipulation, lack of political awareness, and guilty idealization.

Part of this change in perspective is due to the difference in the way post-World War II scholars situate themselves culturally. In contrast to ages when the subjects used to define themselves aesthetically, now they choose pragmatic and political values such as gender, race, ethnic group, and ideology (Ferry). Also being more aware of the role mass culture plays in everyday life, of the pervasive status of audio-visual rapid means of aesthetic gratification, contemporary readers have redefined the function of the aesthetic. In part, such a trajectory is also the result of the fact that, according to its critics, the category of the aesthetic has not managed to successfully “answer” the ethical questions as credited by the philosophy of 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Moreover, it allegedly did not manage to carry out the program of social reforms that it promised, and even worse, it let itself be associated with the extreme right movements of the 20th century.

Yet, as a counterpart to such positions, there are plenty of authors still maintaining that “art produces freedom” (Derrida, “Economimesis”), and that “In periods when justice has been taken away beautiful things hold steadily visible the manifest good of equality and balance” (Scarry 98). Based on the re-reading of the old theory of masterpiece and genius, in On Beauty and Being Just, Elaine Scarry reasserts some of the old claims of Romantic aesthetics. According to her, “The masterpiece calls into question societal values – and by doing so – it undermines the status quo,” and, moreover, “great art [is able] both to create and reflect community”(On Beauty 100). Such pronouncements could still be defended today if the critic of instrumental literature is
equally willing to accept that in the Western world, though not only, the realm of the aesthetic has been the window through which “the aspiration to political, social and economic equality has entered the world”\(^\text{11}\)(100).

The recent aesthetic experience of ex-communist East Central European countries provides an interesting complementary case that supports the theses about the critical and illuminating functions of literature, especially in conditions of totalitarianism. In the following chapters, my study will explore in detail this less-known potential, with the hope of offering an alternative perspective on post-1947 aesthetic modernism.

In North America and most Western European countries, the question of the possible role left for the aesthetic today remains of great moment, as well. The attempts to revitalize its profile for the past 10 years have dwelt on the possibility of reviving the aesthetic as an operational cultural concept, a philosophy of art, or simply as a literary category. Many scholars have wondered if the “death” of yet one more central category of modernity means that the contemporary world has ultimately parted paths with the modern age? Is the contemporary public destined to become, as Cornelius Castoriadis claims, “hyper-civilized but neo-illiterate” (\textit{Philosophy} 17)? And if so, would this direction be damaging for society? Is the rejection of aesthetic criteria in literary assessment the symptom of a deeper social transformation, based on the postmodern radical relativization of values? Is this alleged direction a confirmation of the trend towards the disappearance of many highly consequential [Western] values?

By answering these question positively, Ferry and many other scholars see the tendency of renouncing the aesthetic as a symptom of the general rejection of solid grounds in our society, and as such, as one of the major problems of the contemporary
world. No matter how many ethnic, gender-related, and ideological disputes an
individualist ethics may solve, the question remains: how can a society in which
individualism and extreme liberal values have replaced the collective ethics resist the
absolute fragmentation that follows? Isn’t the abandonment of a unifying paradigm,
within which aesthetics played its significant part, too high a price to pay?

Between the animality of the life cycle [says Ferry] and the virtuous action
through which we claim autonomy, there is an entire sphere of intermediary
activities, for which aesthetics provides the model, and which allow the individual
to make use of forms of expression with fruitful possibilities. (Homo 260)

Ruler over this kingdom of intermediary activities, the aesthetic mode of
understanding and interpretation should certainly not be sacrificed, unless we want the
world to lose some of its diversity, subtlety, and tolerance for difference. Instead of
rejecting it in the name of ever more inclusive democratic models, the critics should at
this point reclaim the domain that advances such values (Levine). Rennouncing it would
only lead only to “the complete disappearance of culture” as we know it (Ferry 261), and
as such to the radical departure from a tradition that gave birth not only to Western
domination and imperialism, but also to the first democratic, open societies.

On the larger scale of the history of civilization, the departure from the Western
humanist tradition, in which the aesthetic performed certain functions, might have been
triggered by the replacement of the ethics of merit and excellence by an ethics of
authenticity. Connected to and required by the contemporary individual, this ethics of
authenticity is largely responsible for the atomization of social life in contemporary
communities. The solution to this situation of decreased communication would be to
encourage the coexistence of the three above mentioned types of ethics. In a somewhat
optimistic manner, Ferry sees that process already underway today, when noting that
what we witness around us is a return to the principle of excellence within the democratic world alongside the meritocratic principle, which has never really left it.

But isn’t it too optimistic to claim that “authenticity is valued today only when paired with the courage of virtue and with the force of seduction, the signs of an authentic inner richness”? (Ferry 260). In my opinion, the mindframe in which the individual is regarded as “neither exclusively autonomous (as the modern morality claims) nor just as consumermeristic independent (as the principle of contemporary authenticity suggests)” (261) is far from being reached. Along Ferry’s most optimistic interpretation, my study pleads for a culture in which the personality of the individual is regarded in all its intermediary nuances, best manifested through aesthetic means.

If one were to adopt such a perspective as a premise, the idea of the aesthetic as a category capable of contribuing to a contemporary ethics would not seem far-fetched, but would in fact allow for a more equidistant approach.

**The Ethic Possibilities of Aesthetics**

In continuation of a rather long tradition, George Harpham maintains that for the Anglo-American world, the discourse of liberalism is the typical locus where the aesthetic functions as a pivotal support of freedom against “encroachments from metaphysics, theory, fixed values, and universals of all sorts” (Harpham 125). To support his argument he cites the observations of John Stuart Mill, who claims that

“[a]rt” seems to represent a principle of humane inexactitude or unpredictability, one that not only allows for a certain speculative or intuitive component in analysis, but, by extension, constitutes a warrant for a practice of self-determination unconstrained by the rules of rationality, utility, or social convention. (Harpham 125)
Despite its allegiance to a rationalist stance that places the realm of art in a secondary position when compared with rationality, utility and social convention, John Stuart Mill’s statement also elevates art to the status of general corrective of oppressive tendencies inherent in all these discourses. His position is rather symptomatic for an entire liberal tradition developed in the wake of Kant, which in recent decades has been constantly labeled as idealistic and of little social consequence. Yet, as Harpham insightfully adds, Mill’s conception of liberty as

  the cultivation of individual flourishing, of ‘originality’ or ‘eccentricity’ [...] informs projects as remote in spirit from Mill’s enlightened utilitarianism as Nietzsche’s self-forming Overman, the capitalist romance of the ‘self-made man,’ and the aestheticized *pratique de soi* advocated by Michel Foucault.” (125)

At the origin of the general attitude underlying these different conceptualizations of individual subjectivity, Harpham places Anthony Cascardi’s liberal interpretation of the Kantian theory of the aesthetic judgment. According to Cascardi, the aesthetic judgment, “while based on private sensations of pleasure and pain, also lays the foundation for the formation of a community through an extension to everyone of individual judgments of taste” (125). In postulating this, Cascardi attempts to preserve a dialectic relationship between the individual aesthetic experience and, what Kant calls, “the supersensible substrate of mankind” (125), that allows for the possibility of collective judgments.

Yet, while modern liberal thinkers still ground their reflections on theses that grant such shaping power to art, leftist scholars such as Herbert Marcuse, Hermann Bloch, and Frederic Jameson challenge the idea of modern freedom founded on the aesthetic. Terry Eagleton also distrusts the field “whenever it posits pure autonomous values” (*Aesthetic* 46), while “priz[ing] it when it insists upon a vital relation between
bodily or material life and the universal level on which questions of reason and justice are raised” (126). By contrast, Christopher Norris, another well-known leftist critic, acknowledges that “aesthetics has long functioned on the left as a secularized, redemptive hermeneutic, holding out the promise that society could overcome its contradictions and theory could transform itself into a discourse responsive to art’s always latent emancipatory potential” (“What’s Wrong” 17).

However, both the leftist and the liberal camp are today among the fiercest critics of the liberal tradition. Between charges of political manipulation coming from the analysts of the new left and the older accusations of “aestheticization of politics” advanced by Walter Benjamin (and other authors from the Frankfurt School), the aesthetic finds itself under crossfire. While the first camp denies it the privilege of disinterestedly assessing the world, and thus challenges its emancipatory potential, the latter camp cautions us about the “imaginary reconciliations [that the aesthetic might bring] to contradictions that remain unsolved in the real world” (Harpham 127). At this point, the field appears to be caught in an unsolvable and mutually determining relationship with ideology, which explains why, “despite the fact that the aesthetic seems to offer a structural resistance to ideology, it also seems naturally or inevitably to assume ideological form” (Harpham 138).

As such, concludes Harpham, “the aesthetic is already ideological [and] ideology is [also] already aesthetic” (138).

This statement might seem encompassing enough to define the ambiguous relationship between the two fields, especially during modernity. Yet, its suitability in describing the ideological biases of well-known works does not account for at least as
many texts that it misjudges by overemphasizing their ideological determination. This is the reason why more contextualization is required.

**Alternative Modern Aesthetics**

While modern humanities accepted the necessity of judgments of taste, conceived as subjective judgments, unsuitable for scientific analysis, and autonomous from both instrumental rationality and morality, the contemporary perspective has changed. The recent efforts to clarify the social and political status of issues like gender, race, and ethnicity have led to the replacement of the previously highly regarded field of autonomous aesthetic judgments with sociological, historical, and politically-oriented analyses.

The pressure to reform the field came mostly from these disciplines that recently redefined the priorities of modern humanities and also from the social and demographic transformations of the post World War II Western world. During the process, few critics realized that the decision to challenge the legitimacy of aesthetic judgments with respect to literary interpretation, though not only, ran the risk of imposing non-literary categories on literature and leaving other discourses with fewer opponents. The situation is clearer now, when witnessing what many observers call the taking over of the literary field by sociology, political analysis, market analysis, and history. Hence the necessity for a new aestheticism.

As John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas observe in the Introduction to their anthology of critical essays, *The New Aestheticism*, the 1980s and 1990s rise in relevance of critical theory has all but swept aesthetics from the map – and, some would argue – rightly so. Critical theory, of whatever variety, presented a fundamental challenge to the
image of the old style academic aesthete sitting in his (and it was always his) ivory tower and handing down judgments about the good and the bad in art and culture with a blissful disregard for the politics of his pronouncements. Notions such as aesthetic independence, artistic genius, the cultural and historical universality of a text or work, and the humanist assumption of art’s intrinsic spiritual value have been successfully challenged by successive investigations into the historical and political basis of art’s material production and transmission. (“Introduction” 2)

New Historicism, Cultural Criticism, Feminism, and Postcolonialism are all ramifications of this direction in studying literature, interested mostly in art’s material production and transmission and in its status as cultural phenomenon. The consequences of this change in focus due to pressure exerted by sociology, political sciences, history, gender-studies, and ethnic-studies have in many respects been beneficial. Due to them,

[theories of textuality, subjectivity, ideology, class, race and gender have shown such notions as universal human value to be without foundation, and even to act as repressive means safeguarding the beliefs and values of an elitist culture from challenge or transformation. The upshot of this series of interventions has been the rapid expansion of the canon, as well as a profound questioning of the very idea of canonicity. (Joughin and Malpas 1)

While revising and expanding the canon are operations periodically undertaken by critics, the fact that at this point the revision has become so radical that it threatens to annihilate “the very idea of canonicity” (3) points out that the debate has reached an entirely different level. Coupled with the consequences of media explosion in the past two decades and the necessarily different conditions of reading literature, this radical form of criticism provokes the questioning and the revising of the status of literature itself in contemporary society.

Alternative Perspectives: East Central Europe

The situation in East Central Europe has been quite different. The post-Yalta years brought the dominance of the communist, totalitarian regimes in the region and the
subsequent curtailment of civil and political rights. The 1950s were the worst years of political persecution with thousands of arrests, forced collectivization of agriculture, and total suppression of freedom. During the 1960s, the ideological thaw allowed public discourse to regain some of its dialogic nature, and literature took full advantage of this freedom. The period was dominated by the efforts of a new generation of authors to impose a discourse of normality through reconnection with the post-World War I modernist tradition.

The result was that instead of a severe criticism of the project of modernity/high modernism, East Central European writers saw in the return to the rhetoric of aesthetic modernism a symbolic reconnection to the values of democratic modernity. By extension, the neo-modernist aesthetics was regarded both as a means to resist the requirements of communist propaganda and as an implicit mode of opposing totalitarianism. This somewhat unconditional allegiance can also be explained by the fact that the themes of anti-fascist and anti-modernist criticism were monopolized and intensely used by the communist propaganda machine, thus being rendered unpalatable for the critical intellectuals.

Due to the opposite political trajectory after World War II, East Central Europe and the Western cultures found themselves worlds apart after the fall of the Iron Curtain, when assessing the ideological underpinnings of modern tradition. While in the Western world their critique was initiated in the 1950s and has been largely undertaken by 1989, the East Central European thinkers have generally maintained allegiance to some of the central “myths” of modernism and to the basic democratic/liberal values of modernity.
After the fall of communism, some, mostly younger East Central European analysts ventured to undermine the formerly indisputable theses concerning the critical role of art during 1947-1989, known under the syntagm of the “resistance through the aesthetic.” Coupled with the attempts to renew the pre-1989 poetics and to challenge and redesign the canon, these positions of the younger generation of critics have been in the avant-garde of the post-1989 liberalization of public discourse, inasmuch as they sought to question any hierarchies and presuppositions taken for granted. Yet, for all their progressive outlook, they were also at risk of conflating under concepts borrowed from the Western European and American criticism many aspects of the aesthetic that were different in the East Central European experience.

Based on their local experiences with modernist aesthetic and societal modernization, literatures from this region could provide their own interpretation of the critical potential of high modernist art. In the light of its adversarial function against the communist totalitarian regimes, the neo-modernist experience of these cultures could lead to a revamping and reassessment of the prevailing picture of modernism. Yet, since East Central Europe itself is in the process of redesigning its profile and identity in accordance to the demands of the globalizing world that it gradually becomes part of, the East Central European reassessment of modernity has to take place with full awareness of the non-Western perspectives on the modernist phenomenon. The wider, global theoretical frame comes very timely for East Central Europeans. It serves them in their attempt to avoid the traditional mimetic perspective on modernity and allows them to emphasize their own specific contribution to and perspectives on the age.
Based on these premises, my study begins with the attempt to introduce East Central Europe with its post-1945 communist experience of modernity and of the aesthetic in the current aesthetic debate. The second chapter of my dissertation explores the regional particularities of this modernist aesthetics, seen as counterparts of the post-World War II Western perspective on high modernism.

The third chapter attempts to revamp certain traits of the project of modernity based on the positive, anticommunist role played by utopian neo-modernism between 1945-1989. A separate part of the chapter is reserved to analysing the role of the oppositional intellectuals who resisted totalitarian regimes in an est-ethic manner.

Similarly to non-Western contemporary studies that bring to light facets and functions of modernity as experienced by ‘the subaltern,’ my view of East Central European neo-modernist aesthetic experience intends to explore its alternative, non-Western profile. My premise is that when contextualized within a cross-cultural frame of reference, the East Central European utopian brand of the aesthetic could re-launch the debate around its positive potential. Although post-World War II Western history of the aesthetic is the constant background of my dissertation, in Chapter 4 I explore the post-1947 polemics surrounding the concept in the United States. This way, I hope to accomplish a truly comparative, crosscultural redefinition of the category.

The Conclusion develops the blueprint of a new, more encompassing aesthetic model, steeped equally in the experience of the Western world and of the East Central European region and aware of both its limitations and of its globalizing potential. In the end, my hope is that my study will enrich the general perspective not only on the
aesthetic, but also on the related topics of modernity, postmodernity, and the role of Western culture in today’s globalizing culture.

**Faces of New Aestheticism; Reasons for Preserving the Aesthetic**

In sketching the profile of what I call a new aesthetics, I will make use of insights derived from Wolfgang Iser, Harold Bloom, Theodore Adorno, Luc Ferry, and many of the books already discussed in the chapters of my study. Such a model envisages literature and its social role from an anthropological, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective, able to integrate both the Western and the non-Western traditions. My goal is to suggest an aesthetics able to satisfy the needs of representation of various cultural and ethnic groups and address all aspects of contemporary culture, the popular one included. The ultimate goal of this study is to assess “the aesthetic” once more, this time from the perspective of an inclusive enough model of interpretation capable of bypassing the ideological and cultural biases projected on the topic in the past decades. In the end I hope to demonstrate that there are still enough reasons to preserve the aesthetic as a meaningful category of contemporary experience and to initiate the project of a global aesthetics.

**Endnotes:**

of Beauty, Alvin Kernan’s The Death of Literature, John Ellis’ Literature Lost, and Richard Rorty with Achieving for Our Country. All these add to Marjorie Perloff’s “infamous” article published in The Chronicle Of Higher Education on December, 4, 1998, “In Defense of the Poetry: Put the Literature Back into Literary Studies” and Scott Heller’s “Wearing of Cultural Studies, Some Scholars Rediscover Beauty.”

Here and from now on I use East Central Europe in the sense given by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer in the recent History of the Literary Cultures in East Central Europe. More than a geographical area, this new “more comprehensive and less exclusionary term could successfully replace those of Mitteluropa, Central Europe, or the Balkans, previously employed to define “the area from the Baltic countries through Central Europe to the Balkans,” (History 6). Its unifying feature is “the struggles of its peoples against the German and the Russian hegemonic threats.” Cornis-Pope’s and Neubauer’s choice of the term follows Jenő Szűcs’s 1983 article (see below), which they consider the most ambitious and successful attempt to define the region historically until now. In his piece, Szűcs “wants to peel off an East-Central European segment from the East, admitting that it fell behind the West in developing its democratic traditions but claiming that it is, nevertheless, more democratic than the Europe east of it”(6). As Szűcs makes clear “East Central Europe remains a region of Western Europe, though the inclusion of “East” in its name suggests that modification of the structure of the Western types of models and norms could be detected in almost everything” (“The Three Historical Regions of Europe. An Outline,” 156). The text translated by Julianna Prati was published in Acta Historica Academiae Scientarium Hungaricae 29/2-4 (1983): 131-84.

See the polemic between Habermas and Lyotard—mainly Lyotard ‘s The Postmodern Condition and Habermas’ “Modernity—an Incomplete Project.”

As Alvin Kernan points out in “Change in the Humanities and Higher Education”, “Socially in the later 20th century, the humanities along with some of the “softer” social sciences like anthropology and sociology, have been the battlefields of an extended Kulturkampf. These subjects have proven extremely sensitive to pressures for social change in the society at large, to the wave of populist democracy, to technological changes in communication, to relativistic epistemologies, to demands for increased tolerance, and to various social causes, such as black studies, feminism and gay rights. Every liberal case—from freedom of speech and the Vietnam War to anticolonialism and the nonreferentiality of language—has fought bitter and clamorous battles in these subjects” (Change 3-4). This conclusion is supported by further studies that discuss these phenomena in terms of exact figures, graphs, and percentages. Thus, with respect to immigration patterns, Lynn Hunt notes that between 1931 and 1960, Europeans made up 58% of the immigrants to the U.S., Canadians 21%, Latin Americans 15%, and Asians only 5%. Between 1980 and 1984, in contrast, Europeans made up only 12% of the immigrants and Canadians just 2%, while Latin Americans comprised 35% and Asians 48%” (Democratization 20). These changes and the social pressures caused in time a considerable adjustment in the faculty body in the humanities. As Lynn remarks, “in 1989 38.6 % of the new hires were women (compared to 24.4 % of the current faculty) and 13.8% were minorities (compared to 9.8% of the current faculty). The figures for 1972 were much lower for women: 24.1% and 8.3% for minorities” (Democratization 24). The situation is quite different with minority students, who preferred sciences to the humanities. Lynn's explanation is that such students have probably been “especially alert to the decline in status of the humanities or that they have felt that the humanities are inherently more elitist and white in subject matter because the humanities are more closely tied to Western culture than the social and natural sciences” (Democratization 20).

The aesthetic theory I allude to is the one developed by and in the footsteps of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Adorno

With respect to language, Wittgenstein notes: Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, -- but they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all 'language.' (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Macmillan, 2nd edition, 1958), p. 39 [77].)

Other related words are “aisthēta,” “perceivable things,” and “aisthanesthai,” “to perceive.”

According to Geoffrey Galt Harpham’s “Aesthetics and the Fundamentals of Modernity” in George Levine(ed): *Aesthetics and Ideology*: “No concept is more fundamental to modernity than the aesthetic, that radiant globe of material objects and attitudes ideally independent of politics, rationality, economics, desire, religion, or ethics. For as Shaftesbury, Kant, Alexander Baumgarten, Friedrich Schiller, and their successors have elaborated it, the aesthetic gathers into itself and focuses norms and notions crucial to the self description of an enlightened culture. These include the privilege of disinterested assessment; the autonomy of the artifact from historical, social or economic forces; the uncoerced liberty of the judging subject; the universalizability of subjective responses; the human capacity to imagine and create objects, and, indeed a “world”, that are harmonious and whole; and even what might be called the destiny of freedom to actualize itself in the world (Harpham, 124)

As I have pointed out earlier, this strong association has not always been beneficial for the field. For the past fifty years, being tied with the core of modernity has placed the aesthetic in the middle of all controversies surrounding the project of the age. Moreover, as a representative manifestation of modern mindset and values, the field has found itself at the center of most attempts challenging the domination of the Western paradigm. Many times, in order to demystify modernity, scholars directed their arrows at aesthetic modernism as well, and today the student who seeks to regard the aesthetic sans ira et studio has to disentangle it first from the prejudicial associations with the so-called capitalist, imperialist, totalitarian modernity.

To be exact, Scarry says that “the aspiration to political, social and economic equality has entered the world in the beauty loving treatises of classical and Christian periods” (*On Beauty* 100).

In defining these three models of Western ethics Ferry begins by noting the sharp difference between the worldviews underlying Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. While the ancient world conducted itself according to the natural law, the modern world was guided by the principle of individual autonomy. Their corresponding ethics were based on excellence and merit. The first one started from the presupposition that “one can never raise above one’s nature” and thus, attaining perfection or excellence meant “ bringing into reality for each being that which constitutes its nature and thereby indicates its function” (Ferry 251). For the modern world, in which the idea of natural teleology lost its meaning, the grounding of morality has to be found in the limits that the subject himself/herself sets for his/her autonomy. Merit is a virtue resulting from the struggle against one’s own interest and egoism. The idea of liberty is thus defined as “the power to resist the nature within us, therefore as the capacity to act disinterestedly” (Ferry 255). The contemporary ethics of authenticity demands that one “should arrive at the expression of one’s personality, at the development and opening of the self” (Ferry 257). The unavoidable narcissism of the command “be yourself” is compensated by the increased tolerance and respect for the Other. The downfall of this ethic is that by instituting “the right to difference,” it also leads to cultural relativism and “differentialist” antiracism. (Ferry 258).

According to Hannah Arendt’s comments in *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. In this text set to clarify the genealogy of the hierarchy between philosophy and politics based on the superiority of *bios theoretikos* over *zoon politikon*, Arendt states that critical thought as a form of “thinking correctly” is an ethical act (37). Her argument follows Socrates axiom of non-contradiction according to which it is better to be at odds with multitudes because you think correctly, than to be at odds with yourself and contradict
yourself. In Kant, ethics is also based on a thought process relying on the rule: “act so that the maxim of your action can be willed by you to become a general law, a law to which you yourself would be subject” (37). In Arendt’s interpretation, critical thought performs an anti-totalitarian function, but the necessary condition is its presence in the agora. Answering Jaspers who said that Truth is what I can communicate, Arendt maintains that “Freedom is the ability to make public use of one’s reason at every point” (39). The inherent anti-totalitarian ability of critical thought is, thus conditioned by its participation in the public discourse. Only to the extent in which the work of art produces in its readers thoughts that challenge and enrich the readers’ reflexive abilities can art function as the highest form of Revolution and thus best fulfill its ethical role of social enlightenment. This argument in more or less explicit formulations was often employed by East Central European writers and is at the very foundation of the theory of the “resistance through the aesthetic.”


15 This tendency was supposed to synchronize with the western postmodern expectations and also to seal the liberation from the former communist, political constraints.


17 I use the term here in the sense given by Andrei Cornea in De la Şcoala din Atena la Şcoala de la Păltiniş. (Bucureşti: Editura Humanitas, 2004) where he proposes a new mode of analyzing utopia. His premise is that the traditional opposition between “realist” and “utopian” is not sufficiently relevant theoretically and proposes instead another oppositional binom: topic/atopic. According to this new system of reference, Andrei Cornea advances the hypothesis that the best way to determine whether somebody’s thinking is atopic (utopian) or not is to apply him/her the self-inclusion test. If the author who proposes a better world does not include herself/himself in it, it means that this project cannot be credible, irrespective of how “realistic” it may seem. By contrast, if the author participates in the world he proposes as utopian/atopic, his “utopia” is credible. Cornea applies this test to Plato versus Aristotle, Morus versus Machiavelli, Fourier, Owen versus Marx and also Constantin Noica and his Păltiniş School. In the light of this theory, Noica’s cultural utopia is evaluated as a credible project. The Păltiniş School as a model of intellectual dedication inspired an entire generation of intellectuals and represents the philosophical blueprint of the doctrine of "resistance through culture." The popularity of The Paltinis Diary, in which Gabriel Liiceanu describes Noica’s paideic model of surviving and fulfilling one’s destiny through culture is the best example of how influential Noica’s theory really was. In the following chapters I will make reference both to Liiceanu’s book and to the Romanian utopian modernism.

18 Among the perspectives that I intend to discuss closely, the one advance by Joughin and Malpas, and definitory for the entire post-Kantian tradition holds a central part. According to it, the aesthetic experience is “tied to actuality in ways that cannot be reduced to the empirical, [and, as such,] it allows for the creation of ‘possible worlds’ as well as for critical experimentation. In a teaching situation […] a reconceptualization of the aesthetic means making the most of an approach to ‘education,’ which relies on an openness to alterity, and developing a pedagogy that refuses to be prescribed by conventional or a priori categories” (Joughin and Malpas 2).
CHAPTER 2

THE AESTHETIC DOCTRINE IN EAST CENTRAL EUROPE

Why is it that when I read the works of Andrzej Kuśniewicz, a Pole born in 1904, or Peter Esterhászy, a Hungarian born in 1950, I find something in the way they put things that draws them close to me, a Central European poetics if you will? What is the tone, the vibration that situates a work within that magnetic field? Above all, the inherent presence of culture: the form of allusion, reminiscence or reference to the whole European heritage, a consciousness of the work that does not destroy its spontaneity, a careful balance between ironic pathos and lyrical flight. Not much. Everything
(Danilo Kiš – “Variations on the Theme of Central Europe”)

The passage from Danilo Kiš’s “Reflections” presents the reader with a claim familiar to many East Central Europeans: that they belong to the large European family due to the inherent presence of culture in their lives. Yet, what is the exact meaning of the term “culture,” especially when invoked with such urgency? Obviously, it implies a common heritage, first of Central Europeans who can recognize each other by a certain style and tone of their writings, but more importantly a common heritage of Europeans in general. Indeed, so little and still so much; in fact, as Kiš says, “everything.”

The emotional value of such loyalty notwithstanding, can one today take Kiš’s words at face value? Or is it precisely their emotional and somewhat idealistic tone that makes them the perfect target of post-communist demystification? After all, what justifies the extraordinary emotional emphasis placed on culture, Central Europe, and the aesthetic as denominators of a common identity?

East Central European studies conducted during the past fifteen years provide quite elaborate answers and explanations to most of these rhetorical questions by exploring not only the historical facts, but also the meta-discourses associated with
concepts like *culture, intellectuals*, and *Central Europe*. It is the goal of this chapter to follow the sociological, historical, political, and aesthetic implications of these terms as they reflect the ways in which modern, postmodern, and recently postcolonial paradigms have successively encoded them supra-semantically as identity concepts or, conversely, decoded them as myths.

Most recent analyses of the region insist on the specificity of East Central European aesthetic modernism that shaped, especially after the communist occupation, the identity-constructions of the region. This methodological choice is motivated by the different ideological paths and opposite socio-political development of east Central Europe and the Western world. While after World War II, the trajectory of the Western countries has been from modernism to postmodernism, postcolonialism and recently global models, East Central Europe has had its own line and pace of evolution. To understand why in the 1960s this part of Europe chose to revive a moderate and ethical version of prewar modernism, why it abandoned the avant-garde experiments and did not take the “postmodern path” adopted by the West, one needs to study in detail the historical determination of the East Central European world at the time. As long as the postwar historical reality of the region was not the expected liberation and revival of free society, but Soviet occupation, constant prison-threats, brain-washing, and censorship, the political and largely cultural results could not be identical to their Western counterparts. This particular context is among the main reasons for the fascination of the area with *culture, the aesthetic*, and *modernity*. To counterbalance the exclusive ideological emphasis of the Western interpretations of these concepts, many East Central
European scholars suggested instead local manners of interpreting the functions of aesthetic modernism in the region.

**Identity Strategies for Hard Times**

The premise of this chapter is that communist impositions generated a specific mindset in which radical rejection of ideological indoctrination preceded, followed, and also coexisted with self-deceit, self-justification, and compliance with the system. Neither the subjects of the communist experiment who genuinely believed in the ideals of social justice and transformation advanced by Marxist revolutions, nor those who chose symbolic, aesthetic means to confront the fallacious claims could in the end overcome communist brain-washing. Consequently, their accounts regarding the role of culture in the totalitarian system have to be considered with caution and discussed in close relation to the context that generated them.

Apart from these categories of subjects, there were also a few individuals who managed to escape official manipulation by fighting it constantly or by “shedding” its spell soon after their countries were occupied by the Soviet army. Their understanding of the function of *culture* and *the aesthetic* is crucial for a proper comprehension of both these multi-faceted phenomena, especially since over the decades of communist occupation many writers veered toward an aestheticization of life as a means of escaping a trivial and brutal everyday reality. By comparing and contrasting the interpretations these three distinct groups gave to the concepts, one can better understand the difference between the ethical and civic potential of modernist aesthetics, – undertaken by the third camp, and the mere aestheticization of life, – chosen by the second one.
The mystification resulting from conflating the two positions is responsible for
the lack of an adequate image of East Central European aesthetic experience during
communism. Similar mystifications, deeply symptomatic of people’s need for
compensatory identity-strategies – and in opposition to those employed by communist
propaganda – can be observed in the case of other identity concepts such as Central
Europe, modernity, postmodernity, and nation.

Before delving into the relationships developed during forty-five years of
communist rule by concepts such as culture, the aesthetic doctrine, and modernity, we
should note that for all the countries forcefully severed from what they considered to be a
common European tradition, culture was the only openly invoked connection with their
stolen past. Consequently, in post 1945 East Central Europe, culture took over the hard
task of trying to alleviate the forced separation, and to recreate at least at the level of
imagination, the phantasm of a still unified and continuous modern European civilization.
The reference to a common culture and tradition was also meant to bridge the constantly
emerging gaps between Eastern and Western Europe and to re-create new connections
based on a shared past.

Milan Kundera starts his famous 1984 essay, “The Tragedy of Central Europe”
with this double-edged observation. When calling the attention of the Westerners to the
twofold tragedy of Central (and for that matter Eastern) Europe, the Czech writer
acknowledges the political catastrophe of post-1945, but insists more on the cultural one.
To clarify this latter aspect, which might have perplexed the 1984 Western reader of his
essay, Kundera insists on the symbolic role of culture in the area.

The identity of a people and of a civilization is reflected in the creations of its
spirit, in what we call “culture.” The more threatened the existence of a people’s
identity, the more intense and important its cultural life becomes. So much so that at a certain point its “culture” might become the living value defining that people. (my translation—“Tragedy” 222)

Embedded in this characterization of Central Europe as a cultural space is a passionate declaration of allegiance to Western values and civilization and a cry for help directed to the West in the hope of preserving this fragile bond. Unfortunately the much sought-after Western world turned a blind eye to the historical and cultural predicament of Central Europe, failing to acknowledge its connection with the wider European region. As Kundera sees it, the tragedy stems precisely from this lack of reciprocal recognition, from the increasing gap of communication, and the progressive drifting of the East Central European side toward a civilization (the more autocratic Russian model) with which it had very little, if anything, in common.

Far from regarding Central/Middle/Eastern Europe as part of the “kidnapped, deported West,” Europe “barely noticed the disappearance of its Central part,” and moreover chose a line of development that estranged it even further from the values regarded as fundamental and shared before World War II. This second trahison of the West consists in its abandonment of the “age of culture” for the age of “late capitalism.”

Part of a common history during which “European humanity used to understand, define and identify itself through it,” culture was “the expression of supreme values, the binding concept of European unity, especially after the Medieval God left the scene” (“Tragedy” 231). With the disappearance of this common denominator, says Kundera, Central Europeans have fewer means of reconnecting themselves with the European family.
Judged by its political system, Central Europe belongs to the East; according to its cultural history, to the West. Yet, due to the fact that Europe itself is going through a process of losing its own cultural identity, the only thing it perceives in Central Europe is an alien political regime. In other words, the only thing Europe sees in Central Europe is Eastern Europe (“Tragedy” 235).

More than a severe criticism of the way Western Europe chose to evolve (as if historical evolution were ever an exclusive matter of choice) the above passage draws attention to what Kundera considers the real tragedy of European civilization. By giving in to the pressures of the new times, the “free and civilized” world abandons the “age of culture” without regrets and even without noticing. The principle of identity, which unified and defined the continent during its modernity, is thus lost, and in the same move modernity itself seems to be abandoned, irrespective of its fundamental contribution to democracy. Given these developments, Central Europe is forced to resist the aggression not only of its bigger neighbor, Russia, but also of the more subtle and relentless pressure of the times which, in leaving the age of culture behind, deprive democracy of an important ally (“Tragedy” 235). Without many choices of political action in the postwar world and having to defend their identity and resist brainwashing, Central Europeans rediscovered the potential of culture to symbolically engender and preserve freedom.

The choice of the region to “stay with the past,” to continue to live in the age of culture, and cling to the modern tradition was the next best thing to political action and also a preparation for it. Under circumstances that prevented the normal exercise of freedom of mind and expression or of any other democratic rights, culture/literature
began to function as repository, and to a certain extent, symbolic domain of manifestation of these values.

Apart from this positive, utopian function, few can deny that culture/literature also played a rather ambivalent role during communism in conditions of censorship, self-censorship, and manipulative propaganda. Although many intellectuals defended and still defend the inspirational role of culture during communism, there have been at least as many who warned about the fallacies of idealization and self-illusion underscoring such a perspective.

Adam Michnik and Miklós Haraszti are examples of such contrasting attitudes. For instance, at the 1990 “Budapest Roundtable,” Michnik observes: “Literature in our sphere functioned in an environment characterized by a lack of civic institutions, a lack of normal intellectual and scientific reflection. It therefore had to be all those things at once” (“Budapest Roundtable” 23). Moreover, literature “had to take the place of sociological inquiries to record the truth about daily life. It had to take the place of political debate and function not unlike a nonexistent parliament. Finally it had to take the place of civil education and create the moral model of a citizen who wants to live in truth amidst lies and who wants to be free amidst bondage” (23).

In its emphasis on the role played by certain literary magazines in supporting the most basic values of a normal, decent life, Michnik’s summary is entirely correct and in agreement with the opinion of many other writers, Kundera included. The latter insists that literary journals were instrumental in fostering civic conscience and preparing the mindset for the Prague Spring and other revolutionary movements. For a Western audience, the remarkable and at the same time paradoxical fact must be that, despite their
clear political outcome, the articles published in magazines like the “Literary Journal”
during communism had only a cultural content. These texts consisted of “long art and
book reviews, articles on general topics of sociology, history and politics” (“Tragedy”
234) that had little to do with the actual issues of communist Central European world.
The extraordinary effect of these articles came from the fact that they had a high
intellectual standard and a potential to engender critical thinking, being authored by
writers, philosophers, and sociologists, not journalists. Just as in Czechoslovakia, in
Poland, Romania, and Hungary, such literary magazines ended up being influential
creators of alternative opinion that, in time, seriously undermined the authority of the
monological discourse of the East Central European communist parties.

The phenomenon is even more surprising, given the actual marginal status of such
literary magazines. Most of them were published in editions no larger than 10,000 to
40,000 for countries of 22 million people, and yet, “I do not know of any other European
weekly magazine in our century to have played such an important role, or to have played
it so well,” notes Kundera (“Tragedy” 234).

Despite all of these testimonials, there are writers who claim that, like many other
texts published with the mandatory official approval, such magazines were most likely
also victims of ideological compromises and negotiations with the communist censorship.
Miklós Haraszti, in The Velvet Prison. Artists under State Socialism (1983), and György
Konrád and Iván Szelényi, in “Intellectuals as a Class,” are among those who expose the
fallacies of the intelligentsia and the mystique surrounding the East Central European
idea of “culture” in Marxist societies.
Haraszti begins from the premise that “art and power are not natural enemies” (Velvet 12) to further demolish the common belief that “freedom is a necessary condition to art: that anything that severs art from its anti-authoritarian essence will kill it; that the true artist is an individual who is independent, that art is false unless it is autonomous; that art is the graveyard of prejudice; it is permanent revolution” (13). After all, he notes, only “since mid 19th century has art been seen as synonymous with anti-totalitarianism” (14), and since then many things have changed, including the increasing need of the artist to actually perform an acknowledged role in society. With art losing more and more of its status and influence, it was ultimately “politics that provided the artist with a public role, an ethos of service, as the only possible path to art’s realization, with the satisfaction of being truly needed” (31). Paradoxically, the more revolutionary and committed the artist, the easier he fell prey to communization. It was such artists, says Haraszti, that created the aesthetic conditions for their later assimilation: “Today’s disciplinarians of art did not materialize out of thin air. The radical artists of bourgeois crisis of individualism nurtured the latent desires that later assured support for the nationalization of culture. Their fate was to preside over their own domestication” (35).

Lured by the official promises of a public role, which would have led to the fulfillment of a dearly held modern dream – to realize art – “the political [communist] artist exchanged his wizard’s robe for the lab coat of the social engineer”(30). The result was the instrumentalization of art at the very moment when it made more pompous claims of autonomy.

Distrustful of the inherent critical function of modernist art, Haraszti states: “Autonomous art has neither the inclination nor the strength to protect itself. It was
dislocated by the ceaseless growth of state monopoly.”(15) Caught in their self-
mystifying perspective about the inherently critical role of their art, the so-called
committed writers behaved like “dignitaries of the Middle Ages. [Like those who]
believed their faith to be the same as that of the Crucified, [these artists] considered
themselves, even as state employees, to be apostles of freedom”(Velvet 17).

Haraszti’s severe and ironic condemnation of all those who, for the sake of being
published, accepted the servitudes of censorship and self-censorship calls for a rather
clear-cut hierarchization of literary culture produced during communism. Having his own
book published in samizdat⁹—and thus officially banned– his position with regard to
official publication and the official role of literature is undoubtedly coherent. Yet, should
one simply dismiss all literature that in order to enter the public domain also got the
approval of official censors? Milan Kundera’s answer is definitely “no,” as he maintains
that the role of culture as a whole – not only of that published in samizdat – was

In Central Europe, the revolts were not stimulated by newspapers, TV and radio,
that is, by the media. They were prepared, shaped and brought into being by
novels, poetry, theater, cinema, historiography, literary magazines, popular
comedies, cabarets, and philosophical discussions, which is to say, by culture.
(my translation, “Tragedy” 233)

Convincing as it may sound, Kundera’s position was considered quite problematic
by writers like Havel, who, very much like Haraszti, Konrád, and Szelényi thought that
literature by itself could not perform the task of defending civil rights and fostering
political change. This idea was shared by other dissident writers such as the Romans
Paul Goma and Dorin Tudoran, who maintained that “resisting communist indoctrination
through culture was a good tactic up to a certain point; but from then on, making just
culture led to the atrophy of one’s civic feelings” (my translation, Identitate în ruptură 146).

The ambivalent relationships culture entertains with an oppressive ideology, which allows for a limited autonomy only within a carefully guarded and enclosed world through censorship and self-censorship, have become self-evident after 1989. In the light of studies about the manipulative nature of any act of freedom “blessed by the police,” literary courage reveals its ambivalent functions.

In the case of the books satisfied with telling half of the truth when they criticized the system, their actual function was to relieve the potential tension built between the readers and the communist system, and thus, implicitly quench the latter’s outrage. Paradoxically, in the act of reading and writing such books, their authors and the public, both potential agents of revolt and change, ended up sharing the feeling that they had already opposed the totalitarian system, even if only at a symbolic level. As a result, very rarely did such “complacent” literature radicalize its authors and its receivers.

Conversely, there is no doubt that a literature that addresses issues of great public concern might help their clarification and, in totalitarian societies that forbid other forms of critical discourse, might take on the functions of sociology, philosophy, history, and political analysis. Still, unless such literary works unveil hidden historical truths that reveal the very nature of the totalitarian system – like Solzhenitsyn’s Gulag Archipelago – such books can hardly claim equal status with those that take upon themselves the heroic task of telling “all the truth,” not just the “aesthetic” one.

Literature’s rather limited threatening potential for former communist rulers is evident in the fact that no writer was sent to prison on account of his/her literary works
alone. In fact, in the cases of most dissident writers, literature functioned as a step toward more radical attitudes of “seeking and telling the truth,” such as open civic and political protests. Havel, Goma, Tudoran, and many others doubled their revelatory, critical literature – mostly published abroad and in samizdat – with open letters, demonstrations, and the founding of civic organizations such as Charter 77. These later or simultaneous public acts marked a radicalization of their critical position, and ultimately its transposition to the level of reality, as realization.

The self-deceiving belief of the writers who thought they could resist ideologization by simply “doing their job well” is evident now when the insidious mechanisms of self-censorship and self-victimization have been openly exposed and analyzed. Without denying such writers’ role in challenging the official narrative and eventually supporting a change of mentality, we may note that their privileged position of public voices still allowed a certain degree of freedom functioned as a double-edged sword. Many times, these authors’ relative freedom of speech – which translated into the permission to make veiled suggestions and literary allegories – gave them the false impression of efficiently resisting communist brainwashing when, in fact, they were playing the very role of stress-releasing devices.

As many writers note, a certain degree of dissidence and criticism was always tolerated at the meetings of the Writers’ Unions, mostly as a tactic to keep the protests within the meeting walls of the literary organizations and prevent them from permeating discourses with a wider public audience, literature included. Part of an elaborate system of symbolic substitutions functioning both for the oppressors and the oppressed, parabolic critical literature was tolerated together with other forms of inconsequential critical
discourses as means to prevent the development of actual forms of public protesting. The communist party must have been aware that literary and philosophical circles such as the Hungarian “Petőfi Circle,” the Czech “Patočka Seminars,” and the Yugoslav “Korčula Summer School,” had the potential of evolving into civil rights debate groups and, later, into public protests such as those in Hungary in 1956, Yugoslavia in 1968, and Czechoslovakia in 1977.

When kept under control and allowed to manifest only as individual protests, as in Romania, critical discourses ended up relegated mostly to literature, where they took up the symbolic function of opposition to the satisfaction of both sides. The writers were happy to be allowed to write abstract and parabolic literature and thus evade everyday issues, while the public was satisfied to relegate its frustrations to characters who seemed to have gotten a clear glimpse of the unspeakable societal truths. For its side, the communist party was also happy to relieve social tension by transferring the burden of unveiling the truth about East Central European communist societies to art.

Under such circumstances, it is quite difficult to pass judgment on East Central European literature as a whole. Structurally altered by the conditions in which it was forced to function, a great part of it was simply complacent with the general censoring edicts, even when it seemed to escape or bypass them. As Eugen Negrici observes in *Literatura româna sub communism* (Romanian Literature under Communism), today’s critic cannot but divide this literature into at least three categories: dissident, tolerated/complacent, and subservient/instrumentalized.

The advantage of this tripartite categorization is that it addresses all types of literature produced under communism with equal seriousness. Apart from discussing the
clearer cases of the literary texts covering the ends of the spectrum, it also endorses the claim that once the wall of absolute Stalinist silence was broken, some liberal literary works started providing partial information about the recent, traumatic past of East Central Europe. In the long run, this situation gave rise to the paradoxical situation of the same works being responsible for creating both a space of debate and dissent and an acceptable terrain of negotiation between the writer/public and the censors. Romanian authors such as Marin Preda, Augustin Buzura, and George Balaita are interesting cases in this sense, though the number of those “involved” in this game with censorship and self-censorship is much larger. The ambivalent position of such writers became evident mostly after 1989, when researchers could openly compare their texts with dissident works and also discuss these authors’ equivocal civic positions.

Such was mostly the case with those writers who accepted official positions in the communist hierarchy and authored political newspaper articles in support of the communist party while also producing critical literature. Their ambiguous position, called by their critics, “writing with two kinds of ink,” one for the literary work meant to define their profile in the Pantheon, and one for the everyday requirements of communist life, made many readers question the honest allegiance of these writers to the democratic values. After 1989 when such reservations could be made public, they also contributed to the partial discredit of these writers’ works.

Taking into account all these circumstances, it is necessary to fully clarify the meanings associated with the concept of culture when employed by writers with such different takes on it, such as Kundera, Michnik, Konrad, and Haraszti. After all, how could the same culture have been both a means of dissent, liberation, and critical thinking
and a self-deceiving, compromising, and indirect ideological instrument of communist power?

To bring some clarification to the matter, many post-communist studies and contemporary histories of literature begin by insisting on the schizophrenic nature of the relationship writers had with the censoring authorities. They also acknowledge quite early Czeslaw Milosz’s intuition regarding the overarching power of captive thinking in perverting even the best intended strategies of eluding official censorship. Today, it is generally accepted that almost no literary text that entered the official circuit of publication, and thus passed the test of censorship, actually escaped its restrictions, whether imposed from the censors or internalized by the author. The only exceptions were the texts published in the independent circuit of samizdat or in the West. From the beginning, these books situated themselves in opposition to the official, ideological guidelines, and set as their goal not aesthetic/formal performance for its own sake or as a means of subversion, but the truth. The genre adopted by such writings varied from the document-literature of Solzhenitsyn, to Paul Goma’s and Arthur Koestler’s symbolic fiction in Ostinato and Darkness at Noon, to Havel’s plays and essays, and Konrad’s, Haraszti’s, and Michnik’s studies.

The inspiring and freedom-engendering function of such texts should not be underestimated. Encouraged by the post-Stalinist thaw launched by Krushchev’s discourse at the 20th Congress of the USSR Communist Party, they were the most radical results of the flow of critical books published since 1954. On a larger social scale, the role of such books was that of an avant-garde in the struggle against communist power.
As Kundera and Konrad point out, these texts were instrumental in bringing about the 1956 and 1968 Revolutions, Charter 77, Solidarity, and most of all, the 1989 uprisings. Given this indisputable social role they played, it is difficult if not impossible to independently analyze their aesthetic value. This is even more the case since the particular characteristic of the reception of East Central European literary works produced under communism is that their force of persuasion and inspiration has generally and unassumingly been regarded in close connection to the ethical stances of their writers.

In this sense, Romanian-born Radio Free Europe commentator, Monica Lovinescu is right when she says: “Eastern European literature, closed off as it is in languages little known outside the region, tends to attract attention in the West because of the ethics of the writer, rather than the aesthetics of the work” (my translation, Unde scurte V 45). As I pointed out earlier, the phenomenon was far from being specific to the Western reception of such texts. In the communist block itself, writers would become known either for being too obedient or for being dissidents.

The ethical aura that has surrounded many literary, philosophical, historical, and artistic works explains the extraordinary social popularity commanded by the humanities in the region, which now amazes even those who once partook of it. The deep appreciation East Central Europeans felt for their dissident authors, who in many cases ended up anointed national prophets and heroes, shows similarities with the status enjoyed by the engaged Western intellectuals after World War II. In this sense, Adam Zagajewski recounts:

We (East Central European writers) could claim that nowhere else on this planet were books being so vividly read, paintings so attentively looked at, theater
performances attended, prayers uttered, unselfish deeds produced […] Now it’s over. It’s all about money and nationalism […] For my generation political opposition meant also an alternative process of education, where our literary masters were not only Kafka and Borges, but also and even more importantly Dante and Plato. (Partisan Review 670)

This fascination with culture and its consequent worshiping was clearly not only the result of its dissident performance, but also of its capacity to evoke and stimulate the normality of free, critical thinking. In this sense, Kafka and Borges, but also Dante and Plato, Kant and for that matter the entire humanistic tradition were assiduously frequented and hailed as spiritual liberators. Creating an alternative way of reasoning and imagining, these authors played a fundamental part in the struggle to preserve the freedom of mind and engender social and, ultimately, political courage.

Intelligentsia: A Distinct East Central European Class

The East Central European intelligentsia, or what many scholars call “critical intellectuals,” was also held in high respect. As many post-1989 studies indicate,13 the preeminent role of humanistic culture in shaping/preserving the region’s identity during communism was equaled only by the prestige of its openly dissident, active intellectuals. András Bozóki’s introductory notes to the book he edited, Intellectuals and Politics in Central Europe, provide an excellent starting point for understanding the peculiarities of the situation:

In Central Europe intellectuals, particularly those working in the humanities have a long tradition of political engagement. Authors, poets, journalists, historians […] maintained and invigorated their national culture and language and set out the basic principles of the nation-state in the 19th century. During this period their main goal – as “knowledge elite” possessing a broad outlook and high erudition – was to further national progress by drafting reform proposals and promoting the establishment of a Western-type bourgeoisie. In the 19th century these reformers tended to be followers of liberal- nationalist, then of radical ideologies of social equality. They believed that their knowledge and learning entitled them to pose as a ‘living conscience’ of their nation, to maintain national identity in the face of
foreign oppression, and to uphold democratic values in undemocratic times. ("Introduction" 1)

This tradition generated the mindset that entitled and obliged East Central European intellectuals to adopt a critical, if not revolutionary stance once the initially, revolutionary promises of communist heaven went sour. Their role as guardians of national identity and “living conscience of their nations” demanded that they position themselves in the avant-garde of the anticommunist struggle for freedom in the same way their forerunners did during the 19th century struggles for the births of the nation states. This revolutionary heritage, together with the predisposition of many authors for rebellious, critical thought, might be among the reasons why intellectuals were ferments of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the 1968 Prague, Charter 77, and of Polish Solidarity.\textsuperscript{14}

One example of intelligentsia at work is the Petöfi Circle, which started as a result of de-Stalinization and, being inspired by members of Imre Nagy’s communist reformist cell, evolved into a discussion group debating issues related to the democratization of public life and methods to overcome the Stalinist legacy (\textit{Reinventing Politics} 71). In 1956, its meetings and debates produced a good deal of the intellectual agitation that ultimately led to the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. With the famous Marxist critic György Lukacs among its members, this intellectual group played a fundamental role in raising the awareness on social and political issues on the part of a range of individuals. Apart from creating the framework for critical reformist debates about Marxism, the Petöfi Circle provided the context for the actual beginning of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, during one of its public demonstrations.
Vladimir Tismaneanu in his book *Reinventing Politics*, where he traces the growth of critical political conscience in Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel, confirms that “the intelligentsia played a leading role in the earlier Hung anti-totalitarian outbursts” (65). The reason for this impressive and crucial participation rests, according to Tismaneanu, in the need this particular social class felt to revenge the persecutions it was subjected to during Stalinism. Its representatives considered themselves the repository of national values debased under Stalinism; in continuation with the revolutionary traditions, intelligentsia considered itself entitled to lead the struggle against despotism, [and, moreover, by that time] the Marxist intellectuals had grown disenchanted with the manipulation of values by the ruling bureaucrats. (69)

As a burgeoning social class, with a glorious tradition and now a new common social goal, soon after de-Stalinization, Central European intelligentsia (mainly from Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland) began to look for allies in its critical enterprises. The first and very important one was to be found among reformist Marxists such as Imre Nagy, in Hungary, the Gomułka faction, in Poland, and Alexadr Dubček in Czechoslovakia. These leaders, raised to actual political power in the late 1950s or after 1968, were sympathetic to the demands of revolutionaries, students, workers, critical groups, and church dignitaries and acquiesced to promote the social and (part of the) political reforms proposed by them.

While the organic cooperation between the radical wings of both the intelligentsia and the industrial working class became possible only in the 1970s, in 1956 the intellectuals were already interested in taking action and reforming the system “from the inside,” with the help of some of its own enlightened dignitaries. Their collaboration, though not successful at the time, opened the door for later solidarity among different social classes.
In retrospect, and if one looks comparatively at the evolution of all East Central European countries, it is obvious that due only to such successful collaboration were any reforms and changes possible. In the cases of Romania and Bulgaria, where the protest movements remained circumscribed to specific worker or intellectual groups, the echo of their actions was condemned to remain limited.

Despite its symbolic prestige, the intelligentsia had a real impact only when it went back to the role it played in the 19th century, abandoning its traditional stance as a scholarly class and taking an active role in the political struggle. Those writers who answered repression by mainly carrying out their professional duties ended up being assimilated into the system of symbolical substitutions that functioned in the East Central European countries, where social modernization was not completed by the time of communist takeover. In these cases, as exponents of aesthetic modernism and of its corollary, “the autonomy of the aesthetic,” the writers were implicitly regarded as representatives of the liberal values associated with political and social modernism and granted the symbolic status of opponents of the communist regime.

The consequent relegation of the social-political role of writers to the symbolic realm led to further ambiguities in defining the ethics of East Central European intellectuals. While the general standard of the engaged intellectuals in the West has been that illustrated by Jean-Paul Sartre and André Malraux, certain East Central European authors embraced the so-called “resistance through literature”. The polemic between Milan Kundera, who defended this position, and Vaclav Havel, who chose to embody the profile of the writer as a declared, anticommmunist opponent, is a telling example of the
dual consciousness with regard to the social function of literature. “Est-ethics” is the concept defining and problematizing this attitude.

**Toward an East Central European Aesthetic Paradigm**

The term “est-ethics” was launched for the Romanian public by Radio Free Europe commentator Monica Lovinescu, living and writing in Paris. She chose this name²⁰ for the 1996 anthology of her former broadcasts about Romanian literature written during communism. The common note of all these articles, consisting of open letters of protest written by Romanian authors, debates about acts of political criticism, and literary reviews with a special emphasis on the political context surrounding the literary phenomenon in communist Romania, was that they provided a necessary contextualization. The apparently exclusive aesthetic judgments of most Romanian literary critics were thus happily complemented by the constant moral problematization of Monica Lovinescu’s articles.

The role that she and Virgil Ierunca, her husband and broadcasting partner, performed during the entire communist age was extraordinary. When contextual information about censorship, political pressure, dissidence, and compromise was totally inaccessible to the larger Romanian public, which was kept in an information blackout at home, they filled this gap. While writers were aware of the constant struggle and negotiation with the official power, and also of the price they had to pay for publication or for courageous positions,²¹ the larger public would have remained victim to official manipulation, had it not been for Monica Lovinescu’s and Virgil Ierunca’s reports²².

Given the lack of open ethical problematization under communism, save for literature books, Lovinescu and Ierunca performed the role of sociologists and cultural
historians, many times decoding the hidden messages buried in texts and discussing the political stance of their authors. Their insistence on the ethical dimension of both texts and authors’ lives complemented the almost exclusive interest in their aesthetic qualities professed by critics publishing in Romania. The difference between Lovinescu’s and Ierunca’s approaches and those of the critics writing in communist Romania consisted in the former’s far-sightedness and radicalism. While many of the critics living in Romania fell victim to the self-serving, compensatory myth of “resistance through culture,” Lovinescu was among the first to expose it:

[I]t was probably inevitable that [Romanian] resistance was more limited than the one of our neighbors; like it was the case in Poland where the Church remained unstained and the patriotism untouched; in Hungary which was proud of its Revolution which made communism shudder; in Prague, where many writers expelled from the Writers’ Union sought menial jobs: they would rather become window cleaners than publish books stained by adulterous lies. Dignity, memory, justice were all honorable terms as long as the upper echelons were capable of sacrificing their career, sometimes even their freedom, in order to pronounce such words. I should not rekindle the formula, alas all too pertinently apt for the Romanian writers who were “orphans of courage”. Never orphans of talent or of refinement. The aesthetics remained the savior and the justifier of all things. “One resisted through Culture.” Such acknowledgement or excuse was still valid during post-Communist years.”(La apa Vavilonului 28)

Lovinescu’s sharp diagnosis is compatible with the memorable formula of est-ethics, which so naturally and still so emphatically captures the main existential tension underlying literature under communism: that between ethics and aesthetics. Using her insight, one can develop an entire typology of East Central European literature based on the degrees in each of the two components exist in various texts. Moreover, such a subtle typology, capturing the multiple nuances of the relationship among author, text, censorship, and reader could do justice to the complex literary phenomena of the region
and finally explain, not only the generally high status of literature, but also how and why various literary works received the degrees of appreciation they had.

Moreover, the concept of “est-ethics,” with its emphases on both the East European sources of this literature and the ethical component of its making and assessment, explicitly draws attention to some of the most important elements defining its specificity. Apart from the geographical reference, which for a time was synonymous with the very oppressive political system controlling the region, the concept rehabilitates the part played by the “ethic” within the East Central European “aesthetic.”

Granted that Monica Lovinescu’s typology refers mainly to Romanian literature, I think that it could beneficially be extended to the entire East Central European region that functioned under similar circumstances. As a first case-study of this est-ethic typology, I will consider Vaclav Havel, since he is one of the most famous examples of East Central European writers who reached a good balance between aesthetic value/experiment and ethic action, and, therefore, a maximal realization of the concept.

The plays Havel published before his first arrest in 1969\textsuperscript{23} were written in the style of Ionesco, Beckett, and Kafka, a style that expressed the general absurdity of existence, but his essays were already openly advancing the idea of fighting for freedom. This position eventually made his stance more radical even than that of the reformist group in the Communist Czechoslovak Party. If Havel’s 1969 private letter to Alexander Dubček might or might not have influenced the leader in his decision to resign, his 1975 open letter to president Husák superceded any other form of protest and as such had a great public effect. The fact that after 1969 Havel’s writings were banned and his
passport suspended by the authorities shows that the communist regime feared the explosive, critical potential of his texts.

As such, during the 70s Havel became a social outcast but he also turned into an active dissenter. From that point on he published his plays and articles either in samizdat or abroad (where his plays were actually performed) and continued to protest against the official hierarchy. “Power of the Powerless,” his famous text reproduced in the 1979 samizdat collection *On Freedom and Power*, is already a proof that Havel’s voice had an effect on the works of other dissidents both from inside and outside Czechoslovakia and on the international community. In this sense former Solidarity activist Zbygniew Bujak compellingly testifies:

Its [“The Power of the Powerless”] ideas strengthened us and persuaded us that what we were doing would not evaporate without a trace, that this was the source of our power, and that one day this power would manifest itself. The essay gave us theoretical backing, a theoretical basis for our actions. He enabled us to believe in their effectiveness. …When I look at the victories of Solidarity and Charter 77, I see in them an astonishing fulfillment of prophecies contained in Havel’s essay.” *(Open Letters, viii)*

There are not too many examples in East Central Europe when a writer manages to pursue with equal success his civic role and his call as a writer, but Havel made it clear on many occasions that he did not see a separation between the two. Rather than having his literature subservient and just instrumental to his political convictions, he had his essays shaped by his talent as a writer. In this sense, Havel’s *est-ethics* is an inspired combination of ethical concerns and literary preoccupations that supplement and enhance one another. From the early years when the forums in which he expressed his convictions were the Tvář magazine and the meetings of The Union of Czechoslovak Writers, to the decades when he published in samizdat not only his own plays and articles, but also
books by other writers at his own “Edice Expedice,” the credo of his life and *est-ethics* was the same: “living in truth.” By adopting Patocka’s famous phrase as a motto for his life, Havel finds the courage to co-found Charter 77, VONS in 1978, and the strength to endure subsequent years of imprisonment (1977, 1978-79, 1979-1983, 1989).

As early as the mid 60s, in one of his speeches to the Writers’ Union he talks about the destruction and tragedy that would result if language and ideology turned away from reality, if thought became disengaged from the world, and if writers avoided problems by putting them in false contexts (*Open letters ix*). Such a schizophrenic situation had already been experienced by the communist block, not only during the worst years of Stalinization, but also in those following Stalin’s death, in the mid-50s. The resulting disjunction between ideology and reality and, up to a point, between literature and reality that characterized the post-Stalinist era was called by Havel *pseudorenascence* (Eda Kriseova 12). Outcome of a strategy of compliance with the demands of censorship, pseudorenascence was characterized by the fact that even the alleged desire for change and truth of certain writers was doomed to remain only at the level of declarations of principles.

To counteract this phenomenon, Havel’s own works followed the standard of artistic truth. The concept itself might seem elusive, given the fact that many times it had been used to justify the lack of social and political relevance of certain works in the name of their artistic excellence. Yet, for Havel, it functions as an absolute aesthetic and ethical standard. In order to attain “artistic truth,” a literary work has to be true to itself – to its own style, organization, and ideological blueprint – and to the reality that inspired it:

The degree to which politics is present or absent has no connection with the power of artistic truth. If anything matters, it is, quite logically, only the degree to
which an artist is willing, for external reasons, to compromise the truth. The counterpart of [oppressive political] power in this conflict is not an alternative political idea but the autonomous, free humanity of man and with it necessarily also art – precisely as art! – as one of the most important expressions of this autonomous humanity. (Six Asides 133)

This quotation provides a glimpse into the rather complex and paradoxical position of East Central European writers, who had to engage on several, different fronts in the defense of freedom. As writers they usually believed in art as the expression of autonomous humanity; yet in order to be able to profess this form of spiritual autonomy they also had to become civic activists. In order to practically support the claims to freedom and autonomy made by their texts, the writers were expected by their readers not only to write in the spirit of truth, but to reject censorship and self-censorship and to assume an important public role.

The difference between Havel and most other authors is that he also considered bearing witness to his times as part of his duty not to compromise the truth. The consequence of this position is that in his choice of subjects he did not avoid the problematic ones. The standard he applied was that of telling the truth about the situation affecting the community, whether in essays or literary pieces. As I will show below, both types of texts were written in a style free from the otherwise generalized captive mentality, and with a full awareness of the possible political consequences.

Havel’s first absurd plays, in the wake of Kafka, Ionesco, and Beckett, made public his awareness of a deep social crisis. The theatrical formula chosen had a lot to do with Kafka’s rebirth among the young writers of Czechoslovakia since 196326, when his name was officially “cleared,” and also with the strong grip absurd theater had on the aesthetic scene at the time. The most interesting fact about this artistic choice is Havel’s
opinion about the role absurd theater was supposed to play in a society still strictly
controlled by ideological censorship:

Personally, I think it’s the most significant phenomenon of the 20th century,
because it demonstrates modern humanity in a “state of crisis” as it were. That is,
it shows man having lost his fundamental metaphysical certainty, the experience
of the absolute, his relationship to eternity, the sensation of meaning – in other
words, having lost the ground under his feet. This is a man for whom everything
is coming apart, whose world is collapsing, who senses that he has irrevocably
lost something, but is unable to admit it to himself and therefore hides from it…
(“Disturbing the Peace” 53-54)

This accurate description of absurd theater could be attributed to any Western
critic and considered just as a good description of the respective movement. When an
East Central European writer chose for his plays the poetics of the absurd theater and
talked about the “absurd” human condition and the “collapsing” world, his stance clearly
had a tinge of dissidence. In the communist block that insisted on an absolutely optimistic
perspective with regard to the acknowledged difficulties of constructing a new society
and a new man, Havel’s choice of modernist, avantgardist artistic means must have
seemed at least suspicious to the authorities. Far from being simple rehearsals on the
well-established absurd themes, Havel’s plays provide the postwar East Central European
facet of the general state of crisis described by absurd theater. In The Garden Party the
often meaningless conversation among the participants leaves the spectator with the
feeling of a disintegrating world that could refer to the demise of logic and the emergence
of fear and insecurity anywhere in the world. By contrast, in The Memorandum, the
apparent absurdity is a clear mirror of the mechanisms of communist bureaucracy. Yet,
for the attentive reader even The Garden Party contains sufficient identifiable references
to attitudes, feelings, reactions, and modes of behavior characteristic of communist
society.
Like many characters of the absurd theatre, Mr. and Mrs. Plaudek are in a state of paralysis in relationship to various authorities of the state. Waiting for Mr. Kalabis, their “Godot,” and for the Deputy Chairman to advise their son Hugo about the right choices in life, they show the same inability to act as Vladimir and Estragon from Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. Their resignation to an absurd existence gains a particular anticommunist note when presented against the background of 1962 Czechoslovakia.

While the older couple is numbed by the incertitude of the future and by fears about the present, Hugo, their younger, naturally becomes part of the system and the general political cacophony of the time by joining the “Garden Party of the Liquidation Office.” As the Inauguration Service is being liquidated and the Central Commission for Inauguration and Liquidation created, he is entrusted with both of these crucial and equally meaningless jobs. Once part of the self-serving mechanism of liquidation in order to inaugurate and vice-versa (a mechanism of eternally perpetuating central power, which periodically liquidates its instruments), Hugo becomes part of the official machine of repression. As such he foreshadows Josef Gross, the disoriented Manager from The Memorandum, doomed to lose his position until he accepts the rules of the official game.

Parting with the general absurd scheme, The Memorandum is filled with remarkable references to life in a communist society. First, there is Joseph Gross, the “out-of touch with the times” manager, soon to be ousted for his incapacity to rule his institution in a dictatorial manner. Too prone to negotiation and civility, he ends up being replaced by his own deceitful deputy director, Jan Ballas, who out of scientific zeal and desire for maximum efficiency institutes the new Ptydepe language as the idiom of official memoranda. Like many other typical bureaucrats before him, Ballas creates a
seemingly perfect parallel reality, with its own alternative structures of power that should ensure his eternal reign. By accompanying the new “scientific” language with an equally scientific, efficient bureaucracy which goes in circles and entraps everyone who tries to demystify its vicious logic, Ballas mirrors the communist agitators/activists destined to institute the use of the communist “newspeak,” and thus create an impenetrable armor for the flawed logic of the system.

The play revolves around an official memorandum written in Ptydepe and received by Josef Gross, who is unable to decipher it or have it deciphered without joining the parallel order, instituted by Jan Ballas, his contender. This inability leads to his ousting. Caught in a hopelessly vicious circle, Gross has to play the game of humiliation, accept losing his position and even his job, only to play the same trick on Ballas. This development of the plot mirrors perfectly the never-ending communist meetings of analysis, exclusion, self-criticism, and eventual ideological recycling that every member of East Central European societies had to go through in order to hold a job.

In Gross’s case, once the Ptydepe system is blocked and the official memorandum is furtively translated by Maria, the only innocent character of the play, Gross finds out that the higher authority actually supports him. His revenge on Ballas, who is forced to resign, is nevertheless short lived as the latter invents a new artificial language meant to regulate power according to his will. This time, however, he allows Gross to remain the Manager Director and thus to account for the eventual dysfunctions, while he controls everything from the shadows.
A clear allegory of the way communist bureaucracy functioned, the play never gives the reader any glimpse of hope. With Gross’ second resignation under Ballas’ power and influence, there is no chance that the system could be reformed from the inside. Maria, the only untainted character, is advised to join the theater group after being fired by Ballas. The vicious world of untranslatable official memoranda provides no other way out. The only chance to escape is by quitting the real world altogether and by choosing art/theater instead.

As we well know, this evasive choice was not the path taken by the playwright himself. In parallel with writing plays that became more and more explicit in their condemnation of the official communist lie, Havel crystallized his attitude of protest. In the early 60s he began publishing critical pieces in the literary monthly magazine of the Czechoslovakian Writers’ Union, Tvář, giving critical speeches at the regular meetings of the Organization, and culminating in participating in the 1968 Prague Spring movement. It took many radio and TV addresses, open letters to Presidents Dubček and Husák, the 1969 signing of the “Ten Points Petition” to the federal government, and the initiation of Charter 77 before he was first imprisoned. This is not to say that the communist regime did not take punitive measures against him, as at the end of 1969 he was forbidden to publish, his books were banned and by 1970 he was publicly vilified in TV and Radio broadcasts.

The Increased Difficulty of Concentration is the last play Havel published in the official circuit before taking part in the 1968 events. Its development and circular ending resemble somewhat the pattern of The Garden Party, where the characters, irrespective of their evolution on the social arena, end up in the same stifling and senseless pattern. In
this play, Dr. Huml, the social scientist, fully engaged in writing an academic study about human values, cannot find a solution to his own domestic -- but in essence existential crisis -- and each time he falls back on the same old scheme of salvation. After Renata and Blanka, Dr. Balcar is the new love-affair meant to temporarily give him the relief of a new beginning, or at least distract him from his present domestic complications. As in most other plays by Havel, the recourse to love, family, domestic values is just a hypocritical means of avoiding making decisions in the social, professional, and more often, moral sphere.

The difference between this vision and that of *Unveiling* (1975), *Largo Desolato* (1984) and *Redevelopment* (1987) is that in the last three plays the escape into personal salvation is challenged by the meta-perspective of the playwright. In *Unveiling*, Vera and Michael’s domestic happiness, their perfectly decorated house, outstanding son, Western-like comfort, and perfectly harmonious sex life, are but a farce when compared with the peace of mind Vanek gets out of his actions of protest. Though in the end these actions ruin any chance of a decent, bourgeois life for himself and his wife, he seems to accept it as a natural and bearable consequence of his non-conciliatory attitude toward the system. His stance is clearly in opposition to that of Michael and Vera, his former comrades, now communist officials, who are ready to sacrifice anything for personal comfort.

The contrast between non-complying citizens and those resigned to play the official game is even more evident in *Protest* (1978) and quite well represented in *Audience* (1975), both being part of the “Vanek trilogy”31. From all three Vanek emerges as a clearly drawn type, the determined, yet modest dissident called by former comrades, friends, and work supervisor to contrast his existential choice with theirs and explicitly
defend it. The civic values he stands for are undoubtedly the same as those for which Havel himself was fighting at the time, and the one-act plays could be seen as attempts to clarify his position.

Vanek talks very little when compared to logorrheic characters like Stanek, the officially recognized writer who wants to get Vanek to sketch a protest against the imprisonment of his future son-in-law, to collect signatures, and eventually to set the latter free, without having to sign the protest himself. At times, this seems to be the reason why Vanek’s position is misunderstood. But soon it becomes clear that what prevents communication with all the people who declare themselves to be his friends, claim to like him, and want to help him “improve” his life, is their completely opposite set of moral values.

The character as much as the author himself chose to affirm their beliefs without any compromise. Once he started to publish in *samizdat*, Havel’s style and range of problems became more radical, and his acts of public protest multiplied. The topics of the Vanek plays reflect his recent clarifying experiences, and his characters hesitate less in making open apologies for the courage to resist political pressures and the inevitable assault of fear. At this point it becomes clear that Havel could not have made openly critical statements about the self-mystification many were engaged in, if he had had to negotiate the publication of his texts with the censors.

Writing a treatise on the *Phenomenology of Responsibility, Love and Nothingness, Ontology of the Human Self* like Leopold, the Professor from *Largo Desolato* (1984) was no longer enough. For Havel as for many of his characters, such texts cannot suggest any practical way out of the moral impasse they find themselves in and as such are pure
exercises in self-deception and futility. Despite their vague inspirational role, especially for young impressionable girls like Marguerite, books that treat civic responsibility as an abstract topic, with no connection to the dilemmas of daily life are of little consequence. Their metaphysical flair generates high expectations in the ethically confused and deeply frightened public, but when the writer is not another Vanek, who is willing to sacrifice personal security, comfort, and the hope of a “normal” life for his civic mission, these expectations cannot be fulfilled.

The public itself, for that matter, is no less to blame than the abstract philosopher. Like Stanek, who lacks the courage to risk too much, the people feel at ease in delegateing the writer as their representative in action by simply declaring their admiration for his principles. This situation, like many others in Havel’s post-1969 plays, is symptomatic of the actual dilemma of every person under communist rule – and for this reason powerfully evocative of them. In these plays, the allegorical function of literature is reduced to a minimum, leaving most of the textual “space” to a starkly realistic depiction of the major conflicts marring everyday life. Instead of fiction making an assault on reality, as in Kundera’s “Hitchhiking Game,” in Havel’s plays reality constantly assaults and transforms fiction. Their powerful intertwining ultimately defines his style and also the maximalist stance of what I called est-ethics.

* * *

At the opposite end of the spectrum, which, in its own way defines the particular est-ethic poetics, is the case of certain Romanian authors in whose works the balance between ethical and aesthetic preoccupations was not always achieved. The reasons for this specific situation rest with the fact that instead of being the heroic adversary
embodied by texts like Solzhenitsyn’s, post-1947 literature in Romania became a strategy of survival and individual resistance. Rather than a herald for an open, collective struggle, literature contented itself with being the substitute for all the other bereft and banned disciplines, as well as the negotiating table at which glimpses of the truth were accepted. As such, it became a means of implicit complicity with the totalitarian system.

The aesthetics professed by the well-intentioned writers who believed in a possible coexistence with the communist party or lacked the heroism to oppose it is quite different from Havel’s; yet it is still a facet of the same specific roadmap East Central European literatures chose to follow after 1947. Crucial for understanding this path is “the resistance through culture,” a concept launched at the end of the 1980s by those authors who defended the implicit role of culture in totalitarian societies, at the very moment when becoming aware that “this kind of resistance was insufficient” (“Rezistența” 4). As Mircea Martin observes, the concept itself was meant to account for “a collective formula of exoneration,” pointing implicitly to “the lack of civic reaction, of protest against the general misery and growing oppression of Ceausescu’s regime by the end of the 80s” (my translation, “Rezistența” 1). A non-conformist strategy rather than a dissident one, “resistance through culture” was a compensatory solution:

The idea of resistance through culture has at its origin a conversion of values. People talk and adopt a morals of literature, of culture because they refuse or avoid a heroic morals, the only really correct and necessary in the given situation. The choice sadly reinforces a cyclical pattern for Romanian people: we have substituted our political incapacity to act by cultural action, ethical incompetence and incapacity by aesthetic performances. (“Rezistența” 12)

Granted all this, the question remains: is a viable aesthetics possible under such circumstances, or is an entire literature produced under conditions of censorship and self-censorship of little relevance and value today33? Was the importance of the literary texts
that dared to utter partial truths in an otherwise barren landscape overrated, or can these
texts still impress us today? Will they endure over time?

Most of these questions point to a twofold inquiry: the function of literary texts at
the time of their publication and their aesthetic value then and now. For the first part of
the question, the answer is rather complex. As many readers and writers can bear witness,
“In Ceausescu’s Romania, literature functioned as much more than pure literature”
(“Estetismul” 13). When “historiography, sociology, and political philosophy were
denied their revisionist function and were not allowed to question the state’s master
narratives,” due to their general annihilation by state rules, literature started to perform
this role alone (Cornis-Pope 133-35).

The extraordinary popularity of Gabriel Liiceanu’s Paltiniş Diary, a collection
of inspiring philosophical and cultural discussions with Constantin Noica, illustrates the
transfer of critical power to traditionally marginal forms of cultural discourse such as a
philosophical diary.

In a world in which material and moral squalor were almost total, in which the
isolation of Romania had begun (and there was increasing talk of
‘Albanianization’), in which the daily television schedule lasted two hours, one of
which was devoted to the president’s family, in which the press, the theatre and
the cinema were subject to the most terrible censorship, in which the sense of life
had been lost, the Diary at once opened a window. (Paltinis Diary xxx)

The generalization of this mode of reception to most modernist literary works at
the end of the 1980s, when life’s daily misery and Ceausescu’s ideological paranoia
reached unimaginable heights, poses some serious theoretical and ethical questions
sharply addressed today by the young generation of Romanian writers. Paul Cernat is
among the more moderate voices challenging those writers who played the double-edged
game with official censorship, choosing as justification for their morally ambivalent
position the questionable modern myth of the autonomy of the aesthetic. For example, he writes:

The modern canon based on the autonomy of art was perceived as “the only alternative to Nazism and communism.” […] In Ceausescu’s Romania, the aesthetic canon functioned as a relative counter-ideological power, as a tolerated, controlled alternative, and, in any case, as a replacement of the total freedom of expression, supported by the democratic exile, as was the case with other Central European countries. This aesthetic survived mainly due to its ambiguous status with respect to the guidelines of the Party, due to the writers’ compliance with the rules of the game, their bribery of the system, and, moreover, due to the protection coming directly from the people of the System. This ambiguous status was the source of a certain social prestige of the aesthetic, which the communist system tried to use in its own interest, while also controlling it. (my translation, “Dincolo de canonul estetic” 5)

Cernat’s diagnosis points again to the multi-layered symbolic substitutions, which increased in frequency and intensity in direct proportion to the increased pressures of censorship and lack of real alternatives of civic and political means of dissent. The thesis of the “autonomy of the aesthetic” was one of the most pervasive and deceitful strategies of self-justification writers found for their lack of radical political action and lack of solidarity with other categories of dissenters. Springing from the symbolic contingency between modernist art and the implicit liberalism historically associated with it (Privind inapoi 134), the generalized thesis of the autonomy of the modern work of art ended up equating genuine civic action with aesthetic satisfaction, and ultimately substituting the aesthetic for genuine action.

While there is no doubt that Liiceanu’s book has nothing to do with the double-standard of many literary texts that played both sides simultaneously, its focus on high culture and advocacy for a total devotion to “cultural exercise” alone, at the expense of any civic engagement, is problematic. The idea that culture can exist by itself and that the philosopher/writer should live in an “ivory tower” is considered almost as dangerous as
signing an actual pact of non-aggression with the officials. Since it alleges the trans-
mundane existence and value of culture and advocates for absolute, metaphysical values,
under conditions of totalitarianism, such a position borders at best on naivete and at worst
on cynicism.36

For many recent commentators, Liiceanu’s inspirer, the philosopher Constantin
Noica, is seen as the initiator, but also the victim of the smart game many Romanian
writers thought they could play with the communist regime: that of escaping the “captive
mentality” syndrome. This spiritual endeavor was based on the premise shared by many
victims of Stalinist prisons and persecutions (Noica included) that communism could not
be defeated, that it would last forever and that each of us should look for individual
means of salvation. As many scholars of the Romanian phenomenon note, this belief was
based on the draconian brand of Stalinism Gheorghe Gheorgiu Dej, the Secretary of the
Romanian Communist Party, enforced in Romania until his death in 1964. Also the lack
of reformists at the top Party levels and the constant persecutions and purges that
followed any declaration of sympathy with the 1956, 1968, 1977 movements of
liberalization from other Central European countries played important parts. Liiceanu’s
worship of culture, following Noica’s teachings, should be read keeping in mind this
context, which might explain why the latter did not become a second Patočka. For
example, Liiceanu writes:

In [that] closed world, in which the mind above all is under threat, culture
becomes a means of transgression, and so, by this very fact, takes on a political
significance. It is not only an alternative view of the world, but also a barely
perceptible resistance to total isolation, rupture, discontinuity and absorption in
the mass. It is the memory of destroyed values, and the possibility of their future
reconstruction. When all means of participation in the destiny of the community
are suppressed, culture remains a way of continuing to participate from the
shadows and of preparing for a regeneration. It is thus in the highest degree subversive. [my italics] (Paltinis Diary xxvi)

No doubt, this is not a blueprint for a strategy of resistance, rather a strategy of survival during hard times, a way of “participating in the destiny of the community from the shadows” (Paltinis Diary xxi). As such, this facet of est-aethics unveils another nuance of the specific East Central European guise of the aesthetic. Infinitely less heroic than the dissident texts published in samizdat, those written and published, or even just read, with the desire to oppose the tide of brainwashing still share a trace of genuine resistance.

As Ana Blandina, one of the most famed Romanian dissident writers says,

This kind of resistance was, in fact an opposition to intellectual death, a means of survival understood not like an opportunist and superficial accommodation to the given reality, but, on the contrary, like a profound subversion of the system due to the clinging to the values, which that very system wanted to destroy in order to succeed in its mission. This “survival through culture” did not hope to defeat communism, but attempted to counteract it and to diminish its effects on the profound core of the collective spirit. (my translation, “Rezistența prin cultură” 6)

This impressive plea for the resisting function of literature comes as a continuation to Kundera’s position and of many other writers, who, by emphasizing the preeminent role of culture under communism, implicitly acknowledge the limited civic and political action taken by most of them. In the long run the undesired result of this strategy was the total aesthetization of existence, the transformation of the aesthetic into an existential option, and the replacement of all the other values guiding our lives with a pan-aestheticism. As Mircea Martin points out:

As other fields and values lost the possibility to act, the aesthetic became more global and comprehensive. A kind of aesthetic hegemony, an implicit pan-aestheticism was tacitly installed over culture as a whole. The aesthetic perspective became supra-ordinary in the sense that it imposed its criteria without
facing any resistance while also annexing the intellectual debate as a whole (mostly with regard to philosophy, sociology, and ethics). Nowhere else did the wide modernist definition of the aesthetic as anthropologic find a better and more pregnant illustration than in communist Romania during the 70s and 80s. Anyway, nowhere in the communist Eastern Europe had such a generalized propensity towards the aesthetic manifested itself. (my translation, “Estetismul socialist” 4)

Granted that the phenomenon is extremely interesting, the ensuing departure from the commonly accepted norm of free, democratic values is at least dangerous. The ultimate result is the relatively uneventful cohabitation between the totalitarian system and those who were expected to profess maximum critical thinking and be among the most fierce critics of oppression: the writers. In terms of the traditional meaning aesthetics held for the German Romantics, this exacerbation of its social role and consequent takeover of entire civic domains is a maximal deviation. Far from accomplishing the supposed mediation and harmonizing of all spheres of existence, such an exacerbated aesthetic ideology resembles general aestheticism, which by substituting the standards of art for those of life under totalitarian circumstances, promotes evasion at best, if not outright cynicism. When nothing is more important than the work of art and every other value is subsumed under it, what follows is “the aesthetization of existence itself” (“Estetismul” 5).

In the writers’ case this phenomenon amounts to “the understanding of writing as existence and even to their substitution, to living life according to a literary pattern, which meant, in fact, living in an alternative world” (“Estetismul” 5).

Despite its content that could make many of the referred authors uneasy, Martin’s analysis is not moralizing or condemning. Its goal is to comprehend this period of Romanian literature, when “the fantastic invention, oneiric divagation, formal artifices,
the absurd, the livresque,” and ultimately the leap into ideal worlds were strategies of instinctively or programmatically building an alternative (poetic) space, separated from the outside world of politics and political intrusions (“Estetismul” 5).

The uplifting belief of the writers who chose this poetics was that the literary product would redeem its author’s lack of civic action through its revolutionary impact on the public, who would implicitly and surreptitiously be instilled with “the real values.” This hope that via its aesthetic qualities the work could exonerate the writer’s silence on everyday pressing civic and political matters explains why “nowhere in Eastern Europe and for sure never before in Romania did writers believe so strongly in art as compensation for destiny” (Estetismul, 6). This brings us back to the question raised at the beginning of this chapter. What is the specific relationship East Central Europeans had with culture especially during communism? What is est-ethics?

In its extreme case – exemplified by Romanian letters which produced many fewer dissidents like Havel (with the notable exceptions of Paul Goma and Dorin Tudoran) – aesthetics was precisely this “living through literature,” this living vicariously, “through mandate” and substitutes. Irrespective of the literary value of the works it had engendered, its existential value appears from today’s perspective as at least debatable. No matter how non-judgmental one tries to analyze these attitudes, when a maximalist, heroic ethics, like that personified by Havel, Saharov, Solzhenistsyn and other dissidents is applied, the aestheticist existential choice becomes hard to defend. In comparison with Havel’s and the others’ efforts and personal sacrifices to “tell the whole truth,” all the other “exercises in culture” look like convenient evasions. Especially in conditions of totalitarianism when the mission of the writer naturally becomes that of
“bearing witness” to the true suffering of his/her compatriots, and not that of edulcorating the traumatic truths of life under totalitarian regimes.

Still, when observed from a purely historical perspective, the aestheticist existential choice becomes interesting and it opens a window towards the pathology of writers living under communist totalitarianism. In this sense, every author becomes a singular case study, and even more so, every culture. When we survey and compare the evolution of these East Central European countries, each with its own historical background and relationships with the Soviet occupier and the West, they prove to have followed specific paths.

Culture is just one factor among many characterizing the reaction of East Central European nations to the same plague – and as such it cannot be studied in the absence of the complex historical-political nexus surrounding each of them. As Monica Lovinescu suggested, the development of a strong intelligentsia in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia could be correlated with the existence of a powerful and rich literature exposing the crimes of the communist system. By the same token, the exaggerated allegiance to modernist values and theories such as that of aesthetics as spiritual liberator in Romania and the extreme preoccupation with producing formally good literature could be seen as reactions to tighter police surveillance and terror. The stricter the communization, the more symbolic value ended up attached to theories antagonizing the dialectical materialism of Marxist ideology. The preference for aesthetic values as a response to the obligatory sociological reading, in terms of class struggle of art, is just another example.
To explore further the relationship between the particular aesthetic ideologies of the region and the respective various modes of communization, let us focus on the reactions to de-Stalinization exhibited by different East Central European cultures. To what extent did such reactions help the emergence of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the Prague Spring and Charter 77? How did writers from each of these countries react to the liberalization and reformism of the 60s?

In Hungary the intelligentsia played a leading role in the earlier Hungarian anti-totalitarian outbursts, as it wanted to revenge the persecutions it was subjected to during Stalinism. As Vladimir Tismaneanu notes, “the Marxist intellectuals [grew] disenchanted with the manipulation of values by the ruling bureaucrats” (*Reinventing* 69) and were looking for support in the communist party’s anti-dogmatic wing. Remarkably, their intentions coincided with those of some of the communist journalists who supported the reformist Imre Nagy in 1953-54, when he began to openly criticize the Rákosi regime at the meetings held by the very Party newspaper (*History* 86). Some of the writers took similar actions when they decided to exclude “those who had compromised themselves with the Rákosi’s regime” from the Executive Committee of the Writers’ Association and replace them with “communists who turned against their own past” (*History* 86).

Together with Tibor Déry, Gyula Háy, Zoltán Zelk, the newly elected committee of the Writers’ Association included prominent non-communists like Pál Ignótus, Lajos Kassák, László Németh, who had been silenced or ignored before. The last two soon published critical and insurgent texts in literary magazines, which together with essays by Aron Tamási and Lőrinc Szabó ultimately led to a questioning of the doctrine of the unique Party and the demand for a multiparty system. Despite the fact that “the role of
the writers in paving the way for the 1956 Revolution should not be overestimated,” (History 87), a number of leading writers were actually arrested, jailed and sentenced to years in prison37 (History 88).

The Petőfi Circle was also instrumental in igniting the Revolution which, though repressed and officially condemned, led in the long run to a more liberal general atmosphere and also a less strict censorship. Yet, this is just one side of the coin. That Hungarian “goulash communism” was far from ideal is proved by the large number of writers immigrating after the 1956 repression and also by the high price those who stayed had to pay. As a result, today “even the reputation of such famous authors like Németh and Illyés is much lower than twenty years ago”(History 90).

Overall, the beneficial effects of the Hungarian 1956 Revolution were felt in most satellite countries where these movements strengthened the process of de-Stalinization, once the immediate repression that followed receded. Even in those countries where these events had a milder impact, the hesitant liberalization led to “a limited revival of both living and historical authors formerly condemned as reactionary, to the appearance of new, critical journals.” The rise of new generations of writers, untainted by any Stalinist past is responsible for “bolder deviations from Socialist Realism, which included adoptions of Modernist and/or Western ideas and literary techniques” (History 91).

In Czechoslovakia “the thaw” allowed the publication of some delayed novels – like Josef Skvorecky’s The Cowards, which “discusses the Czech acquiescence in Nazi rule.” Novels by Jan Otcenasek, Bohumil Hrabal, Ludvík Vaculík, Vladimir Paral, and Pavel Kohut, and plays by Milan Kundera explored “the split between generations, often
turning wartime situations into mirrors of the contemporary division between the compromised Stalinists and their younger, reform-minded sons” (91).

“Generation 56,” the new group of Slovak writers, especially its second wave, “turned away from the big epics focussed on historical events and chose instead everyday issues and everyday experiences. In the early 60s they start introducing formal innovations and experiments, depicting individuals in conflict with the world and with themselves, the search for reaching emotional balance, and launching into existential quests” (History 93). Their style is a revival of Modernism, and even an early Slovak Postmodernism.

Similar directions were experienced by Polish literature, which after 1956 started to publish banned texts like Gombrowicz’s novel Ferdydurke (1937), Czeslaw Milosz’s poems, Bruno Schultz’s prose, and Stanislaw Witkiewiz’s novel Insatiability (1930). 1957 is also the year when a young, more daring generation began publishing, Slawomir Mrozek being its most successful writer.

In Bulgaria the effects included the launch of two culture journals Flame and People’s Culture, which continued a rather cautious liberalization, but allowed a new generation of authors\textsuperscript{38} to start their careers. The ensuing deviations from Socialist Realism and its black and white epic novels in favor of short stories and fragmentary texts organized around a personal point of view led to the “lyricalization of the prose” that favored “the reemergence of a sense of tragic in the languishing Bulgarian fiction” (History 93).

The “April Generation” of poets\textsuperscript{39} that got its name from the April Breeze following the 1956 events, emerged also between 1957-1960 and “took advantage of the
cultural atmosphere which allowed formal innovations, if the artists declared their loyalty to the Party” (93). Yet, these innovations and their consequences remained merely at the level of style. Lacking the fortunate conjunction among the reformist communists and other social classes achieved during Prague Spring, Charter 77 and Solidarity, such literary liberalization did not manage to turn into a force of social change. With literature being the only field where any debate and clarifications were possible, social reforms had to wait.

This situation can be better studied in the case of Romania, where post-1953 de-Stalinization took place under Gheorgiu-Dej’s reign. Its most notable results were that under the guise of the general thaw from strict ideological imposition, the Romanian rulers rid themselves of moderate reformists like Lucretiu Pătrașcanu (1954), the founding father of Romanian Communist Party (numerically insignificant as it was until the Soviet occupation). Earlier on, the now-called “national communist” faction led by Dej had already eliminated Ana Pauker, Teohari Georgescu, and Gheorghe Luca, initially imposed from Moscow. In 1957 this faction rid itself of some other old-time comrades, who tried to topple Dej.

Under such conditions, no actual reformist movement could take place in the high echelons of the party; no Imre Nagy could resurface. Pătrașcanu, imprisoned during the Stalinist purges and a hero of the national communist party, very much like Nagy, was terminated in prison as a traitor. Miron Constantinescu, who could also have initiated reformist directions, was also eliminated. The pattern was repeated 15 years later under Ceausescu, who crushed and preventively discouraged any movement of dissent.
Under such circumstances, the relative thaw that marginal fields like literature began to feel after 1954 was again an ambiguous phenomenon. On the one hand, the result of the accomplished “conversion” to communist requirements of the already famous writers, frightened by punitive measures and the ban of publication, and, on the other, of the bloom of a young and enthusiastic generation --the 1960s-- the thaw was the result of two directions of negotiation with censorship. The older generation agreed to give up part of its former freedom of speech to accommodate the new guidelines and still maintain a public voice, while the young groups found themselves negotiating, in order to be able to affirm themselves at all. The result was that both categories of writers wrote well-adjusted texts, situated somewhere in the middle ground between strict ideological guidelines and individual freedom. Only in the early and mid-60s when certain young writers still supervised by official censorship undertook the task of writing the novels of de-Stalinization would they become the first group to experience some freedom of speech. As for the very relative thaw of the mid-50s, it was definitely short-lived. A sudden series of arrests among intellectuals suspected of having engaged in anticommmunist, “inimical” debates, and correspondence with exiles follow in 1958\(^{41}\) (as an effect of Hungarian Revolution) together with university expulsions based on reasons of “unhealthy social origin.” Nothing actually changed in Romania until after Gheorghiu-Dej’s death in 1964, when a general amnesty for political prisoners was also granted.

Meanwhile, with the older writers “tamed” and converted to a cautious if not complacent mindset and the young ones enjoying the relative liberalization granted by the censors happy to see them write about anything but current political issues, literary life moved toward its next stage: the 1968 moment. Relatively satisfied with Ceauşescu’s
fresh and allegedly reformist direction, which accomplished some de-Stalinization even though by relegating to writers the task of unveiling the “dark communist beginnings,” intellectuals were glad to see him taking the country on a more independent, “national” path, away from USSR.

Yet, Ceaușescu’s “liberal” tactics were a double-edged sword. Though the Soviet Army had withdrawn its troops in 1958, Ceaușescu kept reminding everyone that the danger of a Soviet invasion in case liberalization went out of hand was a high probability. Under this threat potential revolutionary intellectuals were advised to use caution in their “reforms” if they wanted Ceaușescu’s “liberalization” to continue. With Hungary 1956’s and Czechoslovakia 1968’s at hand, the case was not hard to make.

Moreover, Ceausescu’s refusal to participate in the invasion of Czechoslovakia together with the other members of the Warsaw Pact after Prague Spring drew an important contingent of writers and intellectuals into the communist party. At that time most of them believed the party to be the guarantor of the “socialism with a humane face,” and thus the best possible choice.

Until 1971, when upon his return from a visit to China and North Korea, Ceausescu delivered the infamous July theses, which marked the beginning of a new Stalinist era, the spirits of the two symbolic contestants were relatively at peace. Despite occasional derangement, the writers and the communist system had reached a certain agreement and were evolving along accepted lines, with minor slippage. These conditions might explain why there was no major case of dissent in Romania until the late 1970s, when economic conditions began to deteriorate, as well.
Even then, however, except for Paul Goma, who adhered to the Charter 77 movement, and the coal miners from Jiu Valley who spontaneously went on strike in 1977, there was no coherent movement of protest. As Vladimir Tismaneanu puts it, most cases of Romanian dissent remained the result of individual initiative.

Due to reasons ranging from the efficiency of the repressive apparatus to the lack of a reformist line in the Party to Ceausescu’s growing centralist paranoia, or to the lack of solidarity between different social classes and intellectuals, nothing like the Polish KOR and Solidarity or the Czechoslovak VONS and Charter 77 took place in Romania. Additionally, the more repressive control over all means of communication prevented the emergence of any samizdat publishing movement, capable in the long run of domestically publishing major dissident figures. For those who, like Paul Goma, published texts in the West, the fate was loss of any means of sustenance, social marginalization, political harassment, and finally forced exile.

The Romanian sections of Radio Free Europe and later Voice of America were the only constant tribunes of freedom, run from exile by Romanian intellectuals who were trying to provide an alternate, true chronicle of life in Romania in opposition to the official, communist version of all events.

Under such circumstances of general closure and little propensity for personal heroism, literature and culture could only do so much: generate alternative worlds, sometimes completely disjointed from reality, sometimes allegorical, ruled according to a self-sufficient “aesthetics.” The harsh criticism such texts receive today in terms of their social function is that by showing only half of the truth and by solving conflicts with aesthetic means, they defused the tension of the conflicts described and implicitly
induced passivity in their readers. Instead of inspiring them to take to the streets, this literature offered them either abstract, metaphysical evasionism or aesthetically self-sufficient realism; *instead of social justice, poetic justice*. (Alexandrescu, Martin, Negrici, Cernat.)

Even so, this half-way courageous literature, telling half-truths and suggesting compensatory instead of confrontational strategies, was providing a breath of fresh air in a suffocating climate. This may ultimately explain its prestige and privileged status among Romanians before 1989.

As for its actual effects on the collective psyche, especially in terms of helping it re-conquer its self-dignity and live in a free, democratic world, these are more complex issues and deserve a separate analysis, which I will not undertake here.

**Theoretical Implications**

The phenomenon which I have so far called “est-ethics” and have tried to circumscribe historically has multiple theoretical ramifications and implications. Mainly characterized by the emphatic ethical note of its aesthetics, by the crucial importance of the writer’s position in civic life and in relationship to communist authorities, “est-ethics” is the area’s literary and theoretical response to the traumas of post-1947 history. Attempting to perpetuate aspects of the Western modernist tradition that answered best the need for engaged, even militant, anti-oppressive literature, “est-ethics” offers new answers to the age-old questions of the relationship between art and morality, art and truth, art and history, art and society. Its different aspects as manifested in each of the East Central European countries are best expressed by its spelling variants “aesthetics,” “est-aethics,” and “est-ethics.”
Among the possibilities circumscribed by these spellings, there opens an entire range of nuances covered by literary texts ranging from aestheticist, modernist abstractions and postmodernist bookish games, to fictions intently involved in issues of the present by allegorical representation, and finally to openly dissident essays, plays, and novels bordering on historical documents and political manifestos.

The “est-ethic” characteristic of all these texts, in comparison with their Western counterparts produced at the same time, is the presence of a certain kind of ethic urgency (or at least context) which permeates their style and problematic. Whether experimenting with modernist, avant-garde, or postmodernist techniques, their common ethical note singles them out among the European and American productions of the age, while endearing them to Western and East Central European publics alike. Hailed in proportion to the quantity of courage and aesthetic skills displayed, some of these texts ended up interacting with Western literature and pushing their common limits further, forging a common canon. This became even more the case when some of the famous East Central European writers emigrated to the West and started to publish or be widely translated in English and French. Solzhenitsyn, Havel, Kundera, Milosz, Skvoretzky are just a few names that come to mind.

Before being simply absorbed by the general modernist and postmodernist canon or punctually related to the original circumstances of their production, East Central European texts deserve a contextual placement and a theoretical analysis of their specific aesthetic, conditioned at least by their belonging to a certain part of the world at a given time. The particular forms they took and the specific functions they performed bear
similarities to segments of Western aesthetics, but at the same time are original and illuminating in their own right.

Maximalist Est-ethics

Nietzsche said that great changes come in on little pigeon feet. They are played out in secret; that is the essential thing. If they had a speculative streak, Herods of this world would be able to nip change in the bud. It is only because they do not see what is really happening—that it is not things that are changing, but the world— that the world is protected from their greedy hands of manipulators. Where, then, do changes in the world and history take place? “Inside,” or better put, within the life of the individual. (Patočka Reader 99)

Jan Patočka’s strong belief in the great changes meant to come through the pressure from letters of protest, philosophical seminars, non-complacent literature was probably shared by most intellectuals and non-intellectuals who joined Charter 77 and fought for the victory of its principles. Vaclav Havel who went to prison and endured house arrest must have clearly been among those convinced of the impending urgency of change and the possibility that it stems from cultivating ideas such as human rights, democracy, and individual freedom.

In the end, it was to the belief in a natural continuum between theory and practice, literature, ethics, and reality, between the act of philosophizing/writing, ethics, and action that the political power and resilience of Charter 77 owed its strength. The texts preparing and then springing from the movement are informed by similar, uncompromising ethical concerns that instilled in them a common, recognizable note easy to relate to the political actions that emerged from and crowned their reception.

In this sense such texts of literature, essays, and philosophy reach the maximal stand where ethics and aesthetics communicate unobstructed with one another, inform and even determine actions on each other. The result is a happy reunion of what I
identified as “aesthetics”, “est-aesthetics” and “est-ethics,” all facets of East Central European communist aesthetics. In the particular case of est-ethics, the conventional, much-deplored separation between literature and non-literary texts ceases and the gap between fiction, political discourse, ethics, and action is bridged. Havel’s and Patočka’s texts are always situated somewhere at the conjunction of genres, while being informed by an “aesth-ethics” of “living in truth.”

In “Disturbing the Peace,” a 1977 interview, Havel explains this position:

“I am a writer, and I’ve always understood my mission to be to speak the truth about the world I live in, to bear witness to its terrors and its miseries – in other words, to warn rather than hand out prescriptions for change.” (“Disturbing” 8)

The accomplishment of this credo, which could probably belong to any seminal writer, is confirmed both by the furious reaction of the authorities, which in 1969 attempted to put a stop to Havel’s activity by banning his writings, and also by his unequivocal political deeds. Given Havel’s protean personality, his reader cannot make a clear-cut distinction between Havel the writer and Havel the political activist; between his texts and his actions; between fiction and non-fiction. They all come together in a continuum, where each part enhances and complements the performance of the others. At the risk of sounding hagiographic, I would say that in cases like Havel’s, Patočka’s, and Solzhenytsyn’s, the strains of the modern world bring forth protean personalities, or what the Romantics would undoubtedly have called Poets.

In the modern phrasing of “authenticity” and “living an authentic life,” Jan Patočka details the idea of the writer as the embodiment of a total existence, the writer as a prophet and hero of his nation. Permeated by a universal sense of responsibility, such individuals “submit [themselves] to judgment, and to the law, and to a universal,
authentic society.” Furthermore, what this attitude fundamentally entails is: “To want to be judged, knowing of one’s complicity in everything. To want to take up and redeem one’s share of the universal cruelty. Not to want to escape into a realm of privacy, games, esthetics. To want to take part in universal justice as being the only state in which a soul like this – i.e., an existence whose Being is an upswing out of decay – can exist” (“The Meaning of the Pact with the Devil” 112).

Translated into literary terms and applied to the artwork, such a stance amounts to the most desired reconciliation between form and content; between formal experimentation and ethical message that Romantics, Modernists and Ancients established as the highest goal of a literary work. Most of today’s readers are fully aware of the difficulty of striking such a perfect balance, at least since Sartre’s passionate, if misguided struggle to define and accomplish it. The re-casting of this age-old battle in East Central European terms and the results it yielded after half a century of totalitarian communism are unique historical phenomena, which, despite their universal value, are closely determined by the circumstances in which they took place.

Given the bias of East Central European and Western reception, which has privileged the openly dissident writers, it is difficult today to equally value literature not involved with the ethical issues of the time. Formal experimentation and the cultivation of abstraction, art for art’s sake, the “escapes into the realm of privacy, games and esthetics” singled out by Patočka, have a hard time being accepted as “valuable” literature today – especially by the younger generations, which in the 1980s expressed their allegiance to post-modernism and by critics who, like Sorin Alexandrescu, suggest abandoning the aesthetic paradigm altogether.
Yet, all of these forms are also facets of the multifarious “aesthetic ideology” professed during communism and even counted at some point as examples of the (in)famous “resistance through the aesthetic.” The shades of gray they bring to the picture of East Central European aesthetics are not less important than the impeccable white displayed by its maximalist realizations. While texts like Havel’s and other dissidents’ became famous and were widely translated and promoted close to the time of their writing\textsuperscript{43}, other works of less politically involved authors were marginalized by their creators’ lack of social visibility.

A rewriting of the canon at this point would imply their reevaluation according to criteria pertinent to non-heroic literature, although it is hard to accept even today the thought of putting them near dissident texts that performed a liberating function with such success. The supra-thematic criterion of assessing East Central European literature, even when done by young generations of critics from the region is still the est-ethic one. Aestheticist works are even less regarded as valid standards of comparison and neither are those which “told just half of the truth.” (Even the young postmodernists, while practicing all kinds of fictional games like textualism, insist on the grim realist and implicitly anticommunist aspects of their writing.) A strong anti-aesthetic(ist) movement is characteristic of post-1989 canonic reevaluations, especially in countries like Romania, where very few writers managed to be open dissidents and still publish critical, anticommunist and aesthetically valid books. Paul Goma’s case is rather singular in the sense that after the 1971 publication in Germany and France of his novel, \textit{Ostinato}, which led to harassment and discredit by the Securitate, he had the courage to join the Charter
and house arrest, he accepted to emigrate to France.

In Romania the most praised and widely read literature after the fall of communism was never published before 1989. Its main characteristic is a strong documentary component, and anticommunist plots.

The fact that such productions have naturally joined the canon today and that the public immediately recognizes them as defining its identity attests to the rapid exit from the “aesthetic age” (Kundera’ “age of culture”) and the subsequent “synchronization” with a much enlarged canon. Slowly, but surely, post-communist literature and studies are joining the global movement and open towards subaltern studies, cultural studies, feminist, and minority-oriented texts.

The Departure from East Central European Aesthetics

In his study Privind înapoi, modernitatea (Looking Back. Modernity), Sorin Alexandrescu devotes an entire chapter to what he calls “the exit from modernity.” Related to this chapter, is another called emphatically, “Pentru un mai grabnic sfirșit al canonului estetic” (For a More Rapid Demise of the Aesthetic Canon.) The imperative tone of the titles is striking and draws attention to the cultural analysis underscoring them. Alexandrescu is interested in a complex cultural diagnosis, in which literature and the aesthetic, for example, are part of an intricate civilizing mechanism, within which they perform specific roles. These roles are always intertwined with other factors that determine their evolution, and altogether they are responsible for cultural choices that define a community. With respect to the preeminence of the aesthetic in Romanian culture, Alexandrescu has a compelling diagnosis. “The weaknesses and later the
annihilation of civil society in Romania were the causes for which the aesthetic has always been seen as the only defensive redoubt left to democracy when faced both by right and left-wing terror” (my translation, Privind 153).

The observation is crucial for understanding the subtle connection between Romanian aesthetic ideology and modernity. Reflex of the self-consciousness emerging out an unfinished and difficult modernization, the focus of Romanian modern society on aesthetic refinement was a compensatory tactic. Confronted with the often insurmountable problems of a rapid modernization applied to a mainly agrarian and traditional society, the interwar Romanian elite ended up developing aesthetic modernism as a substitute for social modernization. As Sorin Alexandrescu notes, “Being faced with the two main facets of modernity -- social modernization and aesthetic modernity/modernism -- Romanian intellectuals aimed for its aesthetic refinement rather than for its democratic policies” (153). Next, this insufficient development of Romanian democratic structures and institutions took a heavy toll once the country was faced with the two totalitarian regimes of the century: fascism and communism. Instead of fighting back with social and political weapons, Romania chose “the aesthetic.”

With the communists focused entirely on economic modernization and totally suppressing modern liberal values such as civil rights, individual, cultural freedom, and private property (Privind 340), intellectuals in the post-1947 society had to salvage precisely these latter modernist values.45

The present over-evaluation of aesthetics at the expense of other forms of cultural and social manifestation is the effect of the belief held during the communist years that the victory of “aesthetic modernism coincided, at a symbolic level, with the victory of
liberalism” (Privind 134). Today such an identification between the democratic values of political modernity and modernist aesthetics is displaced by political and cultural analyses, but during the communist years, it was a perfectly acceptable strategy of resistance. According to Alexandrescu, the symbolic assimilation had its origin in the fact that the Romanian modernists “had the same ambition as the liberals: to create a new, stable order of cultural values, comparable to that of political values in politics: the accomplishment of Great (independent) Romania in both fields at once” (Privind 135).

Apart from the debatable contagion and substitution between the two fields, Alexandrescu notes that at a structural level, there are striking similarities between them, which could explain why, under totalitarian conditions, they were used interchangeably. Indeed, both “liberalism and modernism are moved ahead by the cult of forms, by a strong trust in impersonal structures and institutions that function according to a logic of efficiency; a collective mechanism in whose name individual shades are annulled” (Privind 151). As such, it becomes clear why they were chosen to function as substitutes for one another in times of crisis.

In contrast with other countries where the aesthetic doctrine functioned just as a temporary compensatory strategy of substitution, in Romania these theories were promoted by the strongest advocates and agents of social and political modernization, and around the same time. The four most prominent critics who defined Romanian literary modernity, Titu Maiorescu (1840-1917), Eugen Lovinescu (1881-1943), G. Călinescu (1899-1965), and Nicolae Manolescu (b.1939–) also performed crucial cultural and civilizing roles. “Maiorescu got us out of the cacophony of an incipient modern culture, Lovinescu defended us against the dangers of rural traditionalism, Călinescu prevented us
from falling into nationalism and anti-semitism, and Manolescu built the resistance structure against Stalinist assaults” (*Privind* 149).

Notwithstanding the generally accepted crucial role literature had in mediating the difficult transition towards modernity of a mainly agrarian country, the prevalence of the aesthetic canon today, says Alexandrescu, generates a series of great shortcomings. For example, he states:

Though historically justified, the aesthetic canon (in Romanian culture, not only in literature – my note) led to an unacceptable stiffness of intellectual thinking and Romanian cultural creation. [Today] this canon legitimizes not the renewal, but the reproduction of central values, i.e. aesthetic conservatism, the catastrophic decrease of methodological, hermeneutic, and cognitive preoccupations – why should we be looking for new methods and truths if we possess the eternal ones– and ultimately the decrease of cultural creation itself. (my translation, *Privind* 153-4)

Before deciding whether the harshness of this diagnostic is entirely justified or if it is only a polemical reflex, let me enumerate the characteristics that define the *aesthetic canon*, according to Alexandrescu. Mixing both general and historical criteria, he lists: “the autonomy of the aesthetic from politics and ethics, a definitive hierarchy of literary values, aesthetic models [mainly French and German, I would add], center-margins hierarchy, national homogeneity, literary strategies against political oppression, textual models of interpretation” (150).

According to Alexandrescu, while most of these criteria were fundamental for delineating the literary tradition and configuring the canons of modern nations, their literal application to culture had debatable consequences in the long run. One of them was the gradual development of an aesthetic mindset at the expense of the civic, cultural, and political one; the replacement of life-values with aesthetic ones, of civic action with
aesthetic resistance. During its use as a strategy for surviving hard times, the autonomy of
the aesthetic principle ended up becoming a self-sufficient and exclusive aestheticism.

From the vantage-point of a critic who left Romania in the 1970s and was
professor at the University of Amsterdam, Alexandrescu applies to Romanian literature
Western expectations. His emphasis on a largely cultural mindset and his urge to break
away from modernity and its dependency on the aesthetic paradigm are related to his
evolution in a normal, democratic Western society and also to a theoretical suspicion
against transcendental categories and myths.

Inasmuch as an aesthetic mindset is the reflex of an exaggerated outgrowth and
mythization of a concept ambiguous and expandable enough to take up the role of
universal substitute, Alexandrescu’s reaction is the reflex of a certain kind of cultural
criticism, defined by suspicion toward anything metaphysical and also by a strong
interest in the ethical, social, and political aspects of literature. The alternative canon he
pleads for in his articles is therefore a largely cultural one, inclusive enough to tolerate
the aesthetic, though only as one among many criteria of evaluation.

**Aesthetic and Est-ethic Criticism**

By 2005, the direction illustrated by Alexandrescu is no longer a novelty in
Romania; on the contrary, it represents one of the defining tendencies, which has given
birth to productive polemics centered on notions of rereading, revision, re-assessment,
modification, and enlargement of the canon. A task which was relegated to critics in exile
during communism, the *est-ethic* reading of literature, as defined by Monica Lovinescu
has taken precedence now, when the most influential critical books are dedicated to an
ethical recontextualization of a literature valued before 1989 mostly for its aesthetic qualities.

The phenomenon is so powerful that apart from critics of younger generations who naturally claim an all-inclusive re-reading and re-hierarchization, influential theorists like Mircea Martin, Nicolae Manolescu, Eugen Negrici, and Gheorghe Grigurcu have become engaged in this process themselves. Over the past years, Martin took up the task of writing comprehensive studies about nationalism and communism and aesthetics, while Negrici published two volumes of a re-written history of contemporary literature. Meanwhile, Manolescu, the father figure of the Romanian contemporary canon prepares his monumental project of the *Critical History of Romanian Literature from Its Origins to the Present*. Whether the results and especially the modifications and reversal of hierarchies in the canon will be spectacular is a different matter. Most probably, in the process, the canon itself will be changed, as Sorin Alexandrescu and others insightfully suggested. The change will come as a result not only of the inner pressure of Romanian culture that is undertaking a process of deep modification itself, but also from the interaction of all these critics, and even more of their younger colleagues, with the contemporary tendencies from the U.S. and Europe.

Given the current interest of criticism in broadening the literary approach into multi- and cross-cultural, global studies that pay attention to the social and political dimensions of texts, sometimes even at the expense of formal, aesthetic analyses, the *esthetic* component of post-communist studies cannot be felt but as a natural development. Under such circumstances, it is but a natural course to integrate stylistic analysis with the interest in the moral dimensions of texts. This approach is even more justified in the case
of texts produced under totalitarian conditions and read mostly through the lenses of pre-1989 general aestheticization. In this sense Gheorghe Grigurcu notes:

This most-blamed and often mis-presented critical est-ethics is nothing but the application of the aesthetic criterion to a literature produced under the unfavorable historical conditions of forced communization of [East Central] Europe, which led to the deviation of literary creation, to its ideological and propagandistic misappropriation. (my translation, “Orice formă de oportunism...” 3)

With this new conceptual clarification, the impressive intertwining and overlapping range of shades contained in the general term of *aesthetics* in East Central European literature during communism becomes more evident. What I have tried to present in this chapter as a back-and-forth movement between “purely” aesthetic ideas and explicitly ethical ones are the multi-faceted texts, which combine in different degrees “ethical” and “aesthetic” concerns.

Apart from the texts seconded by the exemplary political attitudes of their dissident authors, there is a large number of books that reveal an interesting *aesthetic/est-ethic* due to their aesthetic qualities and less to the civic attitude of their authors. Moreover, there are books of marginal authors that seem to have completely escaped this occasionally burdensome dialectic of the age. This emphatic ethic/moral preoccupation of East Central European literature and criticism between the 1960s and 1980s is its specific note and contribution to the 20th century theories of literature.

Judging from examples like Havel, Michnik, Konrad, or Goma, one can even say that though literature can never quite start revolutions by itself, it can definitely act as a mediator between various categories of people who otherwise have little chances of communicating and can inspire them toward a common goal. Moreover, when doubled by a courageous political stance or even by heroic actions on the part of its authors, it can
take on an inspirational role, not far from that envisaged by the Romantics. This conclusion is hardly unexpected, if one considers that apart from the few notable modernist exceptions of “art for art’s sake” and “autonomy of the aesthetic” theories, most of its authors and receptors have attributed to literature a quite significant social role. After all, who can deny that for the East Central European countries “reactionary” aesthetics was the means of preserving contact with and even bringing a contribution to what we call, for better or worse, Western civilization?

The recent, renewed influence of socially, politically, ethnically aware critical paradigms that tend to be globally embraced marks a clear ethical leaning of theories about literature. Could this mean that we are on the brink of redefining literature itself, now that most canonical rules have been reshaped? Does aesthetic theory as professed until the 1980s have any bearing on the literary field today, and if so, what are the shapes and forms of this aesthetics now?

Endnotes:

1 According to N. Steinhardt, a Romanian author who became famous after 1989 when Jurnalul fericirii (Diary of Happiness), his prison memoirs, was published, there are four possible ways to respond to a totalitarian milieu: the mystical solution of faith, the utter self-denial by the prisoner of his own existence and human rights (this solution is invoked by Solzhenitsyn in Gulag Archipelago), the utter un-adjustment to the rules of the regime by a conscious cultivation of a self-marginalizing, self-deprecating behavior (becoming a beggar, an extravagant individual) or, ultimately the so-called Winston Churchill and Vladimir Bukovski one: in a tyrannical system instead of giving up, one feels and cultivates the impulse to fight, to survive, to celebrate life against all odds. Jurnalul fericirii, București: Humanitas Publishing House, 1991, 7.

2 It is generally accepted that East Central Europe fully contributed to the European culture, at least since the 19th century, with authors such as Freud, Rilke, Kafka and also composers like Schoenberg, Bela Bartok, Mahler, etc.

3 However, as Kundera himself points out, these historical and cultural bonds were not strong enough in the eyes of the Western half of Europe which, after World War II, seemed to have lightheartedly abandoned its “other,” Eastern half.

5 “Since 1945 Central Europe is the place where the European drama unfolds. The Hungarian Revolution from 1956, the Prague Spring and the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the Polish rebellions in 1956, 1968, 1970: this is a Western drama, the drama of a kidnapped, deported, brainwashed Western civilization, which persists in defending its identity” (“Tragedy” 212).

6 The proceedings of this early post-communist meeting, intended to disentangle and, in certain cases, demystify the multifarious meanings of the concept of Central Europe were published in Cross-Currents 10 (1991).

7 Kundera refers specifically to “Literarni Noviny” (Literary Journal) which played a great role in Czechoslovakia, preparing the way to the “Prague Spring”. The articles published in it were sociological, historical, political analyses, and art reviews, all written by writers, not journalists. “I don’t know of any other weekly East Central European magazine which played a similar role, or played it so well “ (note to Tragedy, 234).


10 This phrase gained quite a currency after 1989 when it came to define the ambiguous attitude of many East Central European writers. They defended the absolute autonomy of their texts, while holding positions in the upper echelons of the communist party, conducting official newspapers and writing propaganda articles, representing the communist regime as diplomats, and tacitly making the unavoidable concessions to censorship.

11 Dumitru Radu Popescu, Zaharia Stancu, and Nicolae Breban are good examples in this sense.

12 Gulag Archipelago and A Day in Ivan Denisovici’s Life


14 Gyorgy Konrad grants modern humanistic tradition a very important part in the process of transformation of Hungary. In this sense, he notes: “Modern East European humanism, which came out of the dissident democratic movements and matured by battling the strut, spasms, and hysteria of collective egos, has taken deep roots in our cultures, and without it Hungary 1989 could not have taken place”(The Melancholy of Rebirth; 18-19). Havel also maintains (without referring only to writers) that “the withdrawal of the intellectuals from politics would be disastrous. The values formulated during the odyssey of dissent remain as urgent as ever: transparency of human relations, trust, and dignity.” (164)

15 The two best known cases of such collaboration are Charter 77 and Solidarity. In this context, it is worth noting that the Polish movement also benefited from the strong support of the Catholic Church. For details see Timothy Garton Ash, The Polish Revolution, third edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 2002.
The workers’ movements with the most public impact (and even so quite limited) were the strikes of miners from Jiu’s Valley in 1977 and the workers from Brasov’s factories in 1987.


“In Romania, the dissidence was an exception. Our resistance was present when it did not exist in the other satellite countries and it ended just as it started with our neighboring countries. We fought and died in the Carpathian mountains as the West was blind and deaf, soaking in its victory and forgetting its hostages. From the prisons where our Elite was destroyed came out in the 1960’s only the shadows of our earlier determination. Three successive waves of terror – 1948, 1952 and 1958 had drained the collective organism. We caved in a quasi-total silence. We sacrificed ourselves for nothing. With this sense of utter uselessness emerged from jails most of the survivors, some of whom, whilst “free”, remained at the beck and call of the Securitate.” (“La apa Vavilonului 1960-1980”, Vol 2, București: Editura Humanitas, 2001)

Sorin Alexandrescu in “Pentru un mai grabnic sfîrșit al canonului estetic” (For a Sooner Demise of the Aesthetic Canon) advances the thesis that Romanian interwar intellectuals looked up to the West and preferred to follow the refinement of its aesthetic modernism instead of its egalitarian social modernity. (p. 153)

Ext-etice. Unde scurte IV; (Est-ethics: Short Waves IV). After 1990 the entire series of Short Waves anthology containing her broadcasts for Teze and antiteze la Paris (Theses and Anti-theses from Paris) and Actualitatea culturala romanesca (Contemporary Romanian Cultural Life) was published by the Romanian publishing House, Humanitas. Ext-ethics is the fourth volume in the series.

Many of these courageous acts of opposition against the system took place at the professional meetings of the Writers’ Union organization and were fated to remain within its walls, had it not been for Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca.

Nicolae Manolescu who wrote literary reviews about Romanian literature between 1963-1994—approximately during the same time period as Monica Lovinescu, acknowledges her extraordinary role in terms of providing a historical-political contextualization of literary texts: “The immediately perceptible limit of the critical comments published in Romania was that of ‘contexts.’ Nobody was precluding us to write whatever we considered appropriate about books, but we had big difficulties situating these books within the recent history that generated them...We did it sometimes, but indirectly...In [Monica Lovinescu’s] Short Waves there are many articles, which we could not have published in Romania, because they referred to certain events and the general cultural atmosphere. (my translation, Literatura romana postbelica, 3, 159).


VONS is the acronym for the Committee for the Defense of the Unjustly Prosecuted.

“On Evasive Thinking”—in Open Letters.
26 Eda Kriseova narrates the episode from Havel’s youth—allegedly in 1954-or maybe 1963 when he and Milos Forman attempted to write a screenplay about Kafka that Forman would shoot as a film for his class at the Academy of performing arts (FAMU).

27 Their fears are motivated by the fact that their older son, Peter is regarded as both an intellectual and a bourgeois.

28 The reference, never made by Havel himself, is to the language invented in George Orwell’s Nineteen eighty-four.

29 With respect to this part of his evolution, Havel writes: I began as a kind of working stiff at the Theater on the Balustrade, someone who lived only for his work in the theater, and was no more than a curious observer of anything beyond that. Thanks to Tvář I stepped outside this circle, without really knowing where the inner logic of the step would take me...When I joined the editorial board of Tvář, my involvement in the struggle for the magazine’s survival began. It was a period of endless debates, meetings, and arguments: it was my private school of politics (“Disturbing the peace” 77).

30 Yet, in comparison with the Stalinist measures reinstated after 1971 in Romania, to which I will refer later in this chapter, the environment of Czechoslovak, Polish, and Hungarian dissidents was considerably better.

31 The “Vanek plays” are: Audience or Conversation (1975), Unveiling or Private View 1975, and Protest (1978).

32 Marguerite is a young philosophy student, who comes to get advice on life from Leopold and out of admiration for him ends up offering her youth and love, which might save him from his life of incertitude.

33 This exact question is asked rhetorically by Nicolae Manolescu in his review about Monica Lovinescu’s Preface to her first volume Short Waves, published in Madrid in 1973. First he tries to recant the appropriateness of Monica Lovinescu’s principle of judgment when she claims that by ignoring the great obsessions of the communist experience—political trials, imprisonment, collectivization, and condemnations to forced-labor at the Danube-Black sea Canal—Romanian literature was just a literature of evasion—though the most “aesthetically” evolved from east Central Europe. Secondly, he maintains that it is hard, if not impossible to chose between having an ‘aesthetically’ good literature and having more public dissidents. (my translation, Literatura romana postbelica, 3, 157)

34 Gabriel Liiceanu (born 1942) is a renowned Romanian philosopher and translator. Graduates in 1965 in philosophy from the University of Bucharest and in 1973 in Classic languages also from the University of Bucharest. During 1982 studies in Germany as a Humboldt grantee. He is one of the most active members of the “Paltinis Group”. From 1990 Liiceanu is Director of Humanitas Publishing House (one of the best Romanian Publishing houses) and an active presence in the civic life.

35 Constantin Noica (1909-1987) Romanian philosopher. Member of the “Kriterion Group” along with E.M. Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Mihail Sebastian and others. Friend of Eugene Ionesco’s. Right wing sympathies during the 30s-40s. In 1958, 10 years after the communist occupation of the country, Noica is arrested along with other Romanian intellectuals and sentenced to 25 years of prison for hostile discussions and for undermining the “socialist power.” The actual transgression consisted of reading out loud from his text Tales about Hegel, whose French translation is sent to E. M. Cioran in Paris and of continuing the correspondence with Cioran. In 1964 Noica is released from prison and until his retirement, in 1975, works for The Center of Logics coordinated by the Academy of the Socialist Republic of Romania. In 1975 he founds the Păltiniș Group—a group of dialogue and philosophical training for young and gifted intellectuals, which meets once a month in his tiny room in Păltiniș, a remote mountain resort. Gabriel
Liiceanu, Andrei Pleșu, Victor Ieronim Stoichiță are among the best known members of the group which consisted in some dozens of disciples and hundreds of admirers.

36 As I already specified in note number 16 of my “Chapter 1. Introduction,” Noica’s utopian/atopic solution is still defended today by many—Andrei Cornea included, while also being under severe attack.

37 István Eörsi (9 years), Tibor Déry (9 years), Gyula Háy (6 years), Zoltán, Zelk (3 years).

38 Gencho Stoev, Nikolai Haitov, Yordan Radichkov, Vassil Popov.

39 Lubomir Levchev, Stefan Tsanev, and Konstantin Pavlov are the main representatives.

40 Two best members of this so-called pro-Krushchev faction are Iosif Chisinevschi, the chief ideologue of the Stalinist period and Miron Constantinescu, a Marxist sociologist with revisionist propensities.

41 This is the year when the arrest and trial of the so-called group Noica-Pillat takes place. Part of the group were also Arșavir Acterian, Sergiu Al-George, Theodor Enescu, Al. Paleologu, Marietta Sadova, Păstorel Teodoreanu, N. Steinhardt, Vladimir Streinu, and others (twenty-three people in total.). The charge of “plotting against the order of the state” was based on books by Emil Cioran and Mircea Eliade that circulated among these intellectuals and also on some of their own manuscripts. See the story of the trial in Anatomia mistificarii 1944-1989 (The Anatomy of Manipulation 1944-1989) by Stelian Tanase.

42 The exception is again the publication in Germany at Surkamp and then in France at Gallimard of Paul Goma’s novel Ostianto, which unveiled the miseries of life under communism in the 50s


44 Examples of such texts are Lucian Blaga’s Luntrea lui Caron (Charon’s Boat) and I.D Sirbu’s Adio Europa (Farewell to Europe) both published after 1989.

45 As the country did not manage to generate a strong and collective dissident movement, the defense of modernist aesthetic values was seen as the next best option – a codified struggle to keep alive the memory of liberal civic democratic values and even exert them at a literary level (Privind 134).

46 In 22, the 2004 cycle entitled “Între comunism și naționalism” (Between Communism and Nationalism) and “Estetismul socialist” (Socialist Aestheticism) and “Estetismul pardoxal” (Paradoxical aestheticism) in România literară.

CHAPTER 3

RECASTING MODERNISM AND THE AESTHETIC

The history of aesthetics is the place par excellence, where the subjectivization of the world occurs, or to put it better, where the withdrawal of the world that characterizes, at the end of a long evolution, contemporary culture takes place. (Homo Aestheticus 19)

Luc Ferry’s Homo Aestheticus, published in France in 1990 and translated into English in 1993, comes as a crowning to the “aesthetic mini-boom” that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the United States. Its main thesis is that the close interdependence between the history of modern subjectivity and that of aesthetics illuminates them reciprocally and also explains why radical transformations in the manner of conceptualizing one field triggered similar moves in the other one. If one considers the history of art as one of the most sensitive seismographs of the changes affecting the private and collective psyche, aesthetics becomes a genuine palimpsest of the evolution of modern subjectivity.

To emphasize this thesis, Ferry begins his book by recalling the most important aesthetic milestones that were also catalysts of various stages of subjectivity. From the Kantian to the Hegelian moment and further on to the Nietzschean and the postmodern ones, the reader is taken on a path that would eventually culminate with the contemporary “age of aesthetics.” Ferry’s perspective on the future of the field is undoubtedly optimistic, even though the last chapter addresses the problem of finding a ground for a common ethics in an atomized, aesthetic time when individual taste reigns supreme.

The book acknowledges the extraordinary individualization of contemporary criteria of evaluation and self-definition in the Western world, and attempts to see how
this process has affected and will further affect the functional capacities of traditional categories of Western modernity. The paradoxical situation of Ferry’s approach, based on the premise that the present represents a crowning age for aesthetics, is that it comes at a time when the effectiveness of this model of subjectification is bitterly contested.

According to Ferry, aesthetics, as a field that came into being only in the 18th century, when the ideology of modernity had already imposed itself, put the finishing touches to a view of the world for which the autonomy of the individual was less and less of a scandal. With the premise of autonomous domains of cognition and experience internalized, Kant took the revolutionary step of granting the sensible a similar status. As a human domain par excellence, Aesthetics, the science of the beautiful, the pleasant, and sensibility marks the clear acknowledgement of the “definitive separation of the human and the divine” (Ferry 28) and the beginning of the search for criteria that might allow the grounding of objectivity on subjectivity.

The moment is revolutionary and its consequences follow suit. By replacing God’s authority with his own, the 18th-century man asserts a paradigm of knowledge based on new premises and relationships between himself and the world. In light of this triumphant, free subjectivity, aesthetics no longer looks like a field of secondary and somewhat dubious importance, but becomes the central piece in understanding the onset of modern times and of their particular subjective, individualized consciousness. Slowly but surely the domain turns into the mirror of modern culture, which by its own titanic struggle for self-definition reflects the battle for the emancipation of modern consciousness.
In this context, the inquiries into the evolution of the criteria of beauty, taste, and sensibility that have structured the approaches of modern aesthetics, appear to be all the more essential as they mirror the evolution of the ways subjectivity and the world interacted. Moreover, looked at from this perspective, aesthetics becomes the discipline that facilitated the opportunity of addressing some of the crucial axiological questions of modernity. Among them Ferry singles out two that continue to pose a challenge for contemporary scholars and could hardly be addressed without reconsidering the aesthetic tradition: how to ground objectivity on subjectivity, and transcendence on immanence?

To be able to address them himself, Ferry restores to aesthetic investigation some of its traditional philosophical gravitas. First, he notes that modern aesthetics took root when people began to wonder “how to think of collective bonds (social ones, of course, but not exclusively) in a society which pretend[ed] to begin with and found itself on individuals and their rights?”(Ferry 25). Later, he makes the point that aesthetic questions about subjective categories such as taste, beauty, and the private sphere are as pertinent for an inquiry about modern stages of subjectification as any inquiries undertaken by sociology, psychology, anthropology, and political science. To study the relationship between the individual and the community, between man and God, or the bases for the foundation of individual freedom, renders no greater insights into the structure of modern psyche than aesthetics.

The Kantian, the Hegelian, the Nietzschean, the Avant-Gardist, and the Postmodern aesthetics mark key phases in the configuration of modern subjectivity. These crucial moments range from the autonomization of the sensible in contrast to the intelligible in Kant, to Hegel’s historicization of art in the context of a re-instituted
superiority of philosophy over poetry, and culminate in Nietzsche’s radical affirmation of
the legitimacy of the human viewpoint over and against all absolutes.¹

Different schools of aesthetics and various poetic attitudes, each of them with their specific accents and agendas, correspond to the Kantian, the Hegelian, the Nietzschean, and the Postmodern stages of subjectification of the modern Western world. To Ferry’s observation that aesthetics opens a window for studying the history of individuation and democratization in the Western world I would like to add that the category is particularly useful in elaborating theories of subjectification that might unveil the profile of East Central Europe. My premise for this chapter is that the study of certain categories of aesthetics could illuminate the evolution and profile of East Central Europe, in a similar manner to that in which they define the Western world.

Due to the fact that the “synchronization” of the region with the West in the 19th century was neither easy nor fully accepted by a population still entrenched in traditional modes of existence, aesthetic ideas in the region played a twofold role.² On the one hand, principles like the autonomy of the aesthetic proclaimed the necessary emancipation of literature, of the arts and, implicitly, of human subjectivity from the domination of religious, moral, and ethnic criteria of legitimation. On the other hand, the aesthetic, idyllic view of the world provided comfort and an utopian space of evasion when the everyday impact of modernization was too hard to bear. Overall, the field of the imaginary, and most of all literature, had a strong appeal for the full spectrum of individuals and collectivities in East Central Europe. Its role in constructing the modern identity of the region has been more crucial than that of any other field, with the exception perhaps of religion and myth.
To assess the multiple functions of aesthetic ideology in this part of the world, one needs to focus at least on the two distinct moments of modernity demarcated by the Second World War.

**The Second “Taming” of Modernity**

To understand why after World War II East Central European cultures did not take an aesthetic path similar to that chosen by the West, one has to take into consideration that in this part of the world 1947 did not mean liberation, but foreign occupation. Culturally speaking, what followed the war was not merely a censorship-controlled time, but a clear assault orchestrated by Soviet propaganda to ideologically shape existence in the region. Under such circumstances, despite the similar trajectory of the winding down of the avant-garde movement after World War II, East Central European writers had to fight the impositions of socialist realism and communist censorship, instead of experiencing the commercialization of the radical avant-garde gestures undergone by the West. With 1945, the literatures of the region enter a time loophole of modern history, which forces them into a regressive cultural age. From that point on their system of reference and evaluation cannot officially be that of the West, though unofficially it becomes so to an extent rarely attained before. After 1945 concepts like Synchronism, Orientalism, Occidentalism, identity, etc., acquired blatant political connotations. The communist authorities identified Occidentalism with bourgeois decadence while oppositional intellectuals saw it as a means of resistance against abusive Russification and communization. The Soviet occupation of the country violently interrupted the intellectuals communication with the outside. A period of absolute embargo on western models was instituted. (Spiridon, *History*, 68)

Unfortunately there are few studies translated into English that have assessed the consequences of this total break with tradition and history, and even fewer analyses have
focused on the crucial role played by censorship in the return to an aesthetic neo-modernism in this part of Europe. My hypothesis is that it was the particular traumatic and artificial break imposed by socialist realism that ultimately guided the choices of the 1960s generation towards a reconnection with the officially banned modernist tradition. As the cultural reflex of the democratic, bourgeois mentality of the late 19th and early 20th century, modernism was the closest symbolic representation of the ideology of individualism and freedom that these countries were longing for. Moreover, as a representative of the counter-culture, bohemian, anti-status-quo attitude, aesthetic modernism, even in its high modernist version, stood for the constant rejection of a prison-like society.

The return to and revamping of the modernist aesthetic was the East Central European way of reacting to post-1945 Soviet colonization. The implicit agenda of this movement was to preserve a connection with the values of Western civilization by continuing the radical modernist aesthetic tradition of opposing societal and ideological instrumentalization through experimental literature. Nevertheless, the resulting texts were not exactly a follow-up of this initial plan. Under the impositions of socialist realism and censorship, the radical modernist agenda was forced to leave a place for more moderate forms of discourse. Despite this “taming,” many scholars maintain that East Central European postwar modernism, which I will call from now on neo-modernism, still had significant adversarial potential. Between 1945-1990, at the time when modern aesthetics came under severe scrutiny in the Western world, its East Central European manifestations, not much acknowledged outside the region, enriched the profile of the specific modernist mode of subjectification with new facets. To better symbolize the
particularity of East Central European neo-modernism, I borrowed for this section the
title of Virgil Nemoianu’s book that characterizes the East Central European early
response to modernity as a “taming of Romanticism.”

Today, when the Western/American aesthetic battle is still unfolding, there seems
to be a good opportunity for the East Central European specific contributions to
modernist aesthetics to be finally included in the general debate. A significant number of
critics, to whom I shall refer later in this chapter, has already called for a reconsideration
and revamping of the aesthetic paradigm in non-agonal terms. The first volume of the
*History of the Cultures from East Central Europe* is an example of American, Western,
and East Central European critics offering a non-revisionist, contextualized, and
comparative re-reading of modernity. The non-agonistic perspective of the first
volume of the *History* is similar to those advanced by studies written from non-
exclusively Western perspectives that offer alternative views on modernity.

The positive, utopian function associated with aesthetics during the 19th and 20th
century, especially in its revived East Central European neo-modernist form under
communism, provides an alternative perspective to the Western conclusion of the
modern-postmodern debate. Instead of considering modernist aesthetics as a discourse
easily instrumentalized by totalitarian tendencies, the post 1945 East Central European
experience relativizes this claim and asks for a reconsideration of the critical function of
modernist literature from a non-Western perspective.

**A Counter-perspective on the History of Modern Romanian Aesthetics**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Romania was one of the countries that
engaged in the “project” of reconnecting to aesthetic modernism at the expense of its
dissident movements. In the following sub-section I will focus on the analysis of this mechanism of substitution experienced by Romanian post-1947 literature. Because of space limitations and also bearing in mind that the genre of prose could experiment less, being under a more severe and lasting pressure to comply with the requirements of socialist realism, I will limit my examples here to poetry and criticism. They were the main genres in which the modernist reconnection was visible and quite consequential in terms of providing an alternative to the enclosed official totalitarian discourse. Looking back at the actual ways in which the process took place, I distinguish two patterns.

The first although not the most spectacular or influential is exemplified by the mature generation of modern poets, who in 1945 were already well-recognized cultural figures. Among them three names are most relevant: Tudor Arghezi (1880-1967), Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) and Ion Barbu (1895-1961). Even though prior to World War II critics regarded them as quite different in their approach to modernism, their post 1947 evolution is strikingly similar. Although Barbu ends his literary career of his own will in 1932 and devotes his time solely to mathematics, all three poets are banned soon after 1948 for ideological reasons, having to do mainly with the modernist, non-socially committed, and allegedly “irrational” orientation of their writings. Arghezi, whose poetic trademark was the Baudelairean-like inspiration of his lyrics, is “executed” in an article titled “Poetry of Rotteness and the Rotting of Poetry,”\textsuperscript{8} intended to emphasize the alleged decadent mentality dominating his texts. Blaga is forced to interrupt his career as a Professor of Philosophy of Culture and his public presence due to the alleged irrational vein of his poetry, steeped in myth, spirituality, and folklore. As for Barbu, he is banned for the hermetic sound of his lyrics, which could not have served in any way the purposes
of inspiring the working masses and assisting them in building a revolutionary, new
conscience.

Had the revival of Romanian modernist aesthetics been left solely on the
shoulders of these writers, who were already treated with suspicion by the authorities, the
Romanian neo-modernist revival probably would not have taken place. Until the mid
1950s none of Arghezi’s, Blaga, and Barbau’s volumes could be found in bookstores or
libraries and none of them was allowed to publish anything at all. When Arghezi was
rehabilitated in 1953 he returned with a volume of translations⁹ as did Blaga in 1957¹⁰.
Their return took place in dramatic conditions: fired from their places of employment,¹¹
they had to collaborate with the regime unless they wanted to risk total marginalization
and even starvation. Later Arghezi accepted more political assignments and published
two “revolutionary” grand-epics: 1907. Peisaje (1907. Landscapes, 1955) and Cintare
Omului (Praise to Man, 1957), which brought him public praise and distinctions from the
communist authorities. His return to a modernist thematic and style did not take place
until 1964, when he published Cadente (Cadences), followed by Silabe (Syllables, 1965),
and Ritmuri (Rhythms, 1966). These volumes containing lyrics written during the 1920s
and also recent texts brought back many traditional Arghezian themes¹², while also
providing the obligatory quota of patriotic poems.

The volumes are symptomatic for the consequences of the forced coexistence
between the poet and the communist repressive apparatus. They manage at most to revive
some old Arghezian themes, but bring very few new ones, except for a more acute
preoccupation with death, explainable in part by Arghezi’s biological aging. Moreover,
his late acquiescence to serve the communist regime could be blamed for the fact that the
new generation of poets did not choose him, but Blaga and Barbu, as the models in whose company to return to modernist poetry.

Apart from ethical failures, they blamed Arghezi for the fact that his poetry is “too clear and musical” and preferred instead Blaga’s “lyricism of initiation” and Barbu’s “conceptual, hermetic texts” (Simion 85). Despite these reactions, one conclusion is clear: after 1948 the influence of this generation of poets was mainly a “posthumous” one and manifested itself mostly through the re-reading and re-writing of its texts by the 1960s generation.

This phenomenon, which I called ne-modernism, represents the mode in which after World War II Romanian literature reconnected with modernity.

When Nicolae Labiş published his first volume, *Primele iubiri* (First Loves), in 1956, the process of Stalinization of Romanian literature was coming to a close and the dawn of a new, more liberal era was being felt. Stalin’s death in 1953 symbolically marked the beginning of the end of an age dominated by the official effort to impose socialist realism as the ubiquitous method of creation. 1948-1953 were the worst years for Romanian writers, as many of them were forced to collaborate with the communist regime in order to maintain their employment or have any employment at all. For the young generation making its debut at the time, socialist realism or at least stark realistic depictions of revolutionary actions when peasants and workers were fighting the bourgeois were a must.

After 1948, the first year of the communist Cultural Revolution, the Romanian literary scene became dominated by propagandistic texts, sometimes of little aesthetic value, despite the fact that they were written by well-established writers. Mihail
Sadoveanu’s *Păuna Mica* (Little Pauna, 1948), *Mitrea Cocor* (1949), *Nicoară Potcoavă* (1952) are all ideological weapons rather than literary texts. The same can be said of Petru Dumitriu’s *Drum fără pulbere* (Road Without Dust, 1950) and poems that made the front page at the time, only to be rejected by their own authors later. Whether written by already famous names or young debutantes, these texts were the explicit result of political indoctrination and command and many were the result of the writing methods learned by writers’ at the so-called training factory, *Şcoala de Literatură* (Literature School), inaugurated in 1950.

Labiș himself was one of its graduates, and his first volume of verses proves that he learned his lesson well, despite his extraordinary talent for transfiguring most ideological themes. His ability to humanize the socialist realist themes with the candid and enthusiastic breath of his youth is one of the most interesting and troublesome phenomena of his poetry, reminiscent of the fascist artists’ “aestheticization of politics.” Although examples of such texts are few, their function as supporters of the oppressive communist regime cannot be overlooked. The same phenomenon affects the volumes of first rate young poets of the 1960s, who could not publish their books without paying the required lip service to the Party.

In hindsight, I would say that in terms of both the extraordinarily refreshing and valuable ring of his poetry and of his partial complacency with the political requirements of the time “Labiș is the club [in the sense of the forerunner] of a new generation” (Simion). In Ana Blandiana’s, Nichita Stănescu’s, and Cezar Baltag’s debuts one finds a similar propensity towards a cosmic union with Nature, a desire for absolute purity,
hope in reconnecting with the mythical, untainted beginnings of the world – all uttered in a passionate tone that evokes a poetry of initiation into deeper mysteries.

The inaugural tone and feeling conveyed by these texts suited the communist regime, which was looking for enthusiastic voices that celebrated the birth of a new era. In the early 60s, this poetry exulting the sense of an unbounded self, eager to recreate the entire universe passed for a celebration of the new communist era. Later, more explicit proofs of allegiance were required of the young poets, either in the form of clearly patriotic and “revolutionary” poems or in terms of their collaboration in propagandistic actions or at least newspaper texts articles. This ambiguous relationship with the communist authorities, called by its critics “writing with two kinds of ink,” led, in time, to a situation of complicity between artists and authorities that eroded the prestige of the former.

Despite these ideological impositions, the young generation was given the chance to express itself at a time when further liberalization was on the way. With the death of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Romania’s Stalinist ruler, and the advent of the younger, (at the time) reformist Ceausescu, the young generation of writers could develop its own message, while paying its dues to censorship and official propaganda. Given this relative freedom, it might seem somewhat odd that the authors chose modernist literary formulas reminiscent of Blaga’s poetry of initiation and mysteries and Barbu’s hermetic, surrealist style. Why did they not try…postmodernism?

Despite its light tone, the question addresses a number of levels of investigation. In order to refer to all of them properly, I need to clarify the specific profile of neo-modernism, the Romanian postwar aesthetic modernism. First, it is important to note that
Blandiana’s, Stănescu’s, Labiş’s and many others’ texts could not be identified as mere continuations of pre and inter-war modernism, despite their contacts with it. The return of the above writers to a modernist tradition is, thus, not simply a return, but a revival and re-writing. Despite the fact that many of the texts of the 1960s generation exhibited a Dionysian effervescence and vitality similar to some of Blaga’s early poems, after 1965 their rhetoric changed into a more meditative, reflective, and hermetic one. These newly acquired nuances were the result of the writers’ opposition to the optimism and simplistic language required by the official propaganda.

The reasons for this evolution were not only the poets’ increased awareness of the totalitarian reality camouflaged under the pretense of the communist “utopia,” but a deliberate effort to take refuge in literature, to secure at least this space from the catastrophe going on in “the real world.” With a totalitarian society as context and reference, the poetry of the 1960s could in no way simply continue where Arghezi, Blaga and Barbu left off, but it could try to connect with these latest precious signposts of Romanian free literature. A shared spirit of “endangered cast” added to the symbolic prestige of these banned and, for a while, strongly demonized writers, increasing the solidarity between the two generations.

The double affiliation of neo-modernism both with the interwar aesthetic and the requirements of communist censorship prompted contradictory reactions in the 1990s. On the one hand, the critics who launched and consecrated the 1960s generation based on belief in the (implicitly) redemptive and critical qualities of modernist high art, continued to stand by these writers. On the other hand, during the mid-1980s and early 1990s,
young authors launched a strong revisionist project. One of them is Caius Dobrescu, who in *Modernitatea ultima* (Last Modernity) writes:

No wonder that the “deciding authorities” were tolerant and permissive when it came to sanctioning a poetic language, which shared not so few common points with its own language: the total lack of transitivity, the erasure of its reality-reference and an implicit turn toward a self, seen as ‘the artificial double of reality;’ the disinterest in real communication with the reader, and the privileging of an unilateral and always ‘potential’ type of communication, in which the poet, well-versed in philosophy, astronomy, superior geometry, cybernetics, and Cabala was an absolute authority. (my translation, Dobrescu 85)

In 2004, observations of this sort come from critics of all ages. Eugen Negrici, a proponent of the 1960s (during the 1970s and 1980s) is engaged in a full-scale project of rereading Romanian contemporary literature in order to assess the damage caused to it by censorship and self-censorship, and he is not the only one. His conclusions might not be as severe as Dobrescu’s, but they do take into consideration the consequences of the captive mentality on Romanian literature.

Among the most interesting was the development of a whole arsenal of strategies of evasion and double-talk able to bypass censorship in order to convey to the public the fact that the tarnished values of freedom, democracy, individualism were still worth fighting for. The usage of such encoded language on a large scale explains to a certain extent the propensity for hermetic formulas (Nichita Stănescu), abstract vocabulary (Cezar Baltag), invocation of high moral ideals (Ana Blandiana), or, at the other extreme, of dark, sarcastic tones (Ileana Mălâncioiu) in Romanian poetry of the 60s. All these experiments with form were based on the idea that such rhetorical strategies would implicitly undermine the totalitarian rhetoric of communist propaganda.

In time, poetry adopted techniques of “defamiliarization,” of “making strange,” and abstractization. Soon a counter-communist mythology came out of these poems and
their language and a special kind of *existential aestheticism*\(^2\) began to be used and invoked as an implicit strategy to resist the repressive system. The more the official propaganda claimed that people and artists should rid themselves of decadent, bourgeois mentalities expressed in formalist, gratuitous, aesthetic experiments, the more such categories began to function as signposts of the emerging so-called counter-culture. The more the communist party advocated a culture “of masses and for the masses” the more the appeal of “high” culture increased; the more communist propaganda condemned Western modernism, the hippy and rock counter-cultures, and idealist philosophy, the more all these turned into means of symbolically opposing the regime.

One last but not least important reason for the exceptional appeal of the 1960s generation of writers for the general public was the sense that its works restored some dignity and freedom of self-expression to public discourse. It is in this context that the preeminent prestige of aesthetic modernism was born, and many of its idealist theses took hold of the Romanian cultural imaginary. The redemptive function of the written/poetic word, the transcendent power of literature, the capacity of culture to generate alternative, better worlds, all these modern literary myths became dominant in the collective imagination during the 1960s and 1970s, and mostly, the 80s.\(^2\)

One poet of the 1960s seems to be an exception to this pattern and implicitly help us address the question of why postmodernism did not appear in 1960 Romania. Marin Sorescu made his debut in 1964 with *Singur printre poeţi* (Alone among Poets), a volume of parodies that, in hindsight, seems to have announced an avant-la-lettre postmodern poetics. Yet, for his very ironic and parodic attitudes, Marin Sorescu was often regarded as a minimalist, more prone to engage in funny games and puns than in tackling the great
ethical and moral challenges of the age. Probably this critical misjudgment, but also the lack of public response to this type of literature, determined his change of style. The poems and plays he wrote starting with the early 70s abandon partly the playful and ironic game with literary conventions, and their language becomes more “brutal and objective” (*Dictionary 774*). This is not to say that Sorescu changed his style radically, but that he implicitly joined his peers in defending the great myth of the extraordinary power of literature, and thus chose to hail its ability to resist oppression instead of deconstructing its conventions.

Starting his career in an “unusual” way, Sorescu did not take his postmodern/deconstructive attempts further into exposing the fictional/constructed nature of reality and the mechanisms of power underlying sacredly held truths. If he “gives in,” eventually aligns himself with the mainstream literary flow, and retracts his modernist positions, it is because a playful postmodern attitude would have been entirely impossible and without any chance of public echo in Romania at the time. By contrast, a modernist poetics based on the theses of aesthetic disinterest and autonomy was seen as a response to the realistic demands of the system.

The bitter irony in Sorescu’s change of attitude comes to light after 1989 when he is among the most fervent defenders of the doctrine/myth of “the resistance through the aesthetic.” Many young critics see in his repositioning with respect to aesthetic modernism a capitulation to the mechanisms of a captive mentality.

More attempts to connect with postmodernism were made during the 70s when the *Târgovişte School*²² and poets like Mircea Ivanescu, Leonid Dimov, Virgil Mazilescu, and Daniel Turcea started to call into question and reflect openly on textual conventions
in their writings. As in Sorescu’s case, their experiments were regarded as mere textual
games that had little to do with “great” literature. This reception had clearly something to
do with the conservatism of the Romanian critical conscience, but it was also due to the
utopian conception of literature/fiction according to which these fields were destined to
perform a liberating function (and as such should not be “degraded” or played with.) The
fact is that even when Romanian literature took steps toward a more postmodern attitude,
canonical criticism counter-attacked and regarded such texts as “minor” exercises, which
in no way could compete with the already canonical modernist writers, engaged in the
struggle to re-conquer the existential dignity of literary discourse.

The attitude is not without explanation. Always on the defensive against new
restrictions that necessarily followed any politically critical movements in the Soviet
block,23 or the ideological changes of direction in the party line,24 Romanian critics had to
defend the cultural freedoms already achieved. The self-deceiving utopia of aesthetic
modernist literature and high culture being able to resist political indoctrination were
among the most powerful compensatory strategies at the time. Besides, they had a really
long history in Romanian culture on which I would like to focus in the following sections
of this chapter.

* * *

There is no doubt that given the circumstances, Romanian modern literature [and
culture, in general25] was supposed to generate an alternative space, something like a
sanctuary or psychiatric ward for “sane” people trying to escape ideological
brainwashing. The phenomenon was quasi-general, whether people chose literature,
philosophy, rock-and roll, science-fiction, or alcohol as forms of evasion. Still, of all these alternatives, modern literature and its utopian aesthetics had a special appeal.

Hugo Friedrich’s fundamental study about the structure of modern lyrics is extremely helpful in outlining the sources of this extraordinary interest and devotion to a type of literature that was difficult, if not obscure for the average reader. Granted that Romanian post 1947 modernism did not continue the avant-garde tradition and, with a few notable exceptions, did not engage in hermetic games, the prestige it enjoyed with the average citizen, ready to pay a high price for a volume of poetry, came from different sources. Despite the fact that Friedrich’s study focuses only on Western modern poetry, the detailed discussion of its poetics and of the underlying philosophical presuppositions could help the contemporary reader comprehend some of the reasons why after the communist occupation aesthetic modernism cast such a spell on East Central Europe.

According to Friedrich, the modern poem is a ball of contradictions meant to shock the reader in order to challenge his/her ways of regarding the world. By posing an intellectual challenge to the readers, most modernist works demand a radical re-thinking of their relationship with society, language, and their own self. For the East Central Europeans subjected to the socialist-realist experiment and constant brainwashing, a language which infinitely complicates its relationships with reality, and thus calls into question both its traditional and official representations, must have been a perfect means of evading the ubiquitous propagandistic discourse.

In contrast to the latter’s simplistic limitations, modernist discourse provides the reader with a good start in exploring his/her inner self. Whereas socialist realism recommends the exploration of “the typical,” modern aesthetics calls for the strange, the
unique, and the original expression of the purest and ultimate subjectivity. Whereas socialist realism asks for an easily accessible poetry able to instill revolutionary pathos into the masses, modern poetry offers idiosyncratic constructions. Instead of working to generate enthusiasm for communal experiences modern poetry emphasizes abnormality, self-centeredness; instead of boundless optimism – suffering, instead of down to earth materiality – transcendence, and mystical feelings.

The domain in which the total opposition of aesthetic modernism to socialist realist principles is most evident is their use of language. The concatenation of so many stylistic registers, and the explosion of each of their rules, create “the verbal magic and obscurity” which are at the same time “gripping but disorienting; fascinating and confusing” (Friedrich 3) in modern poetry. By combining elements of archaic, mystic, occult origin with intellectualism, straightforward models of expression with complicated ideas, balanced language with unresolved content; precision with absurdity, and insignificant themes with turbulent styles (Friedrich 4), such poetry provides new means of subjectification of the world, in implicit but stark opposition to socialist realism.

This is part of the reason why Romanian writers embraced this poetics during the 1960s and 1970s. A second reason derives from the actual impossibility of launching anything radically new, too experimental, or too dismissive of Realism even in the early 1960s. The postmodern idea of questioning the factual base of reality or of offering a privileged position to fiction would have come in direct contradiction with the theses of dialectical materialism and its deadly seriousness. With their creative future already blocked by socialist-realism or by censorship, Romanian writers did not have much choice but to try to re-colonize the past and take refuge in it.
Irrespective of how little communication between writer and reader such poetry allowed, and of how little grip on actual reality it had, any scholar of the phenomenon is bound to acknowledge its social role in generating an alternative mental space. Moreover, as I have already shown, Romanian poets, prevented by historical circumstances, did not follow the modernist program in its most radical points, so their texts rarely reached the peak of absolute hermetism and abstraction. At their debut, the poetry of Labiș, Blandiana, Nichita Stănescu, Cezar Baltag, Ioan Alexandru was rather an expression of their desire to explore the world, guided by sheer pathos, and boundless enthusiasm. Later, some of them, such as Nichita Stănescu, chose a more hermetic language and evolved towards a certain obscurity, but by then the public was aware of their political stand and understood their difficult language games as a form of discourse designed to escape political censorship. In a country where all public speech was under official control and intense pressure to condemn linguistic gratuity, aestheticism, and playfulness as “decadent” and “bourgeois” attitudes, the simple fact that somebody could engage in poetic hermeticism was seen as an act of resistance.

One could also understand the contradictory concept of aesthetic resistance with the help of Adorno’s theory of negative aesthetics. Adorno claims that art “can be political by completely refusing to participate in all matters social: it must negate communication” (Minima moralia, 207). The way to accomplish this is by allowing its inner contradictory nature to immanently manifest itself in the form of the artwork, which will thus implicitly resist commodification by the status quo. “True is only what does not fit into the world,” Adorno claims (Aesthetic Theory 93), thus instituting the modern principles of contradiction and un-assimilability as central to his aesthetic.
Yet, how is this ideal to be achieved? According to Adorno, one way is by allowing the antagonisms of reality to manifest themselves in the form of the artwork: “Form is, therefore, both the coherence of the artwork and simultaneously the manifestation of struggling forces within it. But unlike the synthesis of idealist dialectics, the form of the artwork is a synthesis without being a totality” (Hammermeister 206). It is a synthesis that lets non-identical moments be. Likewise, the coherence of the work is not in its unity; it remains open. Its form “is the non-coercive of the multifarious that nevertheless retains it as what it is, in its divergence and its contradictions, and is thus truly as unfolding of truth” (Aesthetic 216). In its turn, the unity of the artwork is “truly” unity only in as much as it suspends and interrupts itself; and “its coherence is not to cohere” (Aesthetic 202).

The paradoxical language of Adorno’s aesthetic gives the measure of the true complexity and contradictory nature of modern art in its non-mimetic relationships with society and the world. If form is not a deterministic reflection of the content, or of the concept, and language is far more than a meek instrument, then radical formal experiment could give the full measure of the tensions between them, while also preserving the multifarious nature of each. As such, radical art, whose difficult form requires of the readers true involvement and participative creative effort, could not become a self-indulgent, narcissistic, empty, and formalist exercise.

Moreover, the reward of this reading effort is the development of a critical sense, able to detect the falsity and inconsistencies in the strategies of legitimation of the status-quo discourses.
Inasmuch as radical, experimental art can hope to resist the attempts to be co-opted by the “total,” consumerist society that aspires to reduce everything to simple enjoyment, it will always reject the present state of affairs while keeping alive the hope for a better life in a better world. Modernist art’s utopia consists in its “no” to the present.

The society against which Adorno’s theory of art is directed is the “total” consumerist, bourgeois one, but the same theory can be applied to a totalitarian regime that asks of art to become its political tool. For Adorno the way to avoid such instrumentalization is by defending the autonomy of the aesthetic, the right of the artistic field to speak in its own terms about itself.

The ultimate conclusion of Adorno’s aesthetics is that while critical theory is in constant danger of falling back into ideology itself, art can fulfill a true political role through its form, which contains unresolved contradictions. With “the unsolved antagonisms of reality return[ing] again in the works of art as the immanent problems of their form” (Hammermeister 202), the artwork is a synthesis without being a totality.28

Nichita Stănescu, Ana Blandiana, and many other Romanian modern poets and critics, who are so harshly criticized today by the “postmodern” generation, implicitly, and, at times explicitly adhered to such principles and understood the “resistance through the aesthetic” along such lines. Yet, from the perspective of the engaged intellectual, this resistance through form alone could never be enough. As Monica Lovinescu notes in the 1978 “Preface” of her anthology of studies about Romanian literature29, such literature and criticism that approached the traumas of communist occupation obliquely and expressed condemnation mostly through formal means appeared to the Western world as escapist.
By the 1980s the principles of aesthetic modernism were converted into the only strategy of resistance largely professed that ultimately led to the general aestheticization of Romanian non-communist public life. This direction of Romanian literature led to two equally distressing effects: the lack of an “intelligentsia” and the lack of “great literature.”

The first phenomenon is responsible for the lack of “an elite of the spirit, which [could] become an elite of civic courage as in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Russia” (Unde scurte, 9). The second draws attention to the absence from the East Central and Western European circuit of Romanian writers of a stature similar to that of Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak, Havel, and Mrozek.

Yet, with Adorno’s theory in mind, can one claim in all seriousness that unless a work of art is openly political it cannot exercise a political function? Romanian communist neo-modernism, viewed in the light of Adorno’s negative aesthetics proves otherwise. The mechanisms of generating aesthetic value are not always direct, mimetic responses to the propagandistic requirements of a community, irrespective of how justified and well meant they may be. If political art does not manifest itself through content, but by its refusal to be politically and socially “useful,” maybe the terms of its mission should be recast. If “art can be valued only through its effort to escape the totality of form” (Adorno, 221), then its capacity to “bring chaos into order” could be the proof that it managed “to follow its own inner laws of development” and as such, that it fulfilled its mission of undermining the totalizing pretenses of the status quo.

From this perspective it seems futile to ask, as Monica Lovinescu does in one of her articles, whether it would be preferable to have more political dissidents than modernist writers. Nevertheless, not to address the problematic relationship between
ethics and aesthetics in totalitarian societies that compelled most published writers to negotiation and eventual compromises with censorship, would be to overlook a relevant facet of East Central European neo-modernism. After all, were these writers really free to experiment and, according to Adorno’s scheme, to capture in the immanence of their art the contradictions and tensions tearing their world apart? It is hard to say. In their defense, one can invoke the fact that by the early 1970s Romanian modernists of the 1960s had already managed to restore to poetic language at least part of its expressivity and naturalness, suppressed by the wooden tongue of communist propaganda. As such, they also opened the paths for the new experimentalists of the postmodern generation.

From these accomplishments to the assumption that by writing, these writers actually effected changes on reality itself, on people’s minds and the collective unconscious, there is but one step (maybe too easily taken by many Romanian authors). Yet what other option but writing did they have if they wanted to remain simply writers and did not choose the path of civic heroism? Could it be that in times of political crisis, writing just literature is not enough, morally speaking?

**The Tradition of Modern Aesthetics in Romanian Criticism**

Apart from its literary prestige, the autonomy of the aesthetic had a more general, cultural appeal in the post-1947 age due to its historical connections to the first attempts to define Romanian modern identity and steer the nation-building process in a direction synchronic with that of Western Europe. In a country where modernity was ardently desired by the progressive groups and seen as the solution for integration with European civilization, the struggle for the autonomy of the aesthetic came to be regarded as part of the struggle for modernity itself. The strong connection, and to a point even
identification, between the two is further supported by the fact that the same personalities played crucial roles in the beginnings of modern cultural institutions and literary life as well as in modern political reforms.

Titu Maiorescu was such a personality. Between 1863 and 1912, he was not only an important literary critic, but also a powerful politician and lawmaker\textsuperscript{31}. His fundamental studies on various aspects of language and literature provided norms for establishing the profiles and rules of each field, and as such, encouraged their modern course of development. His literary activity is doubled by a largely cultural one, influencing public education, language reform, and the process of nation-building.

Educated in Vienna and Paris and clearly influenced by Hegel’s, Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s philosophical systems, Maiorescu argued in 1867 for the specificity and autonomy of the aesthetic, pleaded for the professionalization of literature, called for specialization in analyzing it, and for the necessity to create theories of reception and great syntheses. His major contribution consists not in original, theoretical studies, but in a number of texts that draw the first distinctions between the literary and the cultural, the aesthetic and moral judgments, and which encourage Romanian writers to express themselves, instead of simply imitating Western models.

His enormous and lasting influence is a legacy of his role in founding and consolidating some important literary and cultural institutions. The Literary Circle “Junimea” (The Youth) where authors who will later become the classics of Romanian literature made their debut, the cycle of “Popular Lectures,”\textsuperscript{32} and Convorbiri Literare (Literary Conversations), Junimea’s prestigious literary magazine are among these. As Minister of Public Education, Maiorescu advanced a realistic, profoundly reformist
project of public instruction that consolidated educational institutions and created a basis for their later, autonomous development. During the years when he was active mainly as a politician – Prime Minister and Foreign Minister – he continued this project at a personal level by actively helping young writers and critics to obtain scholarships abroad and employment in various cultural institutions upon their return.

If we consider the tendency to secure the autonomy of various public fields through strong institutions and competent individuals as a defining modern attitude, Maiorescu surely engendered it in the newly unified Romanian Principalities. Even his most controversial theory of “forms without substance,” which advocated for moderate imports, followed by steady socioeconomic development, instead of revolutionary, radical changes—could be seen as a pragmatic, modern attitude (Șiulea 78), which promoted the idea of European integration.

Not necessarily an original thinker, Maiorescu’s merit consists in founding the principles of a general, cultural critique, which provided Romanian culture with guidelines to help it integrate into European modernism by developing, in an evolutionary sense, its own version of modernity. With respect to literature, his contribution was “the adaptation of a couple of aesthetic principles, implemented successfully by Western culture for quite a while, to our [Romanian] cultural life” (E. Lovinescu 262). Yet, this somewhat unglamorous “adaptation” meant the engendering of a critical spirit employed to dissociate aesthetic values from national, ethical, moral components, in an autonomous spirit reminiscent of Kant’s aesthetic philosophy. At the time, this was a crucial step in legitimizing the literary field.
Interestingly and symptomatic for the widely cultural and axiologic prestige aesthetic criteria will acquire, Maiorescu’s defense of the aesthetic reception of literature came as a continuation of his previous activity (1866-1873) of offering legitimizing criteria to many other cultural fields ranging from language, education, science, and law, to administration. When in 1885 he initiated what has been called his “aesthetic revolution,” by defending the aesthetic morality of Caragiale’s plays, the specificity of criticism versus poetry, and Eminescu’s radically new lyric style, Maiorescu had already accumulated a considerable intellectual prestige and had imposed a coherent axiological vision in Romanian culture. Nobody at the time could plausibly contest his views without offering, in turn, a different, full-fledged philosophical and social system.

For this reason, when Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea attacked Maiorescu’s metaphysical conception of art and criticism, he did so from an equally strong theoretical position: that of Marxism. Given Romania’s largely rural economy, its incipient stage of modernization at the time, and the radical, revolutionary flare of his proposed reforms, Gherea’s political ideas had little echo. The same was the case with his sociological and historical criteria of assessing literature. Instead of receiving a fair reception, his suggestion of a scientific” criticism that should combine genealogical, sociological interests with aesthetic ones was condemned as “vulgar sociology.” Maiorescu’s metaphysical (Hegelian) conception defending the double nature of poetry – “objective” in terms of Idea/content and “subjective” in terms of its form, won the debate.

In time, Maiorescu’s prestige became synonymous with the very inception of Romanian modernity in literature, politics, and criticism. As Eugen Lovinescu puts it in the monograph dedicated to this spiritus rector of Romanian letters, “Maiorescu’s action
will retain its actuality because it identifies with the very direction in which art, regarded as an autonomous field, has evolved. In Maiorescu’s posthumous destiny one could read the very formula of formation of the Romanian [modern] culture” *(Scriri 8, 261)*.

Moreover, notes Lovinescu, as a strong advocate of modernism and synchronization, Maiorescu was not only the head of a critical school, but of the most lasting and influential tradition in Romanian literary criticism, called the “four generations of Maiorescu’s heirs”. Mihail Dragomirescu (1868-1942), Eugen Lovinescu (1881-1943), G. Călinescu (1899-1965), and Nicolae Manolescu (1939-), to cite just one name from each generation, are the pillars of the aesthetic model of reception in Romanian culture, and implicitly the defenders of the values of modernity. With each of them, the prestige of the aesthetic becomes stronger, especially as a result of victorious struggles against traditionalist, nationalist doctrines such as “Sămânătorism” and “Poporanism,” whose influence in literary production today is only marginal.

For reasons that have to do with social and political polemics about the greater advantages of a modernist versus a traditionalist model, or a free democratic society versus Russian/communist occupation, aesthetic autonomy as exponent of a modern mindset and as a mark of the free world has been infused with wide cultural and political prestige in Romania. The various stages through which this process of empowerment and symbolic transfer took shape could be easily exemplified when following the destinies of the four generations of Maiorescu’s heirs.

Before beginning such a survey, let me point out, however, that the valorization of the aesthetic doctrine along the line of moderate liberalism is not the most common traditional association in Western scholarship. As Virgil Nemoianu notes the aesthetic
doctrine has generally been associated with theses of the political right (“Variable” 174). This association came out of the implicit elitist and individualistic tone of aestheticist defenders, when proclaiming “the absolute purity of the work of art relative to the surrounding world, to philosophical, ethical, religious, and political factors” (179), when emphasizing gratuitous, purposeless activity, and when showing “minimal interest in the political-economic realities of the surrounding communities” (“Variable” 180).

Still, this tendency does not exhaust the ideological potentialities developed during the course of the entire history by the aesthetic doctrine. As Nemoianu notes,

For Kant and even Schopenhauer, the aesthetic attitude was largely a moment within the dialectic of general epistemology, a logical part of the Spirit’s reproduction of creation of reality, whereas aestheticism is an attempt to apply aesthetics to the realm of contingent reality, whether the latter is considered primary or secondary with regard to the Spirit (or the knowing self). Aestheticism is a specializing and limiting process; it takes the aesthetic moment out of a comprehensive circuit and endeavors to set it up as some kind of autonomous structure. It may be seen as a movement from the particular-within-the-general to a particular with generalizing attributes, tending ultimately to substitute its laws for those of generality. (“Variable” 179)

According to Nemoianu, examples of this “subculture” are the Parisian Bohème of the mid-19th century, parts of English artistic societies in the 1880s and particularly the 1890s, and the George Circle in Germany. These groups hoped for the “establishment of a homo aestheticus,” living in a “utopian state of exquisite order, which precludes evolutionary change, as well as the suffering of choice and action” (“Variable” 179). To this attitude one can add Oscar Wilde’s claims about “life imitating art” and Walter Pater’s41 idea of “aesthetic existence as a superior, concentrated, more vital form of life” (Variable, 180), which perfectly sum up the aestheticist doctrine. Yet, confusing it with the Kantian-Schillerian position would be a serious mistake. As Nemoianu observes, “instead of a gathering gesture, a summing up, it [aestheticism] was a reductionist and
separating gesture, downplaying content and emphasizing form. It was leading the way toward the instrumentalization of aestheticist doctrine” (“Variable” 181).

Even so, Nemoianu wants to distinguish nuances in the activist aestheticism of William Morris or John Ruskin, who claim that the direction in social change should be aesthetic and T.S Eliot, for example, who says that “poetry exerts an important influence upon society by shaping language and broadening the range of expressible sentiments available to the members of that society” (“Variable” 184). To the long list of aestheticists, Nemoianu then adds thinkers like Irving Babitt, Paul Elmer More, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset, and the Germans Ernst Jünger and Gottfried Benn. Expressing openly elitist views and developing a philosophy of history based upon the tension between elite and the masses, Ortega y Gasset claims that “to be human means to participate in culture; that only culture offers security and clarity, and, as such, that it should be regarded essentially as a disinterested and redeeming game” (“Variable” 187).

For Gottfried Benn the world is defined by the tension between total chaos and total formalization, while art is the ultimate redemption, “the locus where existence can find itself, the sole defense against nihilism, and the universal pole of existential reference” (187). For Ernst Jünger, art is the formative principle of the universe and the principle of vital selection. Despite their clearly elitist theories, and their tendencies to universalize the aesthetic principle, both writers are anti-Fascist, right wing conservatives. As Nemoianu notes, their version of “universalizing aestheticism differs sharply from other versions of redemptionist-immanentist doctrines, which are also based on ‘order, unity, and coherence’ (“Variable” 189). In opposition to them, the former also
defends “hierarchy and diversity [which] promise a world that is coherent through its variety rather than through its uniformity” (189). All the above nuances are not always taken into consideration, hence the sometimes, hasty association with conservative right-wing doctrines.

Given aestheticism’s “neutrality, anti-historicism, desire for order, and elitism,” it often lends itself to pejorative interpretations. Its neutrality is seen “as an attempt to circumvent class struggle; its anti-historicism as an attempt to arrest development, diversity as an expression of capitalist individualism, and its principles of order and elitism as openings toward fascist trends” (“Variable” 190).

By using Lovinescu’s example, Nemoianu will prove that this is far from always being the case. On the contrary: “in different contexts the function of aestheticism is different: it is often opposed to dominant structures and regarded as subversive, hostile to established power structures, or revolutionary. More than once proponents of aestheticism (particularly in its less extreme formulations) have been found to hold progressive, leftist views.

Lovinescu offers one of these less extreme formulations of aestheticism. The principle he most defends during his entire career is the “dissociation of values,” the right of a literary work to be judged from an aesthetic perspective, instead of a moral, political, or social one. Yet, as Nemoianu also observes, this does not mean that he advocates a “technical-formalist criticism”; on the contrary, indebted as he is to the Impressionist school, taste plays a central part in his assessment. He also looks for the right balance between “the ineffable” and “the rational” moments of reception, anticipating thus, the phenomenological quest for the “essence” of the work of art (195).
Though Lovinescu does not see the critic as truly re-writing the work of art, as do Marcel Raymond, Albert Begiun, or Jean-Pierre Richard, he does side with “aesthetic,” even “creative criticism” at the expense of scientific orientations. But even in this direction he is a moderate, advocating “tolerance, competence, and hard work,” and most of all individualism.

All these values might indicate Lovinescu’s liberal orientation, especially in the rather turbulent 1930s decade of Romanian and European history, but his liberal leanings are more visible in the *History of Modern Romanian Civilization* (3 vols.), where he pleads for “synchronization” with the West through imitation. Inspired by Gabriel Tarde’s theory, Lovinescu states that “forms create their own contents and grow their own substance,” so that their introduction in a culture is a “creative, revolutionary and progressive action which will pay handsome dividends in time” (“Variable” 200). The lack of favorable economic and social conditions should not deter one from importing, imitating, and emulating “the forms” of more advanced civilization. A progressive ideology brings with it the drive to engender economic and social structures. By the same logic, literature and other creative fields could provide the path to social progress and ultimately guide social and political action, not vice versa.

Granted that this perspective on *aestheticism* is rather idealistic, its consequences are more far-reaching than this. According to Lovinescu’s critics, and, for that matter to many other critics of aestheticism worldwide, such a doctrine ends up promoting elitism, in its attempt to establish the preeminence of culture over civilization. At this point Nemoianu feels the need to emphasize the holistic, integrationalist nature of Lovinescu’s doctrine, based, according to him on the solidarity and synthesis between values.
Admittedly, Lovinescu’s writings are not entirely free of elitist overtones, which usually express a kind of paternalistic pride in the knowledgeable and competent, in the doer against the talker. At the same time, the literary group which Lovinescu led [“Sburătorul”-my note] was open to all – even to those without talent; one thing that seems to have been widely resented was the group’s sponsorship of women and Jews, who represented a large proportion of the membership. The point here is that for Lovinescu, elite building was not a separate problem, but part of a larger one; it is in the link between liberalism and the aesthetic that the practical impact of aestheticism is to be sought. (“Variable” 198)

One can discover Lovinescu’s liberal options by looking at his polemics with Nicolae Iorga and Sămânătorul (the Ploughing Man), a group which pleaded for traditionalism, sentimentalism, rural populism, and nationalism, or with Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea’s sociological interpretation of literature.

In his attempt to promote an urban, psychological literature, Lovinescu championed many of the leading interwar writers (Ion Barbu, Camil Petrescu, Hortensia-Papadat Bengescu, among others) and severely attacked ruralist literature, the mystical implications of the “Gîndirea” movement, Caragiale, (because he was anti-liberal) and Sadoveanu (because he was not modern enough). (“Variable” 196)

As part of the same attempt to preserve a liberal, democratic tone in the debates, Lovinescu rekindled Maiorescu’s heritage by writing a two-volume study about the first Romanian critic to defend the autonomy of the aesthetic together with general, democratic values like civility, moral values, and orderly progress. Given that in Tacitus’ footsteps, he elaborated a full theory of saeculum, the spirit of the age, Lovinescu must have conceived of his literary, cultural, and political views as harmonious, so that the inference many critics made about his aestheticism deriving from his liberalism, is not that far-fetched.

Nemoianu himself is an advocate of this version of aestheticism. Due to its “character of perennial opposition” and its reactionary stance against the status quo, such
a doctrine can never hope to become dominant. Despite its various militant, generalizing guises, liberal aestheticism can be claimed to be “a centralist movement that assigns itself a compensatory role in the structure of society. [Besides] the doctrine seems intent on preserving tension and variety on the social scene – which is precisely what art tries to achieve in and through its image in the world” (“Variable” 207).

The strong connection between aestheticism and Lovinescu’s liberalism/modernist view on politics can hardly account for the extraordinary prestige he enjoyed during communism as a exponent of democratic values. Literature’s preeminence as the only “locus” of social, historical and political debate during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s explains better why a literary critic and cultural historian pleading for synchronization with the West attained such status. The rest derives from the actual prestige Romanian literary criticism has held since the 19th century.

Due to the fact that most of the politically prominent figures of that century were either writers or at least published their views in literary journals with a wide audience, literary criticism “served as an important locus for debating national options” (“Variable”197). Moreover, in Romania, certain versions of literature and culture were in the avant-garde of modernization with their plea for synchronization with the Western world, which anticipated the politicians’ decisions. Also, for almost two hundred years Romanian sociopolitical debate was shaped by texts of literary critics, many times according to the insights of aesthetic philosophy. A late example of this aestheticist dominance of Romanian socio-political life was Lovinescu himself.

The time period starting in 1960s had its own reasons for cherishing and sometimes over-estimating the social significance of the aesthetic doctrine. Even more
than during democratic years, the totalitarian regime implicitly encouraged the flourishing of compensatory, marginal artistic movements. At the time very few scholars foresaw the widening of what was left and tolerated of the interwar aesthetic movement to the entire society to the level of a national strategy of salvation, tacit resistance, and even defense of democratic values. Though such generalized aestheticism had never been a major trend in Romanian criticism, its sociopolitical liberal affiliations were well known by the 1960s authors. With the communist occupation Romanian aestheticism took on a whole new set of functions, associated more than ever with liberal, democratic, and modern values. Along these lines one may count the appearance of a certain militancy of marginality, which has never been part of Romanian aesthetic doctrine as professed by Maiorescu and E. Lovinescu.

The first thing to note about the fourth generation of Maiorescu’s heirs, is that by the 1960s, when Nicolae Manolescu (1939), Eugen Simion (1933), and Mircea Martin (1940) entered the literary scene, the theses of the aesthetic doctrine were so deeply entrenched in the Romanian cultural mentality that “one was born with an ‘aesthetic’ mentality as he/she was born with blue eyes” (Martin). What this meant was a clear allegiance to values such as freedom of expression, the right to analyze a literary work in its own terms, and, implicitly the right to promote banned values through literary works and debates. As such, from early on literary criticism became involved in a strenuous negotiating process with the official propaganda/censorship. Mircea Martin details its working steps in his survey of the sociopolitical functions of aestheticism during communism,46 “Estetismul socialist” (Socialist Aestheticism):

Since Marxist philosophical background was a “must” of any theoretical or literary endeavor, writers of the time strategically insisted on portraying and
emphasizing the alleged all-embracing, global character of Marxist philosophy. The next step was to establish a false homology between this alleged totalizing character of Marxist philosophy and the totalizing ideology of the aesthetic, professed by many Romantic-modernist works of art. The result was that, in the long-run, this strategy led to the possibility of ideologically validating literary texts, which did not follow literally the dogma of official communist ideology. It sufficed for them at this point to bear a generally humanist message. (my translation, “Estetismul” 2)

This technique was neither the most orthodox nor the most heroic one, but in its own minimalist way, it found a manner to use the ambiguities of philosophical interpretation of Marxist dogma to the advantage of literature. As Martin suggests, this conniving autonomization of literature and the replacement of communist ideology with an aesthetic one was an important stepping stone towards a freer discourse:

Without any prior understanding, but as a shared reaction to the imminent danger of ideological intrusions, critics of all generations met in the attempt of deconstructing the thesis of art’s determinism and of preserving its autonomy. This strategy was a mode, even if unassumed as such, to symbolically promote individual freedom. [Under political circumstances which precluded direct anticomunist action] the only constant opposition against ideology in general was that of the aesthetic. It was in the arts (with the exception of film, which was more seriously censored) that the aesthetic function did not just counteract the function of official ideology, but it completely annihilated at times. (my translation, “Estetismul” 14)

Art’s hegemony replaces that of political determinism to such a degree that “the aesthetic perspective becomes a super-ordinating paradigm, imposing its own criteria of judgment in the wider intellectual debate.” Under such circumstances, Romanian pan-aestheticism becomes an ideology itself, an ideology whose power comes precisely from its refusal of political engagement. As Martin notes, “under the specific circumstances of the totalitarian ideology, this very aestheticist attitude, which generates its own neutralizing and implicitly undermining force against other ideologies, becomes, in the communist context, a political attitude (no matter how mediated)” (15).
Given the constant deterioration of individual freedoms in the 1970s, the aesthetic becomes the agent of a slow de-ideologization in literature and the agent of the only tolerated resistance against the rapid advancement of nationalistic ideas (“Estetismul” 4). As political science, sociology, psychology, and even history continued to lose their contact with the public due to more and more restrictions, literature, and implicitly the aesthetic, became more and more inclusive, and took over the roles of all these banned discourses.

With virtually no access to real historical information and no possibility of actual political and social debates, the civic conscience found a place of manifestation in and through literature. The field’s prominent role was further increased during the 1980s when the ideological restrictions on TV and radio programs reduced them to a single TV channel, broadcasting daily for only two hours, and two radio stations. As Martin points out, under such circumstances, there can be no wonder that, “In Ceausescu’s Romania, literature functioned as much more than pure literature”(13). Little wonder that under such restrictions, the aesthetics in 1970s and 1980s Romania comes closest to what Murray Krieger calls “the aesthetic as anthropologic.”

Reading today Krieger’s 1998 “My Travels with the Aesthetic” the existential connotations of the aesthetic, as professed in the late 1980s Romanian become clear. In response to Walter Benjamin’s and recent cultural critics’ claims that the aesthetic functions as “a respectable and ostensibly innocent front for reactionary politics” and “a surreptitious way of imposing Hegel’s all-unifying dream, fully realized in the wholly dominating, totalitarian nation state,” (210) Krieger offers his own understanding of literary organicism.
Before taking this concept to mean surrender to “the all-incorporating power of the whole at the expense of the particularity of the part,” and “of any autonomy to the universal, with nothing held out,” one needs to consider “the uniqueness of the text’s internal developments” (223). A closer look at the specificity of aesthetic language and structure will point out that the latter always tries to render the “particular as particular,” and thus creates “a language system that would resist the intrusion of any universal language from the outside” (224), the conceptual one included. Starting from its very definition as a field in between the conceptual and the religious, the aesthetic sets as its mission “to provide [us with] a perceptual form, a form that is pre-conceptual and through which we might grasp the flow of experience; grasp the particular as particular (211). The existential function of the aesthetic derives from this very attempt to render existence as it is; without arresting its flow, and more importantly, while resisting control by external concepts/ideologies.

Due to its inherent “thematic dualism” and “double” nature, and, moreover, due to its self-referential function, literature is able to resist the attempts of being reduced to simple, propagandistic, rhetoric propositions, and thus, to annexation by totalitarian systems. By undercutting “its [own] apparent illusionary claims with its textual or subtextual references to its artifice,” literature, when perceived aesthetically, “alerts us to the illusionary, the merely arbitrary claims to reality that authoritarian discourse would impose upon us – because unlike authoritarian discourse, the aesthetic takes back the ‘reality’ it offers us in the very act of offering it to us” (225).

Krieger calls this ability “the unmetaphoring countermovement” of the poem and presents it as the “self-undercutting action of literature at its highest moment of self-
assertion” (221). In the spirit of this pattern of interpretation, it follows that the power of the aesthetic discourse and reading come from their close attention to form, to the way literary language plays a self-undermining role and thus, “permits us to indulge in the semiotic desire for the natural sign, without falling prey to it” (228). The counter-ideological function of the aesthetic/literary derives naturally from this thesis. Due to its “duplicitous,” inclusive nature, the aesthetic can free us from the repressive dominance of conceptual and ideological discourse, from the drive to exclusion dictated by their monolithic claims. According to Krieger,

The sociopolitical function of literature in its aesthetic dimension is to destabilize the dominant culture’s attempt to impose its institutions by claiming a natural authority for them, and by using a false art (a conceptual rhetoric disguised as art) to create the ground for this illusionary naturalization of its claim to power. The aesthetic reveals the fraudulence and thus, the deception of this attempt. (“My Travels” 226)

The 1960s-1980s Romanian critics and writers did not believe otherwise. On the contrary, their pan-aestheticism and sometimes utopian belief in the power of literature to resist communization was based precisely on such theses, from which they, as much as Krieger, derived the conclusion that literature/the aesthetic “provide the cues for us to view other discourses critically, to reduce their ideological claims to the merely illusionary” (225).

In Romania, this movement of defending the autonomy of aesthetic values and the right of criticism to promote it started because of the political thaw of the 1960s. Nicolae Manolescu, who has been the principal reviewer for some of the major Romanian literary magazines since 1962, but also Eugen Simion and Mircea Martin, who started professing this kind of criticism more recently, made their debut writing about their peers and have continued to do so until today. They are the three foremost contemporary critics
who theorized the Romanian modernism of the 60s, while also relating it to the interwar movement.

In his thirty-one years of writing reviews that cover the entire history of Romanian contemporary literature, Manolescu established the canon of the age and at the same time became the benevolent patriarch of Romanian letters. In turn, Simion, in his four volumes of *Scriitori români de azi* (Romanian Writers of Today) wrote extensive and exemplary studies about contemporary authors, which contribute to the canonization of the 1960s and 1970s generations.

In their early stage, all three critics declared their allegiance to the aesthetic tradition of Romanian criticism, mostly by writing critical studies about its founding fathers: Maiorescu, Lovinescu, and Călinescu. Apart from presenting new perspectives on three major Romanian critics, Manolescu’s, Simion’s, and Martin’s monographs implicitly confirmed the modern, aesthetic canon imposed by Maiorescu, Lovinescu and Călinescu, and thus reaffirmed their philosophical grounds and methodological choices.

At the same time each of the three critics defined themselves as preservers of the tradition initiated by the subjects of their monographs. While Martin professes a type of *creative criticism* in the wake of G. Călinescu, and especially Marcel Raymond, and Simion claims Lovinescu as his mentor, Manolescu defends the right of criticism to subjectivity and “infidelity.” This is also the theme of his doctoral thesis, *Contradicția lui Maiorescu* (Maiorescu’s Contradiction), later converted into a book. Much like Simion’s study about E. Lovinescu, Manolescu’s text reevaluates the figure of the forefather of Romanian aesthetics using insights from of Sartre, Barthes and Foucault. The study brings Maiorescu and the aesthetic critical tradition back into the public discourse of the
mid-1970s, after two decades of marginalization in favor of Gherea’s sociological model of literary reception.

In the same vein of recuperating the main signposts of Romanian aesthetic tradition, Mircea Martin writes his doctoral thesis about G. Călinescu and his role in defining the cultural modern identity of the nation. Titled, *G. Călinescu si “complexele” literaturii române* (G. Calinescu and the “Complexes” of Romanian Literature), the 1981 study establishes G. Călinescu as a symbol of the creative trend in modern Romanian criticism and as a titan with respect to the national literary history. Profoundly aware of the lack of syntheses able to represent the Romanian culture in its dialogue with the world, Călinescu produces a monumental and “ineffable epic synthesis,” *Istoria literaturii române de la origini pîna în prezent* (History of Romanian Literature from the Beginnings until the Present). According to Martin this *magnum opus* brings Romanian culture on the cultural map of the world. The fresco of an entire literature, the text is still unsurpassed in its extraordinary epic force, which creates and recreates traditions, memorable portrayals of writers, and the Romanian modern canon.

Though equally indebted to Tudor Vianu (1898-1964) who practices a classical and serene aesthetics, Martin senses in G. Călinescu a kindred spirit and considers him as a crucial mediator in “synchronizing” once more with the Western critical movement. Subsequently, Martin published mainly theoretical studies, detailing the profile of a “critique of identification,” and of philosophical criticism “opened toward a mode of thinking of an-other” (*Singura critica* 11). His passion for “the diction of ideas” made him develop a style his peers acknowledge as artistic and memorable.
As students of G. Călinescu, Tudor Vianu, and Şerban Cioculescu, who belong to the second and third generation of the Maiorescu tradition, Manolescu, Simion, and Martin celebrate the aesthetic doctrine, the autonomy of literature, and even a moderate version of utopian aestheticism. Schillerian in its origin, the aesthetic pathos of these three critics will turn, under conditions of growing political pressure and censorship, into reading of literature interested mostly in the stylistic virtues of the texts. In the long run, the extension of this direction of appreciating the text for its stylistic complexities might have been at the origin and later success of textualism/postmodernism in the 1980s.

Interested as it was in textual games, Romanian postmodernism could easily relate to the post-World War II tendency of fighting the communist system through literature. Making use of textualism in order to expose the conventions of literature, political propaganda, and discourse in general, the 80s generation picked up the symbolic struggle with communist power where the preceding generations left it. The new series of texts published during the 80s in very small editions set themselves the task of re-writing the great themes of modernist and neo-modernist literature in an ironic, parodic, and minimalist key.

Yet, despite its revolutionary manifestos and theoretical support from critics of all generations, Romanian postmodernism as a truly irreverent and revisionist discourse did not come into being until after 1989, in conditions of political freedom. When this movement first appeared in the early 1980s, both criticism and literature were experiencing the effect of the turn Romanian aestheticism had taken to “textualism”: appreciation for style and artifice, excessive valorization of the text as one’s raison d’être, and the goal of a lifetime. For all its theoretical self-awareness, deliberate manipulation,
and exposure of textual conventions, Romanian postmodern literature did not manage to attack, debunk, or cause the demise of the communist system any more than modernist texts did. At best, this new textual strategy brought about an increased consciousness of the tension between “truth” as seen and transfigured by the artists in their works and that promoted by communist propaganda and censorship. Postmodern texts did not send people to the streets nor did they breed a race of anticommunist heroes by refusing the consolation of aesthetic truth, the maligned credo of older generations.

When after 1989 the postmodern writers started their inter-generational battle with the modernists of the 1960s, the main culprits became the aesthetic mentality supported by modernist aesthetics. These, allegedly, had succumbed to the easy temptations of an abstract, evasionist, trans-mundane language, ignored the grim reality of everyday life, and thus failed to fulfill their social role. The accusation was not new. As I have shown, Monica Lovinescu had already raised it in 1987, when she asked for a more active civic role on the part of Romanian writers. What both she and the younger critics ignored was that what they were asking in fact of literature and criticism was to fundamentally change/alter their status and become active, propagandistic tools for the anticommunist cause.

Faced with Monica Lovinescu’s and other Western exiles’ unflattering assessment of an increasingly “aestheticist”/formalist way of appreciating literature, even Manolescu seemed to waver in his conviction that the autonomy of the aesthetic was the first and last principle of literary criticism. “We have to accept, that in general, Monica Lovinescu is right,” observes Manolescu. In Romania civic action was indeed mediated by culture, at least up to a certain point…Yet, one needs to note that the emphasis on the aesthetic did
not necessarily lead to an escapist literature” (my translation, Literatura postbelica 3, 156).

The implicit paradox of this formulation remains unresolved, but had Manolescu continued, he would most probably have had to point out that the very idea of “escapist literature” was the result of applying to literary texts the expectations of an active political ideology. Ironically enough, the same term was used by communist propaganda and censorship to condemn the insufficient and inadequate involvement with societal problems of so-called “bourgeois literature,” and neo-modernist Romanian literature made a point of resisting this charge.

Irrespective of the different historical circumstances that made such a claim appropriate in a post-World War II situation in the Western world, while making it ring completely out-of-touch, when not slightly utopian in post-1947 East Central Europe, the legitimacy of such claim is not to be easily dismissed. As a field deeply engaged in expressing the feelings, the questions, the dramas of the individual in relation to the world, valuable literature has to connect with that world. An escapist literature would simply indulge in gratuitous games, which regardless of their aesthetic value could not be more than art for art’s sake, cynically professed in a time of crisis. But was this really the situation of modern aesthetic Romanian literature and criticism? And could it have been otherwise?

The answer to the first question has already been provided in my presentation so far. Beneficial or not, aesthetic modernism was connected with the country’s efforts toward modernization. In most cases, aesthetic modernism with its focus on the autonomy of the aesthetic went hand in hand with defending a pro-Western, progressive
mentality. To reread it now as a sign of a dangerous, escapist mentality that prevented the country from devising an active, social and political doctrine is to reverse decades of interpretation in favor of a radical militant utopianism, which wishes that today’s problems had been solved decades ago.

As for its role during the communist era, can the aesthetic doctrine really be blamed for not choosing the best strategy of survival/struggle and nostalgically reconnecting with a “lost/past world”? As I have shown in the previous chapter, Havel’s reconnection with the tradition of the absurd drama of Ionesco and Beckett did not prevent him from civic action. The claim that a metaphorical literature automatically leads to the death of political consciousness is at best an exaggeration. By acquiescing to the aesthetic principles of a past world, Romanian neo-modernist literature may have taken too literally the utopian principles of the romantic/modern tradition. By doing so, it also explored their viability to their last consequences, and thus offered a unique example of both their success and failure.

With the East Central European case in mind, one can finally say that the modernist aesthetic utopia has come to an end, after exploring most of its resources. The conclusions of this exploration are far from being as grim as the young critics make them look. After all, the radicalized anti-modernist perspective in East Central European criticism began to manifest itself only in the mid-1990s, after many of these authors were exposed to certain versions of ideology critique, cultural criticism, feminism, and post-structuralism in Western universities. The younger generation that pleads for multiculturalism was also the beneficiary of the post-1990 infusion of Western critical methodology.
The irony is that quite a number of recent American critical texts invoke the East Central European multi-lingual, tolerant model as a helpful infusion able to disperse the conceptual dichotomies faced by their own critical approaches. Caryl Emerson’s Response\textsuperscript{59} to the Ten-Year ACLA Report characterizes East Central European cultures (including the Russian one) as the embodiment of “multi-languagedness, heteroglossia, outsideness to oneself and thus a taste for irony, the constant crossing of borders and the absence of a tranquil, organic, homogenized center that belongs to you alone.” Her conclusion is that “all these Bakhtinian virtues and prerequisites for genuine dialogue,” which comparative studies in recent years claimed as their goals, have long been endemic to Central Europe (Emerson 1).

Moreover, looking back at the role the region has played in the project of launching comparative literature as a discipline, its contribution was fundamental, though never properly acknowledged. Referring to ACLA’s President’s report, Emerson notes:

What had broken the visibility barrier was not the languages themselves, and (except for the eminently translatable Great Russian Novel) not their classic literary texts, but an arsenal of devices, methods and rationales (such as “literariness”) for linking all literary products at some higher level, independent of particulars but made common, and thus comparable, by a set of universal constants. Alexander Veselovskij in the nineteenth century (just now being translated) and Viktor Zhirmunskij in the twentieth are acknowledged leaders in this effort, as are, of course, the Russian Formalists and Prague Structuralists. The latter two groups are famous for having worked out, in the 1920s and 30s, many of the ideas re-invented in Paris in the 1970s and 80s. (Emerson 5)

The time has come, Emerson implies, to pay better attention to these inspiring early theoretical contributions and make use of the “meta-capacities of the Central European mind: cosmopolitan, restless, homeless, a natural translator and hub; of the peripatetic, trilingual qualifications of these intellectuals, exiled (or self-exiled) east and
west, born of nations that adored the literary word but found themselves always between several cultures and unable to lose themselves in any one of them” (Emerson 6).

By cultivating the tolerant, open-minded, multinational side of their cultural tradition, within which literature played a major part, [East] Central Europeans could provide an alternative paradigm to the dichotomic, mimetic Western model, devised around power-driven categories such as major versus minor, center versus margin, and so on. Yet, ironically many scholars from Central Europe prefer today to employ Western imports to solve their inevitable post-communist canonical battles. By pitting a so-called modern aesthetic against a postmodern one, these critics are already close to the dead end reached by similar approaches in Western/American culture.

“Will their post-Communist Comparative Literature departments also feel the pressure of domestic equivalents to our ‘relevance wars,’ our Cultural Studies and post-Cultural studies?” Emerson asks. “Doubtless yes,” comes the answer, “although exact equivalents there will not be” (Emerson 7). Yet, can one hope that everything will work for the best? The current modern-postmodern debate illustrates the possibility that soon the region, in Western footsteps will experience all the major culture wars, while also getting immersed in the commercial, late capitalist mentality, which marginalizes literature. By framing the natural aesthetic conflict between generations and the ethical postcommunist challenge in the reshuffled terms of the Western modern-postmodern debate, some East Central European critics reenact a scenario from which American/Western academia tries to escape. In her article Emerson mentions the case of post-communist Russia:

At stake in freshly post-communist Russia was not the legitimacy of the national language itself, or the opportunity to advertise one’s own literary history,
traditions, and cultural heroes (after all, the whole world knows Dostoevsky and Tolstoy). Russian professionals sought the right to discuss these, and other, phenomena through the formerly taboo lenses of Foucault, Derrida, Blanchot, Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man – in a word, the right to practice in Russian journals what has long been the familiar binding gesture in English and Comparative Literature departments in the Western academy: a juxtaposition (and thereby a comparison) of disparate national works through some “transnational,” transcendent theory. (Emerson 3)

The result of this orientation is nearly catastrophic as it brings to an end the great modernist aesthetic utopia and, together with it, an age when literature seemed to have naturally found its place in the world. “Russian culture,” Emerson writes, “risks losing the exceptional status she enjoyed for two hundred years as the creator of ‘obligation literature,’ literature that stood up to the state and put poets in the front lines of the struggle for humanity” (Emerson 6).

The moment is indeed dramatic and marks the fact that at this point East Central Europe itself might need to reconnect with the first estranged, Central European tradition. Whether it will choose this path or engage, under mimetic pressure, in the critical steps already taken by the western world remains to be seen.

To offer some answers to the methodological questions of comparative literature today, I will discuss in the next section a model that rewrites the two alternatives mentioned in the previous paragraphs.

The East Central European Alternative

The examples on which I will focus are provided by of two Romanian-American critics whose journey with the aesthetic, in its East Central European and American manifestations, could provide a useful guide for the manner in which the two models interacted with each other in the past fifty years.
Soon after immigrating to the United States, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, Virgil Nemoianu (in 1973) and Mihai Spariosu (in 1971) began publishing articles and books that, more or less intentionally, became involved in a recontextualization of the aesthetic. What was internalized as an aestheticist frame of thought, a mixture of a mystique of beauty, a form of survival, and an anticommunist reaction during their Romanian years, became in the texts published in the United States an object of suspicion. A moderate, perspectivist, and even skeptical version of aestheticism, more comparatively oriented makes its way into their writings and gives rise to a new, dialogic model of analysis.

In comparison to the books they published under the communist dictatorship in Romania and under the invisible pressure of the overarching pan-aestheticism defining the intellectual life of the country, Nemoianu's and Spariosu’s American books show important differences. First, the keen relationship between modernism and aestheticism, as well as their subversive function, are no longer taken for granted, but challenged and even flatly denied. Spariosu's *The Wreath of Wild Olive* and *Dionysus Reborn* and Nemoianu's *A Theory of the Secondary* and “Variable Sociopolitical Functions of Aesthetic Doctrine,” address the issue of aesthetics in its problematic relationship with modernization and with the power-oriented mentality informing Western thought. Moreover, they confront the consequences of the struggle between the scientific and aesthetic paradigms that shaped the profile of modernity, and of the mimetic rivalry between Eastern and Western Europe.

In time both scholars question whether an aesthetic doctrine based on the primacy of imagination and creation can offer a way out of the destructive dialectic of power.61
Spariosu’s conclusion is that the best choice would be an episteme that acknowledges the axiological importance of the aesthetic principles (Vaihinger's "as if" model) and bases its blueprint of social improvement on the creation of fictional and alternative worlds (according to Leibniz's theory, which Nemoianu also advocates). In “Variable Sociopolitical Functions of Aesthetic Doctrine” Nemoianu traces the aestheticist doctrine back to its German, British and French manifestations and also undertakes a comparative analysis of its sociopolitical functions in both Western and Eastern European societies. Following the transformation of aesthetics from "a moment within the dialectic of general epistemology, a logical part of the spirit's reproduction and creation of reality" (in Kant) to a sociopolitical ideology, Nemoianu intends to present and defend aesthetics as a necessary “principle of the secondary” which preserves and balances the play of forces in the world and offers a basis for social harmony.

Starting from similar presuppositions, in Dionysus Reborn, God of Many Names and Mimesis, Literature and Play, Spariosu reaches opposite conclusions. His investigation of the model, going as far back as the pre-Socratics, unveils the competition for supremacy between philosophy/science and art as being deeply entrenched in the conflictive, power-oriented Western mentality, with literature reinforcing the struggle for domination between various epistemes. As part of this struggle, the aesthetic cannot offer any ultimate alternative. Its real generative power and its capacity of creating ethical values could begin to manifest themselves once the field assumes the irenic value of the fictional, "as if" worlds. The choice of a Schopenhauerian path over a Nietzschean one in philosophy, as much as of irenic modes of literary criticism, might eventually put an end
to the agonal tendency that has dominated the Western paradigm for centuries, even when disguised in aesthetic clothing.

Spariosu’s increasingly radicalized critique of a power-oriented mentality does not spare fields such as “literature,” “play,” and “the aesthetic” that traditionally were regarded as transcending the pressure of contingency. As such, his view departs from Nemoianu’s more conciliatory perspective that praises the virtues of a literary-oriented model when used within a liberal frame (as in the case of E. Lovinescu). The difference comes from the fact that Spariosu carries out an in-depth analysis of the agonal mindset and as a result he rejects the idea of a marginal status of literature within a power-controlled structure. For him, in order to accomplish its role of re-shaping the now dominant mindset, the aesthetic has to become an irenic, liminal category, free of any associations with a binary, hierarchical order.

Nemoianu envisages a similarly free space for literature, but he is also interested in the actual socio-historical conditions of its manifestation. In his project of reassessing the aesthetic from a functional, historical perspective he adopts a comparative outlook that takes into account both its Western and East European guises, and leaves room for concepts like the Central European ethos that bypass the East-West dichotomic and mimetic model. In this approach, he meets with Marcel Cornis-Pope, who since the late 90s became engaged in coordinating and editing one of the most important projects of reinterpreting the aesthetic history of East Central Europe: *The History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe*. As I will show later in this chapter, the book set as its task to reposition the region on the map of world culture from a transnational, intercultural perspective. Mihai Spariosu, who was also engaged in the early stages of the
The project saw in it an opportunity for true cross-cultural dialogue that would emphasize cultural intersections and the liminal potential of literature in the region.

The convergence of these three scholars’ interests and perspectives at different points in their careers, as much as their respective differences, suggest the possibility of constructing a model of evolution of the East Central European/Romanian critic, who escaped the communist world by immigrating to the United States. The significance of such a pattern for my study is that in its implicit comparative dimension it addresses the evolution of modernist aesthetic doctrine when transposed from East Central Europe to the United States.

Nemoianu’s interest in marginalized and “secondary” modes of expression are clear signs of his attempt to regard both cultural spaces comparatively. In his early books on the idyllic model of literature and the Central European version of “tamed Romanticism,” he crafts an explanation for elusive concepts like aesthetic idealism—the nostalgic Central European attitude visible in most nineteenth and early twentieth century texts—in terms of a reaction to the rapid and not fully assimilated modernization and democratization. This attitude, which he also calls "Platonic," is associated with the calmer rhythms of the region, which inherited the spirit of moderation and tolerance from the former Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The bloom of the idyllic and Biedermeier traditions in Romania as late as the mid-nineteenth century at the same time that Western Europe was under the spell of a high visionary Romanticism or a triumphant modernism (which nevertheless was manifested in sporadic forms in Romania) was the literary outcome of a mentality of moderation and tolerance that did not cope well with violent visionary or revolutionary impulses. Idyllic
and nostalgic, Central European literature attempts to accommodate two colliding worlds (the one of tradition and the one of modernity) and as such has the advantage of engendering a mentality of calm in a historical moment shattered by violent and contradictory impulses and solutions.

In the early and mid-19th century this kind of nostalgic, moderate idealism, which came into contradiction with both a revolutionary ethics of progress and an aesthetics controlled by high philosophical ideals, was the dominant form of Central European aestheticism. As such Nemoianu sees it as a regional particularity. Instead of interpreting it according to the traditional model of a national complex of belatedness, he finds its correspondents all over Eastern Europe and regards it as a major type of response given by all these traditional societies to the economical and social challenges they were not prepared to accommodate.

Even more unorthodox is the fact that he traces both the so-much deplored Romanian nostalgia and idealism and the rather troublesome utopian reactions of the young fascist generation (Eliade, Cioran, and others) in the 1940's back to the same pathology: aestheticism. The main characteristic of this direction of thinking consists in the wide extension of the functionality of the aesthetic from the field of the philosophy of art to the domain that can answer existential questions. Nemoianu’s point is that instead of attempting to address the issues related to the pressure of modernization in a rational, practical manner, the Romanian generation of the 30s succumbed to an aestheticist perspective. The doctrine that helped the country mentally accommodate with rapid modernization, under the form of idyllic and Biedermeir literature became a destructive force when turned into a philosophy of action. As he will make it clearer in *The Theory of*
the Secondary, Nemoianu believes that in order to accomplish its role as mediator, the aesthetic has to take a complementary part in relation to other dominant social discourses.

As early as Literature, Mimesis and Play (1982), Spariosu also points out that despite its claim to an inherent critical function, literature/the aesthetic can easily be used by a mentality of power. Moreover, the concept of play that the modern mentality generally considered "an indispensable cognitive tool [and] a fundamental way of understanding Being"(Literature, Mimesis 9) holds also ambiguous, contradictory values with respect to the overarching principle of power. Literature and the aesthetic, which have traditionally been associated with certain forms of playfulness by the modern mind, end up sharing an ambiguous and fluid status that no longer guarantees them unconditional moral superiority. From this point on, Spariosu's approach changes its focus from literature to the genealogy of play and mimesis. The dialectics of these two concepts summing up the two main philosophies of the field (literature as imitation and literature as play) compose a more complex image of literature, while also allowing Spariosu to inquire more deeply into its prejudices and aporias.

As his analysis in Dionysus Reborn and God of Many Names reveals, mimesis and play have often been used to reinforce a mentality of power even when apparently criticizing it. From ancient Greece to the present, the dialectics of mimesis and play has controlled the Western mindset in a continuous dispute for authority, which has translated into the cognitive rivalry between literature, religion-philosophy, and science. Consequently, the real problem that needs a close critical scrutiny – precisely because it permeates and controls most of the Western mindset and its discourse – is power. Spariosu's scholarship, which started as a theoretical inquiry into the status of
literature/the aesthetic and its relationship to "reality" and other rival discourses, ends up as a philosophical critique of power.

In his later book, The Wreath of Wild Olive, he offers an alternative to this prevailing mentality, in the form of an irenic, liminal approach to phenomena (literature included). Thereby, he shifts the perspective from the traditionally unsuspicious modern/Romantic way of understanding the aesthetic to a more perceptive and non-dialectical one. His recent interest in defining the status of criticism as an irenic act meets symptomatically with Nemoianu's interest in conceptualizing the functions of the aesthetic in The Theory of the Secondary.

Nemoianu begins by saying that literature "mediates and tempers the conquering and centralizing instincts of our historical species […] and protects the principal drives against themselves, allowing them to exercise a notable effect without destroying themselves or the medium that they seek to shape" (Theory of Secondary 62). Moreover, the secondary stands for plurality, imperfection, diversity, dispersion, digression, descentralization, concreteness, detail, alienation, the reactionary, the parasitical, and ultimately literature, corruption, subversion, and decay (Theory 173). This often ignored field is also the zone that surrounds the un-namable centers of our lives, circumscribing and pointing to their essence. By contrast, the critic “the principal” is represented by the discourses of economic progress, social justice, religious redemption, and sexuality.

Admitting that the Western mindset tends to favor centrality at the expense of the secondary, Nemoianu attempts "to rescue" the latter and to demonstrate that the relationship between the two is rather dialectical and complementary – the secondary, ultimately being the very condition of possibility for the principal. The multifarious
domain of the secondary is a less grandiose principle than progress and rationality, and a less important field than politics and history, being even posited in dialectical opposition to them, but as such it is the necessary condition of access to the essence and "the principal."

Being generally ignored or discarded as non representative, local, particular and digressive, the secondary interferes with the discourses of politics, history, and even science, and "generates its own cognitive equipment, which underlies, subverts and sometimes tames that of the principal" (Theory 186). The identification between literature and the secondary follows almost naturally from this description. Because literature is relegated to the obscure, inconsequential zones of human existence, it deserves a more sympathetic approach; one which is able to read and assess its specificity in connection with all other realms, without trying to reduce it to their functional principles. To engage in such an enterprise, Nemoianu believes that one has to sketch a morphology of literature and the aesthetic in which to map not only their profiles and functions, but also their transgressions. The most astounding fact about literature is its all-pervasiveness. Whether mediating between different human discourses and taming the pressure of the radical ones, or undermining their absolute pretenses with respect to truth and reason, literature/the secondary turns out to be a general matrix to which most everything returns.

Characterized by a centripetal force, literature invades other domains – from literary criticism to science, history and politics – and "softens, [...], corrupts and even swallows up"(Theory 184) their rigidity. The explanation for this overall tendency is "the aspiration of discourse itself towards the status of literature, that is, towards the
privileged enjoyment of liberty, self-referentiality, and a putatively inexhaustible substantiality as expressed in multiple meanings and textual openness” (Theory 185).

This optimistic conclusion is much developed in the two critics’ more recent studies, which fight the growing skepticism about the virtues and potentialities of the aesthetic model. In the context of his recent interest with defining globalization from a non-utilitarian perspective, Mihai Spariosu grants a quite crucial role to literature, which as a mediating, liminal discourse still holds a major potential for providing alternatives to the dominating power-centered and utilitarian perspectives on existence64.

The fact that in their texts Nemoianu and Spariosu regard literature/fiction as a condition for alternative, cooperative, irenic models of interpretation and living proves that the supremacy of the creative principle survives as a major theme of their work after experiencing various stages of evolution. While both these scholars started their careers inquiring into the status and role of literature, their recent interest in conceptualizing the place and role of criticism (mainly with respect to this field) and according to an ethics of creativity, points to a more intense self-reflective dimension of their late works.

After constructing a "theory of the secondary" that grants an indispensable, though adjunct role to literature in relationship with other human discourses (science, philosophy, and religion) and practices, Nemoianu feels the need to define the status and place of criticism as well. In "Globalism, Multiculturalism and Comparative Literature" and in "Literary History: Some Roads Not (Yet) Taken,"65 he pleads for a more inclusive type of criticism, which through its abundance of contextualization manages to come closer to the status of those works of literature that avoid the risks of reductive ideologies.
According to him "literature is a unique human resource: a medium in which images, discourses, potentialities are constantly being tried out," in a space "inside which teaching and action become possible and meaningful"("Globalism” 65). Therefore, criticism, in the form of literary history and multicultural, or global approaches should seek to come as close as possible to this status. Assuming that the "amniotic waters of the literary text (consist of) fashions and mentalities, giddy imitations, scientific hearsay, religious impulses, the grammar of sentiments, arbitrary subjectivity, hazy personal ambitions," a criticism which does not want to betray its object of study would necessarily have to try to emulate it. In this sense, cultural morphology or comparative literature as branches of aesthetic humanism are perfect hypostatizations of the above principle.

New Faces of the East Central European Alternative

I. One of the most recent attempts to find and implement comparative, transcultural modes of analysis comes from a project that regards East Central Europe and involves both scholars from that region and from the United States: *The History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe*.

With its first volume published in June 2004, the *History* offers a contemporary re-conceptualization of many aesthetic and regional categories generally employed in analyzing East Central Europe. One of its first merits is that it draws attention to the occasional use of an idealized version of a pre-World War I and interwar Central European model of multilingvism and tolerance. In the hope of healing the rift between society and literature brought about by the consumerist mentality of late capitalist society and of closing the gap between the modern aesthetic tradition and the post-aesthetic age,
critics identify Central Europe with a source of cooperative, “irenic”67 concepts. This utopian attitude of over-estimating the Central European model is probably no more helpful than the extreme criticism of the East Central European neo-modernism professed by the young, radical critics of each national culture of the area.

A historical, cross-national, comparative analysis of Central Europe between 1776/1789 and 1989 could contextualize the fluctuating meaning of the concept and its amphibolous profile. Such a study can be found in the four-volume History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe (eds. Marcel Cornis Pope and John Neubauer), which is in the process of being published.

Part of a larger project initiated by Mario J. Valdes and Linda Hutcheon, the book suggests a model for reconsidering the aesthetic/literary traditions of these countries from a largely comparatist and cultural perspective. The chosen title “history of the literary cultures” stresses the broad sociopolitical aspect of the enterprise meant to complement the stylistic analyses of literature in the region and points out the forces, historical contexts, and processes that have guided the reception, assessments, and social functions of the texts.

Conceived as a decentralized structure, the four-volume book was intended as an alternative to traditional aesthetic histories of national literatures, organized according to organicist, and thematic principles of the late 19th and 20th centuries (“Preface,” Mario Valdés.) The layout of the volumes follows a network of “nodes,” which are set to do justice to an area of great cultural diversity and to draw attention to the centripetal forces around which its identities have been formed. Politics is undoubtedly one of them and as
such the first volume makes its debut with a series of “nodes of political time,” such as 1989, 1956/1968, 1948.

As an international, comparatist, and collective project, published in 2004, *The History* implicitly answers the theoretical urgencies of the moment, among which is that of devising appropriate comparative methods for a region with fluctuating, multicultural, and plural identities. One method to accomplish this is by engaging the culturally specific contributions of various East Central European authors in a temporal, genre-oriented, institutional, and imaginary-focused dialogue that “brushes” the identity-profile of the region several times. As a result the single, overwhelming grand-narrative characterizing former literary histories is replaced by a constellation of culturally specific reports, seeking to find formerly ignored points of convergence with each other.

As a *historical* project, the book takes on a second major challenge in rearranging the traditional chronological manner in which the literary material has generally been presented, while also calling into question the conventional relationship between the two fields involved. With the historical narrative fragmented into temporal “nodes,” presented in a present-originating order, the constructed and interpretive aspects of historical enterprises in general become more obvious and easier to tackle.

Marcel Cornis Pope and John Neubauer take advantage of this opening while discussing the amphibolous identity concepts of “Central Europe,” “Mitteleuropa,” “the Balkans,” and “East Central Europe.” While the first “has helped many to associate themselves with the West and to dissociate themselves from the more ‘primitive’ or even ‘barbaric’ people to the east and south” (*History* 6), and the second pointed to a German perspective of the eastern part of Europe, the last is a less divisive term. Its value consists
in renegotiating a transnational profile for a region that has been the subject of both stereotyping by its influential imperial neighbors and ignorance by the rest of the world. The blame is not to fall entirely on the latter, insofar as the countries in the region have made little effort to define a common identity, while constantly advancing theses about their belonging to the Western paradigm. Now, in tune with the ideology of the enlarged and still growing European community, which attempts to erase the borders of various mimetic and ideological models, the comparative approach of the History could provide a pertinent identity study.

After decades of national, literary-centered histories of literature, the recently unified European world looks up to the multicultural, dialogic concepts promoted by certain writers, institutions, marginocentric cities in East Central Europe. A “regional” history focusing on a transnationally “imagined” region, instead of national traditions could more easily accomplish such a dialogic task especially when supported by heterogenic concepts like “nodes,” with their fluctuating meaning. Ranging from points of convergence of “crucial dates and date clusters” in political history, to topographical, institutional, and imaginary moments of crystallization, the nodes “acquire different meaning in each of our History’s five parts” (Cornis Pope, Neubauer 17).

The advantage afforded by this structure which privileges descentralization and allows for disjunctures to be represented is that “focusing on nodes allows [the authors] to interrupt the flow of narration and concentrate repeatedly on synchronic-regional perspectives” (Cornis Pope, Neubauer 17). The result is that they ‘scan’ the last two centuries of literary production five times” accomplishing a multi-perspectivist image of the area. The new “imagining” of East Central Europe has the virtue of emphasizing both
the similarities and the discontinuities among various national traditions in terms of important political moments, literary categories such as genre, movement, and period, and cultural institutions. As supra-thematic points of convergence the nodes are implicit points of comparison, enabling the authors to single out specificities of culture and region. The arch-point of reference is implicitly Western culture, with respect to which all these cultures have defined themselves beginning with the 19th century, and even more after the communist takeover.

Due to this theoretical super-perspective, the History develops an implicit comparison with the West, which apart from identifying points of convergence and divergence between the two, reassesses the potentialities of much disputed models like “modernism” and “postmodernism.” One such example is provided by Magda Cîrneci’s analysis of East Central European modernism, which reverses the dominant perspective in the contemporary Western world with respect to its fate. “Because of its specific historical rhythm,” Cîrneci writes, “more typical of a circumference than a center... as well as because of repeated interruptions in the cultural evolution of the modern period, modernity is still a central theme [in the area], a fertile obsession that has to be continued, completed, and consummated, simultaneously with its own critique and deconstruction” (26).

The conclusion sounds paradoxical to the scholar not familiar with the theoretical hybridization and overlappings characterizing the region. In fact, together with a postmodernism of resistance, East Central Europe also experienced a post—1947 neo-modernism of resistance, which transformed many aesthetic categories into implicit political tools. If East Central European postmodernism was “an aesthetic ideological
modality of surpassing aberrant political conditions, anachronistic social difficulties, and artificial cultural obstructions” with the help of terms like “pluralism,” “tolerance,” “relativism,” “anti-utopianism,” “diversity,” “global culture,” so was neo-modernism (Cîrneci 28). Its tools, surprisingly, were mainly aesthetic and their social function still remains to be discussed.

As for East Central European postmodernism, it also performed a series of functions, which might seem quite paradoxical to a Western audience. The most stunning examples are provided by Yugoslavia and Estonia. In the first case, the propensity of the concept towards regional rather than universal categories was used to support the nationalistic theses of the Yugoslav regime, in total opposition to its critical, anti-establishment profile in the West. An even more interesting reversal of the functions takes place in Estonia. As Soviet occupation was promoting tighter propagandistic official discourse, divorced from the realities of Estonian life and the national aspirations of its people, the general impression of the intellectuals was that they were experiencing precisely the “postmodern condition” and living in a world of simulacra (Epp Annus 62). Thus, postmodernism became synonymous with official, empty discourse, while modernist ideology with its nation-building agenda functioned as the subversive, progressive ideology at the time.

This paradoxical situation holds an immense deconstructive potential, employed in the theoretical and historical synthesis preceding each political node. By going against the grain of mainstream critical interpretation in both East Central Europe and the Western world, when necessary, the nodes relativize the meanwhile essentialized perspectives on various concepts, such as “nationalism,” “aestheticism,” “resistance
through culture,” and so on. Thus, the composite point of view provided by the *History* becomes an alternative to traditional modes of conceptualization.

Being familiar with the particularities of the region and somewhat immersed in the “multi-languagedness, heteroglossia, outsideness to oneself, taste for irony, and absence of the organic, homogenized center” that Caryl Emerson mentions in her study, the contributors might have something to offer to the current methodological debate of comparative literature. This might be the case particularly when discussing the emergence of new conceptual facets of various phenomena resulting from the grafting of particular East Central European functions on Western forms. One example refers to the formal postmodern features of “pastiche, parody, montage of ironic questions, deconstruction of narrative continuity, problematization of mimesis, the mixing of low and high styles, and the confusion of fiction and fact” (*History* 43), which have a very poignant anti-communist/totalitarian function reminiscent of Sartre’s “militant literature.”

This conclusion reveals that formal features of any given cultural movement have a potential for ambivalence and ambiguity especially when translated cross-culturally. Thus, under the given East Central European circumstances, they could be both employed as anticommmunist tools by certain writers and abused by the official ideologues. The same holds true for the functions of post-1947 modernism in the region and of many other operational concepts, which might have seemed entirely mapped until now, when their manifold nature came to the forefront once more. This situation calls implicitly for a revisiting of the conceptual basis on which many monochord, influential studies are built in the hope of shedding new light on the multifarious profile of most phenomena that we call by the same names. The integration of more cultures and traditions in a global world
culture will require an increased effort to recontextualize operational concepts that have hitherto been given hyper-significance.

In this context the “nodal” perspective adopted by the History is salutary. Imaginary-related, identity-based, historical, thematic, genre-centered, the nodes constitute a grid that recasts the profile of the region according to new identity concepts such as “hybridity,” “boundary,” “marginocentricity,” “multicultural corridors,” “cultural interfaces,” “imaginary communities,” instead of relating it to purely aesthetic or political events. Many of the articles clustered around the nodes are examples of pluri-perspectivism, which integrates the aesthetic reading with the historical, institutional, and sociological interpretation about the region. The result is that despite strong resistance to deconstructing the myths surrounding the roles of literature and the writer, both of them end up re-contextualized from the perspective of the present. The same happens with archetypal concepts that supported nation-building.

Temporal, institutional, topographical, and figural, the nodes refer to the “watershed dates that separate different periods of development,” “the social structures that organized various literary cultures,” and the “areas or locations that became the centrifugal disseminators of the imaginary and the centripetal centers of attraction” (Valdes xiv). The figural nodes consist of “historical as well as imaginary subjects, stereotypes, personified objects of great variety that galvanized ideas” (Valdes xv).

What follows from the interaction of all these perspectives is an implicit reassessment of various national traditions, which when placed within this wide comparative, cultural context, exhibit previously unnoticed allegiances to transnational/regional forms of the imaginary. These budding structures could further
constitute the starting point of a different way of imagining not only East Central Europe, but also the field of comparative literature itself.

With regard to the aesthetic, the History does not embrace a unitary position, though in many articles the much debated theses of the unconditional autonomy of neo-modern East Central European aestheticism are swiftly amended. Moreover, by emphasizing the constructed character of any history of literature, the book implicitly challenges the universalist and foundationalist assumptions of a certain Kantian tradition of the aesthetic, while opening paths toward a functionalist, pragmatic reception of the latter. Such a perspective presupposes a reconceptualization of the aesthetic along the lines of theories of the fictional and the imaginary like those developed by Wolfgang Iser.

The advantage of this latter position is that it places literary discourse within a larger, anthropological frame, able to bring to light its trans-disciplinary functions. Part of culture and of the social and historical web, literature is also the “privileged locus of interaction between the fictive, the real, and the imaginary” (Iser 34). While both former fields have significant bearings on all other cognitive discourses, including the humanities, but also the sciences, and philosophy, the outcome of their interaction in literature is quite unique. Chapter 4 of my dissertation focuses intently on this relationship. All I would like to point out for now is that the specific “functional feature that distinguishes [the fictional in literature] from its uses in philosophy and science [is] its self-disclosure.” Through this act of “pointing to itself as fiction, the fictive can best carry out its role as mediator between the real and the imaginary” (Remapping 34).

Through its multiperspectivist, transnational approach, the History implicitly thematizes this function of the aesthetic/literary.
II. An interesting, though different position with respect to the vitality of the aesthetic paradigm is offered by Sorin Alexandrescu, another critic of Romanian origin, who, after 1990 has been an influential partner in the dialogue between Romanian and Western aesthetics.

One of the best known representatives of nascent Romanian structuralism in the late 1960s, Alexandrescu emigrated to Holland during the mid 1970s and much like Nemoianu, Spariosu, and Cornis-Pope has been in close contact with the debates affecting Western/American academia in the past half of the 20th century. In 1990 when he returned to Romania, he resumed an active presence in autochthonous criticism after more than 25 years at the University of Amsterdam, where he developed an interest in Gilles Deleuze, post-structuralism, and postmodernism.

Additionally, during his decades of teaching and research in Amsterdam, Alexandrescu did not cease to publish on Romanian subjects, founded a literary journal devoted to them, and organized protests in defense of democratic rights and Romanian dissidents. After his return to Romania in the 90s, he became an active public voice, campaigning for the new, democratic parties in the hope of replacing the old communist activists from Romania’s political structures with democratic partners. Culturally speaking, his contribution is also important. With three books about Romanian political and cultural modernity, published in 1998, 1999, and 200069, Alexandrescu sketches a comprehensive profile of Romanian paradoxical modernization, from a perspective infused by poststructuralist views. In this sense, he thinks that, before any other corrections, Romanian cultural and especially general public discourse is in dire need of a serious de-aestheticization. Premonitory of a series of radically revisionist directions in
contemporary Romanian criticism, his polemical attitude toward the fallacies of the aesthetic and the “stifling” consequences of its utopia are not entirely unrelated to his particular situation as former exile. His reproach to the traditional canon is that it encourages

[t]he autonomy of the aesthetic from the political and the ethical, a definitive hierarchy of literary values, aesthetic references (mostly French); hierarchy center-margins, historical series, recurrent themes, national homogeneity, literary strategies in response to political oppression[…], and mostly in textual interpretations. Also that there exists one literary hierarchy, mostly aesthetic, to be established by the ‘new critics of direction. (my translation, Privind 151-152)

The main thesis of Alexandrescu’s text is that, though representing a salutary initiative in the 19th century, criteria such as the autonomy of the aesthetic have had negative consequences in Romanian culture leading to a “closing” of Romanian culture in an over-protective, utopian “literary cocoon.” Associated with modernity, this aesthetic attitude also legitimizes “evasive” strategies to avoid communist brainwashing and, for that matter, any kind of “power.” Promoting an isolationist model of interacting with history, aesthetic modernity leads to an “alternative utopia of saving ourselves through a culture understood as ‘our better identity’ and also determines an a-historical response to the lost battle of political and social democratization” (Privind 153). In the long run such an aesthetic mentality also led to the passive strategy of “resistance/saving through culture” instead of devising ways to actually fight for democracy.

In Romanian culture, the phenomenon is not new; even the most democratic society the country ever had – between the two world wars -- was dominated by “aesthetic modernism” rather than social modernity.

Its [Romania’s] goal to synchronize with the West, in Lovinescu’s wake, veered more towards Western refinement more than in its egalitarianism. Romanian
culture has been satisfied for a hundred and twenty years with the aesthetic canon because for all this time Romanian society remained blocked in the useless dilemma “modernism versus traditionalism,” instead of finding ways for a real and practical democratization. (Privind 153)

Reversing the traditional positive valorization of Maiorescu and “Junimea,” Alexandrescu blames the hegemony of the aesthetic canon on their supremacy, perpetuated by Maiorescu’s heirs,’ themselves truly prominent figures in Romanian public life until 1947. After that, “communism blocked any canonical debate” so that “taking on Lovinescu’ or Călinescu’s [aesthetic] principles created the false impression of the continuity of values” (Privind 153).

Alexandrescu disavows this alleged continuity based on its “outdated-ness,” its lack of touch with the actual social and political reality of the country. In the same way in which one could not imagine Benedetto Croce’s or Thibaudet’s continuous cultural supremacy in Italy and France, Romanian critics should not insist on preserving the absolute prestige of the aesthetic canon after 1990. Considered once as “the only alternative to fascism and communism,” [and, now as an alternative to the “new multicultural re-ideologization”], the aesthetic canon needs to be left behind if Romanians want to create a public space for free civic and cultural debate.

Alexandrescu’s 1997 position proved prophetic. By 2004 most post-communist Romanian intellectual polemics, from the debates about the canon to those about the inherent elitism of the dominant culture, and the necessity to turn to more “postmodern,” sociologically-oriented, and multiculturalist models of interpretation, prove to have unfolded from it71. As

Paul Cernat, among many other young critics maintains, the rhetorical question guiding current anti-aesthetic debates can be reformulated as follows:
Since globalizing tendencies, including multiculturalism, are now a historic fatality, [maybe] the aesthetic should give up its elitist segregationism and adopt its role as mediator able to prevent the parochialization of cultural institutions, and place into dialogue various disciplines and analytical methods. […] After all, the anti-canonic offensive affecting post-communist countries shares, among many important differences, many common points with that taking place in post-colonial cultures, while the deconstructionist methods used by cultural studies in Western cultures could be easily applied to the exploration of totalitarian memory. (my translation, “Dincolo de canonul estetic” 5)

The position marks the “beginning of the end” for the aesthetic paradigm in Romanian culture, as much as it signals the entering of the country into a new era, in which the opposition between Eastern and Western Europe will soon be considered irrelevant. Whether Romania will manage to solve its long-term problems with modernization and finally break with its unhappy conscience of modernity, remains to be seen. Given the dynamics of the age, which calls for the enlargement of the European Union, one is led to believe that the solution is just around the corner. Yet, as many analysts have already shown, Romania’s incomplete, twisted modernization could lead to many unforeseen problems and to a more difficult than predicted “leap into the future.”72

At this point the question is: has Romanian society and culture arrived at the stage of a fundamentally post-modern mentality? What characteristics of this so-called “postmodernity” does one have in mind? Jameson’s “late capitalism,” Fukkuyama’s “end of history,” or the human and minority rights’ activists’ “postcolonial,” “multicultural,” profoundly egalitarian and politically-correct society?

These questions are for the most part purely theoretical, if not plainly rhetorical. After all, due to its long and “unfinished battles with modernity” (Cornis-Pope), Romanian culture is quite familiar with the tradition of borrowing its ideology mimoetically from the West and then creating its supporting social structure. As has been
advocated by Eugen Lovinescu and practiced so many times before, starting with the 1848 modern Revolution, this course of action is not new to Romanian social utopists and revolutionaries. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the necessity of a fair judgment of the aesthetic tradition, from outside the projections of a utopian future, especially when the mimetic model has often been condemned, most recently by the very advocates of revisionist criticism.\textsuperscript{73}

The irony of the analysis postmodern critics apply to it is that they ignore their own imposition on the concept of a supra-semantic sense and utopian expectations. In the same way in which during communism critics like Eugen Simion, Nicolae Manolescu, Mircea Martin, and others applied an idealizing veil to terms like “modernist” and “aesthetic,“\textsuperscript{74} the young critics from the 80s and 90s generations, deny neo-modernist literature any positive utopian function. Their reaction is the result of an exclusively functional, pragmatic perspective, inspired by the ideology critique of the Frankfurt School and cultural criticism.\textsuperscript{75}

As such, their approaches not only cannot tolerate the substitution of existence by aestheticism and the preeminence of the aesthetic as utopia, but also demand of literature that it be steeped in a feminist, neo-Marxist, Foucaultian revolutionary ideology at the same time that the Western world was so.

Such approaches radicalize Monica Lovinescu’s stance, which has always been that of a “contextual aesthetic” that never denied an important role to stylistic/formal analyses. Due to the fact that during communism, the Romanian public had access to the aesthetic analyses of Manolescu, Simion and others, while lacking the proper political contextualization, her texts were more geared in the latter direction. Nevertheless, her
judgments about the value of Romanian writers never came into conflict with those of Manolescu, Simion, or Martin, nor did she ever maintain that criticism should abandon its aesthetic criteria. Her claim that certain post-1947 texts became rather enclosed in their aesthetical/evasive/utopian world was made from the standpoint of a militant anticommunist critic, who expected literature to play a “true” revolutionary role.

But hasn’t this expectation itself been deconstructed as utopian? Hasn’t it been proven that it “imposes” on literature a radical political function, which, time and again – despite the best intentions of the Romantics and the avant-gardists – it was unable to fulfill in any direct manner? When was the last time that literature, in and of itself, took people to the streets? Isn’t it ironic that this happened – inasmuch as it did – in East Central Europe during the communist regime? Can one in all fairness deny any function of dissent to all modernist literature which, for better or worse, kept alive the belief in an alternative, preferable reality? Has literature ever done more? Has it ever been more than a “principle of the secondary” – and if not, is this a reason to “condemn” and dismiss it? Aren’t the very efforts to read it mostly according to non-aesthetic principles, in the hope of demystifying the underlying imperialist, colonial, gender-based presuppositions, ways of instrumentalizing and ideologizing it in the name of new, egalitarian utopias?

My hope is that my study so far has already answered some of these seemingly rhetorical questions; because there are more which regard the ethics of reading in the coming decades. For example, should one renounce the aesthetic altogether for the sake of a global, more inclusive canon or could contextually-aesthetic readings stay side by side with those of cultural criticism, postcolonialism, and so on? Was modern literature an essential totalitarian tool or did it also have a positive, utopian function, which helped
it partially counteract (communist) totalitarianism? Granted that literature has never
managed to be as revolutionary and progressive as desired by its creators and reproached
by its critics, shouldn’t contemporary scholars stop placing utopian expectations on it and
assessing it according to them?

Virgil Nemoianu’s suggestion of reading aesthetic literature as a discourse of the
secondary could provide a way out of the pitfalls engendered by the attempt to redesign
the canon according to revisionist readings. Since these latter interpretations assert
themselves only by de-constructing again and again the aesthetic method, a path of
moderation, which sees literature as a necessary ‘secondary discourse’ would accomplish
two goals at once. First, it would preserve a space of its own for literature (even if
secondary to dominant ideologies and fields), and, secondly, it would make use of the
very thing a modernist aesthetic managed to protect during communism: the idealistic
belief in the inspirational role of great works and imagination.

This inspirational role of great literary works, which, according to Harold Bloom,
Richard Rorty, and others seems lost for most Western scholars due to the pressure of the
very progressive forces of social change that young Romanian critics invoke, should not
be replaced by a culture of “understanding” and knowledge. Texts, which “make people
think that there is more to this life than they ever imagined” (“The Inspirational” 133)
and thus generate hope and self-transformation, could and should not be replaced by
“dry,” analytic, and for that matter ideological texts. By democratizing literature and
making it a better instrument for various social causes, Western revisionist criticism
demoted it from its previous status and condemned it to represent disparate, minority
groups.
This result is not to be blamed entirely on post-structuralist/postmodern/multi-culturalist interventions, but also on the atomization of Western society in recent decades. In short, the most extreme transformation brought about by the radical critique of traditions and ideology undertaken in the name of liberalism and democracy is the fact that “we no longer live in an a priori common world” (Ferry, 246). Whether one agrees or not with Cornelius Castoriadis, who blames this situation on “the liberal universe which, allegedly undermined solidly founded values and gave way to cynical relativism”(Ferry 243), the fact is that at this point “there is no common foe” against which great art could define its values. Therefore, in the postmodern world, there can be no “great art.” The irony of the situation is that the tradition of aesthetic literature, associated with the rise of individualism, democracy, and modern subjectivity by many, is charged in the very age of their triumph with their undermining.

Still, had aesthetic modernism really subverted these values, how did they survive at a time when literature was the most influential policymaker and social and political sciences had not reached the advanced, articulate, and progressive stances they enjoy today? Could it be that the meanings of “democracy,” “individualism,” “freedom,” and so on have changed greatly in the past two centuries? Could the reactionary profile of modernist aesthetic literature be a belated projection imposed on it by the radical utopianism of postmodern ideology?

**Postmodern Subjectification and Aesthetics in the Age of Ethics**

Luc Ferry’s final chapters of *Homo Aestheticus* answer these questions from a philosophical perspective more concerned with the loss of a common ground for general judgments of value and its consequences for a common ethics, than with the
inflammatory rhetoric and apocalyptic predictions of the cultural wars. “It would be […] mistaken,” he writes, “to go to the extremes and transform the opposition between modern subject and contemporary individual into a real antinomy, to believe that the golden age of the Enlightenment is vanishing with the inexorable decline the West is supposedly fated toward ever since ‘the era of emptiness’ began” (Ferry 259).

Instead, Ferry advocates three ages of ethics that characterize the ancient, modern, and contemporary world: excellence, merit, and authenticity. The last of them, underlying our time, “compensates,” according to Ferry, “the narcissism of the command ‘be yourself’ with an increase in tolerance and respect for the Other. ‘Otherness’ has become the one sure value today, the inevitable and unchallengeable watchword” (Ferry 258), “the right to difference” has become the overarching right of contemporary (Western) world. But is this so?

Numerous polemics and studies opposing aesthetics to “anti-humanistic” studies, infused by sociology, anthropology, gender and ethnic issues instead of the traditionally philosophic and stylistic methods, claim otherwise. As I have pointed out earlier, many of the responses to the 2004 ACLA Report indicate that what the discipline needs is reevaluation, the infusion of “new blood,” and most of all a set of unifying norms. In this sense, in his response to the Report entitled, “Comparative Literature in An Age of Terrorism,” Djelal Kadir notes:

Comparative Literature, as the last report predicted, would indeed appear to have arrived at the individuated extreme of academic professional practices, as one form of discursive practice among many, now with each practitioner of this form of discourse being an isolate among many others, in turn. And were it possible for us to discern with any certainty, we may well discover ourselves so far along in that pluralist multiplicity as to be well beyond the perils of dissensus and at even greater risk than the absence of sensus communis. (Kadir 3)
Kadir’s conclusion flatly contradicts Ferry’s optimism with regard to the consequences of radical individualism and atomization. In an age of terrorism, the role of comparative literature cannot be just that of defending freedom by emphasizing “the right to difference.” On the contrary: its function may be exactly that of creating a cross-cultural, transhistorical dialogue that might generate a sensus communis according to which judgments of taste, but also other forms of public discourse could be assessed.

Ours may be little more than the calculated freedom accorded to radical fractiles and delusionary isolates in free-floating orbits that justly suspect their own putative autonomy but cannot muster the capability to move beyond isolation, silence, or the “cool” of whatever. The result is a default complicity with regimes of truth whose truth derives from the leveraging of terror. (Kadir 6)

This situation is the implicit result of “distance rather than nearness, individuation rather than collectivity, solipsism rather than communion, unbridgeable contestation rather than conversation”(8), which characterizes the state of the discipline and, by and large, the state of society. The soon to be experienced consequence of such a state of atomization is according to Kadir the complete loss of all criteria of evaluation.

In the absence of difference, replaced by modular individuality and exceptionalism that become the private redoubt of each comparatist, Comparative Literature in America is not only a self-contradiction. Occupying as it does the hegemonic locus of a terminus a quo, it easily and inadvertently slips into complicity with regimes of terror. (Kadir 8)

Despite the fact that the conclusion could sound a bit too harsh and hasty in its “Foucaultian” equation of regimes of truths with regimes of terror, Kadir’s diagnosis reflects the deep state of crisis that most American intellectuals sense to have been affecting the state of the humanities in the past fifty years. The corresponding change of status of literature has by now begun to be acknowledged as irreversible, with the
humanities being the locus where most social and ideological battles of the late 20th century were fought. In this sense, Alvin Kernan’s diagnosis is also pertinent:

Socially in the later 20th century, the humanities along with some of the “softer” social sciences like anthropology and sociology, have been the battlefields of an extended Kulturkampf. These subjects have proven extremely sensitive to pressures for social change in the society at large, to the wave of populist democracy, to technological changes in communication, to relativistic epistemologies, to demands for increased tolerance, and to various social causes, such as black studies, feminism and gay rights. Every liberal case – from freedom of speech and the Vietnam War to anticolonialism and the nonreferentiality of language – has fought bitter and clamorous battles in these subjects. (*Change in the Humanities* 3-4)

In light of these decades of development, it becomes clear that at this point, Western culture itself has to decide what to do with its aesthetic tradition. The debate over its debunking and/or dismissal provides fodder for some of the most heated polemics of our time, involving not only literary scholars, but also philosophers and humanists in general, who recognize in it the sign of a major epistemic change. Frank Kermode who investigated this phenomenon in 1997 points out that the approaching millenium has brought an apocalyptic end to the old ‘modernist’ episteme: “aesthetic ideology, tradition, grand recits, canonical works.” In its place, comments Kernan, “is a new postmodern episteme: skeptical if not downright nihilistic, subjective, political, and scornful of such concepts as ‘totality,’ ‘reason,’ and ‘truth’” (*Change* 10).

From this perspective, the hasty adoption by East Central Europeans of ideology critique, cultural criticism and postcolonialism as solutions to their own problems, based on the fact that during the last decades these approaches have solved certain curricular and canonical injustices in the Western culture, ignores that they also deepened the communication gap between culture and society.
In *The Cultural Turn* Frederic Jameson makes a much needed, clarifying observation with respect to the so-called cultural wars, often deduced from the struggles between generations, under the pressure of big paradigm/historical changes. Referring to the inevitable replacement of high modernism by postmodernism, and attempting to see this much discussed “parricide” *sine ira et studio*, Jameson writes:

[The] formerly subversive and embattled styles – Abstract Expressionism; the great modernist poetry of Pound, Eliot or Wallace Stevens, the International Style (Le Corbusier, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe); Stravinsky, Joyce, Proust and Mann – felt to be scandalous or shocking by our grandparents are, for the generation which arrives at the gate in the 1960s, felt to be the establishment and the enemy – dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new. (*Cultural 2*)

This observation recasts the entire debate about the “intrinsic” value of modernism and an aesthetic mode of reading/writing, in more relative, historical terms. According to Jameson, the changing of paradigm has little, if anything to do with the epistemological value of certain literary and critical texts and methods, and much more with the pressure of time and new historical ages. The attribution of existential and even ontological value is thus based on criteria deriving from time-defined priorities that cannot claim any absolute, transcendental value. In this sense, postmodern art cannot be “better” or more “authentic” than the high modernist one – just better related to the present.

Along the same lines, the aesthetic paradigm of writing and interpretation, which performed a large array of functions for two centuries, cannot be simply recast as “non-valid,” though now it might appear as “out-of-sync” with the present, and defending a set of revolute values. Despite all of this, its resurrection and re-writing could come anytime by means of a change in the interpretive perspective, diminished canonical ambitions, and
acceptance of a limited role in a general historical survey. As such, its potential re-contextualization does not exclude reinterpretations, reassessments, and certain continuity after rebirth. Yet, it could also not ignore the possibility of a major change in the 21st century paradigm, where literature might have just a marginal role to play.

In tune with these views Rita Felski and Alvin Kernan consider that what should follow is neither the replacement of the aesthetic by another unique paradigm of interpretation, nor the creation of a megadiscipline, integrating everything, but an interdisciplinary paradigm, allowing for a dialogue among different methods of analysis and interpretation. Would such an approach, with its new set of concepts, illuminate more of the inevitable “blindness” of every reading? Would it provide us with more “insight” into the role of aesthetics, modernity, and present state of culture? It is hard to predict, although it certainly promises a more encompassing and tolerant paradigm of interpretation.

Endnotes:

1 With Nietzsche, Ferry notes “it would seem we are escaping the philosophies of the subject, inherited from Cartesianism and empiricism, precisely because there is no longer either a monad in closure on itself (the viewpoints can no longer be reassembled in the unity of a subject/substance as if they were its attributes) or a monad of monads which would guarantee, as in Leibniz, the agreement or harmony of the multiple perspectives within a world system (Ferry 30).

2 My present observation refers mainly to the countries, where the process of modernization started late and its implementation prolonged into the 20th century. Hungary, which in 1867 becomes the part of the Dual-Monarchy of Austro-Hungary, Poland, and Bohemia enjoyed an earlier and more successful institutional and social modernization that placed them in a better position to later resist communist occupation. The different stages of modernization in which the 1947 Soviet occupation surprised various East Central European countries might in part explain their particular modes of resisting it. In those cultures where democratic traditions and political institutions were not assimilated enough, the answer to the Soviet aggression was preponderantly aesthetic.

3 In the Western world, mainly in the United States, the same generation launched Postmodernism.
In his book Nemoianu advances the thesis that East Central European Romanticism was inspired by the Western version of the movement characterized by strong attributes: visionary attitude, strong philosophical, revolutionary and agenda. By contrast, East Central Europe develops a more idyllic rhetoric, which Nemoianu called Biedermeier, and designated as the “tamed” version of Western high Romanticism.


The recent first volume of the *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe* (eds. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer) is a relevant example of re-contextualization of modernity from an East Central European perspective.

In *Alternative Modernities* (Edited by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, Duke University Press, 2001) a large number of non-Western scholars discuss their own cultures’ grapples with modernity and the alternative views on the phenomenon resulting from these non-Western perspectives. A similar idea structures the first chapter of Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993).

The article, authored by Sorin Toma in January, 1948 was published in Scînteia, the main newspaper of the communist party and represented the beginning of the end for Arghezi’s public career at the time.

Krîlov – *Fabule* (Fables– translation by Tudor Arghezi), 1953.

*Din lirica universala* (Poems from the World Literary Tradition – translation by Lucian Blaga), 1957.

Blaga was Professor of Philosophy of Culture at the University of Cluj, and Arghezi was publishing in various newspapers

According to Eugen Simion, these are the religious themes of the “Psalms,” the magical childhood, themes of art and its creator. (Scrittori români de azi, I., 46)

Dan Desliu – *Minerii din Maramureș* (The Miners from Maramures, 1951), Miron Radu Paraschivescu – *Cîntarea României* (Praise of Romania, 1954), Geo Bogza’s reportage *Portile maretiei* (Gates of Glory, 1951)


According to Eugen Negrici, the situation of Romanian poetry at the time and later deserves particular attention. “While prose was granted a certain “respiro” in the interval between Stalin’s death and the Hungarian Revolution, so that it could consecrate a couple of new names of authors, poetry remained under strict control and continued to function as propaganda until the beginning of the 60s. After 1964 the freedom allowed to it was unusually wide, and clearly superior than that allowed to prose, constantly under the surveillance of censors. (*Literatura româna sub comunism, Poezia, I*, 9).
16 One of the best examples is Nicolae Manolescu, the most influential critic of the period, who since 1963 wrote weekly reviews in România Literara (Literary Romania) about all of the important Romanian writers. In his August 2002 polemic editorial Scriitorii vechi și criticii noi” (The Old Writers, the New Critics) in “România Literara” Manolescu engages the much younger Lumința Marcu and Costi Rogozanu, who radically criticized the empty metaphorical style of the 60s. One of the most significant quotes sounds like this: “The Romanian writers of the 60s, 70s [...] thought of themselves as heroes [...] and after 1989 they came to realize that they did not know much about literature, and that they fought their struggle with extremely rudimentary weapons, such as metaphors or parables. [Moreover, even today] these writers still insist on a number of several narrative schticks that had some effect at a certain point, but that now cannot but make the contemporary reader smile ironically out of compassion.”

17 Until now he has published two volumes of his Literatura româna sub comunism (Romanian Literature under communism 2003), which offer a survey of prose between 1947-1989 and one of propagandistic poetry (until 1964).

18 Nicolae Manolescu, the best known Romanian critic will soon publish his opus magnum, Literatura româna de la origini pînă azi, (Romanian literature from Its Origins till Today)

19 As Frederic Jameson notes in The Cultural Turn, “In the days, abstraction was surely one of the strategic ways in which phenomena, could be estranged and defamiliarized” (35)

20 The term is used by Mircea Martin in his study “Paradoxical Aestheticism” to characterize the later phase of the 1980s Romanian generalization of aestheticism as a strategy of survival.

21 Despite the fact is the time when the generation of Romanian postmodernists/textualists makes its debut, the large public was still enthralled by and found consolation in the neo-modernist discourse.

22 The writers of the Tîrgoviște School are: Mircea Horia Simionescu, Costache Olareanu, Tudor Țopa. They and the poets mentioned in the text (in the same paragraph) are the proclaimed models for the “postmodern” generation of the 80s in Romania. According to Caius Dobrescu “The true struggle against the “wooden language” and the real effort to create a personal language, able to recuperate intimacy and individual self-respect was made by Mircea Ivănescu, Leonid Dimov, Virgil Mazilescu, and Emil Brumaru.” (Modernitatea, 87).

23 Such reactions were determined by 1956 Hungary, 1968 and 1977 Czechoslovakia, and 1980s emergence of Solidarity in Poland.

24 Such was the re-Stalinization after Ceausescu’s return from China and North Korea in 1971.

25 Similar strategic functions of resistance were attributed to forms of popular culture like cartoons, science fiction books and rock-and roll. The later had a very stronghold on the imagination of the young generation, who was involved in endless discussions about rock (and later jazz) bands and musicians, while paying hefty sums of money to get their latest albums.


27 One of these exceptions, and a very significant one, given his stature as leader of his generation, was Nichita Stanescu.

28 Truly great art always explodes its unity, says Adorno. “Art of the highest order pushes beyond form as totality toward fragmentation” (221). Form is an interplay of constructive synthesis and fragmentation. “Art
takes an opposition to the present society not by specifically contradicting any of its moments, but through its mere existence. Because art refuses to be useful and because it only follows its own internal logic, it criticizes society through its existence only” (223).

29 All the articles included in Unde Scurte (Short waves) were broadcast in her show at Radio Free Europe between 1961-1971

30 Romania is, indeed, one of the few countries ruled by a communist regime where the intellectuals did not turn into an “intelligentsia.” The sense of this concept is that of a elite of the spirit that becomes an elite of civic courage. Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Russia had benefited from the actions of their intelligentsia, which by bringing into the public discourse the crimes of the Stalinist age, transformed its understanding. Everything started with the testimony of one survivor, with revelations about workcamps, about the communist trials, and prisons. In our [Romania] case, the Stalinist terror was bracketed by silence. Also, Romanian literature did not talk about it [the terror]…(Unde scurte 9).

31 Maiorescu returns to Romania in 1861 after graduating from the Department of Philosophy at the University of Berlin (1858-1859) and earning his doctorate in philosophy at Gissen. At the time he had also earned degrees in literature and law from Paris. In 1863 he is Professor in the Department of Philosophy and soon becomes President of the Iassy University. In the same year he initiates Junimea (one of the most influential literary circles – especially since it launches the “classics” of Romanian literature: Mihai Eminescu, the national poet, I.L. Caragiale, the foremost dramatic writer, and Ion Creanga, the best storyteller.) In 1871 becomes member in the Parliament, in 1874 head of the National Department of Education, 1900-1901 is head of the Department of Justice, 1910-1912 is Foreign Minister and also in 1912 prime-minister.

32 Started in 1863 and presented by various members of “Junimea,” these “Popular Lectures” were meant to educate and inform the general public about topics of large cultural interest such as: Religion and the People, Sounds and Colors, Antique and Modern Tragedy, Aesthetic Principles and their Application in Architecture, The Influence of the French Revolution on Modern Ideals, The Individuality of People and Cosmopolitanism, Socialism and Communism in France, The Three Ceasars (Caesar, Charlemagne, and Napoleon), Mind and Heart.

33 Wallachia (Muntenia) and Moldavia (Moldova) were unified in 1859 under the name of Romania and the country had its first Constitution in 1866.

34 Maiorescu’s pragmatism and moderate reformism were based partly on Spencer’s evolutionsim, Buckley…

35 Though clearly theoretical in its intent, Maiorescu’s criticism never became pure speculative, but always remained anchored in the pragmatic domain and the concrete determination of Romanian culture. Moreover, as a politician, Maiorescu’s actions always followed the insights of his critique, which is to say that his actions were always design to serve concrete Romanian realities. In this sense, it was ascertained that they always took place within the framework of truth. Whatever did not correspond to the actual circumstances and determinants of Romanian civilization was regarded by Maiorescu as a groundless improvisation, a “lie,” a “phatsamagoria,” not only useless, but also dangerous. These are the reasons why he engaged so firmly in opposing the so-called “forms without foundation,” which is to say, any form that anticipated historical realities. (my transl. and paraphrase, Scriteri, 7, 492)

36 Maiorescu’s cultural critique (7 years): “Despre scrierea limbii române” (Norms for Writing in Romanian 1866); “O cercetare critică asupra poeziei române de la 1867” (Critical Enquiry about Romanian Poetry at 1867); “Asupra poeziei populare,” (Studies in Folk Poetry 1867); “Contra Scoalei Barnutiu,” (Against Barnutiu School 1868); “Limba română în Jurnalele din Austria,” (Romanian Language in Austrian Magazines, 1868); “In contra directiei de astazi,” (Against the Current Direction in Romanian Culture,
1869); “Observari polemice,” (Polemic Notes, 1869); “Directia nouă,” (The New Direction, 1872); Betia de cuvinte, (Redundant Speech, 1873); Răspunsurile “Revistei Contimporane,” (On the Answers of Contimporanul Magazine, 1873); Contra “formelor fără fond” (Against “Forms without Content,” 1873).

Maiorescu’s aesthetic revolution: Comediile D-lui Caragiale (Mr. Caragiale’s Comedies, 1885); Poeți si critici (Poets and Critics, 1886); Eminescu si poeziiile lui (Eminescu’s Poems, 1889); Contraziceri? (Contradictions, 1892)

Born in 1855 in Russia, Gherea studies science at the University, but does not graduate due to the problems created by his revolutionary activity. In 1875 he takes refuge in Romania, where he begins to publish Marxist articles. Among them: Slavery and Socialism (1884), Karl Marx and our Economists (1884), What do Romanian Socialists Want? (1886). In 1886 initiates his famous polemic with Maiorescu with an article titled (in the book edition) “Personality and Morality in Art.”

His prestige was supported by the cultural preeminence of the writers promoted by “Junimea,” by the historical political role of the Conservative Party, in which Maiorescu was one of the most influential figures, and also by the philosophical influence of German idealism, whose prophet in Romania Maiorescu surely was.


Culture, according to Nemoianu’s definition in the wake of Lovinescu is “the organic unity of creative and spiritual endeavors, including philosophy, art, religious belief, the higher reaches of science, the latter economy and politics, technology and the church”; civilization is the sum of repetitive technical or organizational activities” (VSF, 198).

Supported by the literary magazine with the same name (1921-1944), “Gîndirea” was a literary movement exulting traditional, national values such as: orthodoxy, the rural past, and patriarchal life – in a rather mystical language.

Nemoianu cites studies by Ileana Vrancea, Florin Mihailescu, Alexandru George, Eugen Simion that make this claim.” If there is a ‘saeculum’ – a unity or harmony between the different sections of a culture we can understand one section by studying another one; we can expect that modifications in one section (superstructure) exert action upon the whole” (Variable 201).


The deterioration accelerated mainly after the infamous 1971 “July theses” that Ceaușescu promulgated after his return to China and North Korea, and which represented a new Stalinist era in Romanian culture.


The concept is borrowed from Rosalie Colie, whom Krieger particularly acknowledges.
50 Krieger claimed that “The role of any text, when we allow it to function in an aesthetic mode, is not to counter one ideology by another – but rather – as with the moment of carnival, to reveal the inadequacies of ideology itself, as conceptual discourse, to deal with errant particularity.” (My Travels 227)

51 Since no other discourse shared this “self-awareness of their textual limitations, of their duplicity, their closures, their exclusions, their repression” (My Travels, 225)

52 First for Contemporanul (The Contemporary) and then for România literara (Literary Romania)

53 He writes a very influential monograph about Lovinescu – E. Lovinescu, scepticul mîntuit (E. Lovinescu, the Redeemed Skeptic) (1971; 1994) which “establishes” Lovinescu’s post WWII image in the history Romanian criticism. Simion’s contribution is particularly important since Lovinescu was banned after 1947 as an aestheticist and a modernist.

54 The thesis is published in 1973 after being initially rejected in 1963 for its “essay-istic” character.

55 This is Călinescu’s own formula in defining history as “ineffable science and epic synthesis” in Jurnalul literar (The Literary Journal– 1947-1948).

56 After Generație și creație (Generation and Creation, 1969), and after studying with Marcel Raymond, Martin publishes Critică și profunzime (Criticism and Profoundness, 1974)-dedicated to the Geneva school of phenomenological criticism.

57 Krieger’s theses about the self-undermining mechanisms of literature that grant the aesthetic text the critical power to challenge ideological discourses apply perfectly to Romanian postmodern literature.

58 The concept is rather ambiguous since it was employed by sympathetic “postmodern” and modern Romanian critics to describe the new relationships between text, author, and reader that the 80s generation explored. I use the term in a rather pejorative sense – of “textual games,” without much existential significance.


61 Spariosu undertakes this approach in in Dionysus Reborn and The Wreath of Wild Olive and Nemoianu in A Theory of the Secondary.


63 Arriving in the United States in 1983, Marcel Cornis-Pope specializes in literary theory and American literature. In 1992 he publishes Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Rewriting, which reexamines poststructuralist and sociosemantic theories in the light of Henry James’ work. Before leaving Romania he published Anatomia balenei albe. Poetica romanului american epopeic-simbolic (The Anatomy of White Whale. The Poetics of American Symbolic-Epic Novel, 1982), his doctoral thesis and a very well-received study which was awarded the Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for literary criticism in 1982. Also before his expatriation, Marcel Cornis-Pope translated extensively from American literature: J.D. Salinger, Thomas Wolfe, Kurt Vonnegut, Dylan Thomas, Ken Kessay, Allen Ginsberg and Robert Penn Warren (the last two rejected by the communist censorship). His contribution in making the works of many modern and
contemporary Romanian poets known to an English-speaking audience was also acknowledged with prestigious awards. Cornis-Pope’s long-lasting interest in the relationship between the aesthetic and the politic in East Central Europe developed in the *History of the Literary Cultures* becomes visible for the first time in *The Unfinished Battles: Romanian postmodernism Before and after 1989* (1996), a study that focuses on literature’s the role as alternative discourse in totalitarian conditions. His most recent study, *Narrative Innovation and Cultural Rewriting in the Cold War Era and After* (2001) involves former-communist Europe and the Western world in an implicit cross-cultural dialogue.


66 In this sense, Emerson ends her article saying: “They [East Central Europeans] have been through every abomination. An ideology or an – ism that takes itself seriously is simply ludicrous. They (and we can now include the imperial Russians) have accustomed themselves to loss. They’ve had a good look at our Western victories as well as at our patterns of protest, and are indifferently impressed. This state of affairs encourages an outsideness to all things rather than a consuming of them, and is sympathetic to a robust “potentiology.” We could begin learning from them. (Emerson, 8). My only comment to this overtly optimistic view of Central Europe is the presentation of the very inter-generational wars ripping apart for more than a decade the area. The state of cooperative interpretation evoked by Emerson especially after reading Bakhtin and Mikhail Epstein can be reached once the Central Europeans themselves decide to use those best potentiological of their tradition. Yet, judging by the present situation, most critical groups seem more prone to wage intergenerational wars in terms of cultural ones, than to look for a cooperative, “transcultural,” and irenic model like that suggested by Epstein.

67 See Miha Spariosu’s definition in *The Wreath of Wild Olive*.


70 In the article titled “Pentru un mai grabnic sfirsit al canonului estetic” (Towards a Sooner Demise of the Aesthetic Canon) Alexandrescu notes: “I think that the time has come to put an end to the supremacy of the aesthetic canon in Romanian culture. Though historically justified, it has led to an unacceptable stiffening of Romanian thinking and creativity. Moreover, it legitimizes not the renewal but the endless reproduction of central values, and more exactly of aesthetic conservatism, the catastrophic decrease of hermeneutic and cognitive interest (why should we look for new truths, methods, and values since we are in the possession of the “eternal ones”?) and ultimately leads to the impoverishment of the actual cultural creation.” (my transl., Privind 154)

71 Among the most consequential polemics were: the debate about the right-wing sympathies of the interwar generation (Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade, Constantin Noica) sparked by books published in France (Alexandra Lavaignel-Lavastine) and in Romania (Marta Petreu); and the inquiry into the role Romanian nationalism played during communism, initiated by Katherine Verdery’s books and Mircea Martin’s articles in 22. Equally strong debates focussed on the elitist character of modern Romanian culture from Maiorescu to Noica’s “Paltinis School,” and the choice of a modern versus a postmodern paradigm. In all these polemics, the imperative of abandoning the hegemonic aesthetic model in interpreting cultural and even literary themes reigns supreme.
The difficulties of this leap can be observed even for countries that are considered more advanced on the path towards a full modernization and a democratic society. For example, according to a recent poll, a good section of the German population wishes that the Berlin wall were still in place.

Caius Dobrescu in *Modernitatea ultima* (The Last Modernity) recommends that Romanian departs from its long tradition of borrowed models and creates its own original and powerful line of thought. The suggestion is not new. Many other generations of intellectuals invoked it, among them the most (in)famous generation of Cioran and Eliade. At the other extreme one could cite examples like the philosopher Anton Dumitru, ...who also launched new traditions of thought in Romanian culture. Too fragile to resist tormented times such beginnings have never reached the stage of full traditions and as such were of little consequence in Romanian public life. In his book *The Wreath of Wild Olive*, Mihai Spariosu undertakes a well-informed and thorough critique of the mimetic model seen as the embodiment of a power mentality and recommends instead the “irenic,” peaceful, cooperative one – based to some extent on a reinterpretation of the cultural theories of Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and Oscar Wilde.

This group of critics, but also others and many writers from the 60s and 70s, like Ana Blandiana, Nicolae Breban, and Augustin Buzura maintain that that during communism writers and critics managed to “save” themselves, if not to resist, through culture/the aesthetic.

Caius Dobrescu is part of this direction, especially in their critique of the “modernist” generation for not writing a more politically engaged literature, and ultimately for not taking significant political action earlier. With his critique of the elite-based Romanian culture and current elitist practices Sorin Adam Matei strikes rather a Marxist chord.

Some of the critics engaged in this revisionist reevaluation are: Caius Dobrescu, Ion Bogdan Lefter, Paul Cernat, Sorin Adam Matei, and Ciprian Șiulea.

The irony of the situation is equaled only by that of the previous aesthetic critics and writers, who during communism defended the autonomy of the aesthetic, only to be charged with the accusation of evasionist aestheticism, once everybody could express their opinions freely. Were Romanian neo-modernist writers escapist aestheticians? In most cases and given the political circumstances, probably not. Do they look so today to younger generations with revolutionary social projects? Obviously.

Since the quest for identity of many first-rate American scholars such as Murray Krieger, Stanley Corngold, and Harold Bloom and also of generations of writers and readers were framed in aesthetic and counter-aesthetic terms, the doctrine cannot but remain part of the much-amended intellectual history of the 20th century.

After all, as Rita Felski and Michael Bérubé note, despite radical differences, cultural criticism and aesthetics do not necessarily exclude each other. There is an “aesthetics of cultural studies” (Bérubé’s book title) – and a study of a literary text, from whatever perspective could not totally bypass a formal analysis. Whether this analysis will necessarily lead to Krieger’s idealist conclusions about the inherent power of literary/aesthetic discourse or not – it is another question. Developed in connection and in response to modernism/modernist aesthetics – the “aesthetic” mode reading, places a great value on a difficult, sometimes obscure text, whose main goal is to shock the reader out of its habits, rather than to communicate him/her an actual message.
CHAPTER 4

NORTH AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE AESTHETIC

*The study of the humanities will continue to produce knowledge, but it will no longer produce hope* (Rorty, “The Inspirational Value of Great Works” 135).

With this ominous prediction as temporary conclusion for his plea in favor of the inspirational value of great works of literature, Richard Rorty joins the camp of those scholars worried about the direction taken recently by American academia. The tendency of favoring “talent for analysis and problem solving over imagination [that] replace[d] enthusiasm with dry, sardonic knowingness” (“Inspirational” 135) will make the field of the humanities reach the stage of “dismalness” already attained by social sciences and analytic philosophy.

Instead of inspiration and hope, the methods of cultural criticism “produce knowingness, or technique, or professionalism; understanding, but not hope; knowledge, but not self-transformation” (133). Regarding texts as mere mechanism[s] of cultural production curtails their possibility of generating the kind of Wordsworthian romantic enthusiasm that have made generations of scholars and professors adopt the motto: “What we have loved/Others will love and we will teach them how” (134).

According to Rorty, in the long term, the effect of applying this sort of analysis to literary works will be that readers and scholars will cease to think of “beauty as the promise of happiness” (139). Also the cooperative commonwealth envisaged by the humanities will become “scientific and knowing” instead of “utopian and romantic” (139). An atmosphere of professionalism will replace the utopian enthusiasm of Blake and Whitman and of revolutionary thinkers like Jean Jaurès, Eugene Debs, Vaclav Havel,
and Bill Bradley. The result will be “thinking within a box,” complacency, lack of challenge against the status quo. Moreover, if Rorty is right other mechanisms of generating adversarial discourses in the academia are on the wane. Even the discourse coming from the academic left that traditionally opposed the impositions of social establishment and consumerist society seems to have lost its grip. “The Foucauldian academic Left in contemporary America is exactly the sort of Left that the oligarchy dreams of: a Left whose members are so busy unmasking the present that they have no time to discuss what laws need to be passed in order to create a better future” (139).

This loss of the utopian enthusiasm for the prospects of the humanities that has taken over contemporary American criticism was often attributed to the growing influence of the social sciences and neo-Marxist cultural studies. These fields, viewed as being preoccupied mostly with deconstructing traditional humanist theses such as the model of universal man and the autonomous human subject, are also responsible for the non-literary turn taken by interpretation in literary departments. According to Lawrence Buell, some scholars, “often those with disciplinary homes outside departments of literature, have looked to novels, poems, and plays for moral content and values” (Turn to Ethics 12).

**The Perspective of Cultural Criticism**

Such sociological and Neo-Marxist views are generally shared by what has been called with a generic term, “cultural criticism.” This discipline has developed in the wake of ideology critique in the past five decades and is concerned with providing an institutional model of understanding literature, in “the framing conditions that constitute its readability” (Frow 52). Contributions in this direction come not only from the
traditional Birmingham School-inspired cultural criticism, but also from postcolonialism and poststructuralist, and feminist approaches.

Less trustful of the emancipatory and redemptive potential of literature, many of the critics associated with these schools consider that, at this historical juncture, it is more urgent to analyze and emphasize the often overlooked, but by no means inconsequential relationships between literature/art and power. Many first-hand studies such as Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Hommi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, Richard Hebdige’s *The Meaning of Style*, Raymond William’s *Culture and Society* have come to exemplify this rather revisionistic tendency. Occasionally professed by categories of scholars who endured political and social marginalization, when taken too far, this direction of studying literature has been transformed into a culture war that led to the demonizing of aesthetic categories like “modernism” and of philosophical attitudes such as “idealism” or “utopianism.”

Apart from such polemics that supported the curricular pressure on the humanities departments¹ exercised by demographic changes in the U.S. student population and by the social movements of emancipation, the late debate about the role of the humanities in today’s university has also led to moderate positions. Mihai Spariosu, Gabriele Schwab, but also Rita Felski, Micheal Bérubé, and John Frow are among those who suggest various ways of interdisciplinary dialogue. Fully aware of the urgency of devising global, interdisciplinary models of human interaction, Spariosu agrees with the necessity of reforming the humanities curriculum, but is more skeptical about changes of the canon.

As such, he challenges the idea of the purported “death of literature” by pointing out that the concept “signifies nothing more than the death of Literature and Language
Departments as they are organized and function in today’s disciplinary university” (Remapping 20). His opinion about this transformation is that “one should cheer this process along, rather than mourn it. It is high time for academic reform in the field of literary studies as well, which does not mean that this field will die, but that it will renew itself and become again relevant to today’s world” (20). With this in mind, Spariosu proposes to focus on the ways in which we can remap and reorganize a transdisciplinary field of intercultural studies that would hopefully transcend the current ideological and political impasse of cultural studies, especially as practiced in the West, while preserving and reorienting some of its valuable insights. Such a reconstructed, transdisciplinary and crosscultural field would constitute an important vehicle for creating local-global learning environments that will nurture further human development. (Remapping 9)

This non-agonal position attempting to release literary studies from the grip of their long-time battles with cultural studies is also adopted by Gabriele Schwab. In The Mirror and the Killer-Queen: Otherness in Literary Language (1996) she suggests a literary approach that mediates between the aesthetic/hermeneutic model and the militant models embraced by cultural critics. Conceiving the literary forms of language as “modes of cultural contact, which generate an aesthetic experience,” Schwab claims that they “may well form a counter-socialization – as long as literature retains its subversive potential”(Schawb 46).

According to Spariosu, who analyzes Schwab’s book in some detail, her important contribution to an irenic approach is that it brings aesthetics and cultural studies into a mutually beneficial dialogue. In Spariosu’s view, Schwab reshapes traditional theories of reading into theories of cultural contact by “introduc[ing] questions of sexual and cultural otherness in traditional Western hermeneutics, thereby revising and
expanding it, instead of rejecting it out of hand as ‘paternalist’ and ‘sexist’” (Remapping 50). Still her theory of reading should emphasize even more literature’s ability to enhance nondestructive forms of cultural contact, while underplaying the subversive or destructive forms of such contact (Spariosu 50).

Less interested in the utopian potentialities of the literary discourse, Rita Felski, Michael Bérubé, and John Frow are also willing to reframe the role of the aesthetic in cultural studies. Following Jan Mukařovsky’s insight in Aesthetic Function, Norm, and Value as Social Facts, Bérubé maintains that for a proper reconceptualization of the aesthetic one should stay away from treating it as either “an attribute of objects or a transcendental realm” (“Introduction” 12). Instead, the contemporary cultural critic should discuss it as one of the functions that can be assigned to most objects. By doing so he/she avoids the danger of conceiving it as a trans-historical category, and also as “the condition of possibility for certain modes of apprehension that would allow for a distinct realm of beauty” (“Introduction” 11). In Raymond Williams’ footsteps, Bérubé regards the aesthetic as inter-woven with social formations in a rather complex manner that might account for its reevaluation within the field of cultural studies themselves. Instead of a “return to beauty, style, form,” such as that advocated by the mini-revival of aesthetic criticism in the U.S., Bérubé pleads for a type of cultural studies equally interested in “the form of cultural forms” (“Introduction” 9). In this case, the aesthetic would be regarded as a “realm of experience in relation to the main institutions of modernity” (9).

Together with Felski, Simon Frith, and John Frow, Bérubé pleads for a new orientation in cultural studies, which would regard the aesthetic also as a functional mode of interpreting popular culture. Criteria such as “believability, coherence, familiarity,
and usefulness” would count among the most representative, but a number of others, traditionally pertaining to aesthetic investigation, could be added in view of the fact that “people bring similar questions to high and low art” (Frith 19).

The focusing of cultural studies on the reception of literature within an institutional context does not exclude its equal interest in the aesthetic functions of literary discourse. Rita Felski’s article details precisely this type of approach when defending cultural studies from the voices that in the late 1990s “rallied to the defense of the aesthetic” (Role, 29). In a tour de force of the history of the field, meant to correct some of the most persistent misrepresentations, Felski notes that

Cultural studies did not seek to destroy aesthetics, but to broaden the definition of what counted as art by taking popular culture seriously. It was always as much about form as about content, as much about pleasure as about ideology […] In retrospect, its emergence at a time when our everyday environment was becoming saturated with ever more sophisticated media images seems inevitable. Cultural studies provided a vocabulary for talking about the formal complexity of contemporary culture. It made a much wider variety of objects aesthetically interesting. (Role 32)

To prove her point, Felski goes back to the 70s and 80s when, influenced by the growing prestige of poststructuralism, a formalist direction took over the field of cultural studies and changed its focus from the signified to the semiotic mechanisms, “patterns and conventions through which meaning was produced” (33).

Richard Hebdige’s Subculture: the Meaning of Style, a classic of cultural studies, is also the crowning example of the fact that scholars from this camp could regard literature with the eye of an aesthetician as much as with that of a sociologist. By employing both perspectives himself, Hebdige manages to find “parallels between the aesthetics of the European avant-garde and the 1970s British subcultural styles,” and to
prove that for the field of cultural studies as much as for traditional aesthetics, “form was not incidental, but essential”(33).

One issue on which cultural critics totally disagree with the defenders of aesthetics is the thesis of the autonomy of art. Interested in the political, ideological and power-related dimensions of literary discourse, cultural critics debunk the myths of the intrinsic and unchangeable meaning and value of artworks, and maintain instead that all of these are “always the effect of specific (and changing, changeable) social relations and mechanisms of signification”(35). As part of rhetorical arguments, which, in turn are always social events, value judgments are based on a series of norms that vary according to social and historical circumstances.

Taking Frith’s point a step further, Felski claims that textual characteristics such as “ambiguity, irony, paradox, indeterminacy, allusion, the idea of endless reading, innovation, and difficulty,” which for decades have been regulating aesthetic reception are just value-determinants, operational in the cases of certain high, modernist works of art. A suspenseful plot and powerful archetypal figures (Role 35) might function as equally valuable criteria of appreciation, as they, in their own way produce valid aesthetic responses such as emotion, excitement, and escapism.

As an interdisciplinary field, drawing on both the anthropological and on the aesthetic idea of culture, Felski’s cultural criticism seeks to “make sense of the full range of images, stories, and symbolic practices”(39). Also, without excluding the analysis of literature and high art, “cultural studies does require an awareness of the relations and flows of interchange between different cultural spheres and of the interconnection among texts, cultural practices, and power” (39).
The attention to the local, the contingent, and the regional are again principles on which Felski’s version of cultural criticism converges with contextual aesthetics, comparative literature, experimental anthropology, interdisciplinary studies, and so on. Yet, the critique of the dominant ideology undertaken by this discipline has often led to flawed conclusions, as in the cases of recent Romanian criticism analyzed in the previous chapter. Felski is aware of this potential shortcoming and attempts to amend it.

Cultural studies means taking popular culture seriously and without condescension, but it should not lead to a flip-flopping of value, such that studying the popular becomes a sign of political righteousness, whereas high art is placed on the side of conservatism and reaction. (40)

This clarification is a much needed one, as many cultural critics have employed their insights about the (indirect) social and political functions of literature in various battles for hegemony over the literary scene. Felski disagrees with such practices and rejects them as misconstruing the project of cultural criticism. Relying on “a flawed understanding of the politics of literature as well as on the overestimation of its influence”, certain critics draw a deterministic connection “between knowing about Milton or Melville and running a country or a corporation”, and Felski points out that “[I]t is hard to make a convincing case that the values of canonical literature do much to shore up the political status quo” (40).

The mechanisms connecting literature to society are much more intricate than deterministic perspectives made them look. “High art has a complex and often dissident relationship to social norms; in fact modern literature is a major source of the bohemian, critical, antibourgeois sensibility that ultimately gave birth to cultural studies” (Felski 40). As Richard Hebdige proves and Felski restates, low and high culture are not autonomous fields, without means of interaction. Nor do they “act as homogeneous and
mutually exclusive blocks that are closely tied to specific class interests" (40). Neither of them is symptomatic of a certain social order or structure, or, in Frith’s words, they cannot “be neatly correlated with a hierarchy of social classes” (Frith, 1).

To be able to challenge and dismantle such claims, cultural studies should work like an interdisciplinary field, “where faculty and students are forced to confront the competing truth claims of different disciplines” (41). Their ultimate goal should not be that of becoming an overarching field, but of providing a space of interaction and dialogue between various perspectives on cultural phenomena.

According to John Frow,7 one step in this direction could be the recent “rapprochement” between literary and cultural studies. This process implies that “literary studies would learn to attend in a more routine manner to the social relations of signification, [while] cultural studies, would, in turn, be reminded of the constitution of its major explanatory categories in practices of reading” (“Literature” 54). The result would be a new manner of reading, concerned not only with the text, but with the social relations of textuality and its mechanisms of signification (54).

Reframed in these terms, which take into consideration both social determination and the historical becoming of a text, the categories of the literary might open towards a space where the text merges with the nontextual or the heterotextual (Frow 52). Readings based on such a perspective could be the basis for a better connection with the world and a new literary propaedeutic. Teaching students such a practice of reading, immersed in the intense scrutiny of the text and preoccupied with the text’s intense connection with the world, may help develop in them a taste for theoretical openness and heuristic richness (Frow 55).
This goal appeals to the contributors to James Soderholm’s *Beauty and the Critic.* *Aesthetics in an Age of Cultural Studies,* most of whom are worried about the sociological and political turn taken by recent literary criticism at the expense of traditional preoccupation with language, verbal performance, and the power of art. At first, Soderholm follows Harold Bloom’s pronouncement about the current replacement of traditional interpretation by “a hermeneutics of suspicion,” which many trace back to Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In the course of his argument, Soderholm makes it clear that, despite its connections to the “critique of false consciousness” initiated by Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, current studies allied with cultural criticism, ideology critique, or psychoanalysis have become forms of false consciousness themselves.

Most critics from my generation (graduate students of the 1980s) have been trained to believe that the world and the world of texts requires our most strenuous acts of demystification. But this way of analyzing literature has itself become a form of false consciousness filled with largely academic anxieties about class struggle, fretted by misplaced vengeance, and oddly entrapped by the very cultural productions it analyzes. What began as a provocative mode of inquiry now seems to be a set of routines for showing that there is nothing in poetry or art that can be dreamt of outside our ideologies of power and theories of historicity. (Soderholm 2)

To counteract this tendency, in *Beauty and the Critic* Soderholm decided to bring together contributions such as those of Ihab Hassan, Richard Rorty, Christopher Beach, John Blythe, instilled by a cooperative mentality. The common note of these studies is that they attempt to overcome the apparently insurmountable dilemma of loving poetry “for its own sake” or of professing the “deep suspicion that all such loves are poisoned by the ideological masters they secretly serve” (*Beauty* 3). Along the lines of such conciliatory positions that welcomes interdisciplinarity and alternative ways of
conceiving the literary studies, Christopher Beach\textsuperscript{8} outlines the three main stages experienced by aesthetic studies lately.

The first path taken by Ian Hunter’s “Aesthetics and Cultural Studies”\textsuperscript{9} sets as its task to redefine the aesthetic according to social and ethical expectations. Hunter’s goal is to suggest an aesthetic ethos, conceived as “an autonomous set of techniques and practices by which individuals continually problematize their experience and conduct themselves as subjects of the aesthetic experience” (Hunter 353).

Hunter’s formulation and the implicit aesthetic reconfiguration this refers to, seem too evasive to Beach, who considers them results of “wishful thinking and of circular and unspecific reasoning” (“Recuperating” 98) and as such dismisses them as useful alternatives of rewriting the aesthetic. Most probably, Beach’s dissatisfaction stems from his disapproval of Hunter’s rather traditional manner of relating the ethic and the aesthetic along the lines of modern categories such as the autonomous subject and autonomous practices. Fully aware of the severe neo-Marxist critique against such concepts, Beach notes that the open-endedness which allegedly might provide the starting point for self-reflection and further ethical problematization is based more on the reader’s response to the work of art than on the actual properties of the text.

He finds the formula too metaphorical and vague with nothing to say about “the nature of the aesthetic itself” (98). His dissatisfaction is with the lack of clarity concerning the “special kind of ethical work” the aesthetic is supposed to undertake, and also the manner in which the text must allow one to problematize one’s own experience in a way that is specifically aesthetic. Beach might be right in demanding a better exploration of the relationship between ethics and the aesthetic, but Hunter’s point is not
totally untenable either. On the contrary; when maintaining that the political function of an aesthetic texts consists in the “practice of contemplation targeted on the self” (Hunter 365), this is to say that such a function consists in self-reflection that might lead to civic awareness. By establishing a relationship between the aesthetic value of the text and ethical self-reflection, Hunter comes close to Adorno’s position.

If indeed aesthetics and politics are never separate entities and the autonomous work is always itself sociopolitical in nature, as Adorno says, then one has to rethink the very category of the political. Paradoxical as it may sound, “the meaningful political statements are to be found more in those autonomous works of art and literature that ‘present themselves as politically dead’ (i.e., Kafka, Beckett, and Paul Klee) than in works that are more overtly political in content”(Adorno109). In the canonical texts of the aesthetic tradition, it is the implicitly the political work that commands the attention of the reader, who returns to it again and again.

The fact that Beach does not approve of such arguments makes necessary further consideration of the other two alternative views of the aesthetic that he mentioned at the beginning of his article. His first objection to Hunter’s solution is that there are no ultimate criteria for determining whether a text is open-ended or not. Secondly, he distrusts the suggestion of severing the aesthetic from philological modes of criticism [and] considering it instead as “an autonomous ethical practice; a technology for the ethical heightening of subjectivity” (Hunter 98). Beach’s rejection of such a perspective is based on the fact that “only the dialectical process of thought which attempts to wrestle with the apparent contradictions posed by the aesthetic can adequately encompass the aesthetic in all its social and political implications” (Beach 98).
Terry Eagleton’s attempt to revalidate the aesthetic in a Bakhtinian manner, as “a politics of the body,” arouses Beach’s reservations due to its lack of critical rigor. Nevertheless, the approach of the neo-Marxist critic is less idealistic than Hunter’s and more aware of the radically double-edged profile of the aesthetic, which “implicates both bourgeois ideology and the Marxist critique of that ideology” (Beach 99). As a doctrine set to liberate certain aspects of human life from the “brutal autocracies of feudal absolutism”

The aesthetic is at once… the very secret prototype of human subjectivity in early capitalist society, and a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominance or instrumentalist thought. It signifies a creative turn to the sensuous body, as well as an inscribing of that body with a subtly oppressive law; it represents on the one hand a liberatory concern with concrete particularity, and on the other hand a specious form of universalism. If it offers a generous utopian image of reconciliation between men and women at present divided from one another, it also blocks and mystifies the real political movement toward such historical community. (Eagleton 9)

As Beach rightfully notes, Eagleton’s perspective provides a better historical understanding of the aesthetic and its necessary connections to political ideologies. Nevertheless, his suggestion to rethink the aesthetic as a “politics of the body” along the lines of Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque meets with Beach’s reproof on account of its exclusive insistence on the aesthetic’s “unmediated relationship with ideologically or politically contingent discourses as represented by physical materiality” (100). Granted that in Bakhtin “the carnivalesque reprogramming of the body constitutes a radically new version of the aesthetic, one which has revolutionary potential on several levels,” the exclusive insistence on this facet of Bakhtinian aesthetics amounts to ignoring “another Bakhtin, the Bakhtin who stresses the degree of aesthetic mediation involved in the incorporation of these discourses”(100). Moreover, Eagleton fails to address the question
that Beach considers fundamental and to which he returns later in his article: “What makes an artwork an artwork and not an unmediated registering of the sensuous material body?” (“Recuperating” 102).

The last model of recuperating the aesthetic that Beach discusses is David Caroll’s construction of an alternative genealogy of the concept in the footsteps of Nietzsche, Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida. In Paraesthetics, Caroll defines the new discipline as “an aesthetics turned against itself; pushed beyond itself, and a counter-force to aestheticism” (Caroll 103). As Beach points out, the prototype for this kind of critical strategy is Nietzsche, who turned the aesthetic into a discourse able to “point to the limitations of the theoretical, the speculative, the moral-religious, without becoming a replacement for them and a transcendental order into itself” (Caroll 3).

According to Beach, Lyotard has explored what Caroll calls critical aesthetics and has defined it as “an aesthetics or poetics of crisis, a disarrangement, disruption, or ‘deconstruction’ of the discursive through the intervention of the figural” (Caroll 36). Lyotard’s libidinal aesthetics is based on the premise that “the discursive cannot eliminate the figural alterity” (Caroll 37) due to the fragmented, the irrational, and the non-dialectical sides of existence. Derrida’s project, which Carroll calls “borderline aesthetics” is based on similar presuppositions. Beach’s reproach to this second attempt to reinvent the aesthetic in the wake of poststructuralist thinkers is that Caroll’s project merely repeats Adorno’s without giving it proper credit.

After all, Adorno’s negative dialectics was itself an attempt, as Frederic Jameson points out, to “challenge the very conception and ideal of a philosophical aesthetics,” to rethink, (or reinvent) the concepts of art and literature in much the same way Caroll suggests his canon of poststructuralist thinkers do... It is the peculiar nature of the art-work in Adorno’s system of thought to be [as Jameson
says] both ‘aesthetically autonomous and anti-aesthetic or profoundly social and historical.’ (Beach 105)

Moreover, the self-critical discourse so often championed by the poststructuralist philosophers as the main means of controlling the utopian side of aesthetic is also present in Adorno’s theory of the self-critical capacities of the autonomous work of art. According to this theory, which resonates with most deconstructionists but also with critics like Krieger, art is a critical discourse inasmuch as “it knows itself to be a failure, and is always aware of its own insufficiency” (Adorno 105).

This discrete critical function embedded in the literary discourse, especially in what Adorno and many other critics of the Kantian tradition call its autonomous version, appears not to be enough for those who require it to play a more emphatic role as a social practice. After Benjamin’s famous pronouncement that “every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism” (Soderholm 3), the defense of the aesthetic in terms of idealistic, philosophical categories like those employed by Kant, Schiller, the Schlegel brothers, and later by theoreticians of modernity has become almost an impossibility. As Christopher Beach points out in his summary of the recent debunking of the field, “the question of the aesthetic now, when even the Frankfurt School’s work during the 1940s, 50s, and 60s has been dismissed as elitist and insufficiently political, seems to many as an anachronistic embarrassment” (“Recuperating” 95). Terry Eagleton himself has been one of the strongest critics of the autonomy of the aesthetic seen as autonomy of cultural production. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, he notes that

the autonomy of cultural production suggested by the notion of the aesthetic as a meaningful category leads to forms of art which “are sequestered from all other social practices” and which serve as “an isolated enclave within which the dominant social order can find an idealized refuge from its own actual values of competitiveness, exploitation, and material possessiveness. (*Ideology* 9)
As a consequence, the contemporary critic cannot ignore the fact that today’s aesthetic approaches appear connected “with attempts to privilege modes of ‘high culture’ or other bourgeois cultural production to the detriment of forms of popular or mass culture” (Beach 96). Moreover, the “cultural insularity” ensuing from their formalist methods of analysis and interpretation makes them appear elitist and closed to the real issues of society. The last, but not least detrimental position regards the aesthetic as “synonymous with literary approaches that are based on naïve and idealist positions rather than engaged in any socially meaningful critical project” (Beach 96).

Under such circumstances, Beach’s own option is to return to Adorno’s and Benjamin’s aesthetics that “recognize the fundamental impurity of the aesthetic while still maintaining a sense of its crucial importance to society” (Beach 107). In the last part of his essay, he insists on Adorno’s idea that the autonomous work is always itself sociopolitical in nature (109), in order to free the current aesthetic debate from continuing the false polemic about the lack of connection between ethics and aesthetics in the works of art. Moreover, Beach appreciates Adorno’s belief in the crucial role of the literary critic, whose task is to guard literature from the attempts to instrumentalize it coming from various structures of power (Beach 107).

Revalidating the Aesthetic in Contemporary Theory and Criticism

The most recent attempts to reinstate the aesthetic within the current theoretical discourse have hoped to revalidate it according to revamped versions of modernism, as in the East Central European case, or according to moderate poststructuralist readings ranging from deconstruction and postmodernism to cultural criticism. Such studies are those cited by Christopher Beach,¹⁴ but also Isobel Armstrong’s The Radical Aesthetic
George Levine’s much cited essay “Reclaiming the Aesthetic” explores several of these directions in the hope “to recuperate a sense of the distinctive value of literature without losing the crucial insights provided by ideological criticism and contemporary theory”(10). First he pleads together with Harold Bloom and Richard Rorty for the inspirational value of those great works of literature that have not only become pillars of the Western canon, but are recognized as such even by postcolonial critics like Edward Said or cultural critics like Raymond Williams. Secondly, he argues in favor of preserving the utopian space of negotiation created by literary works, since “part of the value of the aesthetic is in the way it can provide spaces and strategies for exploring the possibility of conciliation between the idiosyncratic and the communal” (20).

In his project of restoring a liberating function to literature, Levine focuses mainly on the power of imagination to work as a political category. In his plea for a “new kind of formalism, one which recognizes the ideological implications of the formal,” he insists on the difference between aesthetics and ideology; on their complex and sometimes paradoxical relationship, based on the fact that in certain texts “the formal becomes the political” (24). This is the case, especially with forms of high modernism, which according to Derek Attridge, but also in the wake of Adorno’s theory about the negative function of critical art, manage to subvert the ideology of the status quo.
Modernism’s foregrounding of language and other discursive and generic codes through its formal strategies is not merely a self-reflexive diversion but a recognition that literature’s distinctive power and potential ethical force resides in a testing and unsettling of deeply held assumptions of transparency, instrumentality, and direct referentiality, in part because this taking to the limits opens a space for the apprehension of the other which those assumptions had silently excluded. (Attridge 245)

Levine believes that the aesthetic could be revived precisely along these lines of formal specificity, which would allow it to continue its work as a theory of value and part of a general epistemology. His project in *Aesthetics and Ideology* is to generate an approach able to discuss literary texts in terms of their distinctive characteristics and the aesthetic apart from ideology, though deeply interrelated to it. His stance is that classic works that have resisted time so far should continue to be discussed also in terms of the pleasure, passion, and inspiration they give us, not only as conspirators in the strategies of the political Right, the dominant, or the status quo.

The fact to which Levine repeatedly draws our attention is that the same literary texts performed opposite cultural and political functions at various moments in time and for various communities. While Shakespeare, Melville, and Whitman in Anglo-American culture are examples of writers who managed to resist absorption by the status quo, they could be also regarded as canonical exponents of the oppressive, dominant, Western, white male mentality. Regarding literature as a category of political domination and a means of empowerment ignores the matter of literary value and focuses exclusively on its anthropological, social, and political value, or lack thereof.

Instead, Levine together with Derek Attridge, Edward Said, Raymond Williams and many others, maintains that “it is through the formal that the political gets engaged” (“Reclaiming” 24). Therefore, literary critics would better identify “those qualities that
give to literature as a field of study, parallel to but distinct from cultural studies, its special nature and justification” (23).

Along the same lines, Peter Brooks argues in favor of reviving the interest for “poetics,” which would allow students to ask not only “what a text means, but how it means” (Aesthetics 158). With this recommendation we come back full circle to the position defended by most moderate cultural critics who, in response to the traditional formalist manner of paying exclusive attention to an essentialized, singular meaning, prefer to integrate literature within wider mechanisms of signification.

Overall, the difference between New Historians like Steven Greenblatt and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, on the one side, and Levine and his contributors, on the other, comes from their different emphasis on the importance of textual analysis as well as from their different goals. Levine is concerned with bringing to light the distinct qualities that turn a text into literature and thus grant it access in the “empireum” of inspirational works, able to resist co-optation by the state, the dominant regime of power, and create its own alternative community. Greenblatt and Sedgwick are interested in reading it as part of a specific moment of culture. Their main project, according to Levine, is “cultural, not literary” (6). In this regard, Levine states:

In the end, Greenblatt treats literature as resource (an indispensable one because of the special virtues of “great art” for anthropology). The objective is anthropological knowledge, however impure it might be, rather than what Greenblatt in fact does so wonderfully – analysis of the ways in which the literary and the ideological are implicated in the peculiar textures of language. (8)

This last particular type of analysis is what Levine considers the best of both possible worlds of formal aesthetics and cultural criticism. Instead of an excessive concentration on the ideological, complying features of certain texts, the critic suggests a
change of focus toward analyzing “a mode that operates differently from the others and contributes in distinctive ways to the possibilities of human fulfillment and connection” (3). Instead of exposing only the “deep implication of ostensibly literary discourse in the politics of Western imperialism and the suppression of ‘inferior’ races and cultures”; equal interest in the capacity of literary mechanisms to resist simplification “even of its own ideological commitments”(13). Instead of an exclusive focus on “decadent” aestheticism; equal acknowledgment of its “engaged’ forms; instead of exclusive connections with a reactionary and totalitarian right, equal exploration of its liberating functions.

The path from the first tenet to the second is relatively simple, once the readers agree to regard the literary text as a specific kind of discourse. “My argument is,” Levine notes, “that the ideology is so delicately and complexly entangled in the textures of literature itself that no discussion of the ideological without attention to the formal can have any but the most reductive relation to what texts are up to, how they get their work done” (5).

The meaning of the word “ideology” itself is variable and culturally determined. As Cheryl Wall shows in “On Freedom and the Will to Adorn: Debating Aesthetics and/as Ideology in African American Literature,”15 the negative connotation associated to it by Western high modernists, who sought to “resist ideology” is totally reversed in African American literature. Due to its active role in shaping and promoting a new identity, literature was valued proportionally to its ideological importance. “An increasing emphasis on the formal and ostensibly ornamental aspects of art” becomes in Zora Neale Hurston’s and Alice Walker’s texts, “politically loaded” (“On Freedom” 25).
Despite Levine’s moderate tone and relatively inclusive paradigm of interpretation, cultural critics like Michael Bérubé disagree with his approach of bringing back the formal analysis of literature. In his answer to Levine’s article published in *Falling into Theory,* Bérubé considers “the much-deplored politicization of literary studies, a problem of degree rather than of kind.” Literature and criticism are inevitably entangled in social, historical, and ideological commitments, but contemporary literary criticism simply stresses this aspect of literature too strongly, just as an early generation of critics failed to stress it strongly enough” (“Aesthetics” 393).

For Bérubé, the current extra-emphasis on the political nature of any public discourse at the expense of a perspective that would stress its democratic potential is preferable to Levine’s idealist and utopian understanding of the aesthetic. The old-time function of the aesthetic that “abstracts objects from the exigencies of use, bestowing on them an anticonsequentialist form of attention that asks about their composition and properties without determining, whether, to paraphrase Auden, they might make anything happen” (“Aesthetics” 396), seems at least problematic to Bérubé. Instead, he is “happy to see politics as an inescapable element of all human creation and to read every text into its political moment” (“Aesthetics” 389).

The difference between him and Levine goes back to the very models underpinning their approaches. The tradition of aesthetic reading developed under the idealist philosophical models of Kant, Schiller, and Hegel that Levine embraces can simply not come to terms with the one emerging out of Marx’s economic and social theories of class struggle, preferred by Bérubé. Intended to utterly challenge and change
the “old world,” the latter will necessarily look suspiciously for any signs of “false consciousness” and for any association between the aesthetic and class privilege.

As Isobel Armstrong\(^\text{17}\) claims in her attempt to develop a “democratic aesthetic,” the first step to exit the vicious circle of such hermeneutics of suspicion as that practiced by Bérubé and many other cultural critics, is to break the alleged necessary connection between the aesthetic and class privilege. The task is not simple at all since the history of such association is rather well-established itself. As a 19\(^{\text{th}}\)-century philosophy of beauty, feeling, and the imaginary, the traditional aesthetic now under attack was an idealist one, which seemed an “obsolete elitist fantasy about the high bourgeois subject even in 1886” (\textit{Radical} 2), the year when Henry James’ \textit{The Princess Casamassima} was published.

As Armstrong points out, the indictment of the idealist aesthetic, which allegedly enforces the class privileges of the high bourgeoisie, comes from the ironic image of decadent aestheticism in James’ novel. The image of society that we are offered is that of “distinguished men, with women who were both proud and gentle, talk[ing] about art, literature, and history, in splendid rooms” (2). Indeed, if this is all there is to the aesthetic attitude, why perpetuate it? If its only goal were to flatter the rich and please them with reinforcing portrayals of their life style, why continue? But are James’ own novels, so much embedded with this life style, simple copies and reinforcements of it? Aren’t they precisely critical indictments of an empty, aristocratic philosophy of life at the very moment they describe it most minutely? And isn’t this criticism made to reverberate precisely through aesthetic means? Isn’t James himself suggesting a new type of aesthetics emerging from the ruins of the decadent, aristocratic aestheticism? Is he
suggesting an end of an aesthetic attitude altogether? Not likely, since none of his critical
texts from *The Art of the Novel* support such a hypothesis.

Rather, I would say that James like many other commentators of the aesthetic,
moderate cultural critics included, challenges pretentious aristocratic aestheticism and
attempts to replace it within a more democratic version. The same intention of
“broadening the scope of what we think of as art” inspires Armstrong’s book. To renew
aesthetic discourse and explore its democratic potential, Armstrong uses the support of
Russian psychologist and educationalist L.S. Vygotsky, the American pragmatist John
Dewey, object relations psychologists D. W. Winnicott, Wilfred Bion, and André Green,
the phenomenology of Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, and Surrealist poetics, together
with the revisionary Hegelian Gilian Rose, and Adorno’s aesthetics.

Armstrong uses Lev Vygotsky and D. W. Winnicott’s theories of play to widen
the understanding of the aesthetic category and thus to counteract the critique undertaken
by Marxist thinkers like Terry Eagleton, and deconstructionists like Derrida and de Man.
In the “Poetics of Emotion,” she addresses “the importance of a reading of the emotions
to aesthetic discourse” (13) given that the affect has been constantly bypassed or ignored
by contemporary theory due to its “seeming resistance to analysis”(13). Maintaining that
“above all, the emotions should be included within a definition of the rational, rather than
fall outside it,” Armstrong presents the blueprint of an “analytical poetics of emotion”
based on the texts of Emmanuel Levinas, André Green, and Wilfred Bion.

By rereading John Dewey and Theodor Adorno, Armstrong attempts to escape the
impasse of a cultural theory that “subsumes ‘value’ under ‘cultural capital’” and, instead,
to “reclaim a democratic project” for the aesthetic (13). Finally, in the two chapters
devoted to the second wave of feminism, Armstrong discusses how this gender theory “found new modes of affective and analytical language,” while looking at gender “through the prism of the aesthetic and discovering a poetics of gender” (13).

From these examples, it is obvious that Armstrong is convinced that the aesthetic is not only in dire need of being “rescued,” but that such an operation could enrich the largely rationalist/analytical paradigm of knowledge that dominates contemporary cognitive models with dimensions coming from the realms of the affective and the creative. In this sense, Armstrong’s position resembles that of Richard Rorty, who has often deplored the turn toward the analytic taken by philosophy departments and, in their wake, by their English counterparts. Referring to the change of preference from A. N. Whithead, who in the 1930s “stood for charisma, genius, romance, and Wordsworth” to A. J. Ayer, who advocated “logic, debunking and knowingness” (“Inspirational” 129), Rorty notes:

In the space of two generations, Ayer and dryness won out over Whitehead and romance. Philosophy in the English speaking world became “analytic,” antimetaphysical, unromantic, and highly professional. Analytic philosophy still attracts first-rate minds, but most of these minds are busy solving problems which no nonphilosopher recognizes as problems: problems which hook up with nothing outside the discipline. So what goes on in anglophone philosophy departments has become largely invisible to the rest of the academy, and thus to the culture as a whole. This may be the fate that awaits literature departments. (“Inspirational” 129)

This unequivocal prophetic position that Rorty defended in 1997, is much toned down in his 2003 response to Haun Saussy’s “Ten Year ACLA Report” about the status of comparative literature. There Rorty embraces a much more inclusive and relativized perspective, which acknowledges the coming and going of various theoretical models of
interpretation and also their potential in enriching instead of stifling the discipline. In this sense, he writes:

Paradigm-shifting books are sometimes written by people who are members of a different discipline than the one their books help transform. Then it is tempting for enthusiastic readers to conclude that what discipline A. needs is more interdisciplinary cooperation with discipline B. But, in the humanities at least, the whole idea of “disciplines” is pretty dubious, and so is that of “interdisciplinarity.” The difference between studying analytic and studying non-analytic philosophy, for example, is at least as great as the difference between studying either and studying comparative literature. The difference between Auerbach and Spivak is as great as the difference between Heidegger and Carnap. If you can profit from reading both members of either pair, you are already about as interdisciplinary as anybody could reasonably ask you to be. (“Looking Back at ‘Literary Theory’” 4)

As is obvious from the above paragraph, Rorty’s openness toward a multiple model of interpretation is motivated less by his belief in the possible emergence of new interdisciplinary methods and more by his historical awareness that well informed and open-minded readers will manage to cope with the continuous change in theoretical trends. From this perspective, his ironic conclusion to the article sounds reassuring; like the irony of life:

Fifty years down the road, accounts of the nature of the discipline of comparative literature written with Spivak in mind will sound as quaint as those written with Wellek in mind do now. If they do not, then something will have gone wrong – not because there is anything wrong with Spivak, but because no healthy humanistic discipline ever looks the same for more than a generation or two. (“Looking” 4)

Had all parties involved in the aesthetic debate reached this irenic state of mind, many of the recent polemics would not have been started. As it is, most critics are still involved in defending the ideology underlying their approaches to literature. Whether the name of this ideology is high modernism, neo-Marxism, postmodernism, or postcolonialism, scholars devoted to each of them have produced many studies that
define them against the aesthetic. As to insist on each of them would be a task too
too extensive for the present project, in the remaining pages of this chapter, I should focus
only on two more attempts to redefine the aesthetic: John J. Joughin’s and Simon
Malpas’ volume on *The New Aestheticism* (2003) and a couple of postmodern and
poststructuralist perspectives on the topic.

* * *

*The New Aestheticism* (2003) proposes a type “A” philosophical revalidation
approach of the aesthetic. The premise is the symbiosis between literature and
philosophy, and the historical argument of the philosophical beginnings of aesthetics,
which could explain why a book about “new aestheticism” is written mainly by
philosophy professors and from philosophical perspectives. Apart from drawing its
legitimacy from invoking the origin of aesthetics, such an approach necessarily places at
the center of its investigation “the truth potential” of art instead of emphasizing ideology,
race, gender, and class. With aesthetics as “the theoretical discourse which attempts to
comprehend the literary”(2), the book is directed towards the recovery of the specificity
of literary discourse, which “is not explicable or graspable in terms of another conceptual
scheme or genre discourse”(3).

Though Joughin’s and Malpas’ premise that philosophy, as aesthetics, is the
“natural” theoretical frame to comprehend the literary is questionable in itself, their
observation that many times the singularity of various work’s “art-ness escapes” is
undoubtedly pertinent. Interested as it is in debunking the underlying oppressive ideology
of the literary to the extent that “all that often remains is the critical discourse itself,
reassured of its methodological approach and able to reassert its foundational principles,”

(3) contemporary theoretical discourse is in need of self-critical analysis.

Joughin’s and Malpas’ solution to this dead-end situation is a new type of
aestheticism; a direction that makes use of what is valid in the long aesthetic tradition and
considers literature in terms of its own specific discourse, while acknowledging its
interrelation to political, ideological, and historical discourse. Thus, they write:

Perhaps the most basic tenet that we are trying to argue for is the equi-
primordiality of the aesthetic – that, although it is without doubt tied up with the
political, historical, ideological, etc., thinking it as other than determined by them,
and therefore reducible to them, opens a space for artistic or literary specificity
that can radically transform its critical potential and position with regard to
contemporary culture. (“Introduction” 3)

Concretely, this approach that pleads for the autonomy and specificity of the
aesthetic comes closest to Adorno’s dialectical understanding of art’s critical function,
manifested through the autonomous form; a form engaged with historical processes in
such a way that it allows both for their criticism and for their renewal. Yet, Joughin and
Malpas do not plan to restate Adorno’s argument18.

Instead, they go back to the functions that aesthetics as an autonomous field was
supposed to play within the project of modernity. In Habermas’ wake they discuss the
particular status of this field which did not fit in the overarching reign of instrumental
reason. Due to its “ambivalent location within the philosophical project of modernity, it is
no coincidence that art has remained irreducible within modernity and thus has appeared
in a range of different guises always as a ‘surplus’ to the organizing drive of instrumental
reason” (“Introduction” 8).

In competition with the realms of epistemology and ethics, the aesthetic could
neither be subsumed to the “truth-only” cognition underpinning philosophy nor to the
moral action envisaged by the realm of practical reason. According to Kant’s tripartite system, aesthetics was reserved the role of bridging the gap between the two, a role which it apparently failed to accomplish. The outcome of this failure is, as Joughin and Malpas put it, along the lines of Derrida, Lyotard, Lacoue–Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, an unexpected opportunity for aesthetics to play a role within the project of modernity. Thus, they acknowledge:

Inadmissible to forms of criticism generated solely by pure or practical reason, art comes to occupy its own semi-autonomous realm, presided over for Kant by aesthetic judgment. Although not telling the truth or being just in itself, art opens a space to question and challenge the ‘first-order’ formulations of epistemology and ethics that hold sway in the lifeworld. In other words, it is art’s very ‘alienation’ and ‘isolation’ that provides the grounds for its political and philosophical potential in modernity. (11)

It is in this capacity of questioning the legitimacy of truth-only discourses that art develops its critical function within modernity, in close connection to its own self-reflective stance. As many critics have said, art’s power comes from the self-awareness of its own insufficiency as a “truth-only” discourse. By contrast, the impossibility of these kinds of discourses to account for “the process by which, in detaching themselves from the empirical world, artworks bring forth another would, opposed to the empirical one” (12) allow for the emergence of aesthetic theories, in which art judges itself according to categories pertinent to its particular status. By extension, the new aesthetic mode of relating to the world gives rise to challenges directed at the very hierarchies and value judgments of philosophy itself:

The transformative cognitive potential of the aesthetic and its world-disclosing capacity mark the emergence of art as an autonomous, self-validating entity during modernity and make a new type of truth possible, producing new means of expression and unleashing the creative potential for new forms of social cognition. (“Introduction” 12)
The new aesthetics that Joughin, Malpas and other contributors to their volume bring forth is built in accordance with this newly empowered status of the discipline. Regarded as “an unanticipated opening within an otherwise familiar discourse” (Jonathan Dollimore 14), the aesthetic holds the key to discourses of otherness, more suitable for a culture that “is no longer capable of being thought according to modern conceptions of historical progress or political emancipation” (Malpas 15). For this very reason, maybe today one needs to insist on the “surplus” knowledge provided by (Western) literature, as Andrew Bowie does in his article, “What Comes After Art?”19. After all, this very surplus knowledge might be the reason why we continue to read and gain something from the great works whose “complicity in securing repressive discourses of race, gender, class, etc.” has been constantly exposed in the last two decades (Bowie). Given the lack of results of the emancipatory project of postmodernity, maybe the insights gathered from recent approaches of cultural criticism have not been “superior to what they unmask,” nor did they offer “a truth or revelation inaccessible to their object of investigation [great works]” (Bowie 70).

Together with aesthetics, contemporary readers and philosophers might need to critically analyze the agenda and expectations of postmodernity and poststructuralism themselves. As both these movements were the strongest opponents of modern aesthetics, their manner of rethinking the category today deserves special attention. As I have already announced earlier in the chapter, the postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives represent the second approach on which I shall focus before bringing my survey of the recent attempts to revamp the aesthetic to a conclusion.
Postmodern and Poststructuralist Aesthetics

*The subject of literature is not the republic, but the republic of letters.*
(R. S. Crane in Critics and Criticism 376).

As with many other concepts describing multifaceted cultural phenomena like “modernism” and “postmodernism,” “the aesthetic” is a generic term that covers a wide variety of meanings, attributed to it by its defenders and contenders alike. As such, its profile is deeply controversial and spontaneously develops dimensions with each polemic it engages in.

Its long-term association with various facets of the project of modernity, in the works of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, but also Adorno, Gadamer, Habermas, and the Frankfurt School, brought the aesthetic face to face with one more valiant enemy: postmodernism. During its struggles to escape the essentialist, foundationalist, and universalist charges, brought on by this late association, the aesthetic had to insist precisely on those traits that brought it closer to the “self-reflexive,” “wordly,” “fragmented,” “ironic,” “anti-essentialist,” “historically and politically-aware” postmodernism.

The task shouldn’t have been difficult, given the multiple instances when literary texts and theories openly opposed the status quo; yet, due to hasty generalizations and “essentialist” understandings of modernity itself, the fight has proved to be almost lethal. Regarded together with “ethics” and “modernism” as one of the “totalizing narratives or legitimations that mask contradictions and fissures” (Anthony Carchardi xii), the aesthetic had to define itself less as an autonomous, self-contained practice and more in terms of a historically and politically aware field. Given that the very notion of the autonomous subject that the aesthetic helped define in its early 18th century version and challenged
during the 20\textsuperscript{th} had become deeply suspicious, the concept had to guard itself against associations with oppressive discourses that “privileged the position of the white, male, Christian, industrialist” (Cascardi ix).\textsuperscript{20}

Following the requirements of the dominant postmodern attitude, theorists of the aesthetic tried to emphasize the facets of its versatile profile that appealed to the contemporary tendency of preserving “the tension between the political and the aesthetic, between history and the text” (Andreas Huyssen, 221). Furthermore, such theoretical attempts at reconceptualization tended to insist on the distinction between “the aesthetic” and the humanist frame of reference, in the hope of securing the “aesthetic baby” while “throwing out the humanist bathwater” (Joughin 1).

Stuart Sim in \textit{Beyond Aesthetics} and David Caroll in \textit{Paraesthetics} engage in redefining the category based on the iconoclastic philosophical works of Nietzsche, Lyotard Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard. Before exploring their approaches any further, I would like to note that Sim’s and Caroll’s texts were written to answer questions about philosophical modernity and, by extension, about the aesthetic, which were raised during the modern-postmodern/posstructuralist debate. As such their books focus more on providing alternative readings to philosophical, rather than aesthetic, modernity.

When Stuart Sim says that “the writings of Derrida and Lyotard might be designated as anti-aesthetic in intent, having as their goal the creation of the conditions for a post-aesthetic realm beyond the reach of value judgment” (\textit{Beyond} 1), the implicit background against which he defines his own approach is that of the “rationalist, rule-bound procedures of standardly constituted academic philosophy and criticism” (2).
His perspective on Derrida and Lyotard as battling the problem of foundations in philosophy, waging war on “totality,” and “pushing beyond the absolutes of traditional discourse”(2) is only marginally directly against what I have called in my study, the aesthetic. Identified only with the insufficiencies of “modern aesthetic-criticism,” the aesthetic is considered the manifestation of the foundationalist modern theoretical discourse par excellence. Yet, in his haste to present Derrida, Lyotard, and Baudrillard as the knights who challenged the metaphysical biases of essentialist, system-bound, and theoretically dry modern philosophical discourse, he posits them against aesthetics. To me, this choice seems at least ironic.

Since Nietzsche’s “On Truth and Lies in the Extramoral Sense,” going through Heidegger, Derrida, Paul de Man, and many others, general aesthetic categories of discourse such as ambiguity, the metaphorical, the tropological have been considered as alternatives to the “theoretical,” “rule-bound” rigor of philosophical discourse. Under such circumstances, “a debate on foundations” should not be mainly an anti-aesthetic, post-aesthetic, or beyond-aesthetics one, except if its author uses the term in a very restrictive sense and clearly specifies this.

Modern aesthetics itself is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon and no serious researcher could conflate its (at least) five faces,21 without running the risk of total lack of rigor. On this count, more distinctions need to be made among texts belonging to such “faces” of literary modernity as modernism, avantgarde, and decadence, for example, as among aesthetic principles of modernity manifested in literature versus those enacted in criticism.
The foundationalist, totalizing claims could more easily be leveled against aesthetic criticism, which at times borrowed a certain stiffness from theoretical discourse. To apply these charges to literary works and certain aesthetic categories, which played inspirational parts for philosophers like Derrida, Lyotard, and other poststructuralists would be somewhat superfluous. After all, as David Caroll notes in his “Preface” to *Paraesthetics*:

The critical force of the questions of art and literature in the works of Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida has to do with the fact that these terms are called on to provide openings or entryways into philosophy, history, and politics. From the “distance” instituted by art and literature, these other fields are recast in a critical light and their fundamental assumptions exposed so that the boundaries defining and limiting them can be exceeded (xv).

Yet, not even Caroll attributes a positive, reformative-critical function to the aesthetic. Like many other postmodern scholars he identifies the aesthetic with one of its most restrictive faces, “the theoretical,” and as such looks forward to a “paraesthetics.” Such a discipline allegedly represents a “more of a bastard, parasitical, transgressive, critical aesthetics, than a ‘true’ aesthetics”(xiv), which most probably stands for the worst mixture of insufficiently politically-aware and socially-progressive texts (by today’s standards), and from also from outdated theoretical works.

In response, Caroll’s paraaesthetics claims to recover precisely the much-invoked critical function of “distantiation” of art and literature, especially when manifested as a response to the overpowering pretensions of “theoretical” discourse. The irony is that for two centuries, the same function has been performed according to the literary critics and philosophers of art by the aesthetic.

If I may agree with Caroll that Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault as representatives of postmodernism are also representatives of a different kind of aesthetic than Adorno, I
would also say that the so-called paraesthetic component of their work is the perfect example that, under a reshuffled guise, the category managed to be recuperated as and reworked into a functional postmodern category. Most probably such a reading would be in disagreement with the sense Caroll gives to paraaesthetics, which seems to me closer to Hal Foster’s anti-aesthetic.22

Yet, Caroll’s interest in stressing the critical force of art and literature in the philosophical discourses of Nietzsche, Derrida, and Lyotard, three of the most influential philosophers of modernity, postmodernity and post-structuralism, suggests precisely the cross-disciplinary, long-term potentialities of what I called “the aesthetic.” According to Caroll, for Nietzsche, Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida,

a certain “art” and “literature,” a certain radical notion of “aesthetics” or “poetics” has an important role to play in the struggle of critical theory to move beyond the limitations of theory. For each critical approach to art and literature – what I call paraaesthetics – has made it possible to begin to develop, if not a “critical theory,” then at least alternative critical strategies that confront and attempt to undermine and move beyond the closure of theory in its systematic, philosophic form. (3)

Of all these philosophers, Nietzsche at least would not have thought of calling his approach paraaesthetic, though, most clearly he would have liked to distinguish it from those preceding him. As for Foucault’s, Lyotard’s, and Derrida’s texts, in which “the pursuit of the questions of art and literature is an important critical tool in their respective reworkings of philosophy, history, and politics” (Paraesthetics 188), they never rejected the aesthetic as such. Consequently, their critique of modernity and of certain foundationalist characteristics of the theoretical discourse could not turn them into opponents of aesthetics. Instead, their anti-traditionalist stance should be understood in philosophical rather than ideological terms.
Anthropological Approaches to Literature and the Aesthetic

There are also theorists pleading for understanding literature as a liminal discourse capable of opening ways of self-transformation and even of providing models for a paradigm of global intelligence. Mihai Spariosu is one of these theorists. His most recent books, *Global Intelligence* and *Remapping Knowledge*, advocate a reconceptualization of the humanities along the lines of intercultural studies and a paradigm in which literary theory meets ethnography and cultural anthropology half way, and restores literature, in its liminal, mediating capacities to a prominent position. In *Remapping Knowledge*, Spariosu suggests a transvaluation of the traditional conception of the humanities as a set of discrete, well-defined disciplines in favor of an intercultural model, more conducive to the emergence of a paradigm of global intelligence.

Defined as the ability to “understand, respond to, and work toward what will benefit all human beings” with the goal of “support[ing] and enrich[ing] all life on this planet, global intelligence is based on the collective awareness of the interdependence of all localities within a global frame of reference and the enhanced individual responsibilities that result from this interdependence” (*Remapping* 2). Its basis of emergence consists of “long-term, collective learning processes and continuing intercultural research, dialogue, and cooperation”(2).

As part of Spariosu’s project, the humanities are among those few fields of knowledge that could play a crucial part “in creating new ways of thinking and acting within a global reference frame. They are best positioned to study, comprehend, and convey [cultural] identities and differences, as well as to mediate between them in a responsible manner”(8).
Within the field of interrelated humanities, Spariosu grants a preeminent, transformative role to the kind of literary discourse that is defined by “ontological flexibility, epistemological inventiveness,” and liminal potential\textsuperscript{24} for intercultural translation. Along with Wolfgang Iser and Gabriele Schwab, but also with other proponents of the reform of the humanities such as Edward Said, Wlad Godzich, Paul Bové, James Hans, Arnold Krupat, Virgil Nemoianu, Kurt Spellmeyer, and Frederick Turner, Spariosu pleads for the reconfiguration of knowledge with the help of artistic tools and the rhetorical strategies of literature.

The project also appeals to scholars from other human sciences such as the historian Hayden White, sociologists such as Erving Goffman, Richard Brown, and Mike Featherstone, or ethnographers and anthropologists such as Victor Turner, James Clifford, Stephen A. Tyler, Paul Rabinow, George Marcus, and Michael Fischer, among others (\textit{Remapping 29}). All of these scholars acknowledge recent intercultural exchanges such as “the aesthetic turn in experimentalist ethnography and the anthropological turn in literary studies” (21) and see them as opportunities for creating new cognitive paradigms, more suited for a global age. Wolfgang Iser, who turned from reader-response aesthetics to literary anthropology, explains the evolution as the result of the necessity to reconsider the place of literary studies in the new paradigmatic order.

With the goals of “map[ping] out the changing functions of literature over time, of determin[ing] its role in a postmodern age, and of understand[ing] its enduring place in the human overall scheme of things,” (32) literary anthropology is the emancipative tool, able to recontextualize the place of literature within the humanities. Optimistic in the capability of the field to rise from its own ashes, Spariosu is in tune with Iser when he
notes that, despite the dire pronouncements about its imminent death, “what is fading away [now] is less the literary phenomenon itself than its traditional functions as perceived by the various poetics and aesthetic theories of the past” (20).

Remapping literary studies and assigning them new functions could restore their meaningful status within the humanities, where their anti-essentializing character (which prevents ideological discourses from taking over), and their capacity to allow for “literary figuration of otherness” (Schwab) could play a great sociohistorical role. Looking at literature from an anthropological perspective, as Iser does, would help in reassessing its traditional functions and in assigning it new ones within a trans- and inter-disciplinary paradigm of knowledge and communication.

Part of the effort of recasting the literary discourse in new roles, more adequate to the expectations and needs of a globalizing world, Iser’s most recent book *The Range of Interpretation* proposes a revamped perspective on the interpretation process. Bearing in mind the premise that interpretation itself began as a form of translation, Iser advances the thesis of inter-cultural translatability.

We usually associate translation with converting one language into another, be it foreign, technical, vocational, or otherwise. Nowadays, however, not only languages have to be translated. In a rapidly shrinking world, many different cultures have come into close contact with one another, calling for mutual understanding in terms not only of one’s own culture but also of those encountered. The more alien the latter, the more inevitable is some form of translation, as the specific nature of the culture one is exposed to can be grasped only when projected onto what is familiar. In tackling such issues, interpretation can only become an operative tool if conceived as an act of translation. In Harold Bloom’s words “Interpretation’ once meant ‘translation,’ and essentially still does. (*The Range 5*)

The advantage of such a thesis is that instead of considering the interaction between cultures as marred by prejudices and power relationships, Iser regards
intercultural translation as a natural process, which, in one way or another, has been going on for centuries. In a rapidly globalizing world, cultures feel more than ever the need to be translated into one another.

To further investigate the manners in which such intercultural translation functions, Iser proposes four main models used by the Western world to translate various fields into each other: the canonical-authoritative, the hermeneutic circle, the recursive loop, and the traveling differential. Despite inevitable biases of premises, the most important similarity of the four is that, in its own way, each model opens up a liminal space.

A “self-organizing system” and a “source of emergent phenomena” (Range 145), this liminal space appears as a result of the difference between “the subject matter to be interpreted and the register brought to bear”(5). A vortex-like structure, it also has a certain resistance to all models of translation based on the dialectic tension between itself and the various registers of the latter. This liminal phenomenon accounts for the constant interplay of interpretations, which is based on the failure to fully transpose systems of codes into another, and, consequently generates “residues” of untranslatability. In turn, these signs of imperfection become the power that drives on (147) the three main models of interpretation: the hermeneutic circle, the recursive loop, and the traveling differential.

The liminal space emerging from this failure of full translatability acts as a catalyst and generates nonlinear organizations, which, in turn, become the sources of new phenomena (150). The process is infinite. By generating its own power to go on, out of the “ineliminable residual untranslatability” (153), the interpretive process makes things happen (155). Open-ended interpretation becomes a basic human activity providing the
best instrument of “mapping ever-new territories”(158). A cognitive, ontological tool of world-making, this technique with a long history in literary studies is reconsidered by Iser as one of the principle modes in which human function in the world.

If one goes back to the already old assumption of Nietzsche, Vaihinger, Husserl, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein that our acts of cognition are mainly acts of interpretation, the aesthetic-like quality of our knowledge resurfaces once more, launching the reassessment of literature and the aesthetic according to their functions within anthropology. Iser’s and Spariosu’s hope is that the remapping of the aesthetic field according to the expectations and the needs of a globalizing, intercultural paradigm might lead to reconsidering it according to its general anthropological functions, that could place it back at the center of contemporary theoretical investigation. One such approach is Iser’s The Fictive and the Imaginary,26 a book that “seeks to develop a different form of heuristics for human self-interpretation through literature” (“Preface” xiii).

Starting from the presupposition that art/literature as a means of human self-exegesis is indispensable for understanding human evolution, Iser launches his inquiry into human methods of self-reflection with two specifically literary ones employing the fictive and the imaginary. Before discussing the role of these concepts in literary discourse, in connection to which they were most commonly studied, Iser focuses on “the thematizing of fiction in the philosophical discourse and [on] the attempt to conceive the imaginary in cognitive discourse”(xiv). Also, to fully unveil the range of their influence over various human discourses, he defines the fictive as “an operational mode of consciousness that makes inroads into existing versions of the world.” According to this revolutionary perspective, the fictive “becomes an act of boundary-crossing which,
nonetheless keeps in view what has been overstepped,” thus both disrupting and doubling
the referential world (xv). Liberated from the disparaging connotations associated with it
as a result of the traditional opposition to reality, the fictive can finally be related to such
basic human needs as that of “hav[ing] access to the condition achieved in fictionalizing
and dreaming.” Its function is to grant us access to worlds in which “the coexistence of
what is mutually exclusive” is still allowed (xv), so that one can simultaneously be
involved in an action and step out of it to be with oneself. The benefit of such
fictionalizing acts is manifold and can hardly be restricted to literature. Their usefulness
is visible especially in cognitive disciplines which need to work in an “as if” mode, but
the general advantage consists in the possibility they grant to “constantly shift modes of
operation in accordance with the changing boundaries to be overcome”(xvi).

The imaginary widens even more the number and kind of the possible modes of
interaction with the world. Its role is that of a mediator among various discourses and
disciplines. Traditionally regarded as “a faculty, a creative act, or a Ur-fantasy” (xvii),
with no intentionality of its own, the imaginary was associated with fields as different as
psychology, philosophy, history, science, and literature. Its profile has always been that
of a characteristic that “discloses itself in an interplay with its different activators”(xvii),
an “inter-field” that assisted the emergence of liminal openings among various
disciplines, otherwise caught in the lack of communication deriving from various power
mechanisms. Despite its general relevance for all types of human discourse, the
imaginary, very much like the fictive, has reached its most free, non-pragmatic forms of
manifestation as imagination in literary discourse.
As the privileged locus of interaction among the fictive, the imaginary and the real, literature remains the arch-domain of their paradigmatic interplay, the space par excellence where the human condition itself can be staged.27 Granted this, literature becomes “a panorama of what is possible” and acquires a heuristic cognitive dimension generally overlooked by most theories that deny it any major role in the contemporary world.

Apart from bringing to light these general, anthropological functions of literature from a transdisciplinary perspective, Iser discusses some of its more specific potentialities. As the privileged locus of interaction between the fictive, the real, and the imaginary, the literary work is also the field where “the fictive gains an added functional feature that distinguishes it from its uses in philosophy and science, namely, self-disclosure”(14).

Through the act of pointing at itself as fiction, “the fictive can best carry out its role as mediator between the real and the imaginary” (34). Its ability of performing this function derives from the volatile character of the fictive and its “diffusiveness [which] eludes semantic determination, allowing it to be transformed into ‘many gestalts’” (Iser 232). Given the ability of the fictive to cross boundaries (through such very fictionalizing acts) its interaction with the imaginary might help redefine/modify a past or current state of affairs, and even generate new modes of living.

Although not anchored in overarching philosophical concepts, Iser’s perspective shares similarities with Krieger’s, Hugo Friedrich’s, and Adorno’s, which claim their origin in the Kantian theory of the disinterestedness of the aesthetic and are at the basis of most utopian, modern theories of art. The family resemblance unifying and relating these
critics’ opinions to the East Central European belief in the autonomy of the aesthetic derives from their idealistic/utopian perspective on art. Starting from such a premise all these scholars consider the necessity of recontextualizing the aesthetic according to a functionalist model, which puts into evidence the long history of the field in the service of human development.28

As a general mode of knowledge, infused by categories associated with the literary/secondary and as a domain of sense experiences, the aesthetic can still perform a mediating role in the mostly utilitarian contemporary world. In Iser’s perspective, but also in those of Richard Rorty, Murray Krieger, James Hans, Arnold Krupat, Virgil Nemoianu, Gabriele Schwab, Kurt Spellmeyer, Frederick Turner, Spariosu, and many others, literature/the aesthetic could be at the heart of reform in the humanities.

Other Ways of Revalidating the Aesthetic

In addition to the revalidations of the aesthetic discussed in the previous sections, I would like to examine two other ways of reviving the category today, present in J.M. Bernstein’s The Fate of Art and Wolfgang Welsch’s Undoing Aesthetics. The premise these two studies share is that in order to be revived, the aesthetic has to part ways with its modernist definition in literature and criticism, and with its profile as a discrete discipline within the project of modernity advanced by philosophers. If Adorno’s theory about the critical role of negative aesthetics and the autonomous work of art cannot hold, neither can Habermas’ idea that art/the aesthetic is the only field within the project of modernity that escapes instrumental reason.

If we take this conclusion a step further, what follows is the questioning of the very Kantian tripartite division of human cognition into the realms of knowledge, ethics,
and aesthetics, which founded the aesthetic field in the first place. However, another possible consequence is the liberation of art from its inferior position in relation to truth-oriented cognition, and morally regulated action. This position has been embraced largely by poststructuralist theory, in the wake of Nietzsche. Bernstein calls it post-aesthetic philosophy of art and defines its goal as to “employ art to challenge the truth-only cognition; they locate the meaning and being of art in its cognitive dimension reconnecting art and truth” (4). By analogy with post-positivist scientific theories that challenge the traditionally tripartite separation of human experience into discrete disciplines by modernity, post-aesthetic theories maintain that

Bernstein believes that at the origin of recent aesthetic alienation is the very thesis of the autonomy of art that generates the problem of attempting to re-unify the aesthetic with the other two spheres of human experience. Once the borderlines between the three become more permeable, their interaction itself becomes less problematic, and the aesthetic is no longer subservient to the truth-only cognition.

Wolfgang Welsch’s chapter about the “Aestheticization Processes” explores similar ideas. Drawing on the premise that “aesthetics has lost its character as a special discipline relating solely to art and become a broader and more general medium for the understanding of reality” (Undoing ix), Welsch attempts to rethink the relevance of this new aesthetic for the contemporary world.
If earlier it was thought that aesthetics was concerned only with secondary, supplemental realities, then today we are recognizing that the aesthetic belongs to knowledge and reality directly at a base level. Traditional knowledge of reality sought to be objective, that is, fundamentalist; only the laws of genuine production were clarified through aesthetic phenomena. But, at the same time, categories for the understanding of the production of reality were actually being developed on the quiet. Since it has become clear to us that not only art, but other forms of our conduct too exhibit the character of production, these aesthetic categories – categories such as appearance, manoeuvrability, diversity, groundlessness or suspension – have become fundamental categories of reality. (*Undoing* 23)

Going “beyond art” in this case does not mean simply going beyond high modernist theses about art, but beyond conceiving “art” as an autonomous, separate domain, with no inherent relevance for other spheres of life. By the same token, “going beyond aesthetics” does not imply only going beyond the status quo supposedly represented by “aesthetics,” “modernity,” “modernism” since the 1980s, but opening up aesthetics to questions of perceptive attitudes, media culture, and epistemology. Reclaiming for the aesthetic use categories of everyday experience like “appearance, manoeuvrability, diversity, groundlessness or suspension” (23), processes like “simulation” (as in computer-simulation) and the virtual side of reality, Welsch sets out to prove that contemporary world is characterized by a global aestheticization.

While modernist aesthetic might have been “dominant, but dead” (Jameson) since the 60s, postmodern aestheticization is alive and in full expansion. To reach this conclusion one need only be aware of the four levels of the phenomenon that Welsch investigates. These are: “the embellishing, everyday surface aestheticization,” “the more profound technological and media aestheticization of our material and social reality,” “the deep-reaching aestheticization of our practical attitudes in life and our moral orientation,” and the “epistemological aestheticization” (*Undoing* 24).
The connection among all these facets may seem fairly loose, but as Welsch suggests, one could understand it according to Wittgenstein’s model of “family resemblance”\(^{29}\) which attributes coherence not only in terms of “unitary essence” but also to the usages among which there is “semantic overlap”\((\textit{Undoing} 9)\). For the aesthetic, such usages range from predicates related to something “sensuous, pleasurable and perception-connected,” to those referring to “form, proportion, phenomenalistic, theoretistic, beautiful, subjective, poietic, artistic, sensitive, aesthetistic, and virtual” experiences\(^{30}\) \((\textit{Undoing} 10-15)\). These various semantic attributes of the expression “aesthetic” point toward its polysemic character and rather protean profile that could account not only for historical shifts in meaning and corresponding polemics and revampings, but also for the potentiality of yet new variants.

The \textit{epistemological aestheticization} is one of them and stretches the understanding of the category over the formerly autonomous domain of truth. According to Welsch, this development “came about in consequence of the development of scientific rationality itself, through which truth, as ordained by science, the guiding authority of modernity, has to a large extent become an aesthetic category”\(^{31}\)(20). Paradoxical as this may seem, it is not counter-intuitive if one considers, together with Welsch, that

\begin{quote}
all our forms of orientation are aesthetic in a threefold sense: they are produced poietically, structured with fictional means, and in their whole mode of being of that floating and fragile nature which had traditionally been attested only to aesthetic phenomena and had only been considered possible with these. (21)
\end{quote}

By stipulating that for Kant--time and space – as forms of intuition/ aesthetic presuppositions guide cognition, Welsch implies that “aesthetics, as theory of these forms of intuition, that is, as transcendental esthetic – becomes epistemologically fundamental”
(20). From acknowledging “the aesthetic fundamentals of all knowledge” Welsch easily maps the road to Paul Feyrabend’s “aesthetic character of truth” (22). Going through Nietzsche’s theses of the aesthetic-fictional character of cognition, to those of Otto Neurath, William van Orman Quine, and Karl Popper, Welsch concludes that “truth, knowledge, and reality have increasingly assumed aesthetic contours over the last two hundred years” (23).

The relevance of this epistemologic aestheticization is paramount for Welsch’s general picture of the process in as much as it “forms its actual substratum, it operates as foil, and engine, and also as counsel” (24) for all other aestheticization processes. Once accepted as part of the new post-modern paradigm, this crucial facet of an overarching tendency seals the final deconstruction of the triad of autonomous spheres, which structured modernity: cognition, ethics, and aesthetics. The road for total aestheticization opens ahead.

Arrived at this point, the question is what kind of an understanding of the aesthetic does the present study itself envisage: is it mostly the modernist one, defended by Adorno’s reevaluation of high art; is it the general-anthropological one of Iser, Spariosu, and many ethno/eco-critics, is it the so-called paraesthetic, infusing the works of Nietzsche, Derrida, and Lyotard?

I would have to say that due to the fact that the present study is a general investigation of the functions of various aesthetic models, I refrained from promoting any specific definition and chose instead to work with as many of the potentialiaties of the artistic/literary/critical/philosophical discourse about the aesthetic as possible. The first goal of such an inclusive approach is that of an inventory that could provide a cross-
disciplinary frame wide enough to re-address the question about the vitality of the aesthetic today. In this last sense, the category refers to literary discourse in general and to forms of literary criticism and aesthetic theory as practiced by Krieger, Adorno, some East Central European critics of the 1960s, but also by Felski and Said. The second goal of my approach was that of illuminating the versatile, amphibolous, multifunctional profile of the aesthetic seen as a philosophy of art, anthropologic and aesthetic attitude, and mode of relating to literary and non-literary texts. My ultimate hope was to assess its history *sine ira et studio* and to point to possible new functions in today’s society.³²

**Endnotes:**

1 In her article entitled “Democratization and Decline,” Lynn Hunt notes that “the entrance of new groups (women in the 70s, ethnic minorities in the 80s) has distinctly changed the social dynamics within the university in the last twenty to thirty years.” (23) The most dramatic changes can be observed since 1989 when 38.6 % of the new hires were women (compared to 24.4 % in the current faculty), 13.8 % of the new hires were minorities (compared to 9.85 of the current faculty). In 1972, 24.1 % were women in comparison to the 20.5 % of the current faculty, and 8.35 of the new hires were minorities in comparison to the already existing 5.6% minority faculty.” Lynn’s conclusion is that “the only intellectual trends that seem to follow inexorably from the changing demography of higher education are feminism and multiculturalism, if these are taken as broad affiliations rather than fixed ideological positions. The rise in number of women and minority students, the increase in number of women and minority faculty (but especially women faculty), and the expansion of education to previously excluded social classes must exert some pressure on the structure of knowledge, especially in the humanities and social sciences, whose subject matter is sensitive in one way or another to social configurations. This increasing emphasis on the social construction of knowledge and identity probably stems from these same changes, for previously excluded groups are especially sensitive to the ways in which social structures and social meanings have shaped their lives (if only because such influences worked to exclude people like them from higher education in the past)” (29). In *What’s Happened to the Humanities?* – ed. Alvin Kernan.


4 To illustrate this particular direction, the title for the collection of essays that he edits and from which I cite is: *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies,* with an emphasis on “aesthetics” which is spelled in red letters.
5 Frith continues by saying that this phenomenon happens because peoples’ “pleasures and satisfactions are rooted in similar analytic issues, similar ways of relating what they see or hear to how they think and feel. The differences between high and low emerge because these questions are embedded in different historical and material circumstances, and are therefore framed differently, and because the answers are related to different social situations, different patterns of sociability, different social needs” (Performing Rites 19).

6 The authors and books she cites under this banner are: James Soderholm with Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in the Age of Cultural Studies, Michael Clark with The Revenge of the Aesthetic, Elaine Scarry with her famous On Beauty and Being Just,” Wendy Steiner with Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth Century Thought, Dennis Donoghue’s Speaking of Beauty, Alvin Kernan’s The Death of Literature, John Ellis’ Literature Lost, and Richard Rorty with Achieving for Our Country. All these add to Marjorie Perloff’s “infamous” article published in The Chronicle Of Higher Education on December, 4, 1998, “In Defense of the Poetry: Put the Literature Back into Literary Studies” and Scott Heller’s “Wearing of Cultural Studies, Some Scholars Rediscover Beauty.”

7 In his article: “On Literature in Cultural Studies” in The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies, p. 44-58.

8 In his essay, “Recuperating the Aesthetic: Contemporary Approaches and the Case of Adorno.” Beauty and the Critic, 94-113.


11 According to Beach, the problem with seeing Bakhtin [as Eagleton does] “as providing an alternative aesthetic – one involving an unmediated relationship with ideologically or politically contingent discourses from the “real world” as represented by physical materiality – is that it ignores another Bakhtin, the Bakhtin who stresses the degree of aesthetic mediation involved in the incorporation of these discourses” (Beach 100).

12 Among these levels Eagleton enumerates: the level of philology or ontology where the carnivalesque “explodes the language of reason, unity, and identity into so many superfluous bits and pieces”; on the level of social critique, where it “runs roughshod over ruling-class civilities”; on the level of politics, where it “refuses the inscription of reason, pitting sensation against concept and libido against law, summoning the licentious, semiotic, and dialogical in the face of that monological authority whose unspoken name is Stalinism” (Eagleton 337).

13 Since Nietzsche’s rewriting of the aesthetic was one of the crucial turning points in the rethinking of the field, I have taken a closer look at it in the Appendix.


Simon Jarvis in *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* comes closest to this when claiming that Adorno’s aesthetic theory “investigates the extent to which cultural forms and the materials and techniques by which they are transfigured [might be] already riven by the ‘history sedimented within them’ (Jarvis 123). As such, art forms might exercise their critical function precisely from within those “cracks” that history has already marked on their seemingly perfectly smooth surface. To be able to “attend” to these ruptures, fissures, and discrepancies in the texture of literary discourse, its interpreter needs to pay special attention to form. In this sense, Adorno himself notes that “All other efforts to restore art by giving it a social function, of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty, are doomed,” notes Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory* (1). While proponents of the anti-aesthetic like Hal Foster contest exactly this “notion of the aesthetic as subversive, critical interstice in an otherwise instrumental world,” (*Anti-Aesthetic* 23) defenders of Adorno’s negative aesthetics insist on its indubitable, though not easy accessible, viability. In this sense Jay Bernstein notes “Only by sustaining its function of not being socially formative can art enact a form of resistance to the rationality assumptions governing practice and be a place holder for what socially formative practice would be like” (“Introduction” 7).

20 In this sense in “Writing the Body: Toward an Understanding of l’Écriture féminine,” Ann Jones notes “As long as all cognitive, aesthetic, or ethical maps are drawn to the scale of “I am the unified, self-controlled center of the universe…the rest of the world which I define as Other, has meaning only in relation to me as man/father, possessor of the phallus” (362). Article included in *Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985.


22 Such as Hal Foster’s collection *The Postmodern Culture. Essays on the Anti-Aesthetic.*


24 We literary people should help this process along by contributing to the development of specific blueprints for future remappings of knowledge, which might well need to display the kind of ontological flexibility and epistemological inventiveness that have always been the mark of literary discourse. For that purpose, we need to give up our own territorial ways of thinking and doing things and to cease looking upon literature as a traditional canon of literary texts, but as a form of liminal activity that generates new cognitive associations and interactions (*Remapping* 9).


27 “Staging in literature makes conceivable the extraordinary plasticity of human beings, who, precisely because they do not seem to have a determinable nature, can expand into an almost unlimited range of culture-bond patternings” (*The Fictive* xviii).

28 In this sense, Murray Krieger maintains that “the aesthetic…alerts us to the illusionary, the merely arbitrary, claims to reality that authoritarian discourse would impose upon us; because unlike authoritarian
discourse, the aesthetic takes back the “reality” it offers us in the very act of offering it to us. It thus provides the cues for us to view other discourses critically, to reduce the ideological claims to the merely illusionary, since there is in other discourse no self awareness of their textual limitations, of their duplicity – their closures, their exclusions, their repressions.” (“My Travels” 225).

29 With respect to language, Wittgenstein notes: “Instead of producing something common to all that we call language, I am saying these phenomena have no one thing in common which makes us use the same word for all, – but they are related to one another in many different ways. And it is because of this relationship, or these relationships, that we call them all ‘language.’” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Macmillan, 2nd edition, 1958), p. 39 [77]. For the purpose of his demonstration, Welsh replaces the word “language” with “aesthetic”.

30 In a veritable tour de force, Welsh clarifies the significance he is attributing to all these terms. Thus, “very generally the expression ‘aesthetic’ refers to the sensuous” (10). Two semantic elements are related to this understanding: an aesthetic and an elevatory one. The aisthesis itself has two sides: sensation and perception.

“Sensation is related to pleasure and is emotional in nature; perception is related to objects and is cognitive in nature. Subjective evaluation forms the focus of sensation, objective ascertainmment the scope of perception. Corresponding to this bifurcation, ‘aesthetic’ can assume a hedonistic meaning, with a view to sensation’s accentuation of pleasure, and a theoretic one with a view to perception’s observational/contemplative attitude” (Undoing 11). The so-called phenomenalistic semantic element implies that “aesthetic perception directs itself only to the surface, to the skin of things, thus dedicating itself to appearances, not to essences. To all these, Welsh adds the reconciliation perspective brought about by aesthetic perception. This refers to the fact that “structures are designated ‘aesthetic’ precisely because in them things are wonderfully joined, brought into harmony, and made to agree with each other”(13). Other common associations of the concept are with the beautiful, the artistic, and the poietic – this last characteristic referring to “the generation of objects of aesthetic character” (13). The aestheticistic semantic element stands for “the shaping of life according to exclusively aesthetic criteria; for an aesthetic type of existence. A universalization of the aesthetic is linked with the aestheticistic attitude, and this is , as was ‘artistic’ previously capable of assimilating almost all of the semantic elements discussed before. What is new (alongside the element of enjoyment’s becoming reflexive too, since the aestheticist is ultimately concerned with enjoying his or her self) is, then, above all, the dominance of the playful as well as the priority of the possible over the real. The homo aestheticus is a virtuoso of the ‘sense of possibility’ (Musil) and of virtualization” (14-15).


32 Kai Hammermeister is among those interested in the possible ways of continuing aesthetic philosophy. In the “Conclusion” to The German Aesthetic Tradition, he envisages two possible paths of development. The first one would be that considering that aesthetics is to “deal predominantly with art, or even exclusively with art.” The second direction considers that “aesthetics would be regarded as an inquiry into sense perception” (214). In this latter case, “aesthetics can continue to deal with art, but is by no means restricted to it. All other cultural products – television, movies, fashion, diets, design, pop music, and so on, as well as nature itself –are as good or better objects of analysis than great artworks. In consequence, empirical psychology, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and other fields could be incorporated into aesthetics. In fact, aesthetics would largely cease to be a philosophical discipline (214). One last possibility is that aesthetics would become a truly autonomous field and would shed the guidance of philosophy, but Hammermeister does not explore this any further.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

The survey of the polemic positions concerning today’s status and role of aesthetics that I undertook in the previous chapter suggests two main directions envisaged by scholars who have construed the possibility of reviving the aesthetic. Before discussing them, I would like to emphasize that I use the term “aesthetic” to refer to concepts developed by some contemporary scholars such as “new aestheticism,” “ethics/aesthetics,” and “aesthet/hics.” My approach attempts to venture beyond traditional aesthetics and to open towards new facets of the discipline not by rejecting earlier interpretations in an adversarial revisionistic way, but by rereading them with the awareness of a different cultural age. My theoretical position resembles both Wolfgang Welsch’s project of finding the ethical implications of the aesthetic and Wolfgang’s Iser’s and Mihai Spariosu’s rethinking of the categories of the fictive and the imaginary, and the role of literature. Based on these projects, my study envisages the potential of redefining a new aesthetics that could open towards interdisciplinary and global cooperation.

Of the two main tendencies of renewing the concept of aesthetics mentioned above, Welsch continues the direction defined by Adorno, Krieger, and followed by many East Central European critics. The difference between his reading of the traditional/modernist theses of aesthetic autonomy and theirs is that he contests the foundational premise of autonomy of the aesthetic and pleads instead for an “entangled” form of art, where ethics and aesthetics communicate. Like Stuart Sim in Beyond
Aesthetics, Thomas Docherty in After Theory, David Carroll in Paraaesthetics, John Joughin and Simon Malpas in The New Aestheticism, and J. M. Bernestein in The Fate of Art, Welsch is fully aware that in order to perform a fair reassessment of the aesthetic, one has to go beyond traditional dichotomies. Thus, the first step is to escape the opposition between aesthetics and various fields such as ethics and theory. Most of all, implies Welsh, if it is to ever be adequately reassessed, the aesthetic has to overcome the limitations of the modernist definition that see it as an autonomous field.

The fallacy of the premise of autonomy comes from the fact that though it originally meant “keeping aesthetics free of ethical stipulations” (Welsch 60), in the long run its consequence was that “aesthetic viewpoints have had no role to play for modern ethics since Kant” (Undoing 60). For this reason alone, most of the scholars mentioned above realized that the problem of the ethical status of aesthetics stems not from the alleged divide between the two, but from the misconstrued theory positing it.

Instead of attempting to bridge this gap as many did before, contemporary scholars chose to completely redefine the aesthetic. Some turned their attention to postmodernism as a theory able to overcome the aporias of modernity; others engaged in re-analyzing the premises of a theory-centered model of literary interpretations; still others, like Simon Jarvis, revitalized Adorno’s theories of the “immanent critique” of the modern art-work and utopian negativity by bringing them back to the center of contemporary aesthetic investigation.

Together with all these authors, but also against them, Welsch abandons the premise of the binary opposition between ethics and aesthetics and works instead with that of “transdisciplinarity” (Undoing 61). It is from this perspective that he seeks to
prove “to what extent ethical determinations are inherent in aesthetics as such,” and “to explore the ethical potential of the aesthetic” (61).

The first step on this path is to “rescue” sense perception from the traditionally derogatory association with and relegation to the realm of pure sensorial experience. Though this rather revolutionary direction has been previously and brilliantly explored by Nietzsche, Welsch does not follow in the footsteps of the radical German thinker. Instead of pointing out, in Nietzsche’s wake, that the very hierarchy between sense and spirit is culture/religion biased, Welsch prefers to work within the constraints of the traditional hierarchy of sense and spirit and to come up with an alternative that does not implicitly diminish the role of aisthesis.

Starting with the distinction between perception and sensation, where the first refers to colors, sounds, tastes and smells, and serves cognition, while the second “evaluates the sensible on a scale of pleasure and displeasure” (Undoing 62), Welsch establishes a follow-up distinction between short-range senses and long-range senses. The difference between the two comes from the degree to which they are contact-bound with the object, or, on the contrary, have a more cognition-like orientation and relate to the objective qualities of their subjects of analysis. By evaluating the objects according to reflexive instead of vital criteria, this latter type of elevatory aisthesis, called taste, bonds itself to the realm of cognition instead of that of primary sensation.

Based on these distinctions, Welsch derives the conclusion of an embedded ethic impulse in the aesthetic, an aesthet/hics, as he calls it, from the openness of the domain towards long-range sensory experience. This latter type of aesthetic reaction points to the capacity of the field to naturally develop an inner reflexive imperative. According to
Welsch, the imperative of aesthet/hics states: “In perceiving, keep yourself free of sensuous sensation, disregard it, rise above it!” With respect to sensation, it commands: “Don’t heed primary vital pleasures, but also exercise the higher, particularly aesthetic pleasure of a reflexive delight! Step above primary-sensible determination” (*Undoing* 63) and elevate yourselves above it.

Despite its interesting in-depth analysis that reveals transdisciplinary communication between ethics and aesthetics, Welsch does not free his analysis from the constraints of the tripartite Kantian system of separate spheres: cognition-morality-aesthetics. Up to this point his approach only grants the aesthetic a higher position in a hierarchy built according to criteria of cognition. The price for reconciling the aesthetic sphere with that of ethics is that both should be subordinated to the ethical imperative of reflexive judgment. Many have seen in this situation a preservation of the ascendancy of philosophy over art, and they have considered the attitude still indebted to the traditional, pernicious hierarchy between senses-perception and spirit.

The second model of aesthet/hics that emerges under the guidance of Adorno’s theory of heterogeneity of form consecrates particular forms of art, especially those observant and tolerant of differences, as the desired models for a communal aesth-ethics. Such an aesthetics of heterogeneity has many points of contact with that of radical high modernism, which rebelled against the dictate of organic form and pleaded instead for preserving the specificity and peculiarities of separate elements. In many points, it implicitly followed Adorno’s aesthetic theory that maintained that “Aesthetic work instead of exercising domination, has to follow the singular impulses and attempt to do
them justice. It would have to pursue an ideal not of unity through formation, but of doing justice to the heterogeneous” (Aesthetic Theory 180).

According to this model, the aesthetic could fulfill the ethical imperative of avoiding imperialist tendencies and of overcoming the trials and tribulations of a domination/power-oriented mentality\(^1\) if it uses the ability of form to preserve the differences pertaining to various parts and elements of an artwork. Furthermore, following the dictates of heterogeneous aesthetic form, such an aesthetic would ensure not only the transit from the subordination of aesthetics to ethics but also the emergence of an ethics of justice instead of one of subjection. The model for such an ethics is aesthetic justice, which, according to Welsch, escapes the machinery of domination by acknowledging and tolerating differences. By embedding its ethics within its aesthetic form, the text defined by this type of resolution\(^2\) also finds a way out of the tripartite system of spheres of cognition, morality and aesthetic experience.

Welsch’s interpretation, which makes use of some crucial principles outlined by Adorno’s aesthetic theory, ends up affirming the autonomy of the aesthetic, with the provision that in the 21\(^{st}\) century the domain should be regarded as prone to incorporate ethical concerns in its profile and reshape them according to its own specificity.

Yet, many contemporary readers, especially proponents of cultural criticism, would disagree with Welsh, inasmuch as his aesthet/hics, in continuing Adorno’s aesthetic theory, might also perpetuate the latter’s biases against popular culture.\(^3\) Today, when most scholars are looking for an inclusive canon of plurality and tolerance and when certain forms of popular culture function as the anti-establishment expressions par excellence, accommodating such a model is highly problematic
Welsch himself senses this insufficiency in Adorno’s aesthetics and takes a step away. He pleads for a “plurality of paradigms in regard to art as a whole,” and for an aesthetics that “should acquire bearing in the life-world not just as a line of embellishment, but as an authority of aesthet/hics” (Undoing 74). The generalizing of the aesthet/hic paradigm implicit in this suggestion is far from a return to the previous Schillerian absolutism of form. Instead of resulting in the Romantic “annihilation of the material by the means of form,” Welsch’s aesthet/hic is supposed to lead to a reconceptualization of form as plurality, heterogeneity, and interdisciplinarity.

This direction points toward the second possible mode of reviving the aesthetic, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter and embraced by scholars such as Wolfgang Iser, Mihai Spariosu, Gabriele Schwab, and others. These authors regard the aesthetic as part of a transdisciplinary, globalizing paradigm, in which the liminal potentialities of literature, fiction, and the imaginary perform important anthropological and globalizing functions. By focusing on the liminal potential of literary discourse rather than discussing its efficiency as an instrument of social reform, Iser, Spariosu, and Schwab redefine the ways in which scholars traditionally conceived of the aesthetic along the lines of the inclusive paradigm of globality. The result is that the category is extracted from the dualistic, agonal model of deterministic social instrumentality and viewed from the perspective of its visionary potential.

Dilip Paramenshawar Gaonkar aims at exploring this potential when he outlines the specific facets of “alternative modernities.” His premise is that far from reaching its end, today modernity has turned global and is in serious need of recontextualization. In order to grasp the multiple local manifestations of global modernities, one needs to
engage in a detailed and minute project of studying processes of cultural translation and adaptation. As such, Gaonkar is interested in outlining the differences between Western modernity and local modernities and of emphasizing the need for new theories able to accommodate the transformations suffered by the now globalized model. Societal modernization and cultural modernity, the two axes according to which Western scholars have analyzed the phenomenon so far, need to be complemented, in his view, by “site-specific” directions of analysis.

According to the first findings of such studies, most non-Western modernities do not follow the traditional Western steps: “industrialization, secularization, bureaucratization, and so on” (On Alternative 17). In many cases industrialization coexists with strong forms of religious socialization, with a rural culture, and, in some cases with a resistance to bureaucratization. The profile of such modernities is thus, far from that of a movement with “a [single] governing center or master-narrative” (14), or with a unified ideology and culture-neutral forms and processes.

This direction of interpretation has gained some currency of late and Paul Gilroy and Arjun Appadurai are two of the authors who contributed most decisively to accrediting it. Their works focus on the intercultural effects of the encounter between the Western project of societal modernization and the culture-specific realities of non-Western societies. Like Gaonkar himself, they maintain that

The proposition that societal modernization, once activated, moves inexorably toward establishing a certain type of mental outlook (scientific rationalism, pragmatic instrumentalism, secularism) and a certain type of institutional power (popular government, bureaucratic administration, market-driven industrial economy) irrespective of the culture and politics of a given place is simply not true. (16)
The same can be said about cultural modernization that does not “invariably take the form of an adversary culture privileging the individual’s need for self-expression and self-realization over the claims of the community”(16). The lack of the Western distinctive features or the development of culture specific functions does not signal necessarily an insufficient modernization, but rather a hybrid one, in need of transnational means of contextualization, able to take into account the complexities and differences among various cultural groups.

The understanding of many modernity-specific cultural phenomena, including “the aesthetic,” would be much enriched by such a re-reading. Instead of seeing in aesthetic modernity only the dandy-like aestheticization of the self and of everyday life, singled out by Baudelaire, or the apolitical, abstract, universalizing paradigm criticized by Benjamin, analysts of cultural modernity could also focus on its paradoxical critical social role in East Central Europe during communism. The paring of high culture aestheticism and social critical function, hardly acceptable today for a contemporary Western audience, would have a chance to be rethought together with similarly paradoxical phenomena such as the coupling of “nationalism” and democratic emancipation.6

The number of examples of this kind could be multiplied, when discussing other phenomena related to the “unfinished project of modernity” in East Central Europe, such as the coexistence of postmodern attitudes with traditionalist, nationalist ones, of technologies and mentalities of the post-industrial world with large rural population, and so on.
I consider the previous chapters of my study -- which discuss the role of modern aesthetics as an adversarial cultural instrument to overwhelming communist propaganda; as a strategy of identity against the Soviet model; but also as unrealized utopia in East Central Europe -- as part of the effort to bring forth images of alternative modernities. The next step of a new East Central European aesthetics would be to explore the so-far ignored or marginalized local and regional aesthetic manifestations of groups and authors, who have never been part of the main canon, though they were always an important part of the regionally-specific modernity. These as yet unacknowledged contributions could now be discussed under the banner of a more tolerant and pluralistic understanding of the aesthetic itself.

The fact that during communism East Central European writers and critics believed in the critical power of autonomous art, and that some of their texts actually performed aest-ethic social functions, makes me consider Adorno’s aesthetic theory as the closest approximation of the East Central European understanding of the function of art after World War II. As such, the interpretation of literature produced in the region during communism should consider the allegiance of its authors to the critical project of modernity when discussing its aesthetic value. Whether this project failed or managed to salvage some of its parts is closely related to the role played by literature in communist societies; especially when the aesthetic was the only means of resistance.

Rather than applying to the region an ideology critique, which might lead to misconstruing the aesthetic in the manner of certain revisionistic schools of Western criticism (which I discussed in the previous chapters), I think that East Central Europe deserves an alternative approach. Such a possibility relies on the opportunity of the
region to inspire the contemporary critical community with a cooperative model of interpreting the aesthetic.

Granted that East Central Europe writers themselves have rarely attained the utopian critical function of art envisaged by modernist aesthetics, the experience of the area still provides enough counter-arguments to a total rejection of the paradigm. By using the examples of est-ethics, while renouncing the exaggerated expectations of a modernist utopia, contemporary scholars could create a cooperative model of interpreting the aesthetic along the lines of a tolerant, globalizing paradigm.

Endnotes:

1 Mihai Spariosu’s *The Wreath of Wild Olive* pleads exactly for the same kind of parting with a mentality dominated by power and focus instead on one guided by liminal categories. Art, play are among the discourses that could develop a liminal potential and engender it further.

2 Yet, what is the ability/freedom of the text to follow/generate a pattern of “aesthetic justice” if not the consequence of its autonomous status?

3 According to the Frankfurt School scholar, it is only high art that could open up to society and play a social role, while popular culture has no critical function whatsoever. Adorno’s preference for Schönberg over Bizet in the *Philosophy of Modern Music* and of classical music over jazz and “culture industry” establishes a clear hierarchy of cultural values and a canon dominated by high culture.


6 See Mircea Martin’s studies about “Nationalism and Communism,” “Paradoxical Aestheticism,” and “Socialist Aestheticism” analyzed in the previous chapters.
APPENDIX

Nietzsche: at the Origin of Re-Thinking the Role of Art

In Nietzsche’s case ‘art’ (a category including literature: the poetic, the tragic, the fictive), is the countermovement to religion, morality, and philosophy, and as such has a privileged affirmative and disruptive force. As “the only superior counterforce to all will to denial of life, as that which is anti-Christian, anti-Buddhist, anti-nihilist par excellence, [art] is the redemption of the man of knowledge…the man of action…the sufferer” (“Aphorism” 453).

In this capacity, when chosen over truth, art can provide “a better, non-nihilistic form of truth than the truth of philosophy and religion” (Heidegger 127). But, beyond a better philosophical tool, art is for Nietzsche, “the compulsion to transform into the perfect”1 (Twilight of Idols 72). The initial metaphor of art as a primordial activity of man, becomes art as a fundamental mode of being, a mode that naturally opposes and despises everything that impoverishes life. As such, Nietzsche places the aesthetic question at the center of his philosophic project and transforms it into a philosophic organ of investigation.2

As celebration of both man and nature, of energy and power, art is “the great stimulus to life,” and therefore becomes Nietzsche’s strongest ally in challenging the domination of decadent forces that want to subdue the healthy, natural instincts. If for Schopenhauer the whole object of art “was to liberate us from the will,” from the principle of individuation, for Nietzsche, it becomes an even stronger force, an affirmative principle. The tragic artist “displays precisely the condition of fearlessness in
the face of the fearsome and the questionable” (*Twilight* 82) and affirms life at all costs. By doing so he does not negate, oppose, or try to tame life’s terrible truths, but affirms them at the cost of human pleasure and comfort.

Starting from Nietzsche’s famous observation in *The Birth of Tragedy* that “we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified” (52), Jean Marie Schaeffer comes up with four understandings of the concept in this book. According to the *cognitive* definition “Art is an ecstatic knowledge of the inner being of the world, of its Dionysian heart.” From an *affective-ethical* perspective “Art is a consolation (Tröstung) that allows us to go on living”; while from the *ontological* point of view, it “is semblance, Schein, an illusion”. Finally, according to what Schaeffer calls the *cosmological* definition “Art is the game that the universe plays with itself” (*Art*, 213-14).

By section 5 of the book, Nietzsche has already come up with two definitions of art. First, art understood as artistic energy of nature, manifested in the two main artistic impulses and artistic states, the Apollonian and the Dionysian (38); secondly, art (Olympian) as a means of coming to terms with/overcoming the horror of existence, or as “the complement and consummation of existence” (43). These two hypostatizations alone point out an interesting particularity of Nietzsche’s undertaking: he conceives of art as a fundamental principle of life, a privileged means for revealing the horror of existence (art as a principle of truth), a means of coming to terms with this revelation, and ultimately a hermeneutical tool for studying being in the world. In this sense, one can claim that his main interest in *The Birth* is not the origin of Greek tragedy, but the understanding of
nature as an artistic force. Nature’s artistic impulses are Nietzsche’s true object of study, and from this perspective his book is closer to an ontological than a philological treatise.

Granted that art holds a key position in this book, it is worth noting that in his later works Nietzsche expands the understanding of the concept and claims that the radical power of creation itself can be equated with art as a *mode of being in the world*. While “the aesthetic categories serve to formulate the question of being” (*Art* 213), it is obvious that Nietzsche’s understanding of the aesthetic goes beyond art, *stricto sensu*. The fact becomes clearer in his later writings, where he maintains that bravery in battle, instinct of destruction, cruelty, feeling of overflowing power, artistic creation can all be placed under the same heading – a metaphor of creative intoxication. During this phase of intoxication “one enriches everything out of one’s own abundance; what one sees, what one desires…The man in this condition transforms things until they mirror his power – until they are reflections of his perfection. The compulsion to transform into the perfect is – art.” (*Twilight* 72) But is this Dionysian art and is the process described by Nietzsche ultimately another hypostatization of the Dionysian ecstatic principle?

To disentangle these questions one has to return to *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), and read it in the light of Nietzsche’s “Preface to Wagner,” as well as of his “Attempt at Self-Criticism” published sixteen years later (1886). The natural question that arises after reading the latter is what made Nietzsche return to his first published text, reread it and revise it – after he wrote the “Untimely Meditations” (1873-74), “Richard Wagner in Bayreuth” (1876), *Human, All Too Human* (1878-1880), *The Gay Science* (1882), and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-84). What was “at the bottom of this questionable book marked by every defect of youth,” what “exceptionally significant and fascinating
question,” what “deeply personal” connection was there to make Nietzsche attempt a clarification in the form of self-criticism? Starting from such questions, commentators who initially were inclined to relegate *The Birth* to the shady corner of an early quasi philological/philosophical phase of Nietzsche’s career were compelled to turn all their attention to it. And the results did not prove disappointing.

The exceptional value of “Attempt to Self-Criticism” stems from its endeavor to clarify Nietzsche’s conception of art in the light of his later philosophy, which far from abandoning its beginnings in a logic of creation, transformed his early theory of art into a veritable ontology. As Nietzsche says:

> Still, I do not want to suppress entirely how disagreeable it [the book] now seems to me, how strange it appears now, after sixteen years – before a much older, a hundred times more demanding, but by no means colder eye which has not become a stranger to the task which this audacious book dared to tackle for the first time: *to look at science in the perspective of the artist, but at art in that of life.* (*Birth* 19)

But how does Nietzsche look at art from the perspective of life in his later philosophy?

Before even attempting to address this question, let us look at the way Nietzsche himself frames his rewriting of his treatise about art in this later text. From the very beginning he makes a startling distinction between *the voice* that spoke in *The Birth* and *what spoke* there. While the voice is “the strange voice of the disciple of a ‘still unknown God’” (*Birth* 20) and the author himself is concealed “under the scholar’s hood, under the gravity and dialectical ill humor of the German, even under the bad manners of the Wagnerian,” what spoke there “was something like a mystical, almost maenadic soul that stammered a feat of the will […] almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself” (*Birth* 20). What this distinction entails is a bad appropriation between
content and means of expression, which eventually endangers the undertaking almost to the point of annihilation. Tragic, Dionysian art cannot be defined with the traditional means of scholarship (though Nietzsche grants the fact that he could have revealed the new soul as a philologist) and this is because traditional scholarship has constantly misunderstood art. The employment of the same means would not in the least solve the problem now.

“What I had to say then – too bad that I did not dare say it as a poet: perhaps I had the ability,” notes Nietzsche – only to conclude that the best solution would have been to “have sung this ‘new soul’ – and not spoken” (Birth 20). But what does this radical rebellion against language signify? A still close allegiance of Nietzsche to the spirit of music – as the unmediated manifestation of the will – from which the tragedy springs? In Ecce Homo where he obliquely answers this question, Nietzsche claims that music indeed is the answer, though not Wagnerian music, but Dionysian music that reverberates in Zarathustra’s voice. The statement is at best ambiguous, since in Human, All Too Human, music already “loses its hermeneutic function as a direct expression of the essence of being” to become “a simple, formal arrangement of sounds” (Art 223). As a manifestation of the tragic, Dionysian artist, this type of music/discourse/dance/laughter remains an ideal to be attained in the future.

Returning to the first part of “Attempt at Self-Criticism”, one can read Nietzsche’s severe self-criticism less as a means of establishing the absolute supremacy of music, than as a strategy to free the definition of Dionysian art from all its traditional allegiances and relationships – starting with those to language and ending with the more
dangerous allegiances to science and morality/Christianity. In one of his famous diatribes against the latter, Nietzsche says:

In truth nothing can be more opposed to the purely aesthetic interpretation and justification of the world which are taught in this book than the Christian teaching, which is, and wants to be, only moral and which relegates art, every art to the realm of lies; with its absolute standards, beginning with the truthfulness of God, it negates, judges and damns art. (Birth 23)

The reason for this total incompatibility is that behind a hostile valuation of art, Nietzsche senses a “hostility to life”. At this point, one of our previous questions – the relationship between art and life -- gets a first answer when Nietzsche states that the interconnection between the two is determined by the fact that “all of life is based on semblance, art, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error” (Birth 23).

With this observation the focus of the text shifts smoothly from art to life – and implicitly generates a new relationship between them. Art becomes a fundamental principle of life not only because it grants unmediated contact with the primordial will, but because in its deceiving, ever-changing form it mirrors the very being of life, based on “semblance, deception, points of view, and the necessity of perspectives and error” (Birth 23). As something essentially amoral – life and art – illuminate each other. The idea of amorality was however captured in the portrayal of the Dionysian in the main body of The Birth as well.

The rapture of the Dionysian state with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence gives birth to an art which “in its intoxication, speaks the truth. Excess reveals itself as truth. Contradiction, the bliss born of pain, speaks out from the very heart of nature” (Birth 46). No morality finds its dwelling here, in the blissful ecstasy of the
Dionysian rapture, where “nature which has become alienated, hostile or subjugated, celebrates once more its reconciliation with her lost son, man” (*Birth* 37).

The Dionysian truth, however, is just part of the truth of life. The human incapacity to face the revelation of pain and suffering that constitute the essence of existence asks for the Apollonian illusion, even though this does not imply concessions to morality. Even after the revelation is enshrouded in Apollo’s illusory veils, “the substratum of the Apollonian world of beauty [remains] the terrible wisdom of Silenus” (*Birth* 45). This rather complex dialectic between the two principles is specific to and illuminating of both art and life. The two principles need one another not only in art, but in life as well. In this sense Nietzsche notes:

> For the more clearly I perceive in nature those omnipotent art impulses, and in them an ardent longing for illusion, for redemption through illusion, the more I feel myself impelled to the metaphysical assumption that the truly existent primal unity, eternally suffering and contradictory, also needs the rapturous vision, the pleasurable illusion for its redemption. (*Birth* 45)

The will to illusion as much as the Dionysian will to truth is inscribed in nature and as such does not lend itself to scrutiny so easily. Part of its resistance comes from the fact that its manifestations are rather complex themselves. Since the main accepted ways of conceiving existence are in the form of “the waking and the dreaming states,” the Apollonian voice/drive deserves a more attentive and nuanced consideration. Never directly available, nature/existence lends itself to observation mainly in the illusory forms of “a mere appearance,” being that sensed in dreams or in the waking state. This situation makes humans’ “longing for illusion” and their preoccupation with deciphering its laws a more understandable impulse.
Dreams themselves become possible hypostatizations of the never-ending mirroring game of appearances and, thus, forms that demand further scrutiny. As *mis en abîme*, art functions as the hermeneutical instrument for scrutinizing the Apollonian mechanism of dreams.

On the other hand, as Apollonian dream, art works as the best strategy for coping with existence, and its impulse stems from the very nature of reality. Before *making the artist*, nature engendered in man the need for art. This nuance of Nietzsche’s thought is crucial in clarifying the relationship between nature/life and human art. The latter needs the Dionysian impulse in order to reconnect with the first, which possesses the key for the deep essence of existence. Nature is “the primordial artist of the world” and human art can become a means of cognition and bear metaphysical significance only if the human “genius in the act of artistic creation coalesces with it.” By stating this Nietzsche makes clear the point that the aesthetic comedy is performed at least at two levels: that of nature-artist and that of the human art, and by this simple specification, he finally clarifies the deep connection between nature/life and art.

This conclusion is stated in the famous fragment at the end of section 5:

The entire comedy of art is neither performed for our betterment or education, nor are we the true authors of this art world. On the contrary, we may assume that we are merely images and artistic projections for the true author, and that we have our highest dignity in our significance as works of art – for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified – while of course our consciousness of our significance hardly differs from that which the soldiers painted on the canvas have of the battle represented on it. Thus all our knowledge of art is basically quite illusory, because as knowing beings we are not one and identical with that being which, as the sole author and spectator of this comedy of art prepares the perpetual entertainment for itself. (Birth 52)

If life is the true artist, the sole author who takes delight in staging and witnessing the comedy of existence, primordial art resembles the eruption of pure Dionysian forces
over which humans have little control, if any. The only chance for the soldiers to free themselves from the canvas and become creators in their own right is by coalescing with the “primordial genius in the act of artistic creation.” As an unbridled game of forces, primordial art is just another definition of life, and in order to grasp its essence the human artist has to let himself become one with it – in an act of ecstasy and drunkenness, which will dissolve his clear identity as a soldier on the canvas. Inasmuch as life is understood from a human perspective and the philosopher chooses to thematize man’s cognitive abilities and limitations, Apollo’s return is inevitable. As a cognitive process life is both Dionysian and Apollonian, while outside human understanding, it may manifest as a pure game of forces. In this sense Eugen Fink, one of the most perceptive commentators of Nietzsche’s work notes:

…par sa manière de voir les tragédies grecques, Nietzsche formule pour la première fois un thème central de sa philosophie. Il le fait dans une catégorie esthétique. Dans le phénomène tragique, il aperçoit la véritable nature de la réalité. Le thème esthétique acquiert à ses yeux le rang d’un principe ontologique fondamental. L’art est érigé en organon de la philosophie. (Philosophie 21)

The fundamental intuition that Nietzsche captures through the Apollonian-Dionysian categories in The Birth and develops in his later works is the tragic sense of existence. This stems from the combined revelation of the unbearable truths of life synthesized by Silenus’ wisdom: “What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be anything. But the second best for you is – to die soon” Instead of a pessimistic resignation to the fact that the highest knowledge/awareness cannot be converted into a helpful action, and inevitably ends up being converted into illusion for the sake of action, Nietzsche’s sense of the tragic is of joyous acceptance of fate. In this sense Hamlet is a good example of a tragic character and so are the characters of
Aeschylus’ and Sophocles’ tragedies. “The mystery doctrine of tragedy” according to Nietzsche consists in “the fundamental knowledge of the oneness of everything existent, the conception of individuation as the primal cause of evil, and of art as the joyous hope that the spell of individuation may be broken in augury of restored oneness” (*Birth* 74).

Tragic art affirms the tragic sense of existence and celebrates it instead of deploring it. Liberated from the constraints of individual categories of being, tragic art is tragic knowledge, but its underlying sense is one of exultation, not complaint. In tragedy man redeems himself as part of nature, affirming and celebrating his own destruction as an individual, when challenged by forces stronger than himself. In this sense tragedy is a celebration of truth that does not conceive of life in traditional human (Christian) categories, nor acknowledge their relevance. As Gilles Deleuze in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* notes:

> Multiple and pluralist affirmation – this is the essence of the tragic... The tragic is not to be found in anguish or disgust, nor in nostalgia for the lost unity... This joy is not the result of a sublimation, a purging, a compensation, a resignation, or a reconciliation. Nietzsche can attack all theories of the tragic for failing to recognize tragedy as an aesthetic phenomenon. The tragic is the aesthetic form of joy, not a medical phrase or a moral solution to pain, fear or pity. (*Nietzsche* 17)

Through tragedy art reconnects again with life by freely celebrating life’s essence. Dionysian wisdom triumphs, the Homeric myths are born anew, while “the Olympian culture is conquered by a still more powerful view of the world” (*Birth* 74). In this sense one can say with Eugen Fink that “Nietzsche rapporte au tragique l’essence véritable de l’art: l’art tragique saisit la vie tragique de monde” in as much as tragedy is “la première formule fondamentale de Nietzsche pour son expérience de l’être. C’est uniquement avec les yeux de l’art que le penseur parvient à plonger son regard dans le coeur de mode” (*Philosophie* 21).
The vehicle that transports this Dionysian wisdom is ultimately “the Heracleitian power of music” which “having reached its highest manifestation in tragedy can invest myths with a new and most profound significance” (Birth 75). The process of translation from music to tragedy (an art where music coexists with words) and from music to other forms of art such as epic and lyric poetry deserves further attention. While epic poetry of the Homeric age is relegated by Nietzsche to the realm of naïve art, which for the sake of the Apollonian impulse manifests the supremacy of illusory reconciliation of man and nature, lyric poetry, though far from the intensity of tragedy is closer to its spirit. Inspired by music (which appears as will in the mirror of images and concepts) lyric poetry “seeks an expression analogous to music and feels in itself its power” (Birth 54).

However, impelled to speak of music in Apollonian symbols, the lyric poet “interprets music by means of images [and as such] rests in the calm sea of Apollonian contemplation” (Birth 55). In this sense, despite the fact that “in its absolute sovereignty music does not need the image and the concept, but merely endures them as accompaniments” (Birth 55) in lyric poetry, music does not reach its highest manifestation. It is in tragedy, in the voice of the tragic chorus – a purer manifestation of Dionysus that music, liberated from the constraints of words and concepts, discloses the true essence of the will. As Nietzsche puts it:

The poems of the lyrist can express nothing that did not already lie hidden in the vast universality and absoluteness in the music that compelled him to figurative speech. Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of primal unity, and therefore symbolize a sphere which is beyond and prior to all phenomena. (Birth 55)

The chorus of satyrs accomplishes a similar revelatory effect, though Nietzsche does not clarify the relationship between it and music. Nevertheless, from Nietzsche’s
description of both phenomena it can be inferred that the chorus produces a Dionysian
effect on the civilized spectators similar to that accomplished by Dionysian music on the
civilized man. This claim functions as a premise for Nietzsche’s inquiry into the function
of the tragic chorus:

…the satyr, the fictitious natural being bears the same relation to the man of
culture that Dionysian music bears to civilization. …the Greek man of culture felt
himself nullified in the presence of the satyric chorus; and this is the most
immediate effect of the Dionysian tragedy. (Birth 59)

The interesting aspect of this analogy, however is that the satyric chorus does not
originate in the spirit of music, but stems directly from Dionysus. Since music is the most
representative approximation of the Dionysian spirit, music and the satyric chorus share a
certain similarity with respect to their cognitive-revelatory function. The high value
Nietzsche reserves for tragedy is due to the fact that tragedy arises from the tragic chorus,
which through its direct connection with the Dionysian spirit grants the abandonment of
the principium individuationis and the plunging into an “overwhelming feeling of unity
leading back to the very heart of nature” (Birth 59). This act culminates in the
“metaphysical comfort with which every tragedy leaves us” stemming from the
conviction “that life is at the bottom of all things, despite all changes of appearances,
indestructibly powerful and pleasurable” (Birth 59). More than a satisfaction of our
cognitive urge, the metaphysical comfort provided by tragedy establishes a new
relationship between man and existence, which reconciles them at least at a purely
cognitive level. As Eugen Fink says:

La theorie esthetique de la tragédie antique éclucide ainsi l’essence de l’étant en
genéral. Dans l’événement artistique qu’est la naissance de la tragédie engendrée
par l’esprit de la musique, se reflète l’événement originel de la naissance, à partir
de chaotique fond originel, d’un monde ajusté a l’humain, décomposé en une
multiplicité de ‘formes. Le ‘tragique’ est compris comme principe cosmique. (Philosophie 26)

This new understanding of the tragic is granted by the fact that far from being a creation of man, tragic art is the manifestation of the deep forces of the will–which in late Nietzsche becomes the Will to Power. At this point tragedy becomes an invaluable tool to counteract the theoretical and purely conceptual Will to Truth.

In the same wake, but without yet alluding to the Will to power, in Ecce Homo, Nietzsche expands on his understanding of tragedy, the tragic myth and the tragic hero as triumphs of primordial joy, experienced even in pain. The tragic feeling is

the highest affirmation, born of fullness, of overfullness, a Yes-saying without reservation, even to suffering, even to guilt, even to everything that is questionable and strange in existence. This ultimate most joyous, most wantonly extravagant Yes to life represents not only the highest insight, but also the deepest, that which is most strictly confirmed and born out by truth and science…To comprehend this requires courage and, as a condition of that, an excess of strength: for precisely as far as courage may venture forward, precisely according to that measure of strength one approaches the truth. (Ecce Homo 272)

As one of the privileged loci of truth, tragedy functions as a form of knowledge, more valuable than science and definitely more trustworthy than morality, which acts as the instrument of the weak people and engenders a slave mentality. “Knowledge, saying Yes to reality, is just as necessary for the strong as cowardice and the flight for reality – as the ‘ideal’ is for the weak, who are inspired by weakness” (Ecce 272). Symbol of strength and health, tragic art does not attempt to idealize reality, but renders visible the two fundamental forces of being and manifestations of the will to power: the Apollonian and the Dionysian. In this respect Fink writes:

Nietzsche pense par analogie: au rêve de l’homme, créateur d’images, est analogue la puissance de l’être, productrice de formes et d’images, qu’il nomme Apollon. Cette puissance de l’apparence belle est créatrice du monde de
l’apparition; l’individuation, la séparation, ces sont des fantômes apolliniens. Par là, la psychologie se change en une curieuse metaphysique. Il en est de même pour l’ivresses. …L’ivresse c’est le flux cosmique, un vertige de bacchante qui brise toutes les formes, les reabsorbe et supprime tout ce qui est fini, individualisé. C’est le grand élan de vie. (Philosophie 52)

Becoming sheer forces, the two natural energies and principles of artistic creation engage in a relationship liberated from the traditional limits set by myth, culture, and metaphysics, which thus can define the world in a set of completely new terms. A similar sense of openness toward non-traditional possibilities of defining existence permeates “Attempt at Self-Criticism” where art is no longer an “art of metaphysical comfort,” but a form of Zarathustrian laughter. It is laughter, dance and other Zarathustrian manifestations that by 1886 become the most meaningful forms of existence for Nietzsche, and he apodictically states so: “This crown of laughter, the rose-wreath crown: to you, my brothers, I throw this crown. Laughter I have pronounced holy: you higher man, learn – to laugh” (Birth 27).

Renouncing metaphysics as a form of knowledge and mediation between the artist-philosopher and existence, Nietzsche dispenses with the last prop of traditional thinking and emerges from his theory of art into his purely affirmative philosophy of the Will to Power. At this stage Dionysus meets Zarathustra and crowns him his prophet. The process is perceptively captured by Schaeffer when talking about the transformation of the Dionysian principle in Nietzsche’s late works. In them,

The Dionysian does not yield to the Apollonian: it will cease to be interpreted as the essence of being that has to be known through ecstatic knowledge; under the name of the ‘will to power’ it will be transformed into an energetic principle of production of Apollonian fictions. (Art 222)
Laughter and dance as the new manifestations of the Dionysian principle mark an important stage in Nietzsche’s becoming a philosopher of the Will to Power: the displacement of ancient tragedy and of Wagnerian opera by Zarathustrian actions and interpretations. The step is of tremendous importance since what this replacement ultimately announces is Nietzsche’s total renunciation of his metaphysical system based on the dualistic Schopenhauerian ontology, centered on the distinction between appearance and essence. The move triggers a rejection of art as a metaphysical activity, but also prepares its resurgence under a different form. In *Human, All Too Human*, Schaeffer notes,

Nietzsche inaugurates his great critique and destruction of all values…Morality, religion, metaphysics and art: these are the idols elevated to the pinnacle by the history he [Nietzsche] sets to destroy by describing their anthropological and psychological genealogy. (*Art* 222)

The second reevaluation of art which culminates in its exultation as the most transparent manifestation of the *Will to illusion and appearance* takes place in parallel with and partly because of the reassessments of metaphysics, morality, and religion as manifestations of the *Will to truth*. Starting with *Gay Science* Nietzsche engages in a relentless criticism of the latter as manifestation of a moral impulse. Governed by the wish “not to deceive anyone (including oneself)” (*Art* 230), the *Will to truth* is ultimately prompted by a moral motive, which makes Nietzsche asks rhetorically: “Why will to truth rather than illusion? Isn’t the truth one of the powers directed against life, isn’t it a will to death?” (*Art* 230).

As Nietzsche clearly favors life over truth, this reassessment of illusion over truth leads ultimately to a reaffirmation of art under a new guise, which Schaeffer calls cosmic. “The work of art’s mode of being is the mode of being of the universe, that is the mode of
being of every being. Artistic activity in the strict sense of the term is only one of the forms of cosmic poiesis: life itself is the fundamental artistic phenomenon” (Art 222). The will to illusion is the will to an unconstrained life based on the principle of infinite generation of forms and phenomena. As a result art can no longer be a cognitive tool able to unveil a metaphysical reality, but becomes a new science which “has most definitely to counter this illusion [that present things came out of the ground by magic] and to display the bad habits and false conclusions of the intellect by virtue of which it allows the artist to ensnare it” (Art 225). Once this task is accomplished, art becomes the manifestation of the good will to appearance:

As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon. By giving us an example of the free acceptance of the untrue, art suggests that we consider our life as a work of art in turn. (Art 226)

The turn announced by these claims is absolutely revolutionary in its radical reversal of traditional metaphysical presuppositions. Nietzsche’s refutation of the distinction between appearance and essence amounts to the identification of the true world with the world of appearance and the assimilation of reality into a fictionalizing construction (Art 231), a fact which places art again in a privileged position among other means of thinking of the world. This entails both a redefinition of the traditional instruments of truth and a repositioning of art in the hierarchy of human values. As Schaeffer concludes,

If there is no longer any truth, there cannot be any illusion, either – so Art can no longer be on the side of illusion. If we never relate to a world that exists as an independent given, if the world is always our creation, then the very idea that there might be truthful images and false images of this world must be abandoned. …The arts beyond their function as a stimulus to life, paradoxically recover a
kind of cognitive bearing: if being is always something created, if the world is a projection or effectuation of the will to power, then the arts, insofar as they present themselves overtly as creations, are the most transparent mode of projective activity. Whence a paradoxical resurgence of Art. (Art 233)

Nietzsche’s “artistic revolution,” however, has little to do with the implementation of any aesthetic program and much more with a revaluation of all values – mainly those engendered by metaphysics and theology. Instead of a simple hierarchical reversal between art and philosophy (or science), Nietzsche’s aesthetic turn performs a systematic destruction of metaphysical principles underlying traditional philosophy and morality, which for so long have burdened life. In this sense, art is the perfect means for performing this deed.

To be sure, Art does not teach us anything about being in its ultimate truth, Schaeffer notes in a rather Nietzschean tone, because there is no ultimate being; on the other hand it shows us how worlds are born: through man’s creative, projective activity. Therefore, to understand art is to understand the Will to power, because it is in Art that the Will to power embodies itself in its absolute transparency. The result of this understanding, which is Nietzsche’s reevaluation of all values, is that once again, Art becomes the organon of philosophy since it reveals the structure of the world as fiction….The work of art is the transparent emblem of the creative activity of the cosmic will to power…The work of art’s mode of being is the mode of being of the universe, that is the mode of being of every being. Artistic activity in the strict sense of the term is only one of the forms of cosmic poiesis. (Art 234)

Paradoxically, this thesis does not sound very different from the Romantic conception of art, which determined the first aesthetic turn in modern philosophy. Nietzsche’s turn, however is worlds away from the idealist ontology that underlined the
Romantic understanding of the aesthetic. “Whereas Romanticism elevated aesthetics toward theology, Nietzsche wants to reduce it to physiology” (Art 235).

Endnotes:

1 “Bravery in battle, instinct of destruction, cruelty, felling of overflowing power, artistic creation are all placed under the same heading – a metaphor of creative intoxication during which one enriches everything out of one’s own abundance; what one sees, what one desires…The man in this condition transforms things until they mirror his power – until they are reflections of his perfection. The compulsion to transform into the perfect is – art.” (Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols 72).

2 Eugen Fink notes “The aesthetic theme acquires for him [Nietzsche] the status of a fundamental ontological principle. Art, the tragic poem, becomes from him the key that will open up the essence [Wesen] of the world. Art is raised into an organ of philosophy and taken as the most serious, authentic entryway for the most original comprehension, the concept at the very best coming after…Nietzsche uses aesthetic categories to formulate his fundamental vision of being. The phenomenon of art is placed at the center: in it and from it the world can be deciphered.” (in Nietzsche Philosophie [Stuttgart: Verlag, 1960] 16-17) cf. Caroll 4.

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