



# A Cultural Obsession: The Foundation Of Romanian Classicism

---

**Dragoș VARGA**

Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu, Facultatea de Litere și Arte  
Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, Faculty of Letters and Arts  
Personal e-mail: dragos.varga@ulbsibiu.ro

---

*A Cultural Obsession: The Foundation Of Romanian Classicism*

My paper aims to analyze a basic aspect of Radu Stanca's dramatic work: namely, the relation between his plays and the general cultural and literary vision of the members of the Literary Circle of Sibiu. On one hand, considering their appetite for the so called “foundation of the Romanian classicism” and for the Europeanization of Romanian culture and literature, I shall explain Radu Stanca's return to the strong European mythological models. These include Don Juan, Oedipus, Faust or the biblical myths, treated in a poetical manner, involving mythical vision and metaphorical language, all aiming to the resurrection of the tragedy as a major genre of European classicism. On the other hand, it is not literary mythology that attracts the writer, but its points of convergence with his artistic personality. Within this mythology, the artist innovates with simulated detachment, even allowing minor interpretative distortions that divert the original meaning of the said cultural and literary “models”.

Keywords: Literary Circle of Sibiu, Romanian classicism, European classicism, the resurrection of the tragedy, European mythological models.



The Literary Circle of Sibiu is probably one of the most controversial and fascinating Romanian literary movements of the 20th century. In spite of its short existence, lasting from 1943 until its dissolution, right after the University “Ferdinand I” moved back to Cluj, the group of young intellectuals and writers that composed it traced some interesting and daring directions in Romanian culture and literature. As declared disciples of Eugen Lovinescu's and admirers of his theories concerning the cultural phenomena of synchronism and imitation, they also proposed, through the voices of Radu Stanca and I. Negoitescu, their own conception on the future and chances of Romanian literature. The central symbol of their spiritual adventure was that of Euphorion, designating all that was spiritually new, bringing together the peculiarities of the so-called Apollinical dimension (the order, the moderation, the Greek measure) and the

European modern dynamism, as symbolized by Faust. In his epistolary with Radu Stanca, Ion Negoitescu explained the essence of their “Euphorion” who was never meant to be a new avant-garde rebellion, being on the contrary a sample of the purest classical make. (Stanca, Negoitescu, 1998, 36)

The most important target of this aesthetics was to reach the universality *via* a new perspective on the culture, avoiding the old cultural patterns corrupted by the hyperethnicist “Romanian substance”. Therefore, their aesthetical approach was aiming at the founding of a Romanian classicism that never existed in our literature and, even more, at an “absolute classicism”. In order to compensate this major hiatus in Romanian literature, I. Negoitescu proposes the restoration of classical models and appeals to the peak periods of the European literature: Greek and Latin Antiquity, French Classicism, the Era of Goethe and Schiller and

of the German Modern Theatre, English and Russian Novel, the Elizabethan Era (Shakespeare) and the Spanish Golden Age (Cervantes). This strict selection did not envisage a “cosmopolitan conglomeration, but a classical purification, in its absolute peaks”, with the gaze constantly pointed towards the Greek and Latin Cultures, at the same time amending any exaltation of the Bizantine Orthodoxy and of the national specific: “Let’s re-exalt the Latinity, not as a national support, but in the spirit of culture” (Stanca, Negoïtescu, 1998, 97).

“The classical purification” of the Romanian literature should have considered first of all the opening to universality, the integration into the great European culture through the appeal to the classical eras recognized as such. In his study, “What is a Classic?”, from 1944, T.S. Eliot noted, almost at the same time, the absence of a classical era in... English literature! Unlike the young Romanian writer, T.S. Eliot has also in mind the local linguistical element that leads to the fulfillment of the classical ideal. The great classical poet, thinks Eliot, depletes not just one form, but the whole language of his time (Pater, Chesterton, Eliot, 1966, 290); only a language that can be depleted can give rise to a classic poet – Eliot’s is indeed a perspective that entirely changes the essence of this dispute. Between a language capable of producing a great classical poet, such as Vergile, but doomed to perfection and therefore to definitive closure, and a language biased more toward variety than toward perfection, the American poet and essayist opts for the latter. From this premise onward starts the distinction between the relative classic and the absolute classic, more precisely, between a classical literature considered as such in relation to their own language and that which is classical in relation to other languages. The two young Romanian writers lose sight of the existence of this relative classicism, the only possible classicism in the context of a living literature and language, yet valuing the variety and the opportunity of future linguistic innovations. They prefer talking about “the absolute classicism,” setting as very target of their cultural and artistic efforts the foundation of Romanian classicism. But the classicism is not an end in itself, achievable over a single generation, especially when the previous ones are denied. The overbidding of classicism inside the group is sometimes very hazardous; on May 19, 1947, I. Negoïtescu writes to Radu Stanca: “[...] I am absolutely convinced that you will start the Romanian Theatre. You will be our classic author. No one can stand beside you in Romanian literature” [Stanca, Negoïtescu, 1998, 81]. A few years later, on September 17, 1951, commenting on Radu Stanca’s play, “Dona Juana”, the critic maintains the same tonality: “What amazes me more is your extraordinary dramatic sense, not only as dialogue, but primarily as

a perfect dramatic situation, like a knot rounded with perfect skill. And everything happens as in a “Fugue” by Bach, with simple and eloquent technical accuracy. Here’s the rift in our literature, the transition from talent and dilletantism to culture and vocation. With you begins in Romanian literature the new Theatre” (*ibidem*, 226).

Obviously, the so much invoked universality could not be achieved by rejecting *in toto* the national literature, so that their opposition against Romanian literary history is rather a consequence of the juvenile fever and seems to be, in the end, a rhetoric dissimulation. The same Negoïtescu, the most modernist writer of the group, in an article published in 1945, entitled “The Future of Romanian Literature”, concludes that this future must be found in the past, noticing the existence of many “unverified latencies” of the ancients writers. Many years later, another representative member of the group, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, emphasizes the same relationship of the Circle with the local tradition: “In a certain way, poetry always realizes this paradox of renewing by the revival of the old models. The truth is that the Circle never produced a rift in the history of the Romanian Letters, but it organically grew out of a trunk powered by the national ethos” (Crohmalniceanu, Heitmann, 2000, 45).

The conquest of classicism could have been realized, in Radu Stanca’s vision, by restoring and exploiting two emblematic literary species – the ballad and the tragedy –, both representative for the most important classical literary ages (such as the Age of Pericles, the Elizabethan Era, the French Classicism, the Spanish Golden Age, German Romanticism). The two species are converted, in Radu Stanca’s literary work, into currency for the literature promoted among the neo-traditionalist and the purist directions. The writer feels solidary with the whole European cultural patrimony, a Europe defined in the sense of the axiological aesthetics, easily changing the masks put at his disposal by the classical myths of the universal literature: Oedipus, Don Juan, Faust, Icarus, the biblical characters, Archimedes etc. The sense of this “classicism” could be explained by the attempt of hindering the extremist – ideological or aesthetical – tendencies of that period. Hans Sedlmayr, in his book “Loss of the Center” (1948), called it *escapism*, observing that there is in the mid-20th century an attempt of finding a support in the humanistic eras (the Greek humanism, Gothic humanism, the Renaissance) as a reaction to the weakening of the humanism begun since the end of the 18th century. Sedlmayr differentiates between two types of classicism: a progressist classicism (in the 17th and 18th century) and an escapist classicism (at the beginning of the 19th century), the latter attempting a detour in order



to assure the maintaining of humanism in art, more precisely the return to the forms after the loss of the substance (Sedlmayr, 2001, 140). The necessity of this new humanism had been asserted a few years earlier by Radu Stanca, in his attempt of removing the label of "aestheticism" put on the Literary Circle of Sibiu.

The return to the literary form of the tragedy was assumed by Radu Stanca not only as a way of reaching a classical value, but also in the spirit of that new humanism he was providing. In an article dedicated to "the resurrection of the tragedy", he explains extensively his interest in rediscovering the tragic values. In fact, the polemics concerning the topicalness of the tragedy have given birth to a real trial since the 19th century, when Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both announce and establish, from a philosophical point of view, the disappearance of the tragedy in the contemporary world. The 20th century continued the discussions on the tragical existence and the tragedy from the new perspective opened by the secularized modern society, in which no mythology is any longer possible. On the occasion of a conference presented in Athens, in 1955, entitled "The Future of Tragedy", Albert Camus noted that the major periods of tragic art are situated in the times of crisis, when the existence of the peoples is simultaneously burdened by glory and by threats, when the future is unsafe and the present is dramatic (Camus, 1976, 29). In contemporary history, Camus distinguished a fertile ground for the restoration of tragedy, because the interwar man is tragic by excellence, a torn and contradictory individual, fully aware of the human being's ambiguity. At the same time, the French philosopher and writer notices the signs of this revival in the literary works of his contemporaries, Gide, Claudel, Montherlant, instinctively attracted to the sources of the tragic eras. Though the dominant opinion in the 20th century is that tragedy no longer corresponds to the modern state of mind and sensitivity, deeply affected by the disappearance of the antic tragical values (mythological, magical and heroic values).

Without any doubt, following the precepts of the antic tragedy, Radu Stanca's dramatic plays could hardly be attached to the genre. Otherwise, the author himself doesn't hurry to entitle them "tragedies", even if they present enough elements to be qualified such as: "Madonna with the Smile" is a "little drama", "Dona Juana" is a "tragic comedy", "King, Priest and Prophet" is just a "play in three acts", "Oedipus Saved" is a "drama in three acts", "The Journey of the Magi" is a "tragic popular drama". Though the real target of his plays is not the tragedy, but the tragic, as an aesthetical value, writing a "tragedy with ballets" ("The Faun and the Caryatid"), a "balladesque tragedy" ("The Dance of the Princesses") or a "tragic vision" ("The Eye").

Unlike the so called "infra-tragedy" defined by Jean-Marie Domenach as a tragedy inspired by a trivial and ridiculous reality, conceived as a farce or a parody (Domenach, 1995, 245), Radu Stanca's plays don't lack the tragic solemnity or the mythological dimension.

As I have already emphasized, Radu Stanca is more attracted by the origins of the literature than by its originality, practicing a lofty artistical mimicry based on more or less transparent intertextual and cultural allusions. He replaces the data of the immediate reality with the literary ones, this intertextuality leading to the consolidation of a personal strategy through which the poet dissimulates the existential trama by overbidding the interest for a certain literary mythology. Subsequently, it is not the literary mythology that attracts the writer, but its points of convergence with his artistic personality. Within this mythology, the artist innovates with simulated detachment, even allowing minor interpretative distortions that divert the original meaning of the cultural and literary "models". It is the case of "Dona Juana", which is part of a rich illustration of the myth of Don Juan, but here the characters are aware of their special status, of their belonging to a literary tradition with roots in the ancient myth. The mythological temptation is the starting point in "Oedipus Saved", Radu Stanca's most controversial play, given the resolution that brings the myth to a certain end, but also in some other dramatic works, such as "The Eye," "The Babel Tower," "King, Priest and Prophet," "Madonna with the Smile" or "The Dance of the Princesses."

The bookish memory of the readers is not bullied by too complicated allusions and references, recognizable only as a result of a high erudition, on the contrary it is solicited with certain precaution, because we deal with very well-known legendary and mythical character, most of them being part of the collective consciousness: Don Juan, Archimedes, Oedipus, Icarus, Buffalo Bill, Scheherazade, Joan of Arc, kings, knights, satyrs, princesses, Death, etc. The bookish inspiration and the mythological perspective are therefore complementary, eventually outlining a personal poetics. Monica Spiridon considers that the bookish existence is Don Juan's hereditary disease, no matter what he does, no matter how much he would like to break with his literary tradition, choosing the way of an illusory happiness reached through the reunion with his double, he remains the prisoner of his "mythological progeny" (Spiridon, 1989, 137). This observation is also available for almost all his mythological characters. If with "Dona Juana" the most famous erotic myth comes to an end, under the shifty guidance of the Death, incarnated in the person of Don Fernando, alias Don Morte, "Oedipus Saved" provides a final resolution for the most representative tragic myth, presenting an Oedipus triumphant against

the irrational forces, which was a very controversial dramatic solution: Nicolae Manolescu notes that, “in the most absolute of all tragedies, the human being still has the illusion of the salvation” (Manolescu, 1968), while for Ion Vartic, “Oedipus Saved” means “the end of the tragedy” (Vartic, 1978, 82); even his close friends, Ștefan Aug. Doinaș and I. Negoiteșcu, have objections concerning the denouement of the action; Doinaș thinks that Radu Stanca only achieves the tragic atmosphere without the insertion of the final catastrophe, a situation that determines him to appreciate the play from its very title, a *contradictio in adjecto*. In turn, I. Negoiteșcu proposes a new scenario to support the tragic atmosphere, also including a final catastrophe (Stanca, Negoiteșcu, 1998, 290).

In „The Dance of the Princesses,” written in 1945, the bookish pretext is the decapitation of Brâncoveanu and his sons by the Turks, event transformed into a genuine but quite ambiguous local myth, including elements from Christian cosmogony, such as those of a classical Greek tragedy. The same fantastic and mythological vision emerges from another dramatic play, „The Eye,” in which Radu Stanca is concerned in liberating poetical meanings out of a dark Romanian past, partly historical, partly mythical. There is no doubt that the author has a particular bias on exploring the mythological sources, either local or universal. Beyond this obsessive search of some answers hidden inside the myths, his option is strictly related to the historical and social context. It seems to be a wise strategy of avoiding historical and personal disasters, with the German invasion, World War II, then the communist ideological pressure, and his constant poor health, using the mythology as an armor. The city of Sibiu becomes itself, at least for a short period, a perfect symbol for this spiritual adventure. In a country torn apart by cataclysms, Sibiu is the place which opens the gates for a comfortable utopia. In full chaos of this concrete history (*historia*), the little town becomes an “Ideal City,” preserving (*intra murros*) the impression of a mythological temporality (*aeternitas*), with no relation to the outside (*extra murros*) world.

#### Bibliography:

- Balotă, Nicolae, 1976. *Arte poetice ale secolului XXI/ 20<sup>th</sup> Century Poetics*, București, Editura Minerva.  
 Balotă, Nicolae, 1970. *Labirint/ Labyrinth*, București, Editura Eminescu.  
 Bertram, Ernst, 1998, *Nietzsche – încercare de mitologie/ Nietzsche-A Mythology Attempt*, București, Editura Humanitas.  
 Camus, Albert, 1976. *Eseuri/ Essays*, București, Editura Univers.  
 Crohmălniceanu, Ovid S.; Heitmann, Klaus, 2000.

- Cercul Literar de la Sibiu/ The Literary Circle of Sibiu*, București, Editura Universalia.  
 Doinaș, Ștefan Aug., 1996. *Eseuri/ Essays*, București, Editura Eminescu.  
 Doinaș, Ștefan Aug., 1980. *Lectura poeziei/ Reading Poetry*, București, Editura Carte Românească.  
 Doinaș, Ștefan Aug., 1992. *Măștile adevărului poetic/ The Masks of Poetic Truth*, București, Editura Cartea Românească.  
 Domenach, Jean-Marie, 1995. *Întoarcerea tragicului/ The Return of The Tragic*, București, Editura Meridiane.  
 Eckermann, Johann Peter, 1965. *Convorbiri cu Goethe/ Conversations with Goethe*, București, Editura pentru literatură universală.  
 Negoiteșcu, Ion, 1975. *Engramel/ Engrams*, București, Editura Albatros.  
 Negoiteșcu, Ion, 1966. *Scriitori moderni/ Modern Writers*, București, Editura pentru Literatură.  
 Negoiteșcu, Ion; Stanca, Radu, 1998. *Un roman epistolar/ Epistolary Novel*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia.  
 Pater, Chesterton, Eliot, 1966. *Eseuri literare/ Literary Essays*, București, Editura pentru literatură universală.  
 Poantă, Petru, 1997. *Cercul Literar de la Sibiu/ The Literary Circle of Sibiu*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Clusium.  
 Rousset, Jean, 1999. *Mitul lui Don Juan/ The Myth of Don Juan*, București, Editura Univers.  
 Sedlmayr, Hans, 2001. *Pierderea măsurii/ Verlust der Mitte*, București, Editura Meridiane.  
 Spiridon, Monica, 1989. *Melancolia descendenței/ The Melancholy of Ancestry*, București, Editura Cartea Românească.  
 Steiner, George, 1993. *La mort de la tragédie*, Paris, Gallimard.  
 Stanca, Radu, 2000. *Aquarium*, Cluj, Biblioteca Apostrof.  
 Stanca, Radu, 1968. *Teatrul Drama*, București, Editura pentru Literatură.  
 Stanca, Radu, 1985. *Teatrul Drama*, București, Editura Eminescu.  
 Stanca, Radu, 2000. *Turnul Babel/ Tower of Babel*, Pitești, Editura Paralela 45.  
 Starobinski, Jean, 1985. *Textul și interpretul/ The Text and the Interpreter*, București, Editura Univers.  
 Vartic, Ion, 1978. *Radu Stanca – poezie și teatrul/ Radu Stanca- Poetry and Drama*, București, Editura Albatros.

#### Acknowledgement:

*This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of Research and Innovation, CCCDI – UEFISCDI, project number PN-III-P1-1.2-PCCDI-2017-0821/ INTELLIT, within PNCDI III.*