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Hugo Friedrich and Romanian Poetry Criticism

Abstract: The present chapter analyzes the longstanding impact of Hugo Friedrich's *The Structure of Modern Poetry* (1956) on Romanian culture, where it became a genuine Bible for poetry criticism. This success owed primarily to two of the book's traits: its "formalist," i.e., non-political perspective, which ensured its popularity in the former Eastern Bloc as well, where it could fuel the cultural policy of aesthetic autonomy, and the very limited understanding of modern poetry it put forward, which allowed for conceptualizing a series of alternative modernities. Both of these reasons proved decisive in Romania, where Friedrich's book not only played a fundamental role in the understanding of modernism and, later on, of postmodernism, but supported – either by being assimilated or contested – all the milestones in poetry criticism of the last half-century and was paramount for several investigations into the current state of Romanian literature.

Keywords: Hugo Friedrich, modern poetry, Romanian poetry criticism, aesthetic autonomy, alternative modernities

There are critics and there are books. Or, rather, there are critics without books, just as there are books without critics. And, if the former statement does not need too much explanation – there are, obviously, critics who have imposed themselves by the extent of their activity without necessarily having produced a "masterpiece" (this is the case with the likes of Sainte-Beuve, Anatole France, or even Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller) –, the latter assertion might seem like a paradox. But the paradox is only apparent if we consider the works of authors such as Emile Hennequin, Georg Brandes or, more recently, Edward Said, whose names are generally associated with a single book, sometimes only with a single concept. Undoubtedly, the German critic Hugo Friedrich (1904–1978), whose main book I will address in the following, belongs to this latter category: although *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* (1956) was not the only book he published (he wrote four more volumes, on the classics of the French novel, on Dante, Montaigne, and Italian poetry), his name became inextricably linked to the monograph published in the "Rowohlts Deutsche Enzyklopädie" series, which managed to acquire the status of international bestseller, with 160,000 copies

sold in Germany alone,¹ and translated into numerous European languages (English, French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Polish, Romanian, etc.). However, Friedrich did not become one of the high-profile representatives of mid-twentieth-century European criticism: he was not associated with any paradigm shift with regard to critical thinking or practice, and was rather bypassed by contemporary overviews in the field (e.g., his name is not mentioned at all in the monumental *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, which dedicates the last three of its nine volumes to the twentieth century).²

How can we therefore explain the massive success of his 1956 book? In my opinion, four factors contributed to this phenomenon. First, the heuristic force of the book's central thesis regarding "the structural unity of modern European poetry [die Struktureinheit der modernen europäischen Lyrik]":³ postulating that all modern lyric poetry, from Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé to Gottfried Benn, T. S. Eliot, and André Breton, presumably possess the same structure of depth, Friedrich offered both specialist and non-specialist readers the hopes of quickly understanding the *whole* of modern poetry, beyond its multiple phenomenal manifestations. This feeling was consequently enhanced (and, even more, set on a positive basis) by a second factor: the exclusively stylistic angle from which the poems were analysed. Thus, arguing that modern poetry is above all *une affaire de langage*, Friedrich seemed to offer his readers not only a shortcut that would free them of the obligation to carefully study and understand the obscure poetics and metaphysics of modern poets, but also a relatively trivial, but nonetheless extremely useful tool for decoding their works, which consisted in identifying "negative" properties (negations, ellipses, indeterminates, etc.) at the discursive level. Third, this purely formal understanding of modern poetry did not seem to entail any political consequences. This fact made the volume much easier to assimilate in countries that in the

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- 1 Antoine Compagnon, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, translated by Franklin Philip (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 40.
 - 2 See A. Walton Litz, Louis Menand, and Lawrence Rainey (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 7: *Modernism and the New Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Raman Selden (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 8: *From Formalism to Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Christa Knellwolf and Christopher Norris (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 9: *Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
 - 3 Hugo Friedrich, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik. Von Baudelaire bis zur Gegenwart* (Hamburg: Rowolt, 1965), 7.

second half of the twentieth century were governed by other types of political systems than Western European democracies, and even more so in communist regimes, for example, where Friedrich's insistence on negative categories such as empty transcendence, dissonance, fragmentism, etc., only confirmed the Marxist-Leninist thesis of the decadence of Western cultures and societies. Incidentally, a fourth factor of the book's success was, surprisingly, precisely the Westernocentric selection of only five European cultures (French, English, German, Italian, and Spanish) for analysis. This restrictive choice turned Friedrich's scheme into a model of cultural development or, as the case may be, into a debate that ushered in the concept of "alternative modernities" for numerous Eastern European, Latin American, Asian, or African intellectuals who took various stances towards it, but contributed one way or the other to the book's popularity around the globe.

At least the last two mentioned factors seem to have proven decisive for Friedrich's reception in Romanian culture, which will be the subject of the present chapter. Symptomatic, in this sense, is the first occurrence of Friedrich's name that I encountered in the Romanian cultural press, namely in an article by Ion Lungu, who takes issue with a review signed by comparatist Edgar Papu of Francisc Păcurariu's 1965 *Introducere în literatura Americii Latine* [Introduction to Latin-American Literature].⁴ Given that Papu had reprimanded Păcurariu for diminishing the value of Mallarmé, who was mentioned "among those who promoted poetry's orientation towards formal exercises,"⁵ Lungu intervened by citing Friedrich as *argumentum ad auctoritatem*, who had expressed similar points of view, and thus defended Păcurariu, who had only formulated "a characterization that meets a unanimous consensus."⁶ Taking place in 1965, the year in which Romanian criticism began to break away from socialist realism and reclaim the principle of "aesthetic autonomy," this episode is fully illustrative of this change of perspective, more precisely of the clash between the old rhetoric (which condemned Mallarmé's work on ideological grounds, i.e., "formalism" as "anti-humanism," therefore as anti-Marxism-Leninism) and the new critical discourse, which was to underpin the aesthetic autonomy – at least in the formal sense – of literary works. It is therefore not surprising that Friedrich became the standard-bearer of this new direction in Romanian poetry criticism.

4 Ion Lungu, "O critică alături de obiect," *Luceafărul* 8, no. 25 (1965): 2.

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

In fact, until his official 1969 translation, in one of the collections that will become emblematic for postwar Romanian criticism ("Studii" [Studies]),⁷ Hugo Friedrich is already mentioned as an authority throughout almost all important Romanian magazines (*Contemporanul*, *Iașul literar*, *Gazeta literară/România literară*, *Viața Românească*, *Amfiteatru*, etc.),⁸ the German comparatist being presented to the Romanian public as "an adroit critic of today's poetry"⁹ or "one of the most subtle researchers of modern poetry."¹⁰ Moreover, in the autumn of 1967, the eminent German professor is visited in Freiburg by a delegation consisting of Ion Alexandru, Marin Sorescu, and Nicolae Manolescu – the latter noting that he had an "exciting meeting" with the Romance scholar, in which Friedrich showed "interest in Romania."¹¹ It is not excluded that this meeting occasioned the idea of a Romanian translation of his book, which appeared in April 1969. *Die Struktur...* went on to become a bestseller in Romania as well, given that the author of a press column noted with dissatisfaction that "[t]he volume sold out faster than I could get hold of it."¹² But the publication of the book coincided – likely not coincidentally – with a commentary in which the same Edgar Papu, who four years earlier had been reprimanded with the help of Friedrich's essay, expressed some rather critical opinions about it. However, it could be that the motivation of Papu's criticism was rather personal than institutional, given that the Romanian comparatist had just recently published a book about poetry (*Evoluția și formele genului liric* [Evolution and Forms of the Lyrical Genre], 1968), in which Friedrich's work was completely ignored. If Papu's intervention owes to his fear of the inevitable comparison between his

7 See Hugo Friedrich, *Structura liricii moderne: de la mijlocul secolului al XIX-lea până la mijlocul secolului al XX-lea*, translation and foreword by Dieter Fuhrmann (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1969). For the "Studii" series, see Andrei Terian, "Legalized Translations: The Ideological Filtering of Literary Criticism Works Translated into Romanian during National-Communism 1965–1989," in *Translation and Culture*, vol. 4, eds. Edită Gromova and Maria Kusá (Bratislava – Nitra: SAV Press, 2012), 240–249.

8 These data were extracted through a simple search in the Digitheca database of the Arcanum platform (<https://www.arcanum.com/>).

9 Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, "Poezie și tehnică poetică," *Contemporanul* 21, no. 22 (1966, June 3): 3.

10 Nicolae Balotă, "Manierismul și literatură," *Gazeta literară* 13, no. 45 (1966, Nov. 10): 7.

11 Red., "Cursurile de toamnă ale Universității din Freiburg. Convorbire cu N. Manolescu," *Amfiteatru* 2, no. 24 (1967): 406.

12 Rodica Tott, "Una da, una nu," *Informația Bucureștiului* 16, no. 4875 (1969, Apr. 19): 3.

book and Friedrich's, this will soon be confirmed when Ion Vlad will severely criticize his essay (whose only merit, the reviewer claims, is that it "rearranges known data according to the superior understanding of the poetic structures conceived in their becoming and interference in time"¹³), contrasting it precisely with Friedrich's volume, presented as "a research among the most authoritative and closest to the nature and characteristics of the poetry of our century."¹⁴ Yet, notwithstanding these circumstances, it must be acknowledged that Papu's review contains a series of justified critical observations as well, arguing against the reductionist character entailed by the very definition of "modern poetry" ("although the selection is conducted very well, it cannot be denied that there are at least as many poets [...] in recent times that are excluded by its criteria"), against adopting statements made by modern poets about poetry without further reflection (because these statements "should [...] not be accepted, but interpreted"), against excessively singling out poetic modernism and ignoring its connection with "mannerism," as defined by Gustav René Hocke, etc.¹⁵

However, such considerations did not overshadow the unprecedented local popularity of Friedrich's book, which in the following decades will become a genuine Bible for Romanian poetry criticism. The first step in this direction consisted of putting the book's analytical utility to the test, a process that will be commenced immediately. In the next years, more and more Romanian critics will apply Friedrich's scheme to the corpus of modern Romanian poetry – or they will be quick to proclaim the latter's exceptional character. For example, Marin Mincu seemed convinced that, in the case of Ion Barbu (1895–1961), one of the most resounding names of Romanian modernism, only "the lack of good translations could make a distinguished aesthete like Hugo Friedrich not award it its proper place in the excellent book *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik*."¹⁶ At the opposite end of his reception, Dimitrie Costea patronizingly denied Friedrich's categories any sort of value by drawing on Romanian examples: "The modernity of poetry, for us, is [...] something other than the extreme 'harsh modernity,' detached from tradition, of which the author of the *Structure of Modern Poetry* speaks. [...] In our country, it is the case only with parts of the poetry of Ion Barbu and Tudor Arghezi. Therefore, a first prerequisite for the reception

13 Ion Vlad, "Coordonate ale poeziei contemporane," *Steaua* 20, no. 7 (1969): 21.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Edgar Papu, "Reflecții în jurul lui Hugo Friedrich," *România literară* 2, no. 16 (1969, Apr. 17): 19.

16 Marin Mincu, "Addenda la poetica lui Ion Barbu," *Arges* 5, no. 10 (1970): 14.

of modern poetry is its connection with the tradition of previous poetry, a fact confirmed by other sources and by the growing audience enjoyed by the works of our great poets during the interwar period: Arghezi, Blaga, Barbu, Bacovia, Philipide.¹⁷ But the decisive moment in this first phase of the debate will be the employment of Friedrich's analytical scheme on the canonical figures of interwar Romanian poetry. A crucial attempt in this regard was marked by Nicolae Manolescu, the most influential Romanian critic of the communist period, who, in a 1971 essay, considered the most representative Romanian modernist poet, Tudor Arghezi (1880–1967), a “non-religious poet.” And the main argument in favor of this statement was offered by one of Friedrich's key concepts, that of “empty transcendence”: “Arghezi's transcendence is an empty transcendence. The silence, the refusal to show oneself, the impenetrability, and holding God captive are ultimately just as many images of absence.”¹⁸ An additional detail is here significant: although he makes use of Friedrich's concept, Manolescu does not find it necessary to quote him and no one dares accuse him of plagiarism, which helps show that, only two years following the translation of *Die Struktur...*, its main concepts had already become part and parcel of the Romanian critical vocabulary.

Beyond such particular interpretations, Friedrich's book will support, through the categories it develops, all the literary history projects dedicated to Romanian poetic modernism until the fall of communism, regardless of the age, education, or ideological orientation of their authors. For example, in his two-volume *Modernismul românesc* [Romanian Modernism, 1984–1985], Dumitru Micu (1928–2018), a critic trained in the spirit of socialist realism, considered that a nearly 50-page commentary on Friedrich's book could successfully replace a theoretical and historical introduction to the actual subject of his analysis. This choice was accompanied by the following explanation:

“Even if there were other similar syntheses, the study of the Professor from Freiburg im Breisgau remains a more active, more effective stimulus for reflecting on the defining characteristics of poetics in its modern rendition. And an excellent guidebook. No other critical writing accessible to the Romanian public today, and perhaps no other critical writing in general is able to serve as a first ‘key,’ as an ‘introduction’ and handbook to any new reader of poetry written after Baudelaire's, nor as a point of departure for a critical examination of this newer poetry, whoever the critic undertaking it might be.”¹⁹

17 Dimitrie Costea, “Poezia modernă și receptarea ei,” *Iașul literar* 21, no. 1 (1970): 58.

18 Nicolae Manolescu, *Teme* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1971), 148.

19 Dumitru Micu, *Modernismul românesc*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1984), 10–11.

Later on, even if Micu concluded that Friedrich's interpretative grid was not adequate for the study of Romanian literature (especially because, employing it here of all places, "the field of modernity appears tiny"²⁰), he did venture to propose an alternative concept of modernity, intuitively operating with the same categories, only more diluted. A less explicit, but somewhat firmer relationship with Friedrich's book was established by Mircea Scarlat (1951–1987) in his *Istoria poeziei românești* [History of Romanian Poetry, 1982–1990]. Since Scarlat deals with modern poetry only in the last half of his work (more precisely, in the last two volumes), it was expected that references to *Die Struktur...* would be quite frequent there, but this does not happen – or, in any case, not at the expected frequency, since we only encounter four to five references throughout volumes three and four. Something else entirely garners our attention: the fact that Scarlat's key notion (that of "convention," which determines the various configurations and metamorphoses of poetic formulas) seems to have been inspired by Friedrich's idea of "structure" which, by the way, he also illustrates in the case of modern poetry: "The absence, in art, of formulas that can be efficiently applied does not exclude the presence of supra-individual structures, the evidence of which increases with time, when we can more easily discern established poetic conventions. In one of this century's great books of literary criticism, Hugo Friedrich convincingly proved the existence of such a structure even within the most disconcerting genre: modern poetry."²¹ It is an example that illustrates not only the extent, but also the depth at which Friedrich's book influenced post-war Romanian criticism.

The extent of this impact is also confirmed by the attempts to theorize modern poetry (or poetry in general) that took place in Romania after the book's translation. Thus, in the first project of this kind, *Conceptul modern de poezie* [The Modern Concept of Poetry, 1972] by Matei Călinescu, Friedrich is mentioned in passing and only with observations of little to no relevance, although the overall picture of modernity put forward by the Romanian critic is not significantly different from that conceived by the critic from Freiburg. For, claiming that "modern poetry can be better defined [...] by the acuteness with which it poses the problem of language, by its dramatic linguistic consciousness,"²² Călinescu was only reiterating Friedrich's "formalist" thesis. Somewhat more nuanced are

20 *Ibid.*, 57.

21 Mircea Scarlat, *Istoria poeziei românești*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Minerva, 1982), 25.

22 Matei Călinescu, *Conceptul modern de poezie (de la romantism la avangardă)* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1972), 290.

the essays on poetry published after 1980, even more so since some of them will unequivocally contest Friedrich's ideas. One such example is *Despre poezie* [On Poetry, 1987] by Nicolae Manolescu, who, after first addressing the issue of "what is poetry," tries to provide an answer to the question of "how many kinds of poetry there are." Manolescu's answer incorporates, on the one hand, Friedrich's thesis regarding the fundamental rhetorical difference between "classic" and "modern" poetry, which the Romanian critic explains by citing the extensive comparison in *Die Struktur...* between Góngora and Mallarmé and commenting on it as follows:

"Hugo Friedrich is, of course, absolutely right. Indeed, the metaphors used by the modern poets tend to be atypical, without precedent; and there can be no doubt that between the elite readership addressed by Góngora and that non-existent reader that Mallarmé wanted to create is not only a difference of degree, but one of principle. It would be more accurate to say that modern obscurity is no longer, in fact, a conjunctural one, ultimately decipherable by using a 'key' in the possession of a limited number of readers, but an essential obscurity, in relation to which the very problem of elitist reading is no longer relevant."²³

On the other hand, Manolescu contests another one of Friedrich's central theses, namely that of the "unity of structure" illustrated by modern poetry, to which he prefers a dichotomy similar to that postulated by Marcel Raymond in *De Baudelaire au surréalisme* (1933): "H. Friedrich described modern poetry as a single structure. But [...] Baudelaire was a *Janus bifrons*: at least two directions, parallel and difficult to reduce to the same denominator, branch out from his theoretical work and his poetry; they will constitute the two understandings of modernity, whose history remains to be written."²⁴ However, it must not be forgotten that, although he departs from Friedrich's conceptions, Manolescu legitimizes his own point of view *with reference to him*, which implies an indirect recognition of his authority in the field of modern poetry.

Moreover, it is significant that even the critical representatives of the "generation of the 1980s," who published their main works in the early 2000s, did not abandon Friedrich as a point of reference. On the contrary, the German comparatist's insights still seem to underpin *Recapitularea modernității* [Summarizing Modernity, 2000] by Ion Bogdan Lefter, which aims to achieve "a conceptual reconstruction of genuine Romanian modernism, that is, the writing of a (I hereby paraphrase the title of Hugo Friedrich's famous book) *Structure of*

23 Nicolae Manolescu, *Despre poezie* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1987), 132–133.

24 *Ibid.*, 161.

modern Romanian poetry. Preceded by a *Structure of Modern Romanian Criticism*, of course...²⁵ But such a conceptual endeavor is preceded (and also succeeded), in fact, by a continuous comparison between the doctrines of interwar Romanian critics and the precepts of the German critic, presented as an absolute standard against the backdrop of which local competitors invariably seem to fail to understand modernity. As for the application of Friedrich's "structural" grid to the analysis of interwar Romanian poetry, its clear champion is George Bacovia (1881–1957), who stands out precisely because, "since the first quarter of the twentieth century, [...] he had already pushed *the structure of modern poetry* to its last consequences and beyond [...], opening the way to postmodern 'depictions' of reality."²⁶ Hence Friedrich indirectly contributed not only to the understanding of modernity in Romania, but also of postmodernity.

For Gheorghe Crăciun as well, in his *Aisbergul poeziei moderne* [The Iceberg of Modern Poetry, 2002], Bacovia exceeds the Friedrich model and approaches postmodernity.²⁷ However, unlike Lefter, Crăciun's theoretical ambitions are much greater, as they are not limited to Romanian literature alone. For, denouncing the generalizing tendency shown by Friedrich in his book as "abusive," Crăciun claims to have discovered not only a new "face" of modernity, but an entirely new type of poetry: "Modernity is a multivalent phenomenon. To understand it in all its complexity, we must consider not only the transcendence, but also the contingency of human-world relations. It is not only men's aspiration towards the 'unknown' that should interest us, but also their aspiration towards the 'known,' i.e., towards what preserves the appearance of the known. Not only Rimbaud is a modern poet, but also Whitman."²⁸ In fact, Crăciun adds not only one, but two new types of poetry to that form which, in adopting Friedrich's understanding of it, he calls "reflexive": the first is "linguistic" (or "playful and experimental") poetry, i.e., that form linking Mannerism to contemporary experimentalism;²⁹ the other is "transitive" poetry, based not on creating a distance, but on getting closer to the reader, not on abstraction, but on concreteness, not on the narcissism of an invented, impenetrable idiom, but on everyday language.³⁰ This would be, according to Crăciun, the hidden part of

25 Ion Bogdan Lefter, *Recapitularea modernității. Pentru o nouă istorie a literaturii române*. Second edition, *Cu un epilog despre neomodernism* (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2002), 75.

26 *Ibid.*, 100.

27 Gheorghe Crăciun, *Aisbergul poeziei moderne*. Second edition. Afterword by Mircea Martin (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2009), 148–160.

28 *Ibid.*, 296.

29 *Ibid.*, 328–352.

30 *Ibid.*, 361–371.

the iceberg mentioned by title of his book, one of the most ambitious undertakings in the entire history of Romanian literary criticism.

But this is not all. After showing, throughout this chapter, that Hugo Friedrich's *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik* helped Romanian literary criticism in finding a useful theoretical support in its effort of reestablishing "aesthetic autonomy," in defining its own poetic modernity, in interrogating its particularities and limitations, and in serving as a "sparring partner" in the process of asserting postmodernism and generating an original theoretical debate, the book returned to the forefront of Romanian cultural life in 2008, with the publication of *Iluziile literaturii române* [The Illusions of Romanian Literature] by Eugen Negrici, who returns to Friedrich in order to provide an answer to the question of "how modern is 'modern Romanian literature'?" However, more than the answer itself ("most interwar poets do not possess any knowledge of the properties of ambiguity and do not seem to be aware of the advantage of 'unresolved tensions,' which makes us doubt the modernity of their poetry, their belonging to the poetic model imposed by Hugo Friedrich on the critical consciousness"),³¹ perhaps what should concern us here are the terms in which the question is formulated. Is considering a book published more than five decades ago a sort of undisputable landmark and discussing it without any kind of precautions indicative of the amazing vitality of the book in question or proof of the terrible backwardness of the one addressing such a question? But this is another issue, whose answer does not affect the significant impact that Friedrich's volume had on Romanian poetry criticism during the latter half of the twentieth century.

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31 Eugen Negrici, *Iluziile literaturii române* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2008), 162.

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