

Henric Sanielevici - From Literary Criticism to Anatomy or How Does the Size of the Skull Influence Literature?

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to deal with the relationship between literary criticism and anatomy. To be more precise it will discuss one of Henric Sanielevici's theories, according to which the literary text can only be understood by taking into account the colour of the eyes, the conformation of teeth and size and the shape of the author's skull.

Key-words: skull, brain, dolicephalic, brachicephalic, interdisciplinarity, anatomy, anthropology, literary criticism

1. Introduction

Interdisciplinarity is today widely spread. Literary criticism makes no exception, especially in the second half of the XXth century, when it develops connections to different fields such as religion, sociology, psychology, psychoanalysis or neurosciences. Yet, the beginnings of such an interdisciplinary approach in criticism can be traced around 1900, when a Romanian thinker, Henric Sanielevici, almost unknown today, comes with some revolutionary ideas, aiming at changing the status of literary criticism from an artistic impression into a solid science. The present paper deals with his contributions to the development of determinism and materialism into a personal model of interpreting literature.

2. Literary Criticism and Determinism in the Second Half of the 19th Century

The second half of the 19th century in the European culture is characterized by an extraordinary development of science and technique, which has an enormous impact on arts and, implicitly, on literature. The separation from religion is evident and Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859) turns out to be a crucial moment in the evolution of humankind. Trust on the unlimited powers of science becomes the engine for radical changes in all fields of life. Literary criticism makes no exception, using a large range of methods and techniques in the investigation process and getting closer to natural sciences hoping to acquire objectivity. More and more elements from apparently incompatible fields such as History, Biology, Sociology, Psychology or Medicine, are used in interpreting literature, a fact that can be considered a first step in interdisciplinary approaches.

After the extraordinary development of aesthetics in Germany, where Immanuel Kant had settled the basic elements of a strong idealistic, subjective trend in the European philosophy, some other important German thinkers developed concepts of extreme importance for the understanding of literature. J. G. Fichte, Schelling and Hegel continue Kant's ideas, struggling to prove that art can only be understood by both senses and mind. Taking into account the ambivalence of the text, it becomes impossible to deal with literature using only the tools offered by science.

Although influent, not all philosophers and thinkers share such ideas. Gradually, especially in France, Villemain, Sainte-Beuve and Taine strive for orientating criticism towards science. Under the influence of important changes in politics, industry and society, they come with a different point of view, which does not necessarily reject idealism, but tries to get a more objective interpretation. After Sainte-Beuve has practiced biografism as a research method and granted the art of portrayal with an unprecedented importance, Taine produces a real revolution in Aesthetics considering

artistic works as facts and products whose characteristics and reasons need to be explained. Thus, the connection between art and natural sciences is established. Literary criticism becomes a kind of applied anatomy of artistic works, based on the laws of determinism and universal causality. In fact, Taine makes nothing else but borrows concepts and methods from natural sciences and applies them to literature. Analyzing the text as the effect of some causes, he moves the interest on identifying the last one, considered "the three major forces of mankind history: the race, the environment and the moment."⁷⁴ This is the well-known deterministic triad that will be developed according to different principles. For the time being it is important to accept that Taine's contribution to the development of aesthetics is crucial. He is no longer interested in proving the value of a literary work (which is considered implicit), but in identifying in literature the psychology of a people. Far from being infallible Taine turns modern through the rigorous Cartesian way in which he built a great system, capable of describing the ineffable of literature in terms of positive sciences.

His ideas will be taken forward by Emile Hennequin, whose name is usually associated with aestopsychology, a combination of methods in the field of aesthetics and psychology in explaining the literary phenomenon. Another important name is Georg Brandes, Danish esthetician who has made important contributions in this area. Brandes explains the phenomenon of art in a positivist manner, focusing on genetic factors. His aesthetic conception tries to eliminate irrational factors in explaining the literary phenomenon. He applies a social and historic type of genetics to texts seeking causal explanations and the specific of each writer. Literary history is viewed as a sequence of actions and reactions. Brandes is not limited to biographical, social or political information, aspiring to make a history of the human spirit. The comparative approach, he suggests, also gives birth to value judgments, essential to any critical act. In fact, his criticism makes a synthesis of Hegel's philosophy and of materialist rationality.

3. The Influence of Scientific Criticism in Romanian Thinking and Literature

The effects of these mutations in European thinking begins to be felt in Romania after 1870, especially in socialist circles, primarily through the work of Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea. His ideas and theories about the importance of social factors in understanding literature will be carried on, among others, by Henric Sanielevici (1875-1951), one of the most interesting Romanian literary critics, who aspires to a synthesis of all sciences and claims to be a pioneer in European thinking at that time. Unlike others, Sanielevici seems to be capable of innovation, developing external suggestions into original contributions. His early cultural journalism proves solid knowledge and he will gradually develop a personal design, starting from Taine's determinism joined by influences from Hennequin, Brandes, Lanson or Kautsky.

Due to his interest in anthropology, he goes to Berlin, in 1901, to study. In 1904 he delivers a conference at The Anthropological Society in Paris, *Brachicephaly is Caused by Mastication*, wanting to resolve the problem of cephalic index. The courage of a young Romanian researcher to argue with important names in anthropology and to reject Nyström's hypothesis that the brachycephaly is normal and dolicephalia is abnormal was considered strange and his communication was not successful. The decision of the jury stimulates him to continue his researches until 1926, when he published *La vie des mammifères et des hommes fossiles*, which he considered his major scientific work. After a Romanian stay he goes back to Germany, for specialization. He sets at Göttingen, where he attends lectures at the university and studies at the local Anatomic and Anthropologic Museum. In March 1912, he holds a conference at The Anthropological Society of Teachers from the University of Göttingen, where he suggests that "homo europaeus" owes his physical characteristics to his fisherman life in the postglacial tundra. The idea was greeted with ironic smiles. Without collapse, Sanielevici published his study in "Anatomischer Anzeiger", hoping that the scientific world will recognize his contribution. During this period, he works hard, attending libraries and exhibits. In the Blumenbach collection he finds a

⁷⁴ By *race* Taine understands *nation*, by *milieu*, *environment* and by *moment*, he refers to time.

skull on which Gall, a famous Phrenologist, drew some circles to distinguish the center of friendships, of travel and so on. Such marks and Gall's theory according to which there are certain centers in the human brain responsible for different emotions made the Romanian researcher laugh.

4. Henric Sanielevici's Basic Ideas about Literature and Criticism

Although he continues the scientific direction in Romanian criticism, Sanielevici often recants his model, Gherea, choosing a rather unusual direction, one in which biology and anatomy play a key role in understanding literature. Unlike contemporary Romanian critics such as Garabet Ibrăileanu, for whom the contribution of biology to understanding literature is secondary, for Sanielevici it becomes crucial to open a gate to anthropology and thus to an original point of view. His fundamental study is *From Literary Criticism to the Biology of Mammals* and opens with a shocking confession: "Many years have passed since literary criticism led me to study anthropology. The path is, contrary to how one might think, short and straight."⁷⁵ Unhappy with the inaccuracy of classifications in psychology and literary history, Sanielevici aims at identifying those very causes that made people different during the history of mankind. After years of systematic observation, Sanielevici reaches the conclusion that there are ongoing relations between the character of a person and his physical appearance.

Considering the history of literature as a branch of sociology, he suggests a classification based on scientific criteria: "Things being so, one can easily understand the importance of classification, defining and finding the laws that have governed the apparition of literary production, set by me in *The Iron Classicism*. A perfect classification of a class of phenomena can be done only in close connection with the law of their production."⁷⁶ Sanielevici considers classifications made according to the most typical feature (the result of the cause generating effects on all the others. Applying Lamarck's principle to the biology of man (who is a mammal), he believes to have solved the problem of character. Then, defining temperament as the sum of physical forces and character as a way in which these forces are grouped under the influence of social environment, the critic maintains that the substrate of temperaments has a genetic explanation. The individual is a unity of body and soul, physiognomy and stature which must be studied to help us identify the basis character and then the spiritual qualities. Hence, the belief that he has found the solution to revolutionize psychology: "Years of observation led me to the conclusion that the character of an individual and his physical appearance - particularly the face - are relatively constant."⁷⁷

Applying the results of these observations, Sanielevici explains the literary text by means of elements belonging to anthropology. A rigorous classification in this field can be made only through a comparative study of literary schools in different countries and periods to distinguish the particular features: "The history of literature teaches us that a great writer never appears isolated, but is the highest expression of a school, of a literary current. Taine has shown us that Shakespeare, who seems a meteor today, was surrounded by a group of playwrights not much inferior to him."⁷⁸ Following this reasoning, Sanielevici comes to the surprising and ridiculous conclusion that the configuration of the jaws and the eye color are factors that can explain the art phenomenon. Belonging to a certain race and diet are also essential in understanding the anatomy and psychology of the individual, which, in turn, contribute to shaping the psychology of a people.

Starting from the premise that biology and anthropology have not been established as real science yet, Sanielevici claims to have explained the evolution of man on earth and thus to have contributed decisively to gaining an autonomous status for the two disciplines. According to his theory, the five natural types of environment during the ice age (warm woods, cool woods, warm steppe, cold steppe and tundra) correspond to the five human races (nut eater, snails eater, onion

⁷⁵ Henric Sanielevici, *Critical and Philosophical Researches*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 235.

⁷⁶ Henric Sanielevici, *New Critical Studies*, București, SOCEC, 1920, p. 141.

⁷⁷ Henric Sanielevici, *Critical and Philosophical Researches*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 390.

⁷⁸ H. Sanielevici, *Critical Studies*, București, Editura Literară a Casei Școalelor, 1927, p. 57.

eater, meat eater of and fish eater) which can be described taking into account function and the environment.

In an attempt to define science, Sanielevici shows that it aims at coordinating a class of phenomena by more and more general rules and establishes seven stages of this process: description of phenomena, finding similarities and differences, the classification of phenomena from different points of view, setting precise definitions within the classification system and, most importantly, establishing causal relationships and their coordination in general rules.⁷⁹ Of all these seven sciences (mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology and sociology), only the first four came in the fifth stage, while the others didn't even complete any classifications. In solving a problem Sanielevici thinks that the most important factor is not the amount of knowledge you have, but the power of orientation, the way you choose. This extremely important ability has, in his opinion, three stages: the right judgment (given by the study of Logics), dialectical thinking (which allows you to analyze all the aspects) and intuition.

Applying the results of these observations in literature, Henric Sanielevici changes the initial meanings Taine has given to determinism and explains the literary text only by means of elements belonging to anthropology. Thus, he comes to surprising conclusions, far from the initial intention of changing literary criticism into a solid science, with rules, objective criteria and links to other disciplines. One of the most interesting examples is that of a comparative approach in which he discusses about two contemporaries: "Here are, for instance, two writers, Vlahuță and Sadoveanu, whose physiognomies and psychologies are known to readers of literature. Well, can anyone imagine a melancholic and sensitive person such as Vlahuță with Sadoveanu's physiognomy and, on the contrary, a calm optimist like Sadoveanu with Vlahuță's physiognomy? It takes a special sense to recognize that Sadoveanu's spiritual qualities send to blonde people, while Vlahuță's to the South-Europe or to the East? Vlahuță has the dark-brown face of a Spanish, Sicilian or Greek from the islands: the face of a Mediterranean or West Asian brachicephal. His big eyes, black as oil and terribly expressive, his serious appearance and slow movements betray the hidden excitement and concentrated nature of a Spanish man. He used to be the typical representative of the urban petty bourgeoisie and intellectuals, in the lyric-romantic literary movement before 1900. Intense lyricism, subjectivity and a deep unsatisfaction, concise and polished style, shaping reality through abstractization and self-observation, love of solitude, individualism - nothing is missing from the psychology of the Mediterranean. On the other hand, Sadoveanu has the classic appearance of the blonde brachycephal in Slavic regions: stuff body, short neck, big, round head, round face, small nose, small eyes, deep in their sockets, long upper lip, blond complexion; to his Germanic psychology - perfect memory, plasticity, objective judgment, manly and calm aspect, optimism, elementary, intense and superficial feelings, a general tendency towards human life, constant activity - he adds under the Germanic appearance, the Alpine impulsiveness, which unleashed itself only in literature"⁸⁰.

In fact, even if part of his observations fit the two writers, they can not be taken for granted as a coherent system for interpreting literature. A writer, regardless of belonging to a particular race, remains an individual. Using elements and methods from anatomy, biology or anthropology does not necessarily involve scientific results. In Sanielevici's case, there is a paradox. His theories are usually strong, supported by hard work and years of study. He aims at making a synthesis of scientific elements to have a complex approach of the literary text. Unfortunately for him, in practice he frequently fails. He reaches attractive conclusions, but most of them are unacceptable. Henric Sanielevici's contribution remains crucial, because he built a complex system, a complicated, interdisciplinary algorithm to explain literary works. After a first phase, when Taine's influence is evident, Sanielevici finds his own direction in the Romanian literary criticism, striving to explain literature by means of some particular sciences: anatomy, biology, anthropology and

⁷⁹ The whole theory can be found in *Literary Schools and Genres*, part of *New Critical Studies*, ed. cit., pp. 137-145.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 247-248.

history. That is why, in 1935, after almost five decades of work, he comes to the conclusion that the only possibility of interpreting literature is anthropology.

5. Conclusion

Although Sanielevici's intention of defining criticism as a true science is still interesting and also his ideas about using new sciences at that time (such as Anatomy, Biology, Anthropology etc.) anticipate interdisciplinarity, they were considered strange. In fact they are not that strange as claimed, but were abusively applied in interpreting literature. I believe that they need to be reconsidered, because in theory Sanielevici was extremely inventive, but in practice he usually overexaggerated and nobody accepted his model of evaluating literature.

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