

The glass bead game: Matei Calinescu and the secret life of concepts

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IN PRAISE OF NOMINALISM

The backbone of Matei Calinescu's critical thought lies in his studies of comparative literature and literary theory published before, as well as after his American exile. For all its diversity and heterogeneity, his work on the subject betrays a keen interest in speculation and categorization, and allows us a glimpse of an astute analyst of intellectual discourse, across its ideological, rhetorical, thematic, and formal aspects.

Published in Romania in the 1970s, his doctoral dissertation, *European Classicism*, heralds his later works *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Calinescu 1977) and *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Calinescu 1987). The author sets out on a convergent analysis across a series of dispersed hypotheses on classicism, which are present in almost all his previous studies. He focuses on the trajectory of intellectual discourse from the aftermath of classicism through the literature of our century, claiming that the driving force behind modern poetry is a radical response to the classical axioms of poetic discourse and to its mimetic and purely instrumental functions. From this point of view, with its emphasis on creative imagination and emotional expressivity, Romanticism is the key milestone on the path towards the contemporary view of poetry as a particular use of language to create Meaning.

The first American synthesis on modernity is a culmination of the two main dimensions of Calinescu's output as an anatomist and as a historian of cultural forms encompassing both his *nominalist* appeal and his interest in the *pressures exerted on art by various historical contexts*.

Calinescu defines *Modernity* as a generic category in contrast to what we usually call *Modernism*, which he sees as just one of its several aesthetic and ideological facets. His study is an indispensable guide for exploring modern thought, mainly because the author identifies the successive pitfalls, fallacies and projective illusions embedded in almost all twentieth century theoretical surveys. However, it is also the result of constant efforts by a modern theorist to uncover the vulnerabilities of his own theoretical tools and to exorcise their magnetic power.

According to Calinescu, *Modernity* is a contrasting category which leads to a cluster of aggressive and polemical tensions. On a preliminary level, aesthetic *Modernity* must be set against its forerunners or, in a word, against *Tradition*. On a second level,

it can also be seen as a rebuke to bourgeois modernity and its trust in reason, utility, and progress. Calinescu is always drawing attention to the distinction between the two belligerent faces of modernity. Of these, the first is cultural and aesthetic, and makes every effort to counterbalance social modernity, as boosted by progress, by the industrial revolution and by new communication technologies, which create consumerism, the mass culture, and a sense of bourgeois well-being. Last but not least, as described by Calinescu, modernity lashes out at its own self, as a potential source of paradigmatic constraint and of... Tradition.

In Calinescu's work, every time we are prompted by idleness or by habit to play the card of the *One*, the *Multiple* steps forward with its frames of reference and its concepts to suddenly uncover multiple layers of meaning. Such is the case for contemporary categories of periodization such as Modernism, the Baroque, Romanticism and Classicism, which we usually handle using speculative thought structures deeply rooted in the infrastructures of our Europeanism.

The sophisticated tools of the cultural analyst create a three-tier semantic projection around each of these categories. First, an *axiological* perspective allows us to evaluate each of these concepts positively or negatively – as we all know, modernism was born as a pejorative label. Secondly, a *historical* point of view backs up the view that these concepts cover a precisely circumscribed segment of cultural Time. Enlightenment, for instance, belongs in the eighteenth century, whilst Modernism is usually seen to have appeared around 1850. Finally, a *typological* point of view allows us to use these concepts as taxonomic tools. The faces of Modernity, as outlined by the author, be they Modernism, Vanguard, Decadence, or Kitsch, appear as the product of a very complex game of contrasts and complementarities, set against the background of this three-tier perspective.

Calinescu's sharp awareness of *Otherness*, perhaps the most visible mark of his American transplantation, prompts him to maintain this debate within the bounds of a relaxed atmosphere of relativism. For him, there is nothing eternal in the realm of culture, and everything bears the mark of a particular time. This is the case even for the historical sensibility and awareness which, as the author argues, only became a distinctive characteristic of Western culture at a certain point in time. In fact, Modernity not only made historicity the cornerstone of cultural normality, but also created the appropriate institutions for it, and embraced it as one of its distinctive markers.

Calinescu's approach to Modernity involves another unusual choice. He makes it very clear that our aesthetic postulates and theories are strongly shaped by the intellectual discourse, rather than the particular creative strategies of a specific era, and this bold claim is advanced without pleading guilty of a *nominalist illegitimacy*.

In the second edition of his study, which includes what the author calls the five faces of Modernity, he creates some order in the area of theoretical predicaments and the Babel-like diversity of discourses: Postmodernism. For Calinescu, Postmodernism, one of the chameleon-like faces of Modernity, is the very embodiment of Nominalism. Thus, he successfully deals with one of the conceptual labels most overrated and overused in contemporary cultural discourse, which, as a cultural philosopher has put it "stands in as so many short-hand markers, marketing thoughts in

progress as finished products, off-the-shelf items, ready-to-wear, in the new international markets of knowledge” (Osborne 2000, 53).

It is noteworthy that Calinescu’s speculations on postmodernity are not necessarily referring to the debate on this issue going on before as well as after his book was published (Lyotard 1984 [1979]; Bertens 1995; Natoli and Bertens, 2002). Whatever he maintains on the matter is a follow-up of his nominalist options rather than a retort to the extensive scholarly literature in this area. This position helps him avoid the numerous pitfalls and fallacies of so-called postmodern critical thought. He also managed to avoid the ambiguous subtext to the discussion in the confusion between the *postmodern age* – as an intellectual set of options as well as a period chronologically following modernity (Hassan 1987) – and the existence of *postmodernism* as a style of expression and as an artistic program (Hassan 1971; Butler 2002).

Postmodernity covered an area of cultural facts impossible to master by means of a unique reference system. Put in a broader temporal perspective, this tricky situation led to conceptual dead ends such as the thorny relationship: modern/postmodern/contemporary. In approximately the same critical age as Calinescu, Arthur Danto contends that ‘the distinction between the modern and the contemporary did not become clear until well into the seventies and eighties. Contemporary art would for a long time continue *to be the modern art produced by our contemporaries*. At some point, they clearly stopped being a satisfactory way of thinking, as evidenced by the need to invent the term “postmodern” (Danto 1997, 105).

Under the circumstances, one can conclude that the *genus proximum* of so-called postmodernity was a very peculiar axiomatic of *beyond* that had asked for a radical hermeneutic turn of all cultural discourses (Bloom, De Man, Derrida, Hartman, Hillis Miller 1979). And what’s more, that postmodernism was a concept without an empirical field.

As we all know, the Babel-like polysemy of this concept finally triggered conflicting reactions that suspected postmodernism of clearly incompatible tendencies: it seemed guilty of harbouring an excessive historicism and at the same time a pernicious anachronism, of nihilistic radicalism as well as of nostalgic conservatism, of a commercialism verging on the kitsch, but also of elitist arrogance, and so on (Hutcheon, 1988). In its particular way, postmodernism extended the anarchistic attacks against its humanist foundations, against the existing order, and against the undisguised quest for true pluralism. It celebrated heterogeneity; it revived earlier visions of a united world, and it undermined monoliths wherever they were (ibid, 1989). Due to the abundance of modernist style models, there were as many forms of postmodernism as there had been high modernisms. A look through the otherwise huge volume of bibliography on the subject reveals almost as many, if not more, postmodernisms as there are geographies, cultures, fields of speculation, and of creation.

What becomes clear from Calinescu’s work is that Postmodernism was, more than anything else, a particular way of seeing that was layered over our retinas for a while. Its only tangible manifestations were the studies on postmodernity themselves.

The theorist is fully aware that this trust in the concept of postmodern literary practice or of postmodern cultural furniture was misplaced. The sheer variety of

the literary works analysed in almost every study on Postmodernism raises a simple question: are they being analysed because they are postmodern or, in fact, are they postmodern just because this is how they are being analysed?

In retrospect, we must admit, along with Calinescu, that Postmodernism marks a clear break along the path of cultural history, and between artistic practices and intellectual discourse. He resolutely resists any temptation to give an empirical tint to what is an obviously speculative cultural project.

To better understand this, we must have another look at his *Introductory Study to Exploring Postmodernism*, which he co-edited with Douwe Fokkema following the 1985 AILC/ICLA Congress (Calinescu 1988). This is where he clearly warns against the double temptation to give substance to key concepts and to insist on their embodiment in cultural furniture, or, vice-versa, to transform them into idealized, quasi metaphysical, symbols. As Calinescu argues, most researchers of Postmodernism see it either as a historical category, a literary period, or as an ideal category, a systematic concept. According to Calinescu both approaches come with their particular fallacies – the mimetic or the *jigsaw puzzle fallacy* and the *theatrical fallacy* (Calinescu 1988, 3).

For the former, historians of art are particularly keen to show that this concept can be easily illustrated using a particular range of literary works, or of artistic creations. In this case, Calinescu identifies a positivist belief in the existence of historically accepted literary facts, which are just waiting to be described and evaluated.

The opposite, trans-historical, point of view tries to uncover the hidden substance behind facts, and runs the risk of a theatrical fallacy, so-called by Calinescu after Francis Bacon and the idols of theatre. It is notable that, in trying to escape naive positivism and mimetic illusions, structuralism finally snowballed down this slope itself. Fascinated by the phantasm of the ultimate, hidden Ur-structure, the *Absent Structure*, as Eco puts it, structuralism completely destroyed its own credibility as a neutral scientific methodology.

Given the circumstances, the author seems to plead for a subtle but functionally indispensable balance between these two approaches:

If we follow the third direction in which a poetics of (re)reading might to focus on one or the other of these two semantic dimensions, depending on what he wants to do with the term. But the apparent absence of one of the two axes of meaning does not entail the cancellation of its function: the hidden element continues to play its role in defining “field of tension” within which the term reorders shapes and structures the semantic material to which it is applied (Calinescu 1988, 4).

Overall, Calinescu’s strategy is to shift the emphasis away from the object and towards the epistemological point of view, thus implying that Postmodernism itself was shaped by one of its main subjects: Relativism. In this particular respect, he seems fairly close to the *interpretive anthropology* espoused by Clifford Geertz, promoting a gradual move to transcend empiricism in human sciences, towards a meta-language in which explanation and interpretation can work together (Kelly 2002, 244).

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE REREADING

After the (Post)Modern battles of the eighties, in the next decade Calinescu published *Rereading*, perhaps his best theoretical work, which successfully brings together several of his preoccupations which had heretofore remained scattered across several publications into a coherent and articulate whole (Calinescu 1993).

The concept of rereading, the main focus of his monograph, is seen as a speculative viewfinder with an obvious metaphorical dimension. It is defined by the author with a view to facilitating our understanding of literary texts, but also to ease access beyond the text, towards vast cultural horizons which are caught in their own historical dynamics. Starting from a meeting point for poetics, philosophy, ethics, psychology and politics, he works to build a coherent theory of rereading. From the beginning through to the end of the study, rereading emerges as a theoretical arch-subject, of both the creation and the interpretation of literature. We could even conclude that, for Calinescu, literature is read, reread and also written from end to beginning rather than the other way around.

Rereading neatly underlines the reading thread in Calinescu's work: his interest in conceptual tools as hypothetical constructs, as well as in their self-reflective potential.

The "reader" or "rereader" generically reread to in this essay is usually a hypothetical construct. I see reading – that is (re) reading – as a process of continuously hypothesis building and revising; of continuously making smaller or larger abductions, as Charles Peirce would phrase it, and recasting or replacing them. (...) My generic rereader, then, does not exist in reality: he or she is no more than a hypothetical embodiment of the hypothesizing vocation of reading itself (Calinescu 1993, XIV).

The author argues that we should see rereading as just a moment in the long chain of repetition, where rewriting and rereading just happen to be different names for the same unique creative act. Thus, what we usually call reading is in fact the utopian starting point which allows us to identify what follows as rereading. A wide range of types of reading cooperate, defy or challenge each other under the single roof of rereading. Calinescu devises systems of polar opposites to survey and to classify them.

Perhaps the most important of these interpretative antinomies highlights the contrast between intensive and extensive reading. The former operates like a drill, in a vertical movement across geological layers of meaning, involving constant repetition which, in turn, means constant rereading. The latter is skin-deep, cursory, hasty, trying to peruse as many heterogeneous texts as possible and to achieve territorial expansion. The antinomy between the intensive and the extensive also reveals a historical dynamic:

If we admit that there has indeed been a historical passage from a time of intensive reading of a few 'cultural homogenous' books to one of extensive exposure to many 'cultural heterogeneous' books, it seems obvious to reformulate the distinction in terms of reading and rereading. In speaking of reading or rereading we must be ready to acknowledge from the outset the paradox that the two can be at once complementary and divergent (Calinescu 1993, 89).

In European cultures the ideal model of intensive rereading was the Bible, while the extensive model operated mostly in the field of secular literature. "The passion

for reading is in principle insatiable in regard to quantity, extension, curiosity, variety, pleasure, and quasi-hypnotic involvement with texts capable of captivating an average reader” (Calinescu 1993, 90).

Underneath these two kinds of reading, Calinescu identifies diverging normative strategies. The repetitive reading of holy, consecrated texts is governed by Tradition in its institutionalized meaning, an interpretive authority which is superior to the ordinary reader. This type of control can become dogmatic and compelling, encouraging a doctrinal reading which tries to standardize reading patterns. In the territory of free, secular, a cluster of ethno-psycho-socio-cultural variables create a spectrum of patterns which approximate the contrasting paradigms of the intensive and the extensive.

Rereading which often springs from a deeper personal commitment, religious or otherwise, but which can also be motivated by a reflective attitude and a strong desire to understand how a text works, represents the side of dedication, sustained attention, and sophisticated absorption (Calinescu 1993, 90).

Under Calinescu’s direction, this speculative script gradually develops towards more and more comprehensive frameworks. For example, on a psycho-sociological level, the preference for intensive drilling or for skin-deep interpretation casts readers in a number of roles, such as young or mature, feminine or masculine, authoritarian or tolerant, elitist or popular, and so on.

Virtually all critical schools agree that there is a wide range of variation in how readers have made sense of literary texts throughout history. Even the most conservative believers in authorial intention or in meaning agree that different generations read the same work differently and that, strict linguistics aside, it can acquire hitherto unsuspected meaning in a new historical context. But the response of contemporary readers and rereaders also varies greatly, as a function of a wide range of psycho-sociological factors that have a direct bearing on the process of reading. Calinescu only deals with “the major variables: the age of the reader, the place and situation in which the reading occurs, and gender” (Calinescu 1993, 92).

On a different level, the hypothetical antinomy between reading and rereading allows the theorist to contemplate the successive turns in, and ages of Western mentalities, and to see the broader horizons behind the historical feud between the *New* and the *Old* in creation. On an even higher level, his analysis reveals the contrasting strategies of action and of knowing. Calinescu finally seeks to track how the equation between reading and rereading has been perceived and evaluated at key moments in modern cultural consciousness, and the associated literary values and categories.

Among the latter, ludic values play an important part in enabling the author to develop a true poetics of ludic rereading, including the play of rereading, and rereading as a play.

If we follow the third direction in which a poetics of (re)reading might be conceived as a set of rules for constructing good, effective, pleasurable reading of literary work, we will soon be confronted by an even larger issue of literature, reading, rereading and play. More precisely, we will soon come across an intriguing convergence of two issues, first the sense of a playful text, or a text that invites us or challenges to play a game (Calinescu 1993, 120).

Using the example of Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, the author argues that "the literary text, when it is a calculated, rule governed, and self-reflexive playful artefact, calls for rereading" (Calinescu 1993, 127).

Rereading as play is a conceptual and hypothetical knot which ties rereading to other key areas of Calinescu's analysis, such as fiction, make-believe, and secrecy.

CRITICISM, ART AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE

The way in which Calinescu defines and uses categories such as *modernity*, *post-modernity* and *rereading* pertains to an area of great interest for today's intellectual discourse: the relationship between trans-historic, systematic conceptualization, on the one hand, and historical experience on the other. As a contemporary philosopher of culture maintains, ours is a time when "certain themes predominate, the forms of universally characteristic of general concepts in cultural theory, the relationship of pragmatism to metaphysics, technology and cultural form, the temporality and politics of modernism, conceptuality and aesthesis, the constitutive role of fantasy in human life" (Osborne 2000, 58).

On closer scrutiny, the categories which catch Calinescu's eye have something in common: they can "function simultaneously as both a signifier of a period within the terms of an objective typological, chronological historiography, and a self-referential, performative designation of the changing time of its utterance, the time of the analysis itself" (Osborne 2000, 82).

This is why he is keen to put his arguments about modernity and about reading into a broader temporal context. In Calinescu's work, this type of perspectivism emerges as a product of self-reflection. Among contemporary theorists of literature, Antoine Compagnon is on the same side of the barricade when he singles out self-consciousness as the most important aspect of literary theory: "We should see it as a critical consciousness (a critique of literary ideology), a literary self-reflection, a self-consciousness or self-referentiality, all of which are, in the wake of Baudelaire and especially of Mallarmé, landmarks of Modernity itself" (Compagnon 1998, 19–20).

As a matter of fact, both Calinescu and Compagnon seem to give a similar answer to the same urgent question, namely on the role of theoretical thought in relation to practical artistic craftsmanship, and on its successive interpretations. According to them, theory legitimizes itself only as a self-reflexive, meta-discourse. "A coherent, consistent theory should agree to question itself and to evaluate its own discourse" (Compagnon 1998, 281).

Overall, Calinescu's work is highly self-reflexive, often examining the author's own position as an intellectual who is himself part of modern European civilization. This explains the author's sharp awareness of the fictitious character of our concepts and of our speculative projects.

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Modernity. Postmodernity. Rereading. Jigsaw puzzle fallacy. Theatre fallacy.
Nominalism. Relativism. Self-reflexivity.

This paper looks at Matei Calinescu's theoretical output, with a view to identifying a common denominator: his keen interest in conceptual tools as hypothetical constructs, as well as in their self-reflective potential. The ways in which Calinescu defines and uses the concepts of *modernity*, *postmodernity* and *rereading* pertain to an area which is always of key importance in intellectual discourses: the relationship between trans-historic, systematic conceptualization, on the one hand, and historical experience on the other. As well as the nominalist appeal of the author, his work also betrays his concern with the pressures *exerted on art by various historical contexts*. Specifically, the Romanian-born theorist boldly asserts that our aesthetic postulates and hypotheses are strongly shaped by the particular intellectual discourse of a specific era rather than by the particular creative strategies of that time.

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