

G. Ibrăileanu's *Spiritul critic în cultura românească* (1909¹) Revisited

Paul E. MICHELSON

The aim of this stimulating, ambitious, and controversial work, was succinctly summarized by the author in the preface to the first edition: to provide "Some considerations on the evolution of the critical spirit in Romanian culture from its first appearance to the definitive formation of the modern Romanian state." The purpose of the study, thus, was not to provide an account of the events which had led to the appearance of a modern Romanian language and literature and the 19th century Romanian state, but to describe the development of a distinctively Romanian critical spirit as a prolegomena to further studies of this problematic era.

The author, at the time a little-published teacher at the Liceul Internat C. Negruzzi in Iași and adjunct faculty member at the University, was widely known as the director and animating force behind the influential cultural review "Viața Românească" which first appeared in Iași in 1906. Filling an intellectual void left in Moldova by the departure for București two decades earlier of Junimea's "Convorbiri Literare" (1885) and by the subsequent demise of "Convorbiri" 's Marxist arch rival "Contemporanul" (1891), the journal also sought to capture the role of paladin of the Romanian peasantry from the ultra-conservative "Sămănătorul". It was the voice of Romanian populism or "poporanism".

The precise meaning of this term, coined by Ibrăileanu's editorial colleague, Constantin Stere, has been confused and controversial for a number of reasons: carelessly assumed similarities between the Romanian concept and Russian populism (*narodnicism*); the growing incoherence of European liberalism, which by the early 20th century had in many places become a "social liberalism" rather distant from the classical 19th century liberalism of Adam Smith and Lord Acton; the disproportionate influence of Romania's chief

¹ G. Ibrăileanu, *Spiritul critic în cultura românească*, Iași, Editura Viața Românească, 1909, 2 + 267 + II p. The first edition followed the appearance of much of the contents as a series of articles in "Viața Românească", beginning with the first number in March 1906. A second edition was published in 1922 with a new preface. The third edition, published without a date but probably 1943, is identical to the second edition. This review uses the third edition and page numbers in the text refer to that version.

Marxist/socialist theoretician and critic, Constantin Dobrogeanu Gherea; and the more or less universally vague content of the word “populism” in political discourse. In ideological terms, the Romanian poporanists advocated a kind of compassionate liberalism whose concern for the lower classes of Romanian society was not merely a political gambit. They were patriots, but not nationalists; traditionalists, but not conservatives. They were European-minded, but also proud of their Romanian cultural heritage. In practical terms, the group was an outgrowth of the adherence to the Romanian National Liberal Party in 1899 of disillusioned young socialists, the so-called *generoșii*.

Poporanism and “Viața Românească”, thus, emerged as a result of frustration with the options on offer for a Romanian culture in transition: the lively, but unproductive conservative denunciations of “forms without foundations”; the sterile and inapplicable clichés of internationalist socialism; the unappealing paternalism of extremist nationalism; and the excessive and the equally unattractive centralist liberalism that promoted blind Westernization.

“Viața Românească”’s 1906 program statement² spelled this out: the scope of the journal was to “work in the field of national culture”. Unlike the socialists, the poporanists didn’t see any contradiction between devotion to national culture and valuing universal culture. Indeed, the only rationale for the existence of a people was that it “contributes something to world culture, giving a distinctive note of its genius”. Contrary to the claims of Romanian National Liberals, a hundred years of Westernization had born little fruit: “Our situation is not only that of backwardness, which would be bad enough; it is abnormal, which is much worse”. And why was this? It was because the Romanian ruling elite had been completely isolated from the masses: the only positive class in the country and the one which, the poporanists argued, preserved “the purest *Romanian soul*”³. As a result, the West assimilated Romanian culture instead of Romanian culture assimilating Western culture. On the other hand, Romanian development was also being hindered by those who had responded to foreign cultures by adopting a hostile or obscurantist attitude.

Romanian national culture, the poporanists argued, would not make its own distinctive contribution to the development of world civilization unless the entire people “participate in the *formation* and the *appreciation* of cultural values – the literary language, literature, forms of life, etc. – and this will not happen until *through culture, expanded political life, and economic advancement*, the peasantry achieves a social value proportional to its numerical, economic, moral, and national value, when we will be one people”. Only then would Romania “be able to have a *national culture*, in harmony with European culture [...] the peasantry being the *means* by which we will arrive at

² *Cătră cetitori*, in VR, vol. 1 (1906), p. 5-7, reprinted in I. Hangiu (ed.), *Presa literară românească. Articole-program de ziare și reviste (1789-1848)*, vol. II, 1901-1948, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p. 129-131.

³ This and other emphases are all in the original texts.

a truly national culture of a European value [...]”. This is where Ibrăileanu’s study came in: Romanian exceptionalism [*specificul național*] was manifested in its unique *spiritul critic* which at the same time constituted its contribution to European culture.

Ibrăileanu made his case primarily in the first three chapters of the book. Chapter I focussed on his investigation of the contacts between the West and Romania, beginning in the 16th century. He candidly recognized that Romanians had contributed almost nothing to Western civilization since the medieval era. He believed this owed in part to Romania’s frontier situation, a circumstance that meant its energies were absorbed in functioning as a barrier against incursions from the East.

Secondly, he contended that the Junimist conservative fears of foreign forms was misplaced, showing that Romanian culture had been influenced by outsiders in at least a dozen significant ways. In fact, “if this migration of culture had not occurred, Romania would have remained completely outside of the sphere of civilization [...] [because] civilization is an accumulation [...]” (4). In addition, it was precisely through dealing with adaptations to Western influences that Romanian culture developed its distinctive *spiritul critic* by the 19th century. Significantly, many of these “moments” occurred primarily in Moldova. The emergence of Romanian historiography with Ureche and the Costins was but one manifestation of the critical thought tradition in Moldova.

The process was continued in the 18th century, Ibrăileanu argued, by the critical work of the Transylvanian School, facilitated in part by the union in 1698-1699 of part of the Romanian Orthodox Church west of the Carpathians with the Western (Catholic) Church. Meanwhile, cultural life in Muntenia continued to stagnate morally and nationally under Greek influence.

Chapter II moved on to the 19th century. The influence of the Transylvanian school, Ibrăileanu wrote, became vitiated because of Germanic influences and because of the rise of obsessive Latinism which began to corrupt the Romanian language. However, its emissaries (Lazăr, Bărnuțiu, and others) played important cultural and educational roles in the Danubian principalities. At the same time in Muntenia, French revolutionary political ideas predominated politically to the detriment of cultural development owing to a utilitarian ethos and the “lack of a cultural atmosphere”. In Moldova, on the other hand, the key task of “adapting Western culture to the Romanian spirit, to adapt the forms of Western thought” to Romanian civilization was carried out. “Thus it was that in Muntenia one found a legion of 1848ers, while in Moldova one found a legion of critical spirits and literary lights” (10-11).

Why this difference between Muntenia and Moldova, Ibrăileanu asked? Because at “the start of the 19th century, Moldova *already had a cultural tradition*”, one less infected by Latinism and what Mihail Kogălniceanu called “Romanomania” (12-13). In addition, though Moldova was impacted by French ideas, these were primarily literary and cultural, not social and political as in

Muntenia. The result, on the one hand, in the acid view of Vasile Alecsandri, was that Muntenia was afflicted by politics “a disease which dried up the sources of imagination and common sense in București [...] the capital of dishonest dealings”, and, on the other hand, according to Kogălniceanu, Moldova was where “intelligence gave much more signs of life” (17).

In Chapter III, Ibrăileanu expanded on the argument that Western influences were necessary to the development of Romanian language, literature, and the modern Romanian state. “It was not only unavoidable but also necessary that the Romanian countries got rid of its Turco-Fanariot garb and organized itself in a European fashion; that Romanians would enrich their language with new words corresponding to newly introduced things and ideas; that in the place of Fanariot customs European ways would be introduced; that Romanians would produce their own cultivated literature [...]. But the question was ‘How’?” What was essential were the choices to be made and the method in which these would be deployed. Culturally, “this was the work of the Moldovan critical school of the 19th century” (20-21).

From Kogălniceanu (whose “Dacia Literară” marked the beginning of the age of the *spiritul critic*, from 1840 to the 1880s) and Alecu Russo (“the most theoretical mind of this critical school”) to Titu Maiorescu and Junimea, the importance of the critical approach to culture was understood throughout Moldova. If Muntenia focussed on the “assimilation of political forms, Moldova had the merit of presiding for forty years, from 1840 to 1880, over the assimilation of culture in all its other forms” (25-26). Ironically, Ibrăileanu noted, because of their critical approach, the Moldovans were often disparaged as provincialist and eclectic, but Kogălniceanu and Russo & Co. gave as good as they got and more.

Ibrăileanu went on to enumerate several factors that helped account for Moldovan-Muntenian differences: the lack of a revolution-minded middle class in Moldova (which explained why the Moldovan 1848 was much more anemic, and why liberalism in Moldova was dominated by moderates such as Kogălniceanu and Cuza); greater geographical linkages in the 18th and 19th centuries between Muntenia and Transylvania; the role of Gh. Lazăr in Muntenian education; a traditionally middle-of-the-road/conservative – even skeptical – temperament in Moldova coupled with a traditional respect for tradition (qua Alecu Russo); and a deeper, bookish, Moldovan upper class Orthodox scholasticism going back to Polish-Slavonic and historiographical influences. Because of this, Ibrăileanu concluded, “Moldova gave Romanians a culture, or more specifically, the possibility of a culture, through this *spirit critic* [...]. The history of Moldovan culture in the 19th century is especially the history of this *spirit critic* applied to the introduction of foreign cultures, that is to the process of the regeneration of the Romanian spirit. It is [...] the history of the struggle against false and unbalanced tendencies from Muntenia and Transylvania” (41-42).

In Chapters IV through X, Ibrăileanu explored the evolution of the *spirit critic* in a series of case studies: G. Asaki, presented as a contradictory figure embodying reactionary, conservative, and critical aspects; the role of Maiorescu and Junimea in the development of the Moldovan critical spirit, which he thought was inferior to Kogălniceanu and Russo, but better than nothing after 1866; Costache Negruzzi – another incongruous figure – viewed as a Junimist before Junimism, with a distaste for revolution, given to using the same cold, sarcastic tone, and not particularly interested in the peasantry; Vasile Alecsandri, labeled as a 1848er Junimist, not very ideological and who was contradictorily both a reformer and a conservative; Eminescu, described as part of the critical spirit, especially in his contempt for Muntenian culture and politics, and an advocate of the lower classes especially the *răzeși*, but a reactionary social utopian; and the *spiritul critic* contributions of Gherea and the Socialists, which were useful as criticism but useless otherwise since their “solution” was a revolutionary proletarian utopian social program for a country without a proletariat.

This was followed by two chapters dealing with the *spiritul critic* in Muntenia, namely with Alexandru Odobescu and Caragiale. Chapter XI began with an admission by Ibrăileanu that not all Muntenian writers were pragmatic innovators and revolutionaries. That this concession might be fatal to his thesis did not seem to occur to the author. He thought that Odobescu would have been like Alecsandri if he had lived in Moldova, *e.g.* a Francophile but not in the Brătianu – Rosetti sense. Odobescu seems to have been included primarily because Ibrăileanu saw him as a successful blend of two apparently incompatible elements, a *spiritul critic* and 1848ism.

Chapter XII dealt with Caragiale, another Muntenian critical spirit whose mainly satirical work shaded pretty rapidly to social extremes. Ibrăileanu's rationale for including him was three-fold. First, he was clearly the most outspoken and memorable cultural critic in Romania following Romanian independence in 1877; secondly, he was a sometime contributor to “Convorbiri Literare”; and, thirdly, he was essential to illustrating Ibrăileanu's vision of a București takeover of a Romanian culture going into full-scale decline as the Moldovan spirit was quenched. Caragiale's scathing criticism of radical, revolutionary, pragmatic, parvenu Muntenian “civilization” was summarized in *O noapte furtunoasă* (1878) when Jupân Dumitrache declared in the final scene “E d'ai noștri”. The end result was the society described in *O scrisoare pierdută* (1884), as a country transformed into one gigantic *mahala* in the most pejorative sense of the word. After 1884, revolutionary 1848ism disappeared and Caragiale's task was to discuss its pernicious effects, particularly in his *Momente* (1901). Though Ibrăileanu thought Caragiale's critique was somewhat excessive, the dire prospects facing Romanian culture called for no less. Indeed, in the preface to the second edition of this work, Ibrăileanu noted that “from the war onward, I have become more and more convinced that this man saw better

than anyone our social reality in the 19th century”, and devoted thereafter a considerable amount of attention to Caragiale’s work.

The book closed with Ch. XIII, which summarized the argument and deserves extensive quotation here: “In the 19th century, history confronted Romanians with the following problem: Would Romania remain an oriental, semi-asiatic country, or would it enter into the ranks of European peoples, part of European culture?” (260) The question was whether this could be done with the requisite perceptiveness. “The blind imitators of Western culture and those who were only refractory critics of all steps toward renewal were fatally mistaken. They did not have the necessary attitude [...]. That is why I have forcefully accentuated the merit of the Moldovan critical school, outstandingly represented by the emblematic figure of Mihail Kogălniceanu [...]. As long as this organizer of modern Romania was the one influencing all social phenomena with his ideas – until 1866 – the transforming spirit and the *spiritual critic* worked together in a happy synthesis [...]. After that, these two tendencies separated [...]. This rupture was a disaster for Romanian contemporary history.” (265-266) Not surprisingly, this synthesis sounded a lot like poporanism.

The resultant dilemma for Romanian culture was that “Muntenian Liberalism in its extreme form remains as the representative of the transforming spirit [and] Moldovan Junimism remains as the negative representative the *spiritual critic* [...]. The one operates without the necessary discernment; the other ceaselessly denies the efficacy of the entire work of the former. The one operates without a defined plan; the other wants to stand pat. However, [a civilization] cannot stand pat, cannot possibly ever stand pat; and since criticism has become only anticipative and purely negative, the introduction of Western culture now lacks the essential assistance of the *spiritual critic*. Junimea wants us to stand pat, or even to step back a bit. Eminescu wants us to go back. The socialists want us to leap who knows where into the unknown” (265-266).

“I am sure,” Ibrăileanu concluded somewhat pessimistically, “that if the transforming spirit and the *spiritual critic* could be brought together as before [...]. our country would have today have a different appearance. But things happened otherwise. It seems that that was how things were supposed to be [...].” (266-267).

Ibrăileanu’s account of the genesis and impact of the Moldovan *spiritual critic* has many attractions. It sheds a good deal of light on the uneven and knotty evolution of Romanian civilization in the 19th and 20th centuries. The “Blaj is Transylvania, Iași is Moldova, but București is not Muntenia but Romania” paradigm (11) is at least partially helpful in looking at this. The author correctly highlights the formative and salutary role of Moldovans in key aspects of the linguistic, literary, and even political development of modern Romania. And he makes a reasonable case for both the importance of the *spiritual critic* for Romanian civilization and as a potential contribution to European civilization. At the same time, he is unsparing of purely negative criticism.

The author does have a tendency to imply that there was something genetic behind Moldovan uniqueness, but as an argument for the importance of milieu, the book is at least partially successful. Athens, medieval Paris, Oxford, and Venice provided milieus and an ethos which fostered cultural development far out of proportion to their numbers. The modern study of mentalities is also relevant here. His contention that Iași was superior to București culturally in these senses until the late 19th century is sound. And, certainly, București's domination of Romanian life in nearly all aspects since then has been unhealthy or at least counterproductive.

Ibrăileanu was not, however, a provincial sectarian. He believed that both the Moldovan and the Muntenian approaches were essential to Romanian development, but needed to be utilized with prudence. Innovation, imitation, and criticism were all necessary ingredients in the formation of Romanian culture, but formulaic applications had to be avoided.

A partial weakness of this study is that while Ibrăileanu devoted separate chapters to a number of writers, his two heroes – Kogălniceanu and Alecu Russo – though cited throughout the book, are not discussed systematically enough and, apart from the first three chapters, show up primarily as positive counter-points to others. For example, Maiorescu repeatedly comes off rather badly when compared to Russo. It would have been useful if analyses similar to that given to Eminescu or Caragiale had been included for Kogălniceanu and especially for the lesser known Russo, who Ibrăileanu described as “more critical than all other critics put together and in more directions than all the others” (66-67).

One can also admire the effort made by Ibrăileanu and the poporanists to break out of the web of false dichotomies and dilemmas presented by the principal Romanian schools of social thought in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the author's attempt to interweave his view of the evolution of Romanian literary history with the *spiritul critic* theme is not entirely successful. And one wonders if “Viața Românească” presented a realistic choice: how likely was it that peasants would be interested in or inspired by a literary and cultural journal?

Ibrăileanu should get credit for not being as dogmatic as Gherea or Maiorescu, but his argument tends toward the anecdotal and impressionistic, and is methodologically flawed. In the end, his approach is hard to falsify. Exceptions to the rule, such as Odobescu and Caragiale, are resolved by simply making them honorary Moldovans; too many exceptions tend to undermine his case, but at least he didn't deal with these by the usual expedient of ignoring them. And it must be stressed that he saw this study as a introduction to further, deeper studies.

Spiritul critic în cultura românească made a major contribution to the debate over the evolution of Romanian culture and civilization, a debate that continues to the present. In the end, it was only partially successful in sustaining

its arguments, but it certainly touched nerves across the spectrum, from Gherea's *Neoiobăgia* (1910), to Lovinescu's *Istoria civilizației române moderne* (1924-1925) to Zeletin's *Burghezia română și rolul lui istoric* (1925) and beyond. Surely setting in motion such a debate was significant and important. One can wonder how different and more convincing his book would have been if Ibrăileanu had written it toward the end of his career instead of near the beginning, or if he had extensively revised the second edition of 1923. What if?

Ibrăileanu and "Viața Românească" 's star rose rapidly. By 1912, he had been named Professor of Modern Romanian Literature at the University of Iași; while the political leader of the poporanists and founding director of "Viața Românească", Constantin Stere, served as chief of the National Liberal organization in Iași from 1906 and was elected Rector of the University of Iași in 1913. Their influence was strengthened by the chance that in 1907 a massive peasant revolt spread like lightning across the Romanian Kingdom, starting in Moldova and revealing the deplorable and illusory state of Romanian political arrangements in a way that largely supported the poporanists' arguments.

However, the approach of the World War dimmed these prospects since a substantial number of "Viața Românească" 's staff and contributors (especially Stere, especially Moldovans) were compromised by their perceived Germanophilism, or perhaps, more accurately put, their intense, almost compulsive Russophobia. They strongly supported an Austro-German alliance when the war broke out so that territories annexed by the Tsarist Empire from the medieval Principality of Moldova could be reclaimed. This did not play out well, particularly when Romania joined the Entente in 1916. Politically, though not culturally, "Viața Românească" was dead; and, in 1930, it, too, moved to București.

And what of the *spiritul critic* today? How much remains after more than a century of the stultifying effects of Romanian centralism and integral nationalism, strengthened and fostered by the creation of Greater Romania in 1918, accelerated by the age of tyrannies and World War II, and culminated in the Communist takeover following the war? It would be desirable to see what might be salvaged from the *spiritul critic* tradition by encouraging exploration of the unique role that could be played in the process of Romanian renewal by the rich regional traditions of modern Romania. In the end, it seems clear that a revived *spiritul critic* might release the very energies that Romania needs to break discerningly with negative elements of its past and move on to make its contributions to European civilization.

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(Abstract)

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The article re-reviews and assesses G. Ibrăileanu's study of the appearance, evolution, and importance of the *spiritul critic* in Romanian civilization which stirred wide spread discussion and debate when it first appeared just before World War I. Ibrăileanu's work contended that this *spiritul critic* – which first appeared in Moldova – had been responsible for the essential shape of the modern Romanian language, literature, and state, but had been subordinated and then perverted in the late 19th century by political and cultural centralization in București. Frustrated with the impasse of Romanian politics and culture around the turn of the century, Ibrăileanu and his Poporanist colleagues argued that what Romania urgently needed was a return to Europeanization based on a synthesis of the Muntenian transforming spirit and the Moldovan *spiritul critic*, a healthy regionalism coupled with a genuine democratization of Romania society.