

kind of debunking, prioritizing a history of long-lasting structures, which promote a potentially less spectacular evolution, yet produce more durable effects than revolutionary outbursts and battlefield clashes.



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**Gruparea de la “Viața românească”:
O literatură a spațiului și comunității**

(The group from “Viața românească”:
A literature of space and community)

Foreword by ANTONIO PATRAȘ

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THE BOOK deals with the literary circle that coalesced around the journal *Viața românească*, one of the most important periodicals in Romanian cultural history. Its life extends from 1906 until the present, with interruptions from 1916 to 1920 and from 1940 to 1944. Initially based in Iași, it moved to Bucharest in 1930. The focus here is on the first period, 1906–1930. It belongs to the category of journals founded by a literary circle. In its classical expression, exemplified by the *Cénacle de l’Arsenal* of Charles Nodier, this form of socializing around literature differs from the *salon*, being defined by a more informal atmosphere. The Romanian circles belonging to this category include Sburătorul,¹ Junimea, and Literatorul.

Some research has already been dedicated to the circle around *Viața românească* before 1989. These studies placed undue stress on populist ideas to conform with the socialist-realist agenda of the time² and the need to be accepted by the cen-

sorship.³ Post-communist scholarship on the activities of the editorial team of *Viața românească* has focused on group identity and on the importance of marginality and the Moldavian identity. The phenomenon of literature on the margins has been analyzed remarkably well by Anthony Glinoe and Vincent Laisney in their elaborate study *L’Âge des cénacles: Confraternités littéraires et artistiques au XIX^e siècle* (2013).

The monograph of Maricica Munteanu, based on her Ph.D. thesis, provides a significant addition to the study of this phenomenon. An outstanding contribution is her ability to test certain concepts expressed in literary criticism, art history and the history of ideas by applying them to the circle around *Viața românească*. She demonstrates that some of these theories (such as the ideas of Bertrand Westphal and of Robert T. Tally Jr.) can be applied nicely, whereas others, such as the concepts developed by Derek Gregory, are only partially useful. She also demonstrates that the ideas on the rise, decline and demise of literary circles developed by Glinoe and Laisney do not apply to *Viața românească*. The circle became institutionalized, its members became well-known, some were even honored with memberships in the Romanian Academy, yet the circle lived on.

Munteanu’s study consists of two parts: “Inventarea moldovenismului” (The invention of ‘Moldavianness’⁴) and “Cenacul ‘Viața românească’” (The circle around *Viața românească*). Each part contains five chapters, numbered from one to five. This perfectly symmetric structure is no coincidence. It aids the fulfilment of the author’s desire to suggest that there is a close connection between a literary circle and its space, its medium (p. 19).⁵

The first chapter analyses, with the aid of key concepts from Soja's thirdspace theory and heterotopy as developed by Foucault, the polarization created by writers at *Viața românească* between a Center (Bucharest)—modern, vulgar, mercenary, full of energy, but spiritually dead, economically prosperous, but spiritually poor (pp. 35–38)—and a Periphery (Iași)—proud of its important personalities, nostalgic for its glorious past, patriarchal and conservative, in decline, but with a well-established set of values (pp. 38–50). This presentation is nostalgic and illusory. It is however not uncommon as it was also advocated by other circles of 'peripheric' origins, such as Junimea. After it moved to the 'Center' (Bucharest), its members were unable to adapt, and it lost, in the words of Z. Ornea, "its spirit as a literary circle."⁶ The second chapter examines how the members of the circle provided resistance against the pressure of the Center. One of their strategies was the application of a "radical provincialism," in which the changes coming from the Center were countered by an oppressive conservatism, radically rejecting everything new. The next chapter explores how the intellectuals who did not wish to adapt to the expectations of modernity found a refuge in the marketplaces in Moldavia at the end of the nineteenth century (pp. 70–77). The result is a space comparable with a museum, at the same time admired and despised.

Chapter four deals with another way in which the perceived differences from the Center were enhanced: by storytelling, creating an "other space," using images such as a road, ruins, or hunting (pp. 101–109). Munteanu underlines the importance of space in these identity-forming stories. The fictionalization includes both heroic and everyday aspects (pp. 123–131). In my

opinion, the novel *În preajma revoluției* (In the eve of the revolution) by Constantin Stere (a Bildungsroman, in eight volumes) is relevant in this context. In it the author invents, in an ironic way, characters inspired by fictive places and events. It surprises me that Munteanu largely ignores the work of Stere, who, in spite of his origins in Bessarabia (the eastern part of Moldavia), has been an important influence on the circle around *Viața românească*.

The fifth chapter deals with the view of Moldavian authors that authentic national literature could only develop once serfdom had been abolished, the peasants emancipated and the unification of the nation state completed. Although serfdom had been abolished with the Rural Law of 1864, and peasants received the right to own properties, the situation of peasants in Romania remained insecure. They, the majority of the population, did not have political rights. One of the core motivations of the circle around *Viața românească* was the desire to cause the "withdrawal of the borders of marginality" (p. 159) via the central role they allocated to Moldavia in the creation of a national identity and national culture, characterized by its conservatism and critical spirit.

This relationship between the environment (the space) and the circle around *Viața românească* receives even more attention in the second part of the book. For the members of the circle, the space was less important than the fact that they were together. They, mostly lone wolves, were brought together by their preference for simplicity and austere living conditions. In spite of their differences, they felt comfortable within the circle (pp. 167–174). They even started to develop common habits and "specific ways of doing the same thing" (p. 196). This phenomenon can

often be seen within such circles, for example in the case of Sburătorul, the circle led by E. Lovinescu.

G. Ibrăileanu (1871–1936) was especially important for the life of the circle around *Viața românească*. He hosted them in his house, which was a space “dedicated specially to living in a community” (p. 199). Reflecting the chaos which characterized the host, the messy yard and the overflowing library expressed his way of life. In the third chapter of the second part, Maricica Munteanu draws attention to the interactions between personal and literary life, as the meetings of the circle coordinated with the lifestyle of its host (pp. 214–230).

Chapter four, in its second part, discusses several rituals developed by the circle in more detail. The author explains that, in addition to the literary conversations which formed the basis of all such circles, there were two defining activities which made the circle around *Viața românească* different from other groups: excursions and hunting parties. Maricica Munteanu explains how excursions, undertaken in their beloved Moldavia, functioned as a protest against modernity (pp. 264–290). Hunting served the purpose of what is now called team building, it strengthened the bonds between the members of the group. The difficulties they went through together and their shared stories led to a loosening of hierarchic structures and the development of the image of the writer-hunter. It is surprising that the author does not engage with recent research on constructions of masculinity in this context. She does mention that hunting might have functioned as a “corrective” to the perceived “feminine” character of Ibrăileanu. In her work on Sburătorul, Ligia Tudurachi contrasts the two literary

circles exactly in respect to the gender balance, or lack thereof, of their participants. She mentioned that while Sburătorul was (especially for the time) well attended by women, the meetings of *Viața românească* were almost exclusively masculine affairs, with some notable exceptions of occasional female participants, such as Sofia Nădejde.

In the last chapter the author makes the very relevant observation that the image a group presents of itself differs from its real portrait. The circle around *Viața românească* cultivated a common memory, a group identity, and a shared irony, a markedly different sense of humor than that expressed by the members of Junimea (pp. 328–331). The public image as presented by its members, of a circle characterized by a lack of hierarchy, where anybody who was competent was able to publish their work, was in reality somewhat limited. However, the authority of the leader was much more moderate than in other circles. For example, Lovinescu exercised an almost tyrannic authority over “his” circle, Sburătorul. Maricica Munteanu concludes that, in spite of the emphasis placed on the native region of its members, on conservatism and the specific view on the modern Romanian nation state, the provincial character of the writers around *Viața românească* was not as defining as has previously been understood. It was rather part of an image, the social-cultural ideology presented by the journal (pp. 396–402).

Altogether it can be concluded that the book represents a real contribution to the study of the history of literary circles in Romania. The study covers a lot of ground and brings together many ideas that seem, at first glance, somewhat unconnected. On further thought, the main ideas form

in fact a well-connected central topic: the connection between community and space in the 19th century. Maricica Munteanu has developed an innovative approach which is waiting to be tested when applied to other groups and contexts.



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Notes

1. This group has been studied in detail by Ligia Tudurachi, “Grup Sburător”: *Trăitul și scrisul împreună în cenaclul lui E. Lovinescu* (Timișoara: Editura Universității de Vest, 2019).
2. For example, D. Micu, *Poporanismul și “Viața românească”* (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1961).
3. Which is evident in the case of Mihail Sevastos, *Amintiri de la Viața românească*, orig. published in 1956, revised in 1966. I have consulted the reprint Iași: Polirom, 2015.
4. In translating this review, we have opted for this calque, because a more natural English expression, such as Moldavian identity, does not cover the meaning sufficiently well. This “Moldavianness” was an elitist notion, fed by the Moldavian feelings of superiority vis-à-vis the “Romanian Land” (internationally better known as Wallachia), with which a union was formed in 1859. Moldavian intellectuals associating with this concept were not separatists. They fully supported the union (some even fought for it), but they did not want to be dominated by Wallachia. They were proud of their distinct, Moldavian identity.
5. “O perspectivă dedublată asupra relației dintre un grup literar și spațiu,” literally: a dual perspective on the relation between a literary group and space.
6. Z. Ornea, *Junimea și junimismul* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1978), 93.

Dr. JÖRG BIBER

Aventurile lui Paul Biber, mecanic de precizie pe aerodromul Sânanndrei de lângă Timișoara: Nume de cod “Adebar” (1915 și 1916)

(The adventures of Paul Biber, a precision mechanic at the Sânanndrei airfield near Timișoara. Code name “Adebar,” 1915 and 1916)

Edited by RUDOLF GRÄF, translated from German by RALUCA NELEPCU

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ELEVEN DECADES after the outbreak of the First World War, or the Great War, as the people of that time called it, there are still many unknowns about this topic. Therefore, Jörg Biber wrote a book about the adventures of his father, Paul Biber (1891–1957), a soldier in the German Imperial Army during the First World War, deployed as a precision mechanic for airships, attending to the zeppelins stationed at the military base at Sânanndrei, near Timișoara, between 1915 and 1916. Before going into the details of the volume’s structure, it must be specified that it is a heavy book, literally, albeit not voluminous, due to the quality paper used for printing, allowing for the inclusion of a significant number of photographs and accompanying notes from soldier Paul Biber’s war album.

The Foreword and the Introduction (pp. 23–49) provide general information on the evolution of the First World War in the Balkan area, but also on the political-historical context that allowed the establishment of an airship airfield at Sânanndrei, a village near Timișoara.