

Reminiscence: CMI the Mentor

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No one else had captivated and so irrevocably dominated my formative years at the University of Bucharest in the early 1990s more than Cornel Mihai Ionescu, a much beloved lecturer in comparative literature, well known, among other things, for his inimitable hieratic demeanor and sartorial elegance. In the chaos that followed the insurrection of the ‘untainted’ faculty in the spring of 1990, the Department of Philosophy embraced change and opened its doors to a few brave souls bent on revamping its antiquated curriculum. Amidst student protests, witch-hunts and the customary name-calling, a parade of new and rather unlikely characters wound up in the not-so-hallowed halls of the old Faculty of Law Palace on Kogalniceanu Boulevard.

The first to arrive, Andrei Plesu, Sorin Vieru and Gabriel Liiceanu, had already become household names for my generation. Perhaps naïvely, we had been raised to believe in the redemptive power of high culture epitomized by the Patinis Circle. A few interlopers will shortly follow: Radu Toma, a specialist in French Post-Structuralism, would offer a course on “Modernism and Postmodernism” to the annoyance of those who, like Ilie Parvu (having just joined the Chair of Theoretical Philosophy), were bent on drawing sharp lines between what they thought (vaunting a circa 1980s Anglophone attitude) should count as philosophy proper and everything else. “Oriental Philosophy” would now be taught, at Plesu’s suggestions, by someone (Radu Bercea) without a PhD or any sort of formal training in philosophy. Vasile Dem Zamfirescu, a graduate of the Department of Philosophy at the height of the 1960s social revolution, would offer something that a few months earlier had been inconceivable: a course on “Philosophical Psychoanalysis.” But it is Cornel Mihai Ionescu who would make the most eccentric of all contributions to revamping our old, stodgy curriculum: a course on “Baroque Philosophy.” To us, budding revolutionaries (who had begun our student careers under the old regime and would soon graduate under the new), these were rousing times. Here we were: the first generation to break free from the grip of a failed ideology, ready to embrace the intellectual and social challenges of a new era. Or so we thought at the time.

I will never forget those intimate, cigarette smoke-filled classrooms populated by only a handful of the most dedicated students in which CMI (as he was then, and is still, fondly known), employing at once the most sobering analyticity and lurid rhetorical artifice, would discourse about such varied topics as Caravaggio’s baroque aesthetic and the allegorism of Baltasar Gracián’s *Criticón*. In the customary stylized fashion that stood for his method, CMI would select some passage, theme or illustration and, by exploring all its surface meanings, seamlessly weave a web of interstitial discourse around it, cleaving to its

context but never so closely as to imperil the work’s paradoxical stance.

With his fastidious intellect, keen Nietzschean perspectivism, and beautifully wry sense of humor, CMI resembled a curator of ideas (and ideal forms), always mindful of their infinite plasticity and chiaroscuro effect. To my (and many of my colleagues’) delight he also lacked the dry didacticism that had survived, nay thrived, in a generation of Romanian academics caught in that fateful time warp of history. In CMI I saw the aesthete that Kierkegaard so despised, not for his presumably irredeemable surrender to intellectual fashion (and flourish), but for having so effortlessly embodied that apotheosis of excess and masked virility that defines aristocratic intellectuals. Reading Derrida’s *La pharmacie de Platon* and Heidegger’s *Unterwegs zur Sprache* with CMI meant traversing vast horizons of thought—both temporally and culturally—in what I can only describe as a rather intense graduate-level seminar. As we apprenticed to the craft of rhetorical and hermeneutical exegesis, we learned to tease out the layered nature of a writing (*écriture*) that is ultimately only given to us as palimpsest.



Oftentimes the spell of the lecture hall would not be broken until the late hours of evening, long after CMI had populated our Bacchic reveries with tales of the sublime and the grotesque (yes, a few of us did join him for drinks after class at the Grand Hotel du Boulevard and various other locales in a Bucharest that was fast catching up to its bohemian past).

A truly subtle and accomplished aesthete, philosopher, and homme de lettres, CMI undoubtedly would have been a major presence on the European intellectual stage had he come of age on the happier side of the Iron Curtain. Indeed, as I would learn later on, his *Palimpseste* (1979) had foreshadowed the type of critical literary theory (with deep roots in the poetics of the Baroque era) that would gain widespread currency after the publication of Gerard Genette’s similarly titled volume in Paris in 1982. That many would-be luminaries in CMI’s generation suffered the same fate of marginalization and censorship that befell whatever had been left of the Eastern European intellectual elites is a truism. But it is most poignantly obvious to those of us, his students and disciples, who have had the good fortune to pursue our intellectual passions in the open societies of the West.

When immersion into Indian and Buddhist philosophy turned my gaze eastward to the Orient, CMI intervened to avert it, if only briefly, to the cultural heartlands of Latium and Gaul, to Dante and Pascal. That averting would prove crucial during my long passage to India, and eventually during my even longer passage to Australia. Now, a generation later, having traversed time and again those invisible boundaries that circumscribe culture to geography and intellectual ambition to circumstance, I still look upon that mentoring relationship with fondness, nostalgia, and a little awe.

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