

Iulian BOCAI, *Filologii. Instituționalizarea studiului literar în Europa* [*The Philologists. The Institutionalisation of Literary Study in Europe*], Tracus Arte, 2020, ISBN 978-606-023-224-7, 384 p.

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Iulian Bocai's *The Philologists. The Institutionalisation of Literary Study in Europe* [*Filologii. Instituționalizarea studiului literar în Europa*] initiates a debate on the status, objectives and faults of modern literary study by proposing an exhaustive re-examination of the last three decades not through a strictly literarily oriented view, but by a historically formatted approach meant to bring out the complex and intricate nuances of the relationship between institutionalised philological curricula and politics, ideology, social structures, and widely circulated ideas and philosophies on education. As the book follows the emergence of literary studies in universities from the English, French and German educational systems – which stand as a rather likely area of research in the undertaking of the subject – it also focuses on the local Romanian case of literary studies. This, I believe, represents the central innovative aspect of Bocai's work, as no other comprehensive research on the matter can be found at this time.

Moreover, *The Philologists* formulates a sort of meta-discourse that subtly, yet purposely, traces some lines between the institutional roots of the field and its present state: the book's intentions do not just reside in clarifying the history of the domain in its European form, but also in practicing a process of distancing the reader from their (probable) subjective experience with literary studies or with a romanticised version of them, thus imposing an objective and fairly critical approach. The idea of deconstructing the university as *institution* and, more predominantly, the school as *institution* in general has circulated for a long time, and, along with it, a call for alternative and *modern* educational systems. For example, Ivan Illich in his *Deschooling Society* (1970) and Everett Reimer's *School Is Dead* (1971) work hand in hand in order to present the inability of traditional schooling to satisfy the needs of the modern student and, additionally, they both

agree that the cause of this ruin of the system must be tied to the relations between school and state, between school and ideology, thus implying the ever-criticised lack of autonomy of educational institutions. *The Philologists* does not explicitly fall in the discussion started by voices such as Illich's and Reimer's during the late twentieth century, but its affiliation with it cannot be overlooked.

As opposed to solely engaging in a commentary on the contemporary era of literary studies, the book takes many steps back in time in order to understand the roots of the field and, inherently, the faults that have been following it ever since its emergence in university curricula. Bocai makes a statement out of highlighting disputes and clashes between multiple ideas and beliefs on education in order to make it clear that the *usefulness* and *trustworthiness* of the institutionalised pedagogic process was always questioned. Of course, the focus being on literary studies, this problem is even further perceived and put on trial over many years and in a multitude of terms: the author himself asks in the beginning of the book what *thoroughness* ("temeinicie") might mean in the area of literary studies (10) and makes this idea one of the central points of the text. With this label of a *shaky* sort of science and field of research put on the study of literature, and with a tendency for factually dismantling *popular* history, *The Philologists'* subject and methodology place it within the debate on the status of education today, even though it does not specifically point to contemporaneity.

Moving away from the issue of deconstructing education as an *institutional* structure, the meta-discourse on the literary world practiced by Bocai ties the volume to yet another much circulated approach. In this sense, the most predictable example one can offer is the 1999 *The World Republic of Letters*: Pascale Casanova follows the evolution of literature by pinpointing crucial intersections between cultural spaces through literature and through literary trends and by marking fundamental contextual aspects that frame the global production of texts. Casanova's style of work establishes a critical method that tries to perceive literature as a cultural object and to identify and clarify the external factors that make or break a certain text and its influence. Even though it only focuses on four geographical spaces, *The Philologists* comes close to the model of *The World Republic of Letters* through acknowledging the factual and historical extra-textual mode of analysis as a must in thoroughly understanding the complexities of the literary field. Bocai's book goes even further than Casanova's in

the direction of observing and exposing the ways in which literature is talked about, as it is not “a history of literary disciplines in their theoretical details” (13), but an inquiry into the misconceptions, the reluctance, the social and institutional impediments that the field has encountered in the European university throughout three centuries.

Connecting the last two points I made, it can be said that *The Philologists* intentionally plays out a demystification of the history of literary study, thus annulling any trace of glamorisation or idealisation that might still prevail on the image of the field as it *used to be*. The objective and balanced lens Bocai assumes in his work enables the discussion of several philosophies and ideas on education and on study of letters, as the book follows the process of institutionalisation of the subject, from the direct negation of a need for a new additional subject that focuses on national literatures (and not so much on the rigorous study of Latin and the classics) up until the nineteenth century. The multi-faceted and intricate history of clashes of ideas that Bocai emphasizes in order to comprehensibly depict the evolution of literary study in Western Europe and in Romania show that a *golden age* type of period cannot be identified. Furthermore, as such exchanges occur and resurface with a high frequency even in the centuries the research focuses on, the problem of legitimacy remains the shadow that always follows the representations of the study of letters from Enlightenment to Modernity, as the book makes very clear while also discussing the everlasting questioning of the scientific nature of this research and knowledge area (especially when compared with natural sciences).

*The Philologists* dedicates its first chapters to outlining the contexts which predate the introduction of literary study in European universities, and focuses on the introduction of humanism in the educational systems in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as well as on the transition from a church centralised education to education being funded and organised in different forms by the state in later times and on the ideas surrounding the study of literature at the end of the Enlightenment and the beginning of Modernity. From this initial point onwards, the author singles out three main areas of tension that higher education institutions (unfortunately) maintains and which hinder the emergence of literary study in the standardized higher education network.

The first of these three can be easily recognised in the relation between higher education and the church; irrespective of its religion, the institution of the church as an educator formatted the academic system based on its dogmas and beliefs. This aspect of the problem can be further discussed and commented – Bocai’s book does this quite well by selecting evocative events and examples that convey the ways in which the religious agenda limited the act of learning – but the decisive perspective that the text focuses on is the censorship of the classic works that were studied and the fact that philology mostly meant rigorously learning Latin in order to understand clerical texts and their holy message.

Once universities start being administrated by the state, the possibility of catching a glimpse of more freedom of thought arises, but censorship is once again the focal point, as religious beliefs and ideologies are the main factors that shape the curricula. Moreover, *The Philologists* shines light on the states’ interests of perceiving and subtly transforming the higher education system into a centre of refining the future people in power; with this political agenda in mind, philology was rather seen as a means of enriching individuals’ capacity of sweet talking the powerful, Bocai comments.

The last central aspect that hampers the institutionalisation of literary studies in the Western systems, as illustrated by *The Philologists*, is the relationship the institution of university has with researchers and with literature itself. First of all, for a long time, new discoveries, experiments, research and innovative writings were associated with writers, philosophers and scientists practicing outside the university, its professors’ status and general image being one of intellectual mediocracy. Due to a lack of freedom of speech and transparency in universities, not many were attracted by the prospect of teaching in the higher education system (in this sense, the book brings up the example of Spinoza’s several refusals of such opportunities). Secondly, with the rise of literacy and the popularisation of contemporary authors, as well as with the multitude of books being published in the eighteenth century, the scholastic systems are overpowered and, as the author puts it, this phenomenon “threatens The Republic of Letters from within with the shattering of what Chad Wellmon calls the old ‘empire of erudition’” (47).

These themes represent some of the foundations of the next chapters, as they expand and amplify over time and in different forms. Structure-wise, these

chapters generally tackle the West European models and their history in the first place, in order to prepare the reader for the Romanian case. Reforms of these systems, the introduction of literary criticism and history in the curricula, the initial methodologies of the study of literature are exhaustively described and analysed; the differences between the local educational situation and the German, French and English ones are quite clear, hence the unevenness of the level of discussion on the two geographical spaces and the attention for the Romanian intellectuals' efforts of pushing higher education in line with Western universities. Unfortunately, Bocai's endeavour catches Romanian philological study and its institutionalisation only in their first years. Thus, acquiring a full sense of the field's evolution in the national academic structures is not fully possible. Even so, organisation of data and cultural artifacts related to the first Romanian attempts at literary study over three centuries (without the usual demarcation and divisions between generations of intellectuals) sets the tone for further research in this comprehensive manner.

To conclude, *The Philologists* engages in a historical and cultural approach to literary study in order to recover the contextual ideological, political, social, and religious aspects that formatted the emergence and later development of the field in its institutionalised version. Apart from revisiting the history of literary higher education, the book links the events and ideas from the four countries it focuses on, thus creating a network of cultural influences and academic practices throughout Europe, while also offering a foundation for the debate on the *usefulness* and scientific nature of literary study. Written in an unambiguous style, Iulian Bocai's work represents broad research on the meta-discourses surrounding literature and their process of establishing a new domain of study in four European institutionalised schooling systems, the Romanian case standing as the most unique area of review of them all, due to the lack of prior similar studies.