

PORTRAIT OF A HISTORIAN  
UNDER THE SIGN OF THE PORTICO<sup>1</sup>

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There is a notable scene in *The Odyssey* that I was fortunate enough to recognise in the splendid duplicity of the *logos* (*sleep* and/or *wakefulness*) while in the company of Stelian Neagoe, “the lord of chariots” of the Institute of Political Science and International Relations within the Romanian Academy. This noteworthy scene took place during a *symposion*, around the time of sunset, at the court of Nestor (from “sandy Pylos”) the *commander of words*, who tells his long story to those present, including Telemachus the neophyte. Before taking their leave and plunging themselves into sleep, Athena (Telemachus’ “mentor”) asks them to cut out the tongues of the victims and mix them with wine from the last cup, in honour of the gods. The guests washed their hands in ritual; the cups were filled and the tongues of the victims thrown into the fire. The day’s end was duly followed by silence and sleep – those things which serve to erase memories, for nothing is more unpleasant (according to Porphyry) than “a convive who remembers”.

Beyond the immediate narrative, it is only natural to seek the symbolic meaning of this ritual purification. And the person best suited to do this is, of course, Stelian Neagoe, the *Nestor* of history (past and/or more recent) from the “Odyssey of modern Romanian”.

For Stelian Neagoe is the *ephor* of a grand narrative, as Jean-François Lyotard would have put it, replete with victims and heroes (Alexandru Ioan Cuza, King Carol I, Nicolae Iorga, Raoul Bossy, Alexandru Marghiloman, Titu Maiorescu, Petre Carp, Ion Nistor, Octavian Goga, Constantin Argetoianu, Ion Gigurtu, Gheorghe Tătărescu, Petre Pandrea, Barbu Catargiu, Constantin Titel Petrescu, Grigore Gafencu, I. G. Duca and so many others) – all of whom contributed to the history of modern Romania and to whom the historian, hermeneutician and political scientist Stelian Neagoe has dedicated some 25 monographic works and essential “books d’auteur”. He is a sage in whose “palace” of books about the Argonauts of modern Romania libations were performed in order to “master

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<sup>1</sup> The present revisited intervention is integrated – in Romanian language – in a reverential volume dedicated to historian and researcher Stelian Neagoe, published at the ISPRI Publishing House (2013).

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language” as *logos* bearer of historical truth. In the philosophy of the Portico this rationale is identified with the “law of the world” (concelebrated from Miron Costin onwards), with “providence” and with Romanian “destiny” down the years.

In fact (just as he likes to establish his own hierarchies), under the shield of books whose subject and object is the triumphant reason of the *logos* versus *violence* and *forgetting*, the narrative recalls, without hesitation, the lessons of life drawn by Stelian Neagoe from Romania’s modern and contemporary history – those fundamentally based on the confrontation between the *rational and wise component* (of the meandering course of the history of the Romanian nation) and the *irrational elements* – blind and troubled forces, darkly embodied (again) in people, political platforms and ideologies fuelled by hatred and violence.

Consequently, the role adopted could only be formative: of sound education and virtuous moderation; the triumph of *nous*, the liberation from *thymos* and the evasion of the traps of *epythimia*. This all takes place via a neo-humanist path, created for himself by Stelian Neagoe, one of the few initiated men who know in which part of the historical body lives *reason* and out of which parts emerge both *thymos* and *epythimia*.

And, although it may appear a risky endeavour, I will attempt to describe his position within the field of research he has chosen to pursue. As can be seen, his work is born of secular democratic humanism, expressed through a passion for the political history of Romania (1859-1989); the history of the Union of the Romanians (from their beginnings up until 1947); Romanian academic life in the interwar years; the promotion of national cultural and scientific heritage (through studies and anthologies of important texts, and encyclopaedias of national political history); the publication of representative works by important Romanian and foreign historians, in particular a series of political writings (for the most part previously unpublished) by the “principal statesman and politicians of Romania, who made and wrote history”, as he likes to put it.

The unmistakable trademarks of his choice of subject are given by the complete freedom with which he studies the phenomenon of modern Romania in its axiological complexity and historical completeness; the way he highlights the ideal of national freedom through studies focused on decoding the forms/formulae of democracy and totalitarianism, of synchronisation and disruption or of differentiation in the modern Romanian world; and, especially, through a total immersion into modern and contemporary history, which, from the neo-humanist perspective of the experienced researcher, is perhaps the discipline best able to pinpoint the “common elements” and the “diversity of the trajectories of the past”.

For Stelian Neagoe, history is not a form of prophecy. All the historian is able to do is to provide an ontologically filtered analysis, to use the fine sieve of the past in order to separate “the wheat from the chaff” and to identify *when, where, how* and *by whom* they were first mixed together; and this without sliding into anthropological studies of the imaginary and mentalities (even if these are “all the rage”). For the past was and is a “moving platform” on which not only “facts” but also a series of real and/or imagined, expressed or carefully camouflaged,

ontological remains combine and which only applied research is capable of returning to the spotlight of historical truth.

In placing him “under the sign of the Portico”, I envisage the hesitation of the historian (with the vocation of a continuator) between the Aristotelians and Stoics. On the one hand, Stelian Neagoe is an admirer and a defender of freedom and national unity; on the other hand, he does not entirely reject historical determinism, according to which “the life of the world” is governed by an infinite chain of causes and effects. In the same vein, he (re)locates the virtue of the various historical personalities he happens to be studying within a moderate historical passibility and this while also embracing the opportunity to slide into indigenous impassibility, which is closer to the Stoic’s *apathia*.

The pages of his history books, which we (from “the group of Telemachus”) browsed as part of our obligatory reading, uphold the spirit of the *thymos* within, a *thymos* that is always renewed from without. The *pneuma* of Romanian history, as it is described in the books of Stelian Neagoe, is the result of a secret chemistry that combines the triumph of reason over violence, the feeling of national unity and perpetual hope in better governance.

(Re)viewing the constant networking and references to the decisive moments in the Romanian political history, apparently entered on a track of springboards, inputs and outputs, setting off history in a perspective that, in Max Weber’s terms, could be seen as a perpetual questioning of the facts, despite the avalanche of (serious) Western (exterior) perspectives, the work of historian Stelian Neagoe constantly follows, from the control tower, with strength and stability, this forward movement in history, set on the aisle oscillating between continuity and fracture. In fact, this approach promotes another pact with history, in that democratic relationship (partnership) established, in a three-folded manner, among historical, event, and reading dimensions, elements vested with the status of co-ownership in history. The idea was delivered in a Koselleckian manner, through the argument that the life of the concepts overlaps on the social life itself, or in a Braudelian perspective, life happens exiting the inertia of collective history through a permanent changing of the angle, perspective, or staging.

Historian Stelian Neagoe willingly renounces the accept and deliverance of the Romanian hybrid (let us think of the historical assuages deposed into shapes speculated by the most part of the raclage historians, content with the privilege to assume and denounce), or of adjustment re-writings and of the gliding within the miscellaneous historical complexes, establishing an interactive forwarding, strategically-chronological relation with history, in a double-sided alternance, incarcerated/descarcerated, understood as that territory of history commented upon by Le Roy-Ladurie, a territory of passage among multiple thresholds. What is consolidated is a manifest relation entertained with history, with attuning to the speed of the event assigning and distributing permanent advantages and disadvantages: permanent offer and acceptance. In fact, a fair-play relation of the transmissions with direct grip, cancelling the distance between signified and significant, offers history its own regeneration mechanism: a meaning producing activity. Offering this approach to history (in Enzo Traverso’s terms) concerns

the approach making historians “aware of their instruments” urging them to deconstruct the terms through which people interpret and represent the epoch in which they live; for in “scientists’ republic” (*Gelehrtenrepublik*) imagined by Klopstock, “poly-history” is integral to “poly-theory.”

An additional argument that for us, Romanians, the *phrenes* of the historical (scientific and academic) vocation of political will, national and historical sentiment, and even of the intelligentsia occupy a permanent place in the offer/offering made to history.

This also explains the belief that his *opera omnia* originate out of the founding vocation of his predecessors in Gebleştii Doljului, as well as that of the illustrious predecessors of which Stelian Neagoe is a noble descendent.

Rereading his books has made me even more convinced that Stelian Neagoe is the descendent of a family line that knows how to interpret the immediate event that abounds in the vital fluid of history like the wood of a young tree seething with sap.

And what many uses this wood can be put to! ... from a well pole to the foundations of a house, the table used in the Last Supper and the Endless Column... These are books from which the cold air of historical events emerges warmly off the printer’s press, bearing within them a new life and the unmistakable rhythm of historical *thymos*.