

THE RETURN OF THE AUTHOR: AN EXISTENTIALIST CREED

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Abstract:

Published in 1981, the book *Întoarcerea autorului* (‘The Return of the Author’) is a sharp dialogue conducted by Eugen Simion with the theories formulated by representatives of the *new criticism*, especially Roland Barthes, fashionable in those years with his programmatic study entitled *La mort de l’auteur* (1968). In the final part of his work, which Eugen Simion gave an interactive title, *Dialoguri* (‘Dialogues’), he anticipates the direction of the novel and poetry of the 1980s, in which textualism and theoretical experimentation competed with lived experience. It is not only the author of fiction works or intimate journals who returns to their own text, but the critic himself reveals his existential creed. The result is the portrait of Eugen Simion as a moralist critic, a critic of nuances, who rejects political and theoretical fanaticism, advocating for the author’s inner torment to be ignored when the work is evaluated in terms of value. In the cases exemplified by Eugen Simion, the “return of the author” must be retrieved from the comments scattered throughout the critical demonstration.

Keywords:

Author, work, biographeme, existential creed, fanaticism of the method.

Întoarcerea autorului (‘The Return of the Author’) (1981) is the study of an intellectual from the East who arrived in France in 1970. Confronted with the delirium of history in his own country, he discovered another anomaly in the West: the fanaticism of the method practised stubbornly by the new theoreticians. In an era in which human existence was annihilated by the ill fortunes of history and freedom of expression was abusively restricted, the disappearance of the author from their own text appeared to Eugen Simion as an implausible fact, a gratuitous game in which, for the

sake of theory, the reflective consciousness, the only “witness” in validating existence, was sacrificed.

The Romanian critic analyses the theories of well-known writers or theorists (Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, Stéphane Mallarmé, Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes etc.), in which the failure of biographical criticism is declared and even reaches the point where the death of the author is observed in Roland Barthes’ essay *La mort de l’auteur*. Eugen Simion discovers contradictions and inadvertences in the discourse of the mentioned authors, resulting in the realisation that regardless of the theorists’ intentions, the author, the “great exile” from their own city, returns to the text:

“I wrote ‘The Return of the Author’ not to defend biographical criticism (which can no longer be defended after Proust, Valéry, Barthes and, in general, the new critics had proven that the deep self is a different entity from the biographical self), but to prove that: 1) the death of the author is uncertain and, even if removed from the discussion, the author continues to manifest himself in his text; 2) the author himself, as an individual, has responsibilities towards his work and, through his behaviour, can influence its destiny. For better or worse, at least for a while”¹.

In an essay written between 1908 and 1910 and published posthumously in 1954, titled *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Marcel Proust – Eugen Simion remarks – distinguishes between the deep self and the social self and formulates a pertinent criticism of the biographical method. Creation is the result of a mysterious part of the being that cannot be found in the social image of the writer. Interpreting a work solely based on the author’s life leads to ignoring its literary message. Thus, Proust argues, the failure of value judgements made by Sainte-Beuve regarding the creations of Flaubert, Balzac and Stendhal, whom he does not perceive as geniuses, can be explained. Marcel Proust’s observations are correct, the separation from biographical criticism is necessary, the writer’s inner inferno, anecdotes and character flaws are irrelevant in the act of criticism, when above all, the work itself must speak:

¹ Eugen Simion, 2013, *Întoarcerea autorului: eseuri despre relația creator-operă*, pp. 441-442.

“Proust deals a strong blow to biographical criticism, without being the first to attempt to separate the work from the author’s civil status. Neither the first nor the last. His merit is to have drawn attention to the fact that the origin of his work is elsewhere than in external circumstances, that its roots must be sought in the deep self of the creator, and that the deep self manifests itself in the work”².

However, Eugen Simion identifies contradictions in Proust’s discourse. In his attempt to discredit the French critic, the novelist uses the same biographical method practised by his enemy. Furthermore, the author of *In Search of Lost Time* is tolerant towards certain personalities who commit the same moral or ethical errors as Sainte-Beuve, while being uncompromising with the latter, vehemently condemning him. An episode that increased Proust’s irritation was Baudelaire’s candidacy for the Academy. Sainte-Beuve published – as Eugen Simion shows – an ambiguous, unconvincing article about the poet’s creation. Aware of Sainte-Beuve’s privileged status in the academic world, the French poet did not take into account that the so-called flatteries of the critic were mostly calumnies and initiated a series of acknowledgements addressed to Sainte-Beuve.

From the recounted sequence, the interests of both actors can be observed: Sainte-Beuve values his political relationships, while Baudelaire wants to become a member of the French Academy. However, as noted by Eugen Simion, Proust does not judge the two of them based on the same moral standards. Baudelaire’s deviation from morality and character is mitigated and becomes excusable due to the poet’s genius, while Sainte-Beuve remains “la vieille canaille”. For Marcel Proust, Sainte-Beuve is not just a literary case, but an obsession, a complex, as Eugen Simion claims:

“Translating it into the language of psychoanalysis, we might say that in Proust there is a small Sainte-Beuve complex based on an obscure feeling of ease and aggression, or more precisely, the aggression of ease. This issue deserves examination because, if it is true that only what is repeated has significance, Sainte-

² *Ibidem*, p. 35.

Beuve is, for Proust, more than just a facile critic, he is the symptom (sign) of an intellectual violence"³.

Concerned with the rhetoric of the text rather than the depths of the self, Paul Valéry rejects biographical criticism and believes that the work is a "daughter of forms", with the author not influencing its development. However, the French poet contradicts himself. Referring to Verlaine and Villon, Paul Valéry argues that they represent special cases, resulting in the usefulness of biography. According to Valéry, the adventurous life of Villon and the general public being familiar with it determine the interest in his creation. The symbolist poet appreciates the efforts made by Villon's biographers in reconstructing a tumultuous existence. Delighted by Valéry's contradiction, Eugen Simion emphasises the indestructible connection between the author and his own work:

*"A sign that the existence of the man who writes still means something, that man should not be left infinitely in front of the closed gates of the work. From time to time, this great exile should be accepted into the imaginary country he has created. Even if he himself cannot satisfactorily explain it, even if something else has emerged, something completely different from what he had planned. But let us not pretend not to see the essential fact that the imaginary country may have been born against the creator's will, but not outside his possibilities"*⁴.

A different viewpoint on the author-work relationship belongs to Jean-Paul Sartre, a precursor of existentialist criticism, who introduces new concepts into the equation: *history, action, freedom, alienation, commitment* etc. In the French philosopher's view, man is an individuality that relates to the universal, tends towards totality and inevitably confronts biological and historical fatalisms. Faced with these, the individual has two weapons: consciousness and action. For Sartre, as Eugen Simion notes, the issue of man is inseparable from the condition of the artist. In other words, the writing of an author reflects their condition in the universe:

³ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 56.

“Sartre tends, in this way, to restore a lost unity and to give a major sense to a relationship. He brings the great exile back into the city [...]. Restoration does not mean, in the language of Sartrean existentialism, the elimination of contradictions. Unity (restoration) is of the method, not of the object. The Sartrean creator (man in general) is a knot of vipers. His stability in the world is based on a dialectic of opposites”⁵.

A particular case of analysis of the relationship between the work and the author is proposed by Roland Barthes. The French critic arouses controversy with his stated ideas: he challenges the positivist method and the privileged status of the author, theories assiduously practised by French academics. According to Barthes, writing means transforming the world into discourse: the text starts from everyday questions and turns them into its own interrogations. The author goes further with this theory in a 1968 article, *La mort de l'auteur*, in which he proclaims the author's disappearance. However, Barthes, a critic of nuances, contradicts himself, as demonstrated by Eugen Simion. In *Le Plaisir du texte* (1973), the great exile, le Père, returns to the printed page but in a new form: through existential flashes that impressed the French theoretician.

Starting from this discovery, Roland Barthes – as shown by Eugen Simion – directs his attention towards a new project: creating a structuralist autobiography composed of “biographemes”, that is, “*small meaningful units that give the image of an author (a body) during reading*”⁶. As early as 1954, in *Michelet par lui-même*, Barthes wrote a structuralist monograph, which differs from traditional ones, but which does not exclude the man Michelet. Barthes aims to discover the “structure of an existence”, i.e., “an organised network of obsessions” that define the writer's life and ignore his/her historical existence.

Nevertheless, the Romanian critic notes that although Barthes tries to confine the writer's life to certain themes or obsessions, the moments he presents coagulate into a narrative thread, and Michelet's “paper being” is projected into a socio-cultural context:

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 76.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 103.

*“Barthes wins the bet: he gives a structure of Michelet’s existence by reading his work. Perhaps against his will (but it is not certain, Barthes, I repeat, does not always do what he says), the paper being comes to life. Maybe it is not the blood of the work that animates it, but the blood of criticism that reads the work”*⁷.

Furthermore, in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, the French theoretician provides a model of structural autobiography. In order to avoid confession, Barthes uses an impersonal voice, keeping the subject at a distance. Barthes does not write a history of his existence but selects existential fragments:

*“The shift is facilitated by the fact that Barthes does not write a history of his life, but proposes an image of his imaginary through cutouts. It is an ergograph made out of speeches: the discourse of childhood, the mother’s discourse, the absence of paternal discourse etc. The first images are photographic. Barthes translates them into scriptural discourse. Here is the image of the town of Bayonne, where the primordial imaginary of childhood was born”*⁸.

If Roland Barthes defines biography as a chain of biographemes, that is, essential moments in the lives of personalities, Eugen Simion gives the term a distinct connotation. In the Romanian critic’s view, the influence of biography on creation can be identified through biographemes. Motifs, obsessions, experiences, emotions, and ideas, which marked the writer’s existence, are reflected in the literary discourse. The role of the critic is to discover them, without falling into the Beuvean pathos of the biographical method or into the realm of psychoanalysis, which ostentatiously places writers on a couch, ignoring their work.

Eugen Simion, a specialist in diary and memoir writing, argues that the biography of a writer is important because, even if it does not explain the work, it provides an idea about the person who wrote it. There are individuals who have a tumultuous existence, full of adventures, but leave no trace of their passage through life; and there are others who, although they never leave their place of origin, offer an intriguing biography to those interested. Writers

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 111.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

are contemplative spirits, endowed with an inner biography that is reflected in their creations. In chapters *II. Structura unei existențe* ('The structure of an existence') and *III. Strategia criticilor* ('The strategy of critics') of the study *Întoarcerea autorului*, Eugen Simion illustrates how the author – regardless of their condition: writer or critic – returns to their own text in the form of biographemes. The works of Jean-Paul Sartre, Malraux, Simone de Beauvoir, Rousseau, Marin Preda, Mircea Eliade, Roland Barthes, Titu Maiorescu etc. are commented upon by the Romanian critic by unveiling the biographemes found in their creations. By far, the most impressive analysis is the one about the author of the novel *Moromeții* ('The Morometes').

Having spent a long period of time in the presence of Marin Preda, Eugen Simion proves to be knowledgeable about both the work and the man. However, the critic is not deceived by the anecdotal aspects and does not reveal details about the novelist's personal life which are irrelevant to the act of writing. Eugen Simion listened with interest to Marin Preda's ideas, expressed during various friendly or professional meetings, discovered his way of being, and showed how the ideas and experiences of the novelist came to life within his work through characters or the narrative discourse. Marin Preda was a contemplative spirit; he knew how to remain silent and listened to others. He meditated at length before offering a response, and when he found a solution to a dilemma, he addressed his conversational partners naturally and simply, as Eugen Simion recalls:

„‘What about that matter, sir?’ , you would hear him suddenly ask, in the middle of a conversation... And he would resume the discussion that ended yesterday or a week ago. The idea became an obsession and the obsession lasted for a certain period of time. Then it would disappear, and you would find it again, a year or two later, in the prose writer's new book. Indeed, now, the idea had been definitively consumed... It might as well have disappeared... ”⁹.

The Romanian critic does not idealise the novelist and does not hide how he was viewed by some of his contemporaries. The novelist could not stand snobs and those who despised the writing profession. He showed

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 254

rejection and disdain towards them, but empathised with the common people, behaving in a civilised and friendly manner. The character of Vintilă in *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* ('The Earth's Most Beloved Son') is constructed starting from the discussion between the novelist and a taxi driver, who would interrupt the conversation to utter the word "Cârnați!" ('Baloney!').

Faced with the attacks from fellow writers, Preda proved great self-control, according to Eugen Simion. The second volume of *Moromeții* (1967) was met with a vast campaign of rejection. Even though he noticed the indignation of those who appreciated him, the novelist did not encourage them to become virulent towards denigrators, but at most to treat them with contempt, as hatred – an intense feeling – was unworthy of the "petty Poporanist demagogues". And yet – the Romanian critic wonders – was Preda a calm, composed spirit, or rather was he a neurotic spirit, like Sartre, who mastered his neurosis through the force of conscience and his love for literature?

From a young age, Preda had been confronted with depressive states and was aware of his own organic fragility. The *man* Marin Preda did not like to talk about his health, notes Eugen Simion, but in his work, this theme is not ignored. Preda confronted two enemies: the "biological dogs" that threatened his bodily integrity, on the one hand, and the metaphysical anxieties that particularly concerned the relationship between man and the inevitability of history, on the other hand.

Unlike other writers, Preda has a philosophy of existence, a particular way of thinking about man's relationship with history:

*"Preda possesses what not many creators do: a philosophy of existence, that is, a way of thinking about man and his relationships in the universe. Only in Sadoveanu do we find a vision of man with such depth and coherence: man seen from the perspective of the Cosmic. In Preda's work, man is regarded from the perspective of History"*¹⁰.

The novelist refers, in friendly discussions as well as in his work, to certain human typologies: the madman, the aggressive primal spirit and the

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 274.

person with a light on their face. The word *bezmetic* “madman” recurs in Preda’s work, and Eugen Simion also hears it in the writer’s oral accounts:

“I have come across it in numerous texts, I heard it frequently in the writer’s oral accounts. He’s a madman! He would say it about someone, with such decisiveness in his voice that I was simply astonished. He’s a madman, meaning there is nothing to be done about him anymore, he is an individual without a mind, without moral conscience. Nothing good can be expected of him anymore... The category of madmen is the last, the lowest, on the scale of values of Preda’s prose. The madmen kill Moromete’s friend Dumitru lui Nae, the announcer at the gatherings in Iocan’s smithy. The same madmen are those who usurp (in Delirul ‘The Delirium’) the will of the masses and push them towards catastrophe”¹¹.

The aggressive primal spirit is more dangerous than the madman because it creates a false morality that it wants to impose on others by force. Thirsty for power, devoid of moral conscience, the aggressive primal spirit brings terror, resentment and hatred among people. These creatures – as Preda confesses in *Convorbiri* (‘Conversations’) – prove that there are no boundaries to baseness, betrayal and deception that a person would not cross.

However, the Morometian space is populated not only by lunatics, fools or aggressive primal spirits, but also by a man with a light on his face. This man is, according to Marin Preda himself, his father, Tudor Călărășu, the alter ego of the character Ilie Moromete. The man who wears a light on his face is, in Eugen Simion’s opinion, “*The man who has access to the state of contemplation because - as the writer says somewhere – ‘contemplation is the only way of looking that allows you to truly understand’...*”¹².

The last chapter of the study, *Dialoguri* (‘Dialogues’), recalls the pleasure of storytelling and the logic of argumentation found in Plato’s dialogues, while also capturing the return of Eugen Simion’s voice in the text. In his dual capacity, the voice of the “grumbling” student and that of the balanced professor, the author of the book *Scriitori români de azi* presents his own ideological creed about the art of literary criticism.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 270.

The student rises against the excess of methodology, whereas the professor, a classical spirit, adopts an objective tone, analysing both the advantages and disadvantages that emerged in literature with the onset of the fanaticism of the method. Every discipline, even literary criticism, should – as Eugen Simion argues – revise its tools from time to time. In an attempt to overcome impressionist relativism and the biographical method, structuralist theorists construct their discourse using a solid, even scientific, theoretical framework. However, in Eugen Simion’s opinion, criticism is not a science, even though it engages in dialogue with the scientific fields of the age. In other words, theorists need to renew the principles of critical discourse, but method alone is not sufficient in the analysis of literary works; the act of criticism also requires intuition and good taste:

„Conservative disciplines age and disappear; to survive, they need a purification of intellectual blood. Criticism is an open discipline, it is neither art nor pure science, and the dispute between the supporters of the two formulas seems truly sterile to me: criticism is a discipline of the spirit that moves around a complex object, full of secrets: the work. Their encounter is essential; it is, I would say, their form of existence. [...] That is why I believe that the substance, corporeality and form of existence of criticism is analysis, the place where the myths of our discipline (taste, intuition, method etc.) find justification and fulfilment”¹³.

There are two shortcomings that E. Simion reproaches the structuralist theorists for: they ignore the totalising nature of the work and fail to observe what is fundamental in a creation: “man’s experience (existence)”. By focusing only on one aspect of the work, representatives of the *new rhetoric* turn into fragmentary critics and adopt the same aggressive and fanatic spirit as the positivists:

„The Bonapartists of the new rhetoric make an unbearable noise, their intolerance is as great and obtuse (regarding literature) as that of the positivist criticism they combat. With his jacket buttoned up and his smoky glasses firmly on his nose, Mr. Jean Ricardou (an otherwise insightful intellect) terrorises the symposiums and conferences he attends. Let us note in passing, a little irony and

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 401-402.

more relativism would not hurt him. Literature is not (or, well, should not be) the paradise of fanaticism!”¹⁴.

Other critics, advocates of psychoanalysis, retrieve the author in the form of complexes, phantasms manifested at the level of the unconscious, but ignore the creation and conscious scriptural process. Psychocriticism opens the readers’ eyes to the dark areas of the creator’s life, which may be considered a success as long as – Eugen Simion argues – the method is used within the limits of naturalness. The work should not be transformed into a space of the author’s childhood traumas manifested at the level of the unconscious:

“There is aggression against the work in psychoanalysis, perhaps even stronger than that against the author, because the work tends, in fact, to disappear as a self-standing universe, sufficient unto itself, as an act facing a preexisting reality. [...] Instead of the work, the complexes of the one who wrote it speak, and instead of the complexes, the analyst who has seized a valuable prey, the work, speaks at length, coherently, too coherently not to seem suspicious, and devours it with satisfaction”¹⁵.

Revolutions in literature are short-lived, although some of their representatives declare that they reform literary discourse to the core. What matters, as Eugen Simion points out, is that after any literary movement, one must analyse – objectively – whether literature has gained anything from these experiences. Regardless of whether the movement was a success or a failure, it produces a change in perception among specialists, sensitising the critical spirit. After the Second World War, the novel was redefined through a proliferation of adjectives. It concerns two directions:

“The first one [the new novel] (represented by Nathalie Sarraute, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Buter) speaks of a renewal of forms in continuation of the epistemological novel and phenomenological realism; the second one (the new new novel), under the spiritual tyranny of Jean Ricardou, an aesthete with a

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 404-405.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

Jacobin spirit, considers the novel as a construction game, a process of 'organising signifiers'."¹⁶

By excess of theory and the desire to renovate, the theorists of the *new novel* cancel the identity of the character, even declaring its death (Claude Ollier's radio play entitled *La mort du personnage*). Also, the relationship between the reader and the work is changed. Jean Ricardou argues that we do not read books to discover the depths of mankind, but rather "to learn how to produce texts and we write in order to learn how to read"¹⁷. The novel becomes a sum of *narrative codes* that the reader or critic must decode.

Cancelling characters' identities through their proliferation is not an original technique. The new theorists choose as their precursors Faulkner, Marcel Proust and even Flaubert, the latter "because he imbues the narrative with laborious descriptions"¹⁸. Through the voice of the student sceptical of the major changes in the novelistic discourse promoted by the *new* and the *new new theorists*, Eugen Simion redefines his own vocation: that of an existentialist critic. The fanaticism of the method distances the writer from the human being, who in the twentieth century is confronted with the fatality of history caused by aggressive primitive spirits, followers of radical ideologies:

*„I do not want to fall into dogmatism, but don't you think that, in an age in which man is faced with phenomena that endanger his very existence, recommending a novel that ignores all these aspects and reduces the issue of literature to a matter of technique is unbearable snobbery? [...] It is, I realise, a contradiction. How can you revolutionise spirits if you systematically lose interest in their inner life, how can you, Professor, liberate man if you close the doors that lead to the freedom of his thoughts? Something is not right here"*¹⁹.

The author of the study *Genurile biograficului* shows openness towards bookish poetry, which was gaining popularity among the 1980s generation through the famous concept of intertextuality. At first glance, scholarly poetry may seem "dry", "empty" and "complicated", but through

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 432.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 429.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 424.

the writer's ability to reinterpret myths, giving them a distinct existential charge, it can be "extraordinarily alive":

*"In this case, we should review our old opinion about artifex poetry and admit that great poetry can also arise from meditation on books. I believe we could not fairly judge a poet like Emil Botta without understanding his joy of living in a world of bookishness, which often takes on the form of theatricality, of Harlequinism, as if living in the world of elementary senses. When assumed, bookishness becomes a way of being, and the mask may represent one of the profound forms of spirit, because the choice implies a process of restless conscience, in search of solutions"*²⁰.

What solution does Eugen Simion propose in the face of the avalanche of theories in which each methodist proclaims themselves as the absolute master, rejecting the differing opinions of others and declaring the bankruptcy of past methods? First and foremost, literature is a relative realm, which displays specific rather than serially produced cases, defined by the use of magical formulas. For an authentic literary critic, creation represents the standard, while the method is just a tool intended to illuminate the "cellars" and the "surface" of the work, to contribute to the discovery of literary depths that are less accessible at first reading.

Secondly, the critic should be open to the innovations of the age, but should not abandon the "tactic of constructive doubt". To surrender oneself to the embrace of a single method, ignoring the complexity of the work, means – in Eugen Simion's opinion – to become a critic of fragments, incapable of observing the multiple causes that have favoured the process of writing. The work is a whole, a unity, and its analysis requires the use of various methods rather than resorting to a single strategy, which does not enhance, but diminishes the mystery of creation (in this respect we should mention Lucian Blaga):

"Modern criticism (integrating, comprehensive, critical, once again, of the depths) cannot, in my opinion, commit a new injustice by attempting to rectify an old error. It must, by virtue of things, be synthetic, consider the work as a product with multiple causes and, if truly aware of its power and responsibility, criticism should somehow reach what is essential in the work: the experience (existence) of man.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 421.

*Those who, out of curiosity for the undergrounds of literary text, overlook the floors of the same text (ideas, manifest content, the visible in the work) ultimately offer only a partial and transitory solution in criticism. [...] The choice for a new methodology in criticism must not, I mean to say, be equivalent to replacing one intolerance with another intolerance*²¹.

Furthermore, another topic addressed by the professor and the student in *Dialoguri is Cultul clasicilor* ('Worship of the Classics'). Most literary groups claim to be the descendants of certain writers and criticise others. In this situation, Eugen Simion recommends caution to literary critics: one can do a great disservice to the work both through fanatical denial and through turning it into an object of worship read with piety. For the works of classic writers to triumph over time, they must be read by representatives of each generation through the filter of their own sensitivity, abandoning previously established judgements – of grandeur or decadence:

*“Therefore: it is not only the living who are governed by the dead, but the dead also resurrect, in literature, through the spiritual alliances they manage to forge with the new generations. For alliances to be possible, once again, the classic work should enjoy, like the modern work, the freedoms of our critical spirit. [...] Classics should not be protectively patted on the shoulder, nor should they be transformed into intimidating temples. They should circulate naturally, confronting, alongside contemporary writers, the demands of the age*²².

For Eugen Simion, literature means – regardless of the form taken by the literary discourse (prose, poetry, theatre) – *the structure of an existence*, revisited from time to time by the great exile, the author.

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²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 405.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 412-413.