

SILVIA ANDREESCU'S AND TH. MĂNESCU'S PLAYWRITING. BETWEEN CONVENTION AND DISSIDENCE

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Abstract

The evolution of the dramatic texts published by Th. Mănescu and Silvia Andreescu present a peculiar characteristic: most of them are apolitical and not representative for Romanian playwriting in general, with the exception of one play that draws upon the dramatic experience that Romanian villages underwent during collectivization: *The Pyre* [Rugul] (Silvia Andreescu & Th. Mănescu, 1961).

When reading the dramatic texts of the two collaborators, one can easily notice that this drama is written after a Proletcultist play, *Nepotrivire* [Disagreement] (Th. Mănescu and Silvia Andreescu, 1956) and before another Proletcultist play, *Vecinii* [The Neighbours] (Silvia Andreescu & Th. Mănescu, 1962) – a fact which we regard as a consequence of the pressure imposed by censorship upon these writers.

The thematic oscillation of Th. Mănescu and Silvia Andreescu is, in general, illustrative for the 'fate' of Romanian culture created under totalitarianism, whose evolution records both cases of compromise and dissidence.

Keywords: Romanian playwriting, communist censorship, ideological thaw, convention, dissidence.

1. Introduction

As it is well known, Romania experienced communism for over 40 years. Starting with 1944 the totalitarian left-wing ideology was implemented in Romania and a new legal framework, meant to legitimize the Soviet control of the country (its artistic life including), started to be created and imposed. What followed was a long period which brought with it decades of radical

control (censorship) and shorter moments of relative 'ideological relaxation/thaw' – all in all, it was a period which generated dramatic transformations within the Romanian society from a political, economic, professional, cultural, and spiritual point of view. Anything that reminded of the former political regime in Romania had to be erased. Consequently, a well-coordinated (centralized) process of mental and social cleansing was initiated so that the Romanians' former political and spiritual (democratic and Christian, basically) values would go into oblivion.

Most of the artistic works, literary ones including, which were created in Romania during the communist regime, must be related to the political context within which they came out. Ideological pressure, the wish to be published even with the risk of making unimaginable compromises on the part of writers, the fear to protest against the unacceptable intrusion of politics into the realm of Art, as well as the scrutinizing control of censorship, all were factors that definitely influenced and shaped the topics that authors chose to write about, the characters they imagined, and their manner of writing, too. Theatre and playwriting were not protected from this influence and had to adapt to it, either by complying with the thematic, typological and stylistic patterns imposed by socialist realism or by avoiding to relate to immediate reality and, thus, by escaping into the realm of fiction. Thus, many writers followed the party ideology, while others tried to avoid it. Sometimes, when censorship was more permissive, authors either chose to publish bold texts, which openly protested against the given state of facts, or ambiguous ones, which came up with an encrypted and symbolical message. Ion Simuț (2008) coins these four literary directions we have outlined above by using the following adjectives: 'opportunistic', 'evading', 'subversive' and 'dissident'.

2. Paper content

In his book *Scenele Teatrului Românesc 1945-2004. De la cenzură la libertate [The Stages of Romanian Theatre 1945-2004. From Censorship to Freedom]*, Marian Popescu (2004) sums up the steps that were taken for imposing the mechanism of censorship in Romania. According to the Romanian theatre critic, for 9 years, theatre and playwriting are "brought into line" in order to correspond to political ideology dictated by the Soviets. Thus, in 1944, on 12th September, within less than a month since the dramatic 23rd August 1944, the first step was taken in subjecting all publications and artistic manifestations to censorship: we refer to the replacement of the Superior Council for Playwriting and Musical Creation with the Bureau for Repertoires within the State Council for Culture and Art. On the other hand, according to the same theatre critic, Marian Popescu (2004), the mechanism of censorship was installed in Romanian starting with September 1944, after the enactment of Law no. 256 (also known as *Legea teatrelor [The Law on Theatres]*), which was meant to organize the functioning of theatres, operas and state philharmonics, as well as to impose the conditions under which shows and plays could be staged within them.

As regards critical reception of the literature which was published during the communist regime – we refer to the critical reception of the literary phenomenon after December 1989 – one can identify two general tendencies. There is a global, as well as a sequential approach of the Romanian literature (including playwriting) published during the 1944-1989 period (Marian

Popescu, 2004) and, on the other hand, a more minute analysis, which identifies several sub-periods within the almost 50 years of totalitarian literature (Florin Mihăilescu, 2005 & Al. Ștefănescu, 2006). According to Florin Mihăilescu, the period comprised between 1944 and 1947 marked the transition from aesthetically autonomous literature to Proletcult literature. Thus, if the first three years that followed the Soviet occupation of Romania meant the implementation of the legal framework for the totalitarian political regime, the period comprised between 1948 and 1954 was synonym with "pure and tough dogmatism" (Florin Mihăilescu, 2005) or the period of Proletcultism. Florin Mihăilescu and Marian Popescu regard the 6 years which followed Stalin's death, 1954-1960, as an attempt, the first one, to depart from the left-wing ideology. Contrary to Florin Mihăilescu and Marian Popescu, Nicolae Breban more radically establishes the duration of the Proletcult period between 1948 and 1964/1965. Nicolae Breban extends the temporal borders of the Proletcult age up to 1964/1965, considering that the pale attempts to aesthetically free literature from the patronage of politics, identifiable between 1953 and 1964, did not result in the creation of a true literature, but rather to a literary hybrid, whose roots still stemmed from the communist party ideology. However, the play we have chosen to write about in this paper - *The Pyre [Rugul]* - was staged in 1961 (not in 1964 or afterwards) and it brought an openly critical message against the political measures adopted by the communist party, i.e. the collectivization process imposed on the Romanian village. In consequence, we conclude that this play is one of the few positive exceptions at the time.

If Romanian literature was transformed during the obsessive decade into a "Siberia of the spirit" (Daniel Cristea-Enache, 2001), the period of ideological thaw marked the rebirth of our literature. Thus, the playwrights who belonged to the post-proletcult period (Marin Sorescu, Theodor Mazilu, Ion Băieșu, Dumitru Solomon, Iosif Naghiu, D.R. Popescu, Ecaterina Oproiu and others) had the chance to contribute to the revival of Romanian playwriting, by creating original plays which were partially or totally freed from socialist-realism. We have not included Silvia Andreescu and Th. Mănescu in the above list because, from an aesthetic point of view, their theatre does not bring innovations to the dramatic discourse.

Silvia Andreescu and Th. Mănescu (1956) published their first play in the 1950's – the proletcultist play *Nepotrivire [Disagreement]* (1956), which was followed by *The Pyre [Rugul]* (Silvia Andreescu & Th. Mănescu, 1961), 10 years later included in *Comedies and Dramas* (Silvia Andreescu & Th. Mănescu, 1971). As we have pointed out in the Abstract, it is interesting to notice that only a year later, we suppose that under the pressure of censorship, the two authors returned to the Proletcult literature – and published the play *Vecinii [The Neighbours]* (Silvia Andreescu & Th. Mănescu, 1962), thus reaffirming their return to socialist-realism. The volume *Drame și comedii [Comedies and Dramas]* – published in 1972 by the two collaborators – comprises the most representative plays signed by Silvia Andreescu and Th. Mănescu: *Podul [The Bridge]*, *Epoletii invizibili [The Invisible Epauettes]*, *Rugul [The Pyre]*, *Iubitul meu fără nume [My Nameless Beloved]*, *Unde-s marile iubiri? [Where Have the Great Loves Gone?]*, *Superbii bărbați singuratici [Superb Lonely Men]*, *Dragostea noastră moare odată cu noi [Our Love Dies with Us]*. As one can notice, socialist-realist plays are not included in this volume.

The best play ever written by Silvia Andreescu in collaboration with Th. Mănescu is *Rugul [The Pyre]*. The metaphoric title of the play – *Rugul [The Pyre]* – refers to the destruction of the

moral and spiritual values of the Romanian village during the collectivization period. The rural universe, depicted in gloomy colours, is inhabited by well individualized characters that the two writers conceive as the symbolical figures of a world trapped into its own decline. The play is a parable of a world in agony. The authors focus on the effects of the peasants' expropriation from their land (mirrored in destiny of Ion Aluion – the central character of the play), on the fatal influence of the left-wing ideology upon the intellectuals of the village area (see the destiny of Ion's brother, Iosif, the former priest, and fate of schoolmaster Petrescu), as well as on the difficult work at the kolkhoz and the tensions that appeared between peasants subsequent to the new 'political order' which modified the path of their lives for good.

The dramatic conflict of the play displays the tensions that exist between three brothers: Ion, Iosif and Andrei, also known as the Cripple. The different political orientations of the three brothers, their competition for reaching a better social position or a higher fortune are the main causes which lead to the destruction of their family. Ion stands for the expropriated peasant who is proud, authoritative, passionate, hard-working, and who has a high sense of property; Iosif, a former priest, is a mean and greedy person, who determines Ion's daughter, Severina, – through the plot he builds – to commit suicide; the Cripple – illustrates the fanatic supporter of communism, who tries to impose his convictions upon the other in a compulsory, almost maniacal manner.

The name of the central character, Ion Aluion, is a pun upon words that mirrors his independent nature and trust in his own capacity and resources. The names of the other two brothers are nonetheless accidental, too. Iosif is a betrayer of the church first of all. We suppose that the authors of the play intended not only to illustrate the drama of the hard-working, honest and well-off peasants that could be often found in Romanian villages during the interwar period, but also to refer to all those who betrayed the moral code that was once valid in Romanian society and that was, among others, represented and illustrated by the priests. Finally, the third brother, the Cripple, is neither a victim, nor an opportunist, but the fanatic idealist of the new epoch.

Today, when reading the play, we find it courageous on the part of the two writers, Silvia Andreescu and Th. Mănescu, to have depicted the negative effects of collectivisation upon the Romanian village and its inhabitants. Dialogues included in the play are an occasion for the writers to refer to the real face of the kolkhoz experience:

„**Ion** (către Invalid, președintele colectivei):

...Le-ai făgăduit (țăranilor) raiul pe pământ! Eu sunt gospodar, nu glumă, față de coate-goale ăștia și tot n-am izbutit să trăiesc așa cum mi-am dorit. Ești tu vreun făcător de minuni, vreun prooroc? Îi târâi prin noroiul ăsta blestemat și le făgăduiești marea și sarea! Ai să aduni tu lapte și miere în cofe și găleți? Ai să fii tu în stare să aprinzi aici, peste întunericul ăsta, vreo lumină? (Îl scutură) Cum

„**Ion** (to the Cripple, the President of the kolkhoz):

... You promised (to peasants) Heaven on Earth! I'm a truly hardworking man, not like these empty-handed ones and still I haven't come to live as I wanted to. Are you some kind of miracle worker, a prophet? You drag them through this damned mud and promise them wonders! Are you going to gather milk and honey in buckets and wooden pails? Are you going to bring any light in this darkness here?

de nu-ți e rușine? De ce-i amăgești?” (Actul I) (he shakes him) How on earth aren't you ashamed of yourself? Why are you deceiving them?”

The above fragment is an original excerpt from *Rugul [The Pyre]*, Act II (Silvia Andreescu & Th.Mănescu, 1971) The above text is the translation we wrote for an excerpt from *Rugul [The Pyre]*, Act II (Silvia Andreescu & Th.Mănescu, 1971)

The conflicts that burst out between the inhabitants of the village after the new political regime is installed, as well as the tensions within Ion's family lead to the fall of the entire existential universe of the central character: Ion Aluion is expropriated from his own land, his wife leaves him, Severina, his daughter, commits suicide being convinced by Iosif that her finance has a lover, his brothers disappoint him (Andrei joins the communist party, he turns in his brother, expropriates peasants from their land, while Iosif determines Severina, his own niece, to commit suicide so that Ion wouldn't have a heiress to his house).

Typologically, Andrei, also known as The Cripple, is a well-built character. His nickname hints both at the physical disability he has and also at his blind conviction that his village is going to be an example of progress and emancipation thanks to the collectivization of agriculture. His voice reiterates the Soviet slogans that were uttered as propaganda meant to support collective farming. At the same time, Andrei is *the cripple* because he proves to be dehumanized in relation to his family members: he denounces his own brother, Iosif, simply because the latter offered to give shelter to a peasant that was chased by the police. Not being able to accept that he became a cripple during the war made him to adopt a mastering attitude, as if he were the prophetic voice of a “golden” age; hence his contradictory attitude: he is sociable and honest with those who obey his orders (Căliman și Vasilica), and irascible and mean with those who disagree with him (Ion, Iosif). Andrei tries to find supporters from among the weak ones, whom he can dominate. The only ones who listen to him are women (Vasilica and Maria) and men without dignity (such as Căliman and Cristea). The fragment given below is a propagandistic discourse in which Andrei tries to persuade Căliman of the *fight* which the lower social classes (to which they belong) are encouraged to get engaged in for the creation of *a new better world*:

„Invalidul (lui Căliman): ...Vino cu noi, pentru un trai civilizată al țărănilor. Și să-ți mai spun ceva. Nu vreau să pleci, pentru că eu am nevoie de d-ta. Ești tânăr și pari om cu inima deschisă. Eu...cum să-ți spun...dacă aș avea numai grija mea, n-aș avea bătaie de cap. Da' de doi ani altă făină cern. Înțelegi? Și n-am carte. Nu știu nimic. Trebuie să învăț o școală. M-am hotărât. Pe mine m-a lăsat nevasta. Când m-am întors beteag de pe front. Una, Catinca. Ai s-o afli. I-a fost cică rușine să se

„Invalidul [The Cripple] (to Căliman): ...Come with us, for a civilized living standard of the peasants. And let me tell you something. I don't want you to leave, because I need you. You are young and seem to be open-hearted. I...how shall I put it...if I had to take care only of myself, I wouldn't bother. But for two years I have changed. Do you get me? And I'm an illiterate. I don't know anything. I must go to a school. I've made up my mind. My wife left me. When I returned

arate cu un șchiop în lume. Am vrut să mă omor atunci. Dar n-am știut eu și nici ea că așa vătămat cum sunt și zdruncinat cu sănătatea, stă în mine o putere care de-abia așteaptă să se arate. (Pauză) Dacă ai fi răs de mine, te-aș fi lăsat să pleci. Am ghicit de cum te-am văzut că ești omul meu. (Pauză) Nu te mint, să știi. N-o să-ți pară rău. Am pornit-o și din drum nu ne întoarcem. Asta-i.” (*Rugul*, Actul I)

The above fragment is an original excerpt from *Rugul [The Pyre]*, Act II (Silvia Andreescu & Th.Mănescu, 1971)

from the war as a cripple. My wife was named Catinca. You’ll meet her. She said she was ashamed to show up with a cripple. I wanted to kill myself then. But neither I nor she knew that even if I was so ill, I still had a force in me that was to come out. (Pause) If you had laughed at me, I would have let you go. Once I saw you, I guessed that you were my man. (Pause) I don’t lie to you, you know. You won’t regret. We’ve started and we don’t get back. That’s it.”

The above text is the translation we wrote for an excerpt from *Rugul [The Pyre]*, Act II (Silvia Andreescu & Th.Mănescu, 1971)

One of the best fragments of the drama is the scene we have included below. This scene – in which the Cripple meets comrade Cristea (the county representative) and the episodic dramatic persona, the Stranger, – is written with talent and a mature stage perspective. The dialogue of the three characters (in which we have to identify the three representatives of power: the Cripple - the president of the kolkhoz; Cristea - the county representative; the Stranger - the man of Securitate) is isolated from the rest of the text. The nameless character, the Stranger, is a prototype of the Securitate officer, sent in the territory to “settle” conflicts and problems that might hinder the implementation of the communist party ideological plan:

„**Cristea:** Dânsul e tovarășul președinte.
Necunoscutul: (tace)
 (Pauză)
Invalidul: Poftiți, ședeți.
Necunoscutul: Dumneata conduci gospodăria?

Invalidul: Deocamdată.
Necunoscutul: Și cum merge?
Invalidul: Prost, cum să meargă!
Necunoscutul: Recunoști.
Invalidul: De ce n-aș recunoaște?
Necunoscutul: Fratele dumitale e la pușcărie?
Invalidul: Da.
Necunoscutul: Ai ajutat la arestarea lui?
Invalidul: Da.
Necunoscutul: Și nu-și pare rău după el?

„**Cristea:** This comrade is the president.
The Stranger: (remains silent)
 (Pause)
The Cripple: Come in, sit down.
The Stranger: Are you the one who manages the collective farm?
The Cripple: For the moment, yes.
The Stranger: And how are things?
The Cripple: Bad, how else!
The Stranger: So, you recognize.
The Cripple: Why wouldn’t I recognize?
The Stranger: Is your brother in prison?
The Cripple: Yes, he is.
The Stranger: Did you help to his arrest?
The Cripple: Yes, I did.
The Stranger: And aren’t you sorry about him?
The Cripple: I could answer with yes and

Invalidul: La întrebarea asta pot răspunde și da și nu.

Necunoscutul: Va să zică îți pare rău după el. Și celălalt frate ce face?

Invalidul: Trăznăi.

Necunoscutul: Trăznăi! Ce simple sunt toate în mintea dumitale! Și tu ce hram porți, de fapt?

Invalidul (mânios): Da' cine ești dumneata, tovarășe?

Necunoscutul: Ai să vezi cine sunt, ai să vezi.

Cristea (către Andrei): Îmi pare rău...

Necunoscutul: De ce îți pare rău?!

Cristea: (tace)

Necunoscutul: O să vedem și de ce îți pare dumitale rău. O să vedem noi. (Brusc întineric ...)” (*Rugul*, Actul II)

The above fragment is an original excerpt from *Rugul [The Pyre]*, Act II (Silvia Andreescu & Th.Mănescu, 1971)

no to your question.

The Stranger: So, you are sorry. How about the other brother, what does he do?

The Cripple: Stupid things.

The Stranger: Stupid things! How simple is all in your mind! And you, what about you, then?

The Cripple (angry): But who on earth are you, comrade?

The Stranger: You'll see who I am, you'll see.

Cristea (to Andrei): I'm sorry...

The Stranger: Why are you sorry?!

Cristea: (remains silent)

The Stranger: We'll see why you are sorry. We'll see. (suddenly all turns dark ...)”

The above text is the translation we wrote for an excerpt from *Rugul [The Pyre]*, Act II (Silvia Andreescu & Th.Mănescu, 1971)

The above dialogue is written in the form of a severe and inhuman interrogatory. The person against whom this interrogatory is addressed (The Cripple) is treated with superiority and lack of respect by the representative of the party's intelligent agent, The Stranger. The short replies evolve slowly, thus underlining the tension that the text creates. The moments of silence, in which characters seem to find comfort, suggest the clash between the authority of the Securitate representative (The Stranger) and the obedient attitude of comrade Cristea. These moments of silence are meant to echo the words of the Stranger. At the same time, it is obvious that the name of this episodic dramatis persona, The Stranger, is not accidental. It is a hint at the lack of identity and dehumanization of those who embraced a career in the oppressive system represented by the Romanian intelligent service. Besides the name of this character, one can easily notice the ambiguous and threatening way in which he speaks: “why are you sorry?!”, “we'll see why you are sorry. We'll see”. The darkness which falls on stage before and after the appearance of the Stranger has a precise role in the text – it is meant to suggest terror and the impossibility to react in front of the terrifying unknown.

The most dramatic moment of the play is Ion's decision to burn the last thing that remained to him, his house, and then to commit suicide. Ion Aluion's gesture of setting fire to his house followed by his suicide can be translated as an attempt to grasp control of his own destiny. The act of self-killing is also a refusal to go on living once he become aware that he has nobody and nothing left to live for. His cry: “Ion Aluion used to live here, but is no longer alive!” announces the spiritual death of the Romanian village.

Even if this drama was meant to demonstrate the side effects of collectivization, its plot and characters are not demonstrative. On the contrary, they are natural and memorable. Silvia Andreescu and Th. Mănescu proved that the lack of the narrative space and techniques can be compensated in drama by the creation of a strong conflict and of well individualized characters.

3. Conclusions

Rugul [The Pyre] is an illustrative example of the dissidence phenomenon in Romanian playwriting. Its publication and stage representation were allowed under the totalitarian regime thanks to the period of ideological thaw of the 1960's, which made it possible for a new *playwright-communist ideology-censorship* paradigm to be established and, consequently, for Romanian theatre and playwriting to be considerably modified and modernized (see, for example, the modern dramatic discourse of Marin Sorescu, Th. Mazilu, Ion Băieșu, Dumitru Solomon, D.R. Popescu, Ecaterina Oproiu and others).

The reading and aesthetic assessment of the less known plays published by Romanian playwrights during the totalitarian regime helps us hierarchically organize their creations in the canon of the time and broaden the analytical perspective over dramatic discourse of the plays written between 1944 and 1989.

The act of re-reading plays written in totalitarian Romania is a necessary task for better understanding the cultural climate and productions of the time, as well as for identifying the positions that authors adopted as to aesthetic autonomy and censorship or as regards the 'strategies' they could resort to for avoiding an undesirable reality or, quite seldom, for boldly criticising it.

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