The Prose of the „60s, from Allusion to Subversive Message

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs.2017.0501.03

Covered in:
CEEOL, Index Copernicus, Ideas
RePeC, EconPapers, SocioNet

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Abstract: When it comes to postwar prose, most part of the literary history chooses to split it - according to the specific theme and style - into opportunist, subversive, dissident, and evading. The novels of the 1964 – 1975 decade follow several directions, both theme, and style-wise: political novel, mythical novel with parable nuances, fantastic prose, analysis prose, poetical prose. The Prose of the ‘60s, from Allusion to Subversive Message follows the literary approach and intends to identify the volatile allusion to the major social and political issues of the time. How do aesthetical and ethical combine; how artistic creation succeeds in taking in ideological suggestions that are more or less accusatory; how natural is the combative message or how far-fetched and false does it sound? These are questions that the present work is trying to provide an answer to, through clear examples taken from the novels of writers such as D.R. Popescu, Ştefan Bănulescu or George Bălăiţă.

Keywords: generation of the ’60s, social, language, abstractness, subversive.

1. Socio-cultural context

Following both the text, and the context, the subject proposes as working method the Critical Discourse Analysis, in which the focus is on the social and political aspects involved in producing the message. Consequently, the methodology applied throughout the research deals with the texts in an interdisciplinary manner, identifying the mixtures between the sociological, historical and literary aspects.

The chosen fragments are detailing the allusive - sometimes even coded - way in which the above mentioned authors condemn major issues such as: hopelessness and the feeling of emptiness associated to the human state – especially as consequences of the recent war –; the destruction of the old moral and social structures; the current censorship practices; the sudden change of status of the individual and the frail border between opulence and decadence; the harmfulness of the cult of power, etc. Relevant from this point of view is the remark of Eugen Negrici, who considers that all these negative aspects undergo – perhaps paradoxically – a valuable artistic
reinterpretation in the context of postwar prose: “Prose writers came to the conclusion that even the errors, character-related ambiguities, political cowardice, writer-related failure, reticence when faced with censorship have artistic consequences and can be recycled in the realm of literature” (Negrici, 2001).

There was quite a lot of debate regarding the historical moment when the generation of the '60s emerged in the Romanian literary landscape. It was seen as a saving point in relation to the reconstruction of an artistic system which Proletcultism had previously damaged, stopping its normal evolution within the frame of progress and specificity. Encouraged by a young criticism, developed from Impressionism, especially in the larger context of an overall relaxation of the regime after a decade of tight censorship (“loosing of the grip”), the representatives of this generation bring the necessary departure from the dogmatism of the Socialist Realism current. This kind of separation could not be done openly. Instead, it consisted in a complex process that meant recovering and substitution, reestablishing the natural ties with the interwar literature, and promoting and enforcing aestheticism and the artistic dimensions of the literary endeavor to the public conscience. All literary histories note the coexistence of two hierarchies of values in the postwar literature. One of them is supported officially, being enforced by ideology; the second one would be acknowledged through the quality of its works and would soon prevail in the canonical battle. The change of paradigm triggered the change of the official hierarchy, mainly because of the acknowledgement of the inability of the official one to fulfill the taste and expectations of the audience. This is also the subject of the remark of the critic Cornel Ungureanu, who considers that the preference of the beginner prose-writers towards the “revival myths”, including the mundane version of waking up (Preda, Bălăiţă), had also an allusive undercurrent, that of a very necessary revival of literature after a sterile previous decade. (Ungureanu, 1985, p. 363) Eugen Negrici also insists upon the recovering of modernity – both team-wise, and style-wise – that the neo-modernism brings right after the interwar period. As a result of the need of retaliation, the critic identifies a Reconquista process that is visible in multiple layers (structural, theme-wise, typological), as well as in the realm of ethics (through the need for truth) (Negrici, 2002, p. 159).

2. Example-providing discourse

While in the novels of the „obsessive decade” criticism is often transparent and sometimes elocutionary, the prose within the scope of
artistic realism with mythical nuances focuses on the atmosphere and promotes ambiguous messages, abstractness, parable, elaborate and intricate epic – features that require an attentive and knowledgeable reading.

The modern narrative play between coding and reading the symbols is a constant one in the novels of the above-mentioned prose-writers; some critics even interpret this excessive interchange as an irony, a farce directed against the snobbish reader, eager to find sibylline meanings, particularly against the linear narrative, which is always colorless and predictable. In the view of the modern narrator, the novel follows the existential paces, the windings of human character. At the same time, its theme and style should reflects the unpredictable. Although the creative process of the above-mentioned prose writers is oriented mainly towards aestheticism, escapism, preference for the fantastic realm, drawing inspiration from a new aesthetical category (grotesque, macabre etc.), it doesn’t elude the civic spirit. Also, the need for truth is periodically reaffirmed, at least theoretically, at a declarative level, through the voices of the characters. Therefore, the aspiration towards literary is combined with that towards truth.  

George Bălăiţă places the difficult issue of the balance between lie and truth on a domestic level, seems to belittle it, but the respective fragment is one with a more comprehensive meaning: “Lie has its own dimensions and nuances, isn’t it?! There is also the everyday harmless lie, which you can’t do without, the one that is as habitual as teeth brushing, isn’t it?! […] Before anything, human truth is tolerant, isn’t it? Has a rather democratic trait, isn’t it? […] I lie. I defend myself. She defends herself too. In order not to let herself hurt by my lie, she avoids it as much as she can. This is how you reach perfection!” (Bălăiţă, 1998, p. 57). For Felicia and Antipa, lie means protection. It spares feelings, keeps the person in the comfort zone, and these beliefs lead them towards a weird play, in which both of them are simulating so much that, at some point, lie and truth seem interchangeable. In a prose at the end of Vânaţoarea regală (Royal Hunt), the attorney Tică Dunărinţu is holding a comprehensive speech with judiciary tendencies. The inquiry he leads in order to find those who are guilty of his father’s death thus receives a new meaning, is transferred from personal towards social and has as culminating point this speech with emphatic nuances, whose effect surpasses the individual case: “Of course, truth also includes all the little aspects of life, but why not include what’s most essential, that is life and death, the country, the conscience? […] Yes,

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2 These are the two aspects considered by E. Negrici as essential for the Romanian prose after 1964: “the issue of the literary (of literature as literature) and that of the truth (of literature as a mirror)”. (Negrici, 2002, 160)
I’m now searching for the truth even in the belly of death horses and maybe in my search I often find dirty things, decay which you can’t even imagine, but this doesn’t mean that they will stop me from digging up (look what a stupid verb) until I find what I am looking for. [...] I want to find out the truth: because there’s another truth which teaches us that those who don’t learn from the past will be eventually forced to experience it again” (Popescu, 1973, pp. 302-303).

Apart from the ethical implication, the thoughts that accompany the truth are eloquent for the ambiguity promoted by the modern novel, for its protean trait. The particular statement of a character – “Any analysis is valid when it is credible, so several credible alternatives are possible, several truths and, as a result, several errors” – reflect the idea that stands at the root of D.R. Popescu’s prose, with its fragmented character and its fluctuant pace. Literary criticism highlighted a “blatancy” of approximations, of hypothetical, an excess of contradictions and ambiguities that revolutionize the overall shape of the postwar prose from the beginning of the ’70s. A fragment that describes an ordinary game of chess in D.R. Popescu’s can be seen as both a remark related to the typical modern prose, and an allegory of the social and political context: “Since you are playing after the old rules of chess and you don’t notice, or, even if you do, you don’t play like I do, following the new law of chess, where the check can move like the queen and the queen can make the same steps as the check, the king jumps like a knight and runs across the board on the black or white checkers as bishop, the castle is also using the same moves as the pawn, the knight, the bishop, and the queen; it’s another rule, in which all moves are possible”. “Yes, the knight lost its specific character; same goes for the queen, the king, the pawn, the castle, and the bishop.” “They now have a new one, which they don’t quite take into consideration, since they change it after each new move, and they cannot be defeated”. “It’s a haloimes, there is no rule. And if I also play like this, there is nothing interesting left, it’s madness, something absurd, like a sickness of chess, a dizziness; you play according to a logic-less logic, as you want to, as all the pieces are scarred with the plague or are living some drunk days, on a drunk chessboard” (Popescu, 1973, p. 123).

Although the social and historical dimension remains important, it is often very subtle, addressing to a reader who is truly capable of the intellectual effort required by the decryption of the message. All the more so as, in the beginning of the seventh decade, the recipients are mainly attracted to narrative techniques, talent, and beauty of style. Radu G. Țeposu states the same thing when talking about George Bălăița’s prose. The critic suspects that he deliberately adopted a strategy based on refinement and
playing with modern narrative techniques, in order to hide the underlining ideological message (Ţeposu, 1983, p. 158).

Hermetism is also present in several shapes. In *Cartea de la Metopolis* (*The Book from Metropolis*), Ştefan Bănulescu provides the reading key that would lead the reader through a dense story, offering hints to how much his characters like to make up stories, to filter the most common events through their own imagination. The prose writer uses the verb ‘to byzantinize’ as a bouncer, making use of his characters’ habit in order to portray his own style, in which “so many complications and intricate networks [...] send you into a world of character and soul deviations, where the artificial is more precious and appreciated than reality” (Bănulescu, 1999, p. 280). A narrative strategy meant to protect and allow access to some uncomfortable truths, by presenting them through an allegorical view. Therefore, the Millionaire, who is both narrator and a character, the alter-ego of the writer, denounces the practices of censorship and depicts the quibbles he uses in order to protect his writing against the intruding eye of those who don’t respect the intimacy of personal space: “Even the shortest note I am writing would need Champollion’s eye to be decoded. And even if nobody decodes it, I usually note only one point or another, and no one, sometimes not even myself, knows if it is part of a straight line, a curve line, if it is a simple point or one deemed to disappear forever. My writing is indecipherable. Certainties scare me. I almost tangle the writing hypothesis myself, because I don’t want to give up to easy or false paths. I rarely reach certain and definitive lines, and when I do, I am writing them clearly. Still, I don’t keep them here, in this abandoned house on the plateau, far from the city and from the world” (Bănulescu, 1999, p. 228). It’s easy to spot in the quoted fragment the allusion to conditioned freedom of writing and to the “drawer literature” with only a limited circulation or, most of the times, for personal use. The prose writer also provides an image of censorship that is acting fraudulently, as a character who is both treacherous and shallow: “After visiting me knowing that I was home, Havaet paid me another visit, knowing I wasn’t home. [...] After the thief-like visit of Havaet, I found my papers put back to their place almost the same as I had left them, maybe better. Havaet took his time looking through them, in an orderly manner, since he had all the time in the world. Back then I was away from home for about a week. He doesn’t get intimidated by his own gestures and actions” (Bănulescu, 1999, p. 227).

The issue of freedom of speech is a very important one in the novels of the ‘60s. This is also a theme approached many times by Viziru, the prosecutor who, during his investigation of the suspect death of the main character in *Lumea în două zile* (*The World in Two Days*), turns into a writer.
Through his creative effort we get to know all the uneasiness of this profession, the efforts involved by the creation process, the fears and enthusiasm that accompany creation. Writing requires sacrifices (see the “Lucifer contract” of the character), but it equally triggers a metamorphosis: “Some really inconceivable things are happening to me. [...] Maybe a stranger lived within me, showing himself only later? For instance, now when I’m writing: the words are filling me with an unknown life, the world is changing, I forget my duties, I’m fueled by different hopes” (Bălăiţă, 1998, p. 81). Endowed with creation powers, he allows the illusion of omnipotence and refusal of constraints: “I’m writing all this with no hurry. I’m thinking: being able to write whatever you desire, without censoring anything, to make a colossus of words, something similar to the Sphinx or the Golem, which not even the desert wind or a magic formula could ever break. To be able to say, even when you are whistling, hands in your pockets: something durable, definitive, nothing temporary” (Bălăiţă, 1998, p. 82). The prosecutor’s notes during the investigation make up “a novel within the novel”, in which Viziru is feverishly searching a clear line between allusion and truth, a symbolic limit, which, in his view, would be able to take the creator out of the realm of fear and provide him complete freedom: “But I don’t want a parable. I want to know the limit, the extent of joking; I want to know with my senses first, to be able to shout here, the same as, on the river bank, I know and I have no doubt when water ends and land begins. [...] Oh yes, prosecutor Viziru would shout, this limit exists. It does. It frightened me without ever seeing it. Now I’m searching for it. I’m not healed yet. I need to find it. [...] Our times discovered this limit. When I will know when and how much I’m allowed to joke, I will get rid of the fear. And then I will be free and healthy” (Bălăiţă, 1998, p. 27).

D.R. Popescu and George Bălăiţă often refer to biblical episodes to insert cryptic, double meaning messages. While Lumea în două zile (The World in Two Days) can be interpreted as a whole also as a parodic apocryphal writing, the paragraphs with religious meaning from Vânătoarea regală (Royal Hunt) mirror mainly the loss of innocence, the impossibility of the individual to believe in miracles: “[...] waters don’t split so easily with a staff anymore. They remain mingled, even when hit with a club, and it’s hard to see their bottom and find a way through them, a light that would help you reach the other shore and save yourself” (Popescu, 1973, p. 49). D.R. Popescu’s characters can’t feel enthusiasm anymore; bored and skeptical, they understand that main facts can no longer be seen as certainties: “I would by no means want to think that the Red Sea is a sea of blood where it’s useless to search for a truth that happened on the past. I only think that sometimes
it’s really hard to find a solution, as good and evil are often intertwined, they live together, not in a pure state, and no matter how much you’d hit with the staff (we deal with hypothesis that sometimes are purely imaginary), water doesn’t split. Or maybe it’s just that stuttering Moise is missing, so to do the miracle can’t be performed [...]” (Popescu, 1973, p. 49).

The loosening taking place after 1964 and the relative “debacle” were associated to an insidious tactic of the central power to acquire popularity, the intention of the leader being to consolidate his position with the help of the intellectual elite. Therefore, permissiveness is a mutual consensus, which made a winner from both sides, at least until the beginning of the seventh decade, when “the July thesis” mark a new ideology of literature. Once acquired and consolidated, the power of the leader is transformed, following the Asian pattern, into a veritable “cult of personality”. The prose writers of the ‘60s bring this cult to light in a parodic manner, such as in the case of the ironical reinterpretations of the sacred writings: “All those who praised our Lord in the Bible were saved by Him; when they were not sure, He showed them the way, the truth, gave them a staff to split water in two” (Popescu, 1973, p. 49). Bănulescu also deals with the cult of personality in the same parodic manner; the performance he imagines during the celebration of the city Metropolis is easy to interpret in a secondary pattern. The request issued by the officials asking the playwright to adapt the text of the play to concrete information related to the city is an allusion to the cult of personality and to the promotion of national specificity: “He wasn’t required to change an emperor or an empress in the play, and make them metopolisians. He was required only one thing. In the play there is a general. He should be of metopolisian origin. That’s it. And this small and simple thing to be emphasized throughout the entire play” (Bănulescu, 1999, p. 221).

An essential change, with clear polemical emphasis, which the postwar prose is undergoing came as a result of the revolution of characters in the narrative plan. Literary criticism used the tag “screwed” to group the strange characters that fill the prose of the ‘60s. Be it inertial, lethargic characters that are separated from the terrestrial realm (Bănulescu), or the dreamers and the characters filled with illusions who act unexpectedly (Fănuș Neagu), the “personality cheaters” (Bănulescu, D.R. Popescu, Bălăiță), those who put on a mask, representative for the theatrical dimension of existence, or those who are dealing with interior otherness, with breaks at the intimacy levels and with the pressure of senses (D.R. Popescu, Bălăiță), the strangeness of these characters make them marginal, putting them outside the group and the norms that govern it.
The otherness which the main characters from the ‘60s prose bring into the literary landscape can be regarded as a fictional compensation to the rigidness and poorness of the typologies from the previous century. “Life conditions are diverse, people don’t grow in the greenhouse. I’m talking about common people, from everywhere, our contemporaries. I’m not talking about hypothetical, perfect, people, grown in the greenhouse” - D.R. Popescu’s words can be also regarded as an irony or as an accusation against counterfeit heroes, and against the false typology promoted by the Socialist Realism (Popescu, 2004, p. 147).

The writers of the ‘60s promote the paradoxes of the human being, which they analyze from all possible corners. At the same time, it’s obvious how much they like to raise issues, to discuss about behavioral discontinuities, about what can be usually found under the sign of shock. The lack of normality of the characters in the prose of the ’70s is going towards otherness as counterpart of the norm; but, at the same time, it is a bookish consequence, a result of the manner in which the epic discourse is organized, of an artistic emancipation. Instead of tags, of simple antithesis, the modern prose writer chooses irony and farce as tools to introduce his characters, understanding that unpredictability, approximate and contradiction are those that resonate with human nature and gives it credibility, a complete “affective density” (Susan Suleiman): “I’d like to believe that many people are filled with uncertainties, are paradoxical individuals and are leading their own life filled with uncertainty, a paradoxical life” (Popescu, 2004, p. 94).

3. Conclusions

Through manipulating language towards identifying subversive connotations and double meanings, the research above intends to highlight the power given by the characteristic iconicity to the literary discourse. The „ethical” perspective approach brought to light the ability of the literary discourse to be representative for culture and society and to make changes within these scopes.

References

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