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-Abstract -

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ION VLASIU
MONOGRAPHIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study represents an incursion of an apparently bivalent purpose: life and literary works of Ion Vlasiu, an approach of a recuperatory and integrative purpose. Why **apparently** bivalent destination? It is because in reality the two aspects subjected to analysis interact and overlap in the area of the memoir literature of the targeted author, the man and his fictional reflection couldn't be judged otherwise than as a whole, as they appear as the faces of Janus. Moreover, the entire research can be subsumed under this rich symbolism: on the one hand there is Ion Vlasiu, a man and an artist, featuring his personal history that belongs to the past, a memoirist who makes the remembrance a creative method and the times that have passed first source of inspiration and, on the other hand, the "voice" of his literary work - still highly actual, addressing to the present, without being intimidated by it, having the courage and the value to aim the future.

The intention of this monographic study is to get the contemporary critics and readers interested in the validity and the timeliness of a literary work that has not lost its value over time and that can be successfully subject to modern interpretative methods. The purpose of this research is also to bring to the forefront a man and a life situated under the sign of the extraordinary, offering to the interested lecturer an existential pattern in which "to be" was always synonymous with "to become".

The theoretical and scientific support of this thesis is based on both classical methods of investigation and on some current, innovative ones. To ensure the relevance of the exegetical approach, we counted more than once on transdisciplinarity, on the plural fusion of the interpretative methods, by joining analytical tools belonging both to the literary criticism and history (formulated by Romanian specialists, including: Mircea Zaciu, Ion Chinezu, Nicolae Manolescu, Dan C. Mihailescu, Mircea Mihaies, Eugen Simion, Ion Vlad, Dumitru Micu, Vasile Fanache, Constantin Cublesan, Virgil Podoaba, Monica Spiridon, Anca Ursă) and foreign ones (including up to: Philippe Lejeune, Gérard Genette, Georges Poulet, Hugo Friedrich, Wayne.C.Booth, Maurice Blanchot) with philosophical and aesthetic judgments (of Romanian thinking: Tudor Vianu, Liviu Rusu

and universal: Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Ernst Cassirer, Jean Jacques Wunenburger, H.D. Gadamer, Roman Ingarden, etc.).

Of course, due to the vastness of the researched material, the traps were present, the researcher being in the position of an alchemist who must choose from thousands of ingredients those able to contribute at the creation of the precious material. That is precisely why diversified investigative techniques were used, ranging from the positivist method, specific to the monographic approach, to phenomenological and comparative approaches. In carrying out the writer's biography the researcher has used a dialogical method based on an alternation of voices (the biographer and the autobiographer's voice), designed to make the evoked man a presence, not a silent portrait, hanging on a wall or hidden in the pages of a book. The study has also used the traditional means of recovering an existential journey offered by the inventory of the history of literature.

As for the analysis of the literary works, the approaches have varied, but one has claimed the lead because of the strong autobiographical character of the Vlasian literature: it is inter-subjective criticism, a criticism of identification¹, defined as the exegete retirement from himself, letting "to be inhabited by the work"². Throughout this study we therefore sought a dialogue with the Vlasian work, dialogue materialized into a text that values the process of citation combined with relevant critical observation. The articulation of critical language reflects the pulse and ideational style of Ion Vlasiu's writings, so the final effect is that of a conversation during which the two implied sides respect each other regardless of their agreement or disagreement. In analysis and interpretation, the study caught the echo of various critical opinions that have accompanied and still accompany the Vlasian work, reporting it permanently to the poetics of reception. The criticism of identification enlarged its area of penetration by appealing to aesthetic and critical elements of critical instrumental, because the emphasis is placed not only on the object, but on the critical issue and the method used.

¹ Teoretizata de Virgil Podoaba în *Cele trei gratii. Schita fenomenologica triadica a criticii literare moderne*, din volumul *Competitia continua. Generatia '80 în texte teoretice*, volum coordonat și realizat de Gheorghe Craciun, Pitesti, Editura Vlasie, 1994, p. 47.

² *Ibidem*, p. 55.

The study does not avoid the monographic positivist formula, although it has enough detractors, just because it countered its faults by using other analytical means, when the directions of interpretation offered by this method seemed limiting. A such alternative method of investigation was the comparative analysis, based on the identification in the Masian work of the common elements with works belonging to Romanian and foreign writers, not in a cowardly and exhaustive way, but placing it in a broader context, a metatextual and intertextual network that is proper for enlarging the direction of interpretation.

The novelty of the thesis lies in judging Ion Vlasiu's literary work as a whole and in the contrapointing the methods of analysis, but also in applying the exegetical process on all departments of Ion Vlasiu writing: his autobiographical novels, his intimate journals, his literature for children, his poetry or journalism, thus facilitating the tracking of how the thematic horizons spread and move and the style throughout the work. Also, innovations can be identified in the way of reconstruction the writer's biography, by taking advantage of the alternating voices who assume the message, the voice of the biographer being always doubled by the voice of the autobiographer, achieving a rhythm designed to make Ion Vlasiu more than a subject to investigation: a presence compulsory to be taken into account, bearing the most complete truth about itself.

The monographic study is organized into seven chapters, an introduction, conclusions, a bibliography and appendices. Their goal is to provide a systematic approach to Ion Vlasiu's life and work so, finally, to create a more complete image about them. The study starts with the researcher's argument for an argument for optioning for this particular topic and continues with a biography of the writer and artist Ion Vlasiu.

The first chapter- *Between Biography and Autobiography*- aims to combine the psychological approach with the documentary one, the factual narrative with the analysis of the emotions and the inner states which accompanied Ion Vlasiu's existential itinerary – all these for comprising the complexity of a man who defied the banality of life without setting this as a goal, demonstrating that the extraordinary can occur even in the most ordinary circumstances, when the protagonist is a personality who refuses any limitation. Reconstructing Ion Vlasiu's journey from his childhood to his old age, the study has

brought to the fore a unitary vision upon his life and his character, encompassing the various hypostasis he has chosen to play on the stage of life (a self-taught artist - as he often characterized himself - a gifted writer, a moralist, an occasional philosopher, husband and father, friend etc.). The approach has captured how Vlasiu depicts his existence in his literary works too, a manner designed to decode his personality, but also to encode it through fictionalization, staging a spectacular role play in which opening and closing alternate, creating a portrait in that, regardless of light or dark areas, the depth of the power lines is outstanding.

The analysis of Vlasiu's literary work follows five different directions: his autobiographical novels, valued by the reference to the symbolism of the road and to the triple determination Topos-Chronos-Anthropos; his diaries in whose complex construct the researcher has identified those elements of a decisive significance for the access to the essence of the message; his poetry whose evolution has been evaluated by relating to the particularities and hypostasis of the lyrical ego; his literature for children as an alternative method of recovering the lost childhood; his attitudes towards the issues of art, artist and towards the Romanian fine-arts phenomenon which Ion Vlasiu felt so bound to.

Thus the second chapter, *The Autobiographical Novel – a “Road to People”* analyzes Ion Vlasiu's novels *Drum spre oameni*, *Poveste cu naluci*, *Succes moral* and *Nebunul din turn*. The research has brought to surface the writer's ability to give coherence and fluency to the narration not only by chronology, but also by using an integrative symbol: the chronotop of the road that causes the "artistic unity of the literary work in its connections to reality"³ producing a connection between the protagonist and the time and space he lives in. The interpretative approach has decoded the construction mechanism of Vlasiu' novels: a representation in a narrative pattern of the human being's journey through life, a journey towards knowledge and self-knowledge. This kind of approaching the text has facilitated the investigation of the narrator's self, perceived as a traveller through life, the life being revealed as a construct in a permanent changing where Ipse and Idem identities act as some complementary poles, the self configuring its

³ Mihail Bahtin, *Probleme de literatura si estetica*. Traducere de N. Iliescu. Prefata de M. Vasile. Bucuresti, Editura Univers, 1982, p. 39.

spiritual profile between them. As regards the traveller's typology, he may be related to a modern picaro because, like the medieval adventurer, the narrator assumes courageously his journey. Reduced to its basic meaning, his journey is both a history of a dislocation and a returning to his origins. Displacement is the main cause of the fragmentation of his existential journey, it is the initial condition that makes him to start his journey and that often produces the narrator's transmutation from the condition of an actor to that of an observer- an Other- an objective self able to contemplate lucidly the subjective ego's journey through life and all the changes implied by it. This process that combines the knowledge by action with the knowledge by contemplation is defining for a picaro, whose main purpose is to search for his own identity, the success of this searching depending on, above all, his own spiritual resources. As an artist, the protagonist of the Vlasian novels is a dislocated picaro who aspires to return to his origins, not anyhow, but transfigured by the revealing experiences he was the subject of.

The attention has also focused on those stages and events of the narrator's life which have imposed his itinerary. Analyzing how Ion Vlasiu directs his narrative power to evoke childhood, the research has compared his novels to those belonging to other Transylvanian writers – Ioan Slavici, Ion Agârbiceanu, Pavel Dan, Lucian Blaga – to whom he shares the same space of evolution and a very particular way of relating with the past. *Am plecat din sat* was also compared to Ion Creanga's masterpiece *Amintiri din copilarie*, a comparison that helps the reader to grasp the direction of evolution of the Romanian autobiographic literature and to understand “the changing of times and people during the quite long period that separates the child from Humulesti from the orphan of Ogra”⁴

The inventory of the events which played an important part in the narrator's evolution included the experience of love, the study focusing on how the causes and the effects of this feeling are reflected into the Vlasian epic. The conclusion was that, being an artist, the narrator is the protagonist of a constant oscillation between art and life. He is always preoccupied to find reverberations as full of intensity through love as he finds

⁴ Tudor Vianu, *Referat asupra lucrarii <<Am plecat din sat>> de Ion Vlasiu*, în „Revue Roumaine”, 30 decembrie 1957, p. 12.

through the act of artistic creation. Fulfilment through love means to him the finding of beauty and the opening towards knowledge; this is very difficult to be achieved because it involves the expansion of the self, its effort to absorb the emotions of another soul, to incorporate them in its inner universe and to make them the object and the subject of its own feelings and judgements.

Valuing the symbolism of the road, the research reported another experience with a powerful impact on the narrator's identity, based on the finding that completing the road is not always simple because the traveller has to overcome the obstacles that he encounters in his way. The overcoming of these obstacles requires various methods. Sometimes the obstacles are so devious, so dangerous that the traveller's identity is endangered, being frightened by the perspective of self-desintegration so he uses techniques able to hide his true identity, to camouflage it in order to keep it unaltered. Sometimes the obstacles make the traveller to embrace the challenge of exteriorization in order to contemplate as a spectator the performance of himself, a modality to find new resources to continue his journey. In this situation the traveller choose a subterfuge: the duplication of the self, a hermeneutic tool that facilitates the access to the unknown of his being. For Ion Vasiu the appeal to such a method neither creates a breach through which fantasy can invade his novels' universe, nor places his autobiographic ego in a destructive rapport with his fictionalized alter ego, but generates a context for a judicious self-analysis, by investigating the boundaries between subject and object. Vasiu builds the double as an alter ego of the auctorial voice, so it is a symmetrical, complementary double that sets the premises of a communicational context which offers a solution for the lack of dialogue, specific for the autobiographical discourse: the locutor – the auctorial voice – gets an interlocutor - the double as the mask of the locutor. It bears the dates of identifying the auctorial voice, the dialogue being even more exciting. Apparently paradoxically, the projection of the autobiographical self into another identity opens its way for a non-contradictory logic, a way towards self-acceptance, because duplication means dialogue, this being the key of self-defining and of harmonic integration into community. Yes, among the others, because managing to look at himself as at an Other, the autobiographical ego practice his ability to look at the others as at himself, with the same

empathy, finding an integrating pattern of living and a way of understanding the others. The contemplation of its inner self from “outside” helps the ego to become aware that the variety of feelings and experiences is a characteristic of the human being who undergoes its journey through life. This way the ego comes to give a different connotation to his journey – he understands that the unity that he dreams of will instaurate in time by suppressing it and that the feeling of totality is based, obviously, on the identity, but it does not exclude the difference.

The chapter dedicated to Ion Vlasiu’s journals - *The Intimate Diary - a Need for Perpetual Confrontation* – sets the objective of identifying the elements which compose the poetics of Vlasiu’s diaries, aiming, in turn, the motivations, features, structural particularities, the art of portraiture, the diarist’s connection to space and time. This kind of approach has revealed the “photography” of a personality, completing the typology depicted in Vlasiu’s novels. Stronger than elsewhere, the author opens the door to his inner self, to the directed or reflex movements of his inner universe, setting up an self-portrait more complex than in his novels, because his soul plunging into the depths brings at the surface extra significance. The study has pointed out how the diarist understands the differences that appear between the act of living and the act of writing, the “transcription” of life causing, inevitably, its fictionalization and thus a fictionalization of the confessing self. Being the subject of a permanent construction and deconstruction in the pages of the journals, the self becomes a categorial character who disputes the text and wants to impose its image. This categorial character⁵ is “sent into the world to illustrate the author’s image”⁶. This authorized, accredited character is accompanied, without asking for the diarist’s permission, by a second character, one revealed by the text itself: “You can call it in several ways: the character from the subtext or the character between the lines. However, it is the character who the text is not telling expressly about. He is not absent but he is not entitled to an image. It is like a ghost that gets a shape without the narrator’s will.”⁷ When the diaries are the subject of an attentive lecture it is obvious that

⁵ Eugen Simion, *Fictiunea jurnalului intim. I. Există o poetică a jurnalului?*, editia a II-a revazuta si adaugita, Bucuresti, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 2005, p. 36.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p 44.

these different characters develop a joint ownership over the discourse, the revealed self and the hidden one claiming possession of the text, embracing different masks: the reader witnesses not only the biographical ego's confessions but also the evolution of the psychological and emotional egos that are giving echo to the "voices" that compose the complex universe of feelings, ideas, thoughts of the man who chooses to narrate his life story. The entire diaristic behaviour is modulated by these voices which come together in a concert, sometimes harmonious, sometimes disharmonious, that reveals the author's personality. On a superficial level it may seem that these voices transmit strictly events, facts of the existence, but, in fact, they transmit emotions generated by the narrator's everyday life, by his relationships and interactions with the others and with his inner self, by his ideas and dilemmas more or less reductive.

The daily notation, doubled expressly or impliedly by the analysis of the excitement caused by it, makes the diarist a constructor of meaning who arrogates the leading role in modulating his self-image through the creative power of words, because he communicates and is communicated through language, using words as mediators between the inside and the outside world. The intimate journals outline the diarist's feverish searching for knowledge, the cognitive effort focusing mainly but not exclusively on his inner self.

The intimate diary is related, even if in much modified forms, to the examination of conscience. From this perspective, the Vlasian journals can be interpreted as an allegory of gradual self-seeking and searching, causing a permanent forcing of the limits of reflection: "What we know well about us is obvious, it shouldn't be written, we have to write only what we do not know clear yet: writing (especially a diary) may be revelatory."⁸. The diarist's priority is self-knowledge, but this goal does not exclude the possibility to reveal himself to the reader through confession, designed as a self-analysis. Subjective mirror, diagram of a perpetual self-investigation, the journal always keeps in his pages the images of the diarist, without ignoring the presence of the others, because Vlasiu completely understands that nobody can really know himself without even

⁸ Ion Vlasiu, *În spatiu si timp*, vol III, Cluj-Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1973, p. 9.

attempting to know the others and without assuming his condition: a member of a community.

He knows that he shall undertake a fake trial, if he bet on the absence of a community to belong to. Since the pages of the journals from his youth the position of the diarist emerges: he does not deny and does not ignore the outside world, but accepts it as such, convinced that *le dedans* mean, after all, also the way in which it appropriates *le dehors*. The self investigation operated by Ion Vlasiu is not focused on the idea that "the world is elsewhere," but on the principle that "world is around me and even in me": "Man is in all and could be expressed, defined, known by his acts and through his contacts with the outside world."⁹ Hence the constant temptation to portraiture, as observing the others, the diarist feels he makes a decisive step towards unity. In fact, the art of the portrait is one of the great qualities of the Vlasian journals. This correlates with the author's constant concern for the poetics of the diary, for his own fertile creative laboratory and for a profound meditation on the impact of spatiality and temporality on the human being - areas of interest that are the pillars of the confession scaffolding, giving it the scale and the importance of a writing with revelatory causes and effects.

As a method of approach, the diaries are very exciting in that they provide another facet of the Vlasian autobiographism. The multiform structure, the trademarks of the self-analysis, the thematic diversity converge towards the configuration of a true "map" of a destiny. If into the world of the novels the protagonist has assumed the hypostasis of a traveller who, coming out of himself, without denying his identity, has found his road to people, the diarist returns to his own conscience, realizing that only the basic act of self-discovery may make him able to claim to understand the universe and to aspire towards totality.

The analysis of the Vlasian poetry in the chapter *The Poetry - the Reverberation of the Sensitivity* brought to the surface, beyond the finding that the prose writer is admirable seconded by a gifted poet, the author's strong interest to hypostasis the poetic ego as homo duplex that oscillates between attachment to the landmarks established

⁹ Eugen Simion, *Fictiunea jurnalului intim. I. Exista o poetica a jurnalului?*, editia a II-a revazuta si adaugita, Bucuresti, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 2005, p. 50.

circumstantially and the awareness that the ego separated itself from the contingent. This way it is developed a poetry of self-definition in which the outside world is seen as a centripetal structure that has at its heart the ego. It oscillates between a categorial definition - man like any other - and an extracategorial one - artist who conquers his uniqueness through the act of creation. When the categorial prevails, the self is caught in his aspiration to communication and freedom, but also facing his own alterity, with his weaknesses and flaws which remove the original harmony which he longs to return to. When the extracategorial assumes the status of subject of poetic meditation, the lyrical ego appears as the voice meant to convey the essences of the world through the interface of the work of art that facilitates the access to the tectonic of the spirit.

The poetry doesn't create a discordant note into Ion Vlasiu's literary work because in its area is also approached the theme of the triadic relationship ego-space-time. Topics of poetic transfiguration, the return to the past and the escape of the horizon of the homeland become leitmotivs that cross the ideatic content, organizing and completing it. Interestingly, in the area of his poetry, Vlasiu goes even further with the significance of the village, besides that of spiritual matrix reported in his diaries and novels, adding the valence of space that makes it possible the foundation of an osmotic relationship between man and world, a *locus amoenus* - less geographical reference and more ontological and axiological relief. With this attitude, Vlasiu distances himself from the Traditionalism his poetry reaching to resonate and to relate to the Expressionism, being close to the signalectica of the Blagian poetry.

When the self is placed in the urban chaos, the situation changes radically: the ego does not live in time but under time, being dominated by the terror of alterity. The kairotic moment turns into intratemporal moment that places the ego in a battle against his own mortality, that includes the Vlasian poetry in the category of the existentialist poetry that proclaims the tragedy of the human condition. The feeling of time passing, imperturbable and sovereign, establishes the awareness of finitude. The Vlasian poetry illustrates three distinct attitudes of self towards death, attitudes that subsume themselves to the three steps of the psyche. The three attitudes capture the modality in which the

conflict between experience and intellectual knowledge, between the soul and the spirit confronted with the idea of death installs and then manifests.

In the chapter entitled *The Literature for Children – The Recovery of Innocence* the researcher's attention has turned to the writings of Ion Vlasiu dedicated to children, registering their connections with the author's novels, connections visible both at a thematic level and at a motivational one, because the writings for the young readers transmit the same nostalgia for the magical *topos* of childhood. The area of interest of the analysis in this case is the modality in which, beyond the particularities of this kind of literature, the author allows to translate into his writings the adult who experiences the pleasure of travesty, by reliving the unique child's vision about the world that surrounds him - a magical universe where everything is possible. The educative intent, characteristic for writings of this kind, is accompanied here by a delightful humour, by a subtle irony and by a philosophical substrate capable of conquering the adult reader, not just the young one.

Perceived in the position of observer and commentator of art in general and its various materializations in particular - in the chapter entitled *Art - A Creed of a Lifetime* - Ion Vlasiu appears as an artist who sees in his interest in the artistic phenomenon a mandatory mission. He feels that the true artist must be backed by a passionate investigator of cultural climate, because, otherwise, he may abandon himself to the cult of self-worth - destructive and reductive, or break from reality, thus committing the unpardonable mistake of denying the access to the very inspiration of his art. Whether analyzing art from a theoretical perspective or analyzing its particular materializations, Vlasiu always treats the subject with seriousness and responsibility, reaching to shape a true *ars poetica* burned on a subject of debate whenever he has the occasion. As always when he aims to decode the paradigm of a particular concept, he tries not to overlook any part of this theme of meditation, formulating the definitions of art and the artist, investigating the issue of talent, style and aesthetic equilibrium and the specific of the work of art, examining artistic doctrines, commenting on the phenomenon of Romanian and universal art. Even in this theoretical dimension, Vlasiu does not abdicate the principle of self-discovery, so that such analysis often focuses on personal creativity,

giving the reader the privilege to witness a fascinating performance of an artistic conscience of a deep sensitivity oriented towards the fulfilment of a pressing need for self-definition.

The seventh chapter, *Ion Vlasiu in the Mirror of the Literary Criticism*, is focused on the poetics of reception, synthesizing the specialists' opinions on the Vlasian work and signaling common places identified in this exegesis. Contradicting the author's opinion who saw in his writing only a secondary vocation, the critical approaches have confirmed the permanent value of Ion Vlasiu's literature, praising the realism and the consistency of his vision, the true vocation for confession, the structural proteism and the stylistic vigour of his works.

The annexes aim to broaden the investigation by presenting the formation of Ion Vlasiu as an artist and a writer by providing the image of Cluj's cultural climate in the fourth decade of last century, on the assumption that this was the period when the plastic grounding vocation and the affirmation of self produced, Vlasiu adhering to the wishes of a generation. They also contain the result of a laborious bibliographic research, centralizing articles published in the interwar newspapers that record the impressive starting point for his activity as an artist and writer.

Summarizing all these aspects and directions of interpretation, the conclusions of this monographic study brought to the fore the idea that Ion Vlasiu's literary work is undoubtedly an *opera aperta*, being far from exhausting its freshness and resources. Its great merit is, in fact, its actuality, that opens it through contemporary exegetical methods, confirming the writer's belief that a truly valuable work of art always finds a way to transcend time and to show that a well-articulated content of ideas, embodied in a form capable of reflecting its essence, is immune to alterity. Through his work, beyond space and time, Ion Vlasiu still finds his road to people.

Key terms of the research: biography, autobiography, novels, chronotop, Topos-Chronos-Anthropos, road, traveller, modern picaro, childhood, first person narrative, intimate journal, diarist, self-investigation, creativity, existential poetry, homo duplex, children's literature, art, beauty, truth, *opera aperta*.

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