VIRGIL DUDA – A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A MATURE MAN

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Abstract: It is a rather regrettable fact that Romanian literature produced beyond the borders of Romania remains relatively unknown, unless it is supported and promoted by steady marketing efforts. This holds true for literature written by Israeli authors of Romanian origin who, despite their long presence in the so new and so old country of Israel, have chosen to write and publish in Romanian. Virgil Duda is probably the most prominent among the living authors of literature in Romanian, produced in Israel. This article aims to retrace his ars poetica, his portrait of a mature artist who has written himself, a la Flaubert, in the many writer-characters that he has created.

Keywords: vocation, consciousness, rupture, intertextuality, writing.

Introduction: the autobiography of a rupture

In *Alvis si Destinul (Alvis and Destiny)*, the main character argues that in every man's life there is a moment of rupture which marks one for eternity (Duda 1993: 6). *România, sfîrşit de decembrie (Romania, the End of December)* (1991), Virgil Duda's most autobiographical work, maps precisely this moment of breakage. Written at the recommendation of his brother, the literary critic Lucian Raicu, *Romania, the End of December* is the first book that Virgil Duda published after he settled in Israel, at the end of 1988, and it attempts to explain for, presumably, a foreign audience, how it was possible that Romanians had put up for so long with the Communist regime. On a first level of interpretation, the book documents the final years of Communism, the terror and tragedy of the everyday, the personal survival strategies that allowed some to have access to basic supplies such as hot water or food.

Unlike other authors who put forth the idea that Romanians deserved, more or less, to suffer under communism because there was something in their DNA, as a nation, that made them obedient and compliant with perpetrators, Virgil Duda suggests that communism seeped through recent Romanian history and developed a whole system of terror and oppression that could not be shaken off easily. In his view, communism survived and grew so strong because it relied on an all-pervasive mechanism of lies, silences, threats and intimidations, ranging from the lack of public information about problems that citizens were faced with up to the terror techniques that party activists were using to extract information from unsuspecting suspects. As a system of intimidation and terror, communism was not a Romanian phenomenon; it could have settled in other countries as well, with similarly devastating consequences.

Yet more than providing an autopsy of Romanian society just before the outbreak of the Revolution, *Romania, the End of December* retraces Virgil Duda's own internal rupture,

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when he came to the realization that Romania was no longer his homeland, that he could no longer live in the country in which he had been born:

”I am a Jew, born in a town from Moldova and determined, up to the age of “40 and something” to live and to die in Romania, just as my ancestors have been doing for a few hundreds of years now. And to write literature. However, I have come now, at the end of the show, to live in Jerusalem, as a pilgrim of none of the three great religions of the world… I am in the country of Israel. Why? If I were to simplify, because of my profession as a writer, of life as literature and of literature as life. A writer is especially connected to the environment which has produced him. Usually, just a monstrosity of Ceausescu’s kind can pull him out of a certain place ”(Duda 1991: 66, *my translation*).

What determined him to leave the country was the fact that he lost confidence in a regime that had no logic and no sense of reality. Somehow, the system of discrete yet powerful terror, that could have entitled one to believe that the Romanian population was undergoing a genocide, undermined his confidence that Romania was the country where he could go on living or writing. It was not only that censorship had become too strict, but self-censorship as well had stiffened any desire or urge to write. For someone who had deeply believed that writing was his vocation – “the very reason of my intimate and public existence” and who had had the “courage to believe that [he] had something to say, because of which one always sits in front of blank pages (Duda 1991: 10), the impossibility to write any more was not a matter of writer’s block, but the sign of an existential crisis:

”I discovered “one good day” that that inner certainty that comes from “what you know about yourself” was gone. Good and bad things, pleasant and unpleasant ones. What your name is, who your parents and friends are, what the world’s level of wisdom is, which country is yours. Maybe some other people have never had in the chemistry of their being this abstract and also concrete element, a country that belongs to you and to which you belong. I had it. To have noticed its disappearance shook me terribly. How could I survive without a country that I would feel to be mine?” (Duda 1991: 39).

While the perception of having been robbed of one’s own country could have been a good enough reason for anyone to leave Romania, for someone who believed that he came to the world to write and who felt responsible for what he put on the page, the absurdity of the communist system made him wish to radicalise his position because, after all,

”literature does not represent an occupation among others, such as trading fish. Without any trace of vanity (...) or of cast spirit, we must all admit that to be a writer implies other duties apart from that of creating interesting and valuable works” (Duda 1991: 102).

This sense of historical responsibility shows that for Virgil Duda, a writer is not an isolated individual in an ivory tower but someone who lives relationally, among people and for people, for whom writing is a matter of consciousness and a mature act of courage, knowledge and self-knowledge.

Virgil Duda’s *ars poetica* – un-fictionalising fiction

By the time he left Romania, Virgil Duda had authored ten books (novels and short stories). The first book that he published after he made *alia*, *Romania, the End of December*, benefited from a quite large readership and it proved to be a form of personal therapy that

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transported him across the impasse of the impossibility of writing. Once he set himself down in front of the blank page, the book somehow urged to be written, and Duda could produce no fiction before he exorcized his inner demons in non-fiction. Thus, though autobiography is a genre that Virgil Duda has not cultivated, this single autobiographical piece proves to have played a critical role in his literary career. Just like with other authors, the autobiographical exercise – even though it does not lead to stylistic performances, which would be suspicious in memoirs or autobiographies – has a performative value, in the sense that it creates a reality, explains a position, suggests a programme, an identity, an assertion of the self as unique or as relational.

Read against the background of Duda's fictional work, *Romania, the End of December* features realistic portraits of several types of characters that haunt his fictional world (the communist activist, the security officer, the woman who uses her body to get a job or privileges). The prototype of the activist – a "mollusc" that is capable of becoming enthusiastic over anything, and who perfectly masters the wooden language of the official discourse, finds its perfect exemplification in Iancu Herman from *Alvis si destinul (Alvis and Destiny)*: a simple worker at first, who is introduced in the communist party by Alvis, he becomes Alvis' Security investigator and later, in Israel, his (presumably) German capitalist boss.

Romania, the End of December acts as an interpretative key to Duda's fiction in that it problematizes writing. Several novels feature well-established authors: the playwright Orăscu in *Sase femei (Six Women)*, the playwright Raul Siropol in *Un cetățean al lumii (A Citizen of the World*), authors who are prominent for one book, which is summarized or discussed in the novel: Sorin in *Ultimele iubiri (The Last Loves)*, author of a crime novel set among ultra-religious Jews, and Aurel Obramovici, the narrator from *Despărtirea de Ierusalim (Separation from Jerusalem)*, author of a book which, just like Duda's *Romania, the End of December*, attempted to depict and explain the last years that the narrator lived under communism before he moved to Jerusalem in December 1988. Alvis, from the epomenous novel, used to be a contributor to and the editor of a communist propaganda journal.

Earlier novels such as *Razboiul amintirilor* (*The War of Memories*) (1981), *Hărțuiala* (*The Harassment*) (1984) and *Oglinda salvată* (*The Saved Mirror*) (1986) create, as Ioan Holban pointed out, an autobiographical space that retraces the *buildung* of an author in the person of Dan Barbosu. The latter is the type of the intellectual author who is concerned about whether he is representative for his time, and about the types of persons that would find a voice through his works. Thus, the notion of literature as a responsible act runs through Duda's work.

As Duda implied in *Romania, the End of December*, writing involves risks: the risk of failure in using, metaphorically, one's pen as an instrument to probe into one's own inability to understand. As such, writing is an instrument of knowledge and of self-knowledge. As Anton Maurer, the narrator from *A Citizen of the World* intimates, trying to understand how Raul Siropol built his international career and meandered between pro-Semite and anti-Semite positions means trying to understand himself, since for a while, in their formative years, Raul and Anton were inseparable friends.

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The same idea of risk is restated in Duda's comparison between literature and walking on a tight rope (Duda 1991: 17). Some of the dangers that befall writers are apparent in discussions with aspiring authors. Dr. Dusmanescu, a gynecologist from *Six Women,* has written a play titled *The Red Dog,* in which he attempts to rehabilitate general Antonescu. His only audience, Miriam, warns him, however, that such a play could never pass beyond the vigilant eyes of censors. Miriam herself, Orascu's wife from the same novel, is also an aspiring author. The discussions over her first short story – with a dedicated communist editor, with a less propaganda-passionate editor and with her own husband – point out to the fact that in communist Romania, the moral of a story was likely to prevail over its artistic merits in the decision whether to publish a certain piece or not. Also, age is a factor that can impact one's success with editors, which is not always granted by having a certain set of desirable qualities but rather by proving to have a set of desirable faults.

Aurel Obramovici (*Separation from Jerusalem),* Miriam and Dr. Dusmanescu (*Six Women),* Alvis (formerly Al. Visu, formerly Carol Wise, formerly Haim Wise) belong to the category of persons who are possessed by an idea, by an artistic, aesthetic, philanthropic or social ideal, or by an ideal of love. Thus, in *Ultimele iubiri (The Last Loves)* Viki and Dror share the ideal of creating a public library. Radu Glasberg, the focalizer from the same novel, believes in an ideal love, which is pure, mutual, shared and faithful. This passion for an ideal likens Duda's characters to Camil Petrescu's "strong souls:" their passion saves them from banality.

The comparison between Duda's characters and Camil Petrescu's "strong souls" is not a fortuitous one: Camil Petrescu's work is one of Duda's intertexts. Intertextuality, in fact, is a defining quality of Duda's work. His novels abound in references to classical literature, to the works of Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Stendhal, Proust, Balzac, Faulkner, Goethe, etc. It is not only that narrators make conscious references to classical authors, but characters also read and copy passages from books which they enjoy. For Miriam, copying her favorite passages from books is an exercise that prepares her for her career as a writer as for her, literature is born not only from life but from books as well. For Radu Glasberg, the love passages that he copies from books have the role of intensifying existence, of providing the appropriate description for reality.

The relationship between art (literature) and reality is often thematised in Duda's novels. Aurel Obramovici, the narrator from *Separation from Jerusalem,* is confident that "books are born, in fact, only from what you live, you and those around you, or from imagination, by deforming memory and implying dream and dreaming" (Duda 2005: 325). Duda's narrators or focalizers often oscillate between memory and dreaming. Glasberg, for instance, lives in two worlds: the world of his memories from Romania, and the world of the daily events in his Israeli life, intensified or described by passages from books, or by his dreams. Similarly, Anton from *A Citizen of the World,* lives between his childhood memories in Bucharest and his contemporary reality as a journalist, aspiring writer and traveler in Israel, Cyprus and the US.

The advice that aspiring authors get in Duda's novels, or the writing tips that Duda's writer characters use, can be seen at work in his own writing: novels combine dreams and transnational memories, build tension and are left seemingly un-finalized and unfinalizable:

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the story seems to go after one has finished reading the book, in the reader's mind, who is left to wonder and to draw a life-itinerary for the novels' (still) living characters. This open ending empowers readers to create their own sequel, to endow characters with options that could escape the author's imagination.

Conclusion

Virgil Duda's *ars poetica* can be traced by un-fictionalizing his fiction, i.e. by identifying the writing tips and practices that his consecrated or aspiring writer characters follow. His novels problematize memory and writing, the relationship between fiction and reality, between a writer's self and his literary alter-egos. Such topics liken Duda's work to Philip Roth's, as Roth too – though at another level – has raised questions about the boundaries between reality and fiction, and about the reliability of personal memory. On the other hand, the penchant for retracing the workings of involuntary memory, and the writing of a novel that includes the journal of writing a novel that is the novel that we get to read, likens Duda's work to Proust's.

The rich intertext of Duda's work shows him as an intelligent writer, for whom the sense of responsibility towards what he writes and towards his readers can be seen in the construction of open plots and of minutely described characters. The risk that he has assumed – which is the risk of any professional writer who has embarked on the tight-rope walking which literature is for him, is that of not having too many readers who would be aware of the entire intertext.

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