THE MASKS OF IRONY IN ION MINULESCU'S POETRY

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Resumen: *La escritura de Ion Minulescu abarca la evolución del simbolismo rumano alcanzado en su madurez teniendo como puntos de referencia a George Bacovia, Alexandru Macedonski, Ştefan Petică, Dimitrie Anghel, Mircea Demetriad, Traian Demetrescu. Las obras minulescianas constituyen la tercera etapa, la del simbolismo exterior, en la que la ironía es la técnica principal utilizada en sus letras. Tengo la intención de explorar algunos de los textos de Minulescu, para confirmar que la ironía, con sus diferentes "máscaras" (auto-ironía, parodia, desacralización, incluso sátira) se usa para revelar una cierta atmósfera. Observaremos la influencia que la experiencia personal y su interés por el espacio urbano tuvieron sobre sus escritos. El poeta deconstruye la imagen estereotipada del amor que ya no se considera ideal, y presenta la religión como ya no es sagrada.*

Palabras claves: *ironía, parodia, poesía, simbolismo, desprecio.*

Ion Minulescu is one of the remarkable Romanian symbolists, who "tend to watch life from a reflective perspective, without inner struggle nor drama. Sinecurists, gentlemen of leisure, freelancers, they show aesthetic desires, of gratuitous and more often than not hedonistic delight. Therefore, they will be receptive to the *fête galante* and outskirts-related atmosphere, particularly attached to the settings preferred by Symbolits, to sophistication, sharp sensitivity, and even formalist practices." (Bote, 1966: 40).

Whilst appreciated by readers, Ion Minulescu was both cherished and contested by literary critics, his poetry being "accused" of being "rhapsodic, grandiloquent and evoking a fanfare sonority (...). Minulescu's lyrics are nothing but loud and superficially free", as George Călinescu put it. (Călinescu, 1941: 613). Minulescu's romances were welcomed by the public, because they did not address an exclusivist group, they were pure feelings that met the readership's sensitivity. George Călinescu admitted to the power of the feelings conveyed by Minulescu through his romances and supported the idea that the verses of the poems had no connection with the attraction felt by the public, because the readers were sensitive to vibrant emotions and not to the form of the poem: "if he was liked by the

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common people... the explanation cannot be verse-related, because common people do not judge the form." (Călinescu, 1941: 613).

Mircea Braga, in the *Preface* to the anthology *In a Sentimental Market* (our transl.), wrote that "being immersed in the Parisian literary environment at the beginning of the century seemed to have made the poet believe that the epigone romantic tonality was a form of inertia rejected by the artistic field. But its own inner structure could not be annulled, annihilated. He then embraced the latest symbolist props (...). And when the form alone failed to hide his romantic scaffolding, the mask of bonhomie, irony and self-irony was put on." (Braga, 1977: 17)

Irony is an act of speech, it involves a voice with an intention. An ironic poetry is inevitably discursive, histrionic, involving an actor; in literature, the ironic spirit refers us to the power of the creative imagination to produce alternatives to life superficiality and suffering. Thus, in Romanian literature, a young man with a voluntary spirit made his voice heard. He "asked his mother to give him everything he had inherited from his father and went to live at ease in Paris for a few years, giving up his studies and joining the Parisian bohemian circles." (Manu, 1981: 47). This was Ion Minulescu, the future poet, who became a loyal customer of coffee houses and cabarets, but who "did not forget to adorn his hotel room with a beautiful rug from Oltenia and with three old Romanian icons, decorations that caused great excitement especially among female visitors." (Manu, 1981: 47).

The symbolist poetry is not characterized by humor, but Minulescu is an exception: he is parodic, self-parodic, "with a playful mood and the ability to produce humorous effects" (Zafiu, 1996: 54). So Minulescu begins to stand out especially through parodies, and we can even speak about "a whole industry of Minulescian parody [...] the pastiche and the Minulescian parody have become a literary genre", states Tudor Vianu (Vianu, 1957: 250). In the last two volumes especially, which sum up the interwar creation Minulescu challenges his own work and embarks on parody and self-parody.

His lyrics are suffused with benign irony and self-irony, in parts (*see* Dănciulescu, 1986: 23), because what the "new" symbolist poets have in common is the intelligent persiflage of serious things, the ironic duality, as mentioned by Iulian Boldea:"Minulescu's pathos is always put into perspective by an ironic look or a parodic effusion that always puts serious things under the sign of interrogation, dedramatizing the tragic." (Boldea, 2007: 1)

This attitude towards poetry does not diminish the value of the texts, on the contrary, it increases its authenticity: "The authentic, new sound of the Minulescian verse is the sentimental tonality, put in a blatantly modernized novelette in order to camouflage its old-fashioned modulations. [...] He often takes on the role of the jester, mocking serious attitudes, reducing great feelings (especially the erotic one) to their caricature, depriving them of poetry by means of modernization."(Micu, 1975: 990)

By way of consequence Minulescu's romances become "a common cynical easy and deliberately prosaic game." (Manu, 1981: 252-253). He higlights the prosaic accents in his romances, renouncing the poetic vibe which was suffocating him and, unlike the other symbolists, turns the sinister, the macabre into picturesque, plasticizing it.

In *The Romance of the Key* the tone is simple, almost naïve, insisting on the banality of the situation, trivializing it: *'Cause what key can't be lost?* (our transl.); this transparency of the verse may be construed as a sign of irony. Along the way, the tone becomes serious and the scenes in question may be read as parodies. *Polychromatic Romance* is also representative for Minulescu's self-irony which arises from surprise associations, by the use of unexpected contrasting elements in enumeration: Salomeea, for example, a true emblem of symbolist poetry, appears here in a comic parallelism with another feminine character:

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Give me the poisoned rhythm of Salome/ And the F minor cough of Traviata (our transl.). Cultural symbols are demystified by the insistence on their fictional, artificial pattern ("*the F minor cough*"). Hence the self-irony: "since the texts stage a tragic, inspired image, half lyrically assumed, half comically undermined. After all, the poet is not ironical towards an external reality, but towards his own lyrical option." (Zafiu, 1996: 236)

In his maturity years, the woman, the "object" of the poet's past admiration (either ideal or hedonistic), is presented with a nostalgia hidden under the shield of irony:

> *Autumn has passed me by/ And took me by the arm without shame/ To be her all night long* (*Mediocre Song,* our transl.)

Thus, *Verses for Everyone* and *I'm not What I Seem* denote the decay of romance by overcharging, by emphasising the minor aspects of life. In general, the poet no longer hyperbolizes, but trivializes and, "implicitly, he contests his own first approach whose pathos and emphasis now seem vulnerable and easy to caricature. First of all, he gives up the theatrical-apodictic tone [...], inventively speculating on one of the essential attributes of romance: intimacy. An encounter with autumn - the favourite season of romance, which has become a kind of needy muse, all wet, cold and with a running nose, is now a rather friendly rendez-vous." (Dimitriu, 1984: 239):

> *Autumn! loose girl - Poor girl!/ She once entered my house,/ Brashly/ To ask me how I was...* (*Mediocre Song,* our transl.)

In *Rural Evening*, the ordinary becomes blatant in the illustration of his new direction as "there is no longer anything fictional nor speculative in terms of feelings; his poetry becomes a mere ironic and burlesque report." (Manu, 1981: 100):

> *In all the courtyards/ The chickens and pigs went to bed/ The women cooked polenta.../ And people started chatting/ With the priest who arrived in a carriage/ From the city,/ Where he changed the ewe-cheese strainers/ With three dozen wax candles...* (*Rural evening,* our transl.)

Unlike his old poetry, Minulescu is now "a versifier of the everyday life, of the blatant anonymity" (Manu, 1981: 106) and "deliberately leads poetry to the grotesque anecdote and the common piquancy" (*Ibidem*):

> *It was raining as if raindrops/ Were but splashes of sweat/ Which could run down a naked Anny Ondra –/ When she locks herself up with her boxer dog in the bathroom...* (*Wet Scenery* – our transl.)

In other texts, a momentary mistress leaves behind a bed with three legs, and *A quarter of a walnut cake/ And a toothpick stuck in it* (*Short Story*, our transl.) in the cabinet; an old love is like a china bauble; the fragile Mi-Tzu-Ko will lose her virginity in a lavender-smelling room (*Verses for Mi-Tzu-Ko*).

> "The ordinary, the insipid, the small everyday things have something protective in them, they exude peace and an invariable good mood. The obvious and consistent trend is a literally demystification. A theme of philosophical meditation becomes, therefore, the subject of poetical joke, by descending to the level of petty utilitarianism." (Dimitriu, 1984: 240)

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In such poems, the balance between comic and dramatic is on a razor' edge. Minulescu feels the danger, especially the danger of sentimentality, his great fear, therefore "his irony is in a constant waking, either to hide the pain or to caricature, turning many poems, through humor, into parodies or self-parodies." (Apetroaie, 1996: 103). The monastic scenery becomes burlesque: *Blown by the winds/ And spat by the rain,/ The saints on the monastery walls/ Stripped off of their vestments/ And left almost naked,/ Like Jesus Christ at the time of the crucifixion...* (*Profane Pastel*, our transl.) and, fed up with devotion, the saints appear to be "sleepy" and "yawning during the holy Mass" (Manu, 1981: 99). We find the same demystified image of religion in T*o an Abbess*, where the nun is portrayed as a beautiful woman who fell prey to carnal sin, falling in love.

Rural Noon is a delicious parody, not only of rural poetry, but also with ironic references to patriotic poetry: *By the lake,/ An ox,/ A cow,/ A calf/ And a bull/ Recite the New Testament/ And an old communist poem, from our primary school:/ 'Our country has/ A golden future!...'"* (our transl.)

He dedicates *Vesperal* to Gala Galaction, in which, he ironically states the dogmatic ambiguousness of the Virgin Mary and of baby Jesus, a bastard, but "it cannot be said that Minulescu mocks the religious theme. His metaphors remain metaphors and they are not complicated theoretically or ideologically. Anti-religious banters are gratuitous games, used to the purpose of irony." (Manu, 1981: 98).

In *Verses for Sulamita* (dedicated to his friend Benjamin Fundoianu), the poet scolds the famous Jewish muse of one of the greatest erotic poetry in the world in secular fashion: *Yet from all the praise/ You only got the thisles/ And the fateful curse/ You can't be a mistress,/ Nor a wife.../ Why did you run away from the king/ And were so stupid* ... (our transl.)

The ironic attitude, of deriding the human gestures and feelings, through parody, continues, sometimes accentuated in the volume *I'm not what I seem*, becoming a second nature of the lyrical self. We can notice here a "profane" descent of poetry in everyday life.

The literary critique of the time insisted on the minulescian hedonism, but also on the absence of ideal love, of absolute love, an idea contended by Nina Apetroaie who considers that Minulescu "dreams of ideal love, seeks and longs for it, ready to sacrifice for it. The fact that he does not find it and fails in hedonism, then in dullness and even in cynicism, i indicative of the modernity of his art." (Apetroaie, 1996: 88)

The desacralization of love is mirrored by the scenery, being thus transposed into irony; in one of the most popular romances, *To the One Who Lies*, the preparation of the wedding ceremony has the aspect of a mortuary preparation. *The Death of the Passenger* maintains the same brevity in the tendency to turn the spectacle of passing into non-existence into a tragicomic image: the suicide, apparently unsuccessful, of the anonymous traveler, in the autumn setting, in a sordid hotel room.

The famous *Watercolor*, cherished by the poet (which he recited whenever he had the opportunity), aims to fix in poetry the same suffocating atmosphere of the place (the urban space) where nothing new happens, besides the almost daily rain where the human beings *Seem like automated puppets, fallen down from shop displays*… (translated by Daniel Ioniţă).

Through the well-known image of the old man and the old woman, *Two old toys for long now broken,/ Wander, walking hand in hand*… (translated by Daniel Ioniţă), it is suggested to us that love beyond the limits acquires a ridiculous patina.

> "The gestures of the lyrical characters, disarticulated and mechanical, reveal a piece of the absurdity of existence, transforming it into a carnivalized universe, in which parts change rapidly and the masks hide the true identity." (Boldea, 2007).

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In the same article, he notes the poet's own confession, which he considers indicative of such a lyrical vision: "I allowed them (the lyrical characters, m.n. - I.B.) one sole thing. A luxury that didn't hurt my auctorial pride - the luxury of sometimes appearing in public under different carnival masks. Thus I managed, I think, to present them, as well as myself, in the true light of our everyday life, which is also a carnival, multiplied to infinity under the infinite aspect of the same symbolic triangle: a Columbine, a Pierrot and a Harlequin." (*cf.* Boldea, 2007).

The same process of trivialization covers different universes: the countryside and the city where: *A tram returns from the station,/ And on the tram full of passengers/ Everyone sings along/ What they sang yesterday,/ And the day before yesterday...* (*Urban rain*, our transl.)

The lover, demystified, is no longer a possible partner in sensual experience, but a mere anonymous flirt: *A handshake/ An "ah!",/ A kiss.../ And left behind: dots...* (*Autumn Echinox*, our transl.) or a semi-scholar interested in *alliance proposals*, because not even Eminescu's verses are absolved from parodic allusions: *The woman who spoke to me last night/ She had some beautiful yet bizarre ideas.../ She said the lonely poplars are words of reproach,/ And all the Evening Stars in the books are falling stars...* (*Vespera*l, our translation)

Regarding the representation of women in texts whose link is irony, parody, Mircea Braga "explains" this attitude by the fact that "the ideal is built according to the poet's ability to accumulate and to live once again the great loves and despairs of the past, as in *The Romance of Yesterday's Mistresses* (our translation*)*, which causes a slight slip to the obscure, to the indeterminate image of the beloved woman." (Braga, 1977: 11).

Thus, she appears as a *caricature/ Who God/ Drew for you like His face* (*The Romance of the Last Kiss*, our transl.), a demystification of love through sarcasm; love is trivialized, reduced to a simple physical act, without any spiritual involvement: *For my mouth/ Kisses without... to be continued.* (our transl.)

The same idea appears in *The Romance of the Speechless Answer*, where the ex-girlfriend is treated with indifference. In two other poems, *Tourism* and *The Automatic Doll*, we discover the same caducous love, which comes out from the presentation of voluptuous women who let themselves be loved by the tourists *hungered/ By the charm of a passerby romance.* (our translation)

Love becomes only a physical act, it turns into an erotic hedonism meant to "exorcise" the torment of the soul; the woman is disregarded, she becomes only a mistress (*Her Romance*), and the marriage is also no longer sacred and perceived as a "factory for making children" (*Confession*).

Last but not least, the trivialization of love also emerges from Ion Minulescu's *Odelette*, which is a pseudo-declaration of love, taking into account, first of all, the title of the text, *odeleta* being a short ode, in which the lyrical communication is familiar, relaxed. In addition, this "ode of small proportions", dedicated *to the most beautiful and crazy of girls*, gives way to parody, stultifies the feeling, trivializes it by employing the word *keychain* (a small, banal, worthless object). All these sarcastic, parodic notes, also created by the original spelling of some words – *odes, romances, Pharaohs, Sphinxes, Sahara, Aden* – are accentuated in the derisive ending, referring to "Triolet", suggesting the woman's inability to understand love.

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