REAL AND IMAGINARY IN ŞTEFAN BĂNULESCU'S AND JOSEPH CONRAD'S WORK

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Abstract: *The common element of the two writers' work is the mixture between real and imaginary. The myths and the symbols are a very important source of inspiration which has not only a native, popular origin, but it is also a mixture of different cultural ideas. Both Ştefan Bănulescu and Joseph Conrad's work can be considered either an imitation of the reality or the memory of those already told or written.*

Key words*: real, imaginary, myths.*

Real and imaginary are intertwined in the fascinating world of travel, space and mysteries that cover both Ştefan Bănulescu's work and the work of the English writer, Joseph Conrad.

The literary work of the Romanian writer configures a memorable universe, the universe of the plain Bărăgan and the swamps, creating an atmosphere dominated by solitude, by monotony and by reverie with its hallucinating effects, an atmosphere which reminds of the magical realism. This imitation of the real along with the memory of those said or heard from the people who seem to come out from a primordial world, constitute the substance of Ştefan Bănulescu's writings from the volume of stories and short stories, *Iarna bărbaţilor*.

While Ştefan Bănulescu is fascinated by the plain, Joseph Conrad was in love with the sea since childhood. Passionate by travel, the English writer of Polish origin, his real name being Teodor Josef Konrad Korzeniowski, arrived in 1890 at the destination that generated *Heart of Darkness*, a narrative which is closer in style and content to Ştefan Bănulescu's archetypal prose. Talking about the origin of *Heart of Darkness*, Verlyn Klinkenborg mentioned that: "Conrad kept two short journals, a *Congo Diary*, with scattered impressions of the country, and an *Up-river Book* full of navigational notes. These, with the fevered memory of a driven man, became the basis of *Heart of Darkness*, one of the most unrelenting works of fiction ever written." (KLINKENBORG, 1993: ix).

Two of the novelettes of the volume *Iarna bărbaţilor*, *Dropia* and *Mistreţii erau blânzi* are considered narratives on their own, the others seem to form more a monograph of an imaginary territory. As in the case of Joseph Conrad's work, *Heart of Darkness*, where the natives reject colonization and modernization, while preserving their beliefs and rituals, finally demonstrating that those truly savage are the colonizers, not the natives, as well in Ştefan Bănulescu's short stories, modernity is not accepted by even the oldness of habits and people: "Fiecare aşezare îşi are tradiţia stranie. Fiecare personaj îşi are istoria. Ne aflăm în pragul unei lumi ce dă o curioasă impresie de vechime. Obiceiurile şi ritualurile sunt arhaice. Civilizaţia modernă a pătruns numai în primele ei straturi, neizbutind a o scoate din izolare. Străinul care încearcă s-o cunoască trece din perplexitate în perplexitate. Socialmente, aşezările se prezintă compuse din neamuri succesive şi împerecheate, care şi-au păstrat identitatea, ca în Biblie. Oamenii au în schimb porecle, în care numele adevărate se ascund. Numele de locuri sunt

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metafore obscure pentru neiniţiaţi. Timpul constă într-o repetare insidioasă, ca şi cum n-ar curge înainte, ci s-ar roti în cerc." (MANOLESCU, 2001, vol 2 : 146).

Almost the same atmosphere which seems to create another world is to be found in Conrad's novelette, *Heart of Darkness*, which at first sight may seem to inspire "a sense of drudgery, but there is no drudgery in *Heart of Darkness*. In some works of literature, your memory is anchored to the character of the author's words themselves, to their precise rhythms and texture, so that images don't come to mind without the phrases that created them. But in *Heart of Darkness*, the impression Conrad creates seems to have slipped the mold of his sentences and to have grown more enveloping, more ominous than perhaps even he imagined it. It is a book of extraordinary intensity, so much so that, returning to it after a time, you're surprised to discover that what it most resembles is a nightmare - a momentary nocturnal vision that transforms the ordinary light of day." (KLINKENBORG, 1993 : x.).

The same intensity of searching the place called *at bustard* (*la dropie*) is to be found in one of the representative novelettes of the volume *Iarna bărbaţilor*, the short story, *Dropia*, which is "o povestire aproape fantastică, totuşi nu pe de-a-ntregul, pentru că, ezitând un moment între explicaţia realistă a faptelor neobişnuite şi cea de ordin fantastic, prozatorul alege în cele din urmă pe cea realistă. Un realism însă în care magicul, straniul intră şi dispar firesc şi pe neobservate." (SIMION, 1998: 273).

Heart of Darkness is "the story of the dissolution of a man and of the system he stands for. The man is Kurtz, an ivory trader with a mission, and the system is the system of shameless exploitation which certain European powers imposed upon Africa." (WEEKS, 1960: xiii).

In terms of narrative technique, the two short-stories, *Dropia* and *Heart of Darkness*, seem to be built after the same pattern, the two witers adopting the frame story technique, using a key character who tells the story. In *Dropia*, the narrator character is Miron, a character that recalls the years of this youth, having a feeling of lack of fulfillment and even failure. In his youth, he had loved a girl of the village, but because he was rambling and listless, the girl was wooed by Paminode Dănilă and taken to the neighboring village. Miron comes to seek his girl, but what he is looking for now seems to be more an illusion.

In *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator character is Charlie Marlow, whom Conrad characterizes as being "the only man of us who still *followed the sea*. The worst that could be said of him was that he did not represent his class. He was a seaman, but he was a wanderer, too, while most seamen lead, if one may so express it, a sedentary life. Their minds are of the stay-at-home order, and their home is always with them - the ship; and so is their country - the sea. One ship is very much like another, and the sea is always the same. In the immutability of their surroundings the foreign shores, the foreign faces, the changing immensity of life, glide past, veiled not by a sense of mystery, but by a slightly disdainful ignorance; for there is nothing mysterious to a seaman unless it be the sea itself, which is the mistress of his existence and as inscrutable as Destiny." (CONRAD, 1993 : 6). Marlow's story can also be considered a story about destiny, about the search of an ideal.

The searching becomes a motif in the two narratives. If in *Dropia* people search, on the one hand, the rich place where the maize grows, and on the other hand, Miron looks for the girl in his youth, in *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow wishes to reach Africa and to meet the mysterious Kurtz. Moreover, *Heart of Darkness* is also about a supernatural force which nature exerts on human-beings, a force that is spoken about even from the beginning of the narrative, from the moment when Marlow meets the

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doctor who gives him the consent to travel: "I remember the old doctor, - 'It would be interesting for science to watch the mental changes of individuals, on the spot.' I felt I was becoming scientifically interesting." (CONRAD, 1993: 27).

Both Miron and Marlow are two strangers of the places where they tell their stories and they talk to their companions and also to the writers themselves who are supposed to be a part of the respective groups. Still, *Heart of Darkness* "opens in a voice that is not Marlow's. It belongs to an unnamed man whom I'll call the Auditor. Marlow, the Director of Companies, the Lawyer, the Accountant, and the Auditor are seated aboard a yawl called the *Nellie*, which is awaiting the tide among the Essex marshes, in the lowermost reach of the Thames, a place that seems to the Auditor *like the beginning of a interminable waterway*. (KLINKENBORG, 1993: xii). But also Miron's voice, the character of *Dropia*, is interrupted by other voices: ...deşi scrisă la persoana a III-a, lucrarea nu relatează în prim-planul epic aproape nimic - autorul făcându-şi simţită prezenţa doar prin mijlocirea motivului acompaniator (deci auditiv) al ierbii. Aceasta sună « ştergând burţile cailor », sugestia fiind, prin urmare, aceea a unui convoi ce înaintează ca şi cum « ar fi mers dormind ». Pe un asemenea fundal sonor intervin, ca într-o partitură, diferitele grupuri de voci: Corbu, Miron şi străinul - iar prin intermediul lor, conform tehnicii povestirii în povestire: Victoria şi Petre Uraru." (DAN, 1975: 174).

The journey appears to have value of procession at the end of which, it is expected to be revealed the mysteries and symbols that mark the lives of the two characters, Miron and Marlow. "Voiajul este folosit curent în literatura fantastică pentru că permite personajului să intre în universuri necunoscute şi să descopere lucruri ce îl pot pune în dificultate. La Ştefan Bănulescu este vorba de o dublă călătorie: la *dropie* (o călătorie în prezent, suspendată înainte de a ajunge la capăt; o călătorie în acelaşi timp, *spaţială*, în cadrele realului) şi o călătorie mai misterioasă decât cea dinainte, în trecut, în profunzimile amintirii. Dubla călătorie figurează, într-un anumit sens, dublul scenariu (realist şi fantastic) al nuvelei." (SIMION, 1998: 274). Also Conrad's short story is about a double journey: a journey which takes place at the moment of speaking and a past journey into the deep Africa, the one in Marlow's memory.

In the works of the two writers, the nature is not a simple frame, but the force which can change the man and his destiny. Ştefan Bănulescu's villagers resemble the natives that Conrad describes through their tribal mentality, the impression being that of "protoistorie, de început de veleat, de exotică ieşire din timp" (DAN, 1975: 172).

In *Dropia*, the people are organized as really true tribes: "Să zic aşa, în sat sunt de toate patru - cinci neamuri. Cel mai vechi, neamul lui Pepene. Neam ostenit, cu meri bătrâni în curte şi cu femei iubeţe. Se spune că neamul ăsta ar fi dat şi câţiva cărturari. Nu ştiu, n-am aflat de soarta lor. Ori fi fost şi ei osteniţi dacă nu li s-a auzit glasul în lume. Apoi vine neamul lui Poenaru - Păcuraru, cel mai rămuros. Pe urmă, neamul scurt şi cu talpă lată al lui Dordoacă - şi neamul bătut de vânt al lui Sălcău. De aici se încurcă lucrurile şi încep furtunile de fată mare. Vine, adică, un neam cam neştiut şi nou amestecat din toate astea, care nu prea se ţine de amintirea a ce-a fost. Cam astea ar fi. Într-o parte de tot stă neamul lui Dănilă, care-şi ia neveste neştiute de nimeni, din sate străine. Neamul ăsta se puieşte mult, ca să aibă în curte slugi fără plată." (BĂNULESCU, 1971: 51-52).

Bănulescu's villagers believe in and talk about the rituals specific to the Romanian people, as it is the case of the girls who throw grains of rice on the kitchen range on New Year's night to see from which part of the village their future husband comes. Conrad's natives take part in real pagan rituals that they hold in the honor of

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Kurtz, who represents for them a kind of god and whom they don't want to lose: "...but deep within the forest, red gleams that wavered, that seemed to sink and rise from the ground amongst confused columnar shapes of intense blackness, showed the exact position of the camp where Mr. Kurtz's adorers were keeping their uneasy vigil. The monotonous beating of a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration. A steady droning sound of many men chanting each to himself some weird incantation came out from the black, flat wall of the woods as the humming of bees comes out of a hive, and had a strange narcotic effect upon my half-awake senses." (CONRAD, 1993: 90). Impressive is also the image of some of the members of the tribe: "It was very awful. I glanced back. We were within thirty yards from the nearest fire. A black figure stood up, strode on long black legs, waving long black arms, across the glow. It had horns - antelope horns, I think - on it's head. Some sorcerer, some witch-man, no doubt: it looked fiend-like enough." (CONRAD, 1993: 92).

Nature has a heart of its own, a heart of the place which can be considered an axis mundi, but which may take the form of a mirage in the character's mind. As Marlow says: "The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for the centre of the earth." (CONRAD, 1993: 16). The same impression of axis mundi is given by the place named *at bustard* (*la dropie*) to which Bănulescu's villagers go: "Mergem *la dropie*, cine o fi numit aşa, nu ştiu, locurile astea, spre care ne-am rupt satul ca să scăpăm de sărăcie şi să luăm în dijmă culesul porumbului. Aş fi cântărit cu cântecul, culesul şi alesul. *La dropie*, pământul întreg e galben de atâta porumb. Când apune soarele, rămâne ziuă, că e porumbul." (BĂNULESCU, 1971: 66).

The nature is almost a character itself in both *Heart of Darkness* and *Dropia*. The impression is not of grandeur of the geological, but that of terror. For example, the description of the river in *Heart of Darkness*: "But there was in it one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land. And as I looked at the map of it in a shop-window, it fascinated me as a snake would a bird - a silly little bird." (CONRAD, 1993: 10) or the description of *Valea Mieilor* (*Valley of Lambs*) in *Dropia*: "Acolo ne paştem primăvara mieii. Prin surpăturile de la marginile Movilelor a încercat mai adineaori neamul lui Dănilă să treacă. Dar acolo sună pământul, mai ales noaptea şi pe senin. Pe la Movile oamenii nu trec decât rar cu căruţele şi numai la nevoie. Numai copitele mieilor nu răsună pe golul de sub Movile. În Movile sunt nişte morminte vechi, unde a fost pusă de turci o oştire a lor dintr-un război pe care nu-l mai ştie nimeni. Amărâţi morţi!." (BĂNULESCU, 1971: 55).

But maybe the most important element in Conrad and Bănulescu's short stories is the use of symbols, which gives to their work a permanent oscilation between particular and general, between real and imaginary. Both Miron and Marlow look for a symbol, which in the end seems to reveal to themselves. Miron tries to discover the symbol of the *bustard*, while Marlow looks for Kurtz, the man who became the symbol of the place of darkness, in fact, he became its real heart.

Dropia (*bustard*) in its turn may be seen either as a whole, as a bustard for the entire group or as an individual one, a *bustard* for each of them: "Ni se propune, astfel, o *dropie* a întregului grup şi o alta a indivizilor, - divizibile semantic, la rândul lor, fiecare. Menită să contureze cadrele epice, prima categorie semnifică locul numit *la dropie*, pământ mănos în porumb unde aspiră să ajungă - ca într-un alt exod spre Canaan - oamenii. Este, de fapt, singurul element *realist* al bucăţii. Pentru că, de la acest

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nivel chiar cea de a doua accepţie a cuvântului ne conduce spre hotarele sensibilităţii mitice." (DAN, 1975: 174-175).

For each individual, the *bustard* has a different signification. For Corbu, the word *bustard* has the general meaning of the land sown with corn, the place where the maize is confused with the sun: "În faţă începea să crească o dungă galbenă. Porumbul sau soarele." (BĂNULESCU, 1971: 68). Victoria of Pepene's nation considers the *bustard* a noble bird with special significations: "Dropia nu se poate prinde nici vară, nici toamnă, e greu şi de zărit, stă la capăt de mirişte, în soare. Şi în soare nu te poţi uita. Numai iarna pe polei o poţi atinge, când are aripile îngreuiate şi nu poate zbura şi seamănă la mers cu o găină. Greu şi atunci. Rar cineva care să prindă clipa potrivită. De multe ori, când e polei nu-i dropie, şi când e dropie nu cade polei." (BĂNULESCU, 1971: 63). For Miron, the *bustard* expresses the feminine ideal, the symbol of erotic fulfillment. But the *bustard* can be Victoria herself, Petre Uraru's wife, to whom Miron remains overnight. On next morning, instead of Victoria, he finds an old woman who does not recognize him: "Femeia s-a întors cu faţa spre mine; avea părul veşted, nasul ascuţit şi gura pungă. Nu era ea." (BĂNULESCU, 1971: 65).

Wandering shadowy lands haunted by sordid and greedy ghosts, Marlow discovers the mystery surrounding the one who had become the symbol of the place, Kurtz, the man who was as "an impenetrable darkness" (CONRAD, 1993: 98). Instead of the one who was admired and considered a genius, Marlow finds a man dominated by terror, a man who is said to be ill and about whom it is not known if he is alive or not. But, his image appears as that of a god in front of his subjects: "He looked at least seven feet long. His covering had fallen off, and his body emerged from it pitiful and appalling as from a winding-sheet. I could see the cage of his ribs all astir, the bones of his arm waving. It was as though an animated image of death carved out of old ivory had been shaking its hand with menaces at a motionless crowd of men made of dark and glittering bronze. I saw him open his mouth wide - it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him. A deep voice reached me faintly." (CONRAD, 1993: 84).

Kurtz resembles the archetypal *evil genius*, the highly gifted but ultimately degenerate individual whose fall is the stuff of legend. At first, Kurtz is for Marlow what the *bustard* is for Miron, an ideal. Kurtz also has different significations in people's mind: he is considered a great musician, a brilliant politician and leader of men, a great humanitarian and a genius. But Marlow has another impression of what Kurtz really represents: "I thought his memory was like the other memories of the dead that accumulate in every man's life - a vague impress on the brain of shadows that had fallen on it in their swift and final passage; but before the high and ponderous door, between the tall houses of a street as still and the decorous as a well-kept alley in a cemetery, I had a vision of him on the stretcher, opening his mouth voraciously, as if to devour all the earth with all its mankind. He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived - a shadow insatiable of splendid appearances, of frightful realities; a shadow darker than the shadow of the night, and draped nobly in the folds of a gorgeous eloquence." (CONRAD, 1993: 103-104).

Kurtz may be put in connection with the term *ivory*, which is usually a symbol of purity. But in this case it may also be associated with suffering and fear, also with prosperity and richness. Platforms where the ivory is stored resemble the land where the maize grows, the difference being that the ivory is obtained through sacrifice.

Maybe more than a fantastic prose, *Heart of Darkness* is the story of the decay of a man who is clearly not a normal person. It is the story of the one who said:

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Exterminate all the brutes!, but in the same time it is the story of the man who yelled: *The horror! The horror!*. In fact, it is about the ability of creation of the human mind. Kurtz had succeeded in identifying himself with the place, to become a legend, that is the reason why the natives feel that he is something that belongs to them and they don't want to let him go away. Maybe the content of the story lies in the fact that "History proves only that *the mind of man is capable of anything - because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future*. If Marlow has learned anything in Africa, he has learned that the mind of man can be just as terrifying when it accepts its cultural constraints, like the Europeans busy raping the *dark continent* under the pretext of *civilization*, as it is when it escapes them, the way Kurtz does." (KLINKENBORG, 1993: xii-xiii).

Although written in different countries, the two short stories follow the pattern of the mythical epic, being a combination of the fictional and real elements. The two writers, Ştefan Bănulescu and Joseph Conrad, succeeded in creating two impressive narratives using specific cultural elements, but also universal symbols. The unity and the intensity of the actions of *Dropia* and *Heart of Darkness* are due to the use of the postponing technique and of that of the frame story technique which are handled with great art by both the Romanian and the English writer.

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