NATURE- IMAGERY IN THE POETRY OF COMMUNIST PRISONS[1]

Abstract: *The present paper highlights that the poetry of communist political detention does not exclusively define its image in the existence and daily condition of the isolated author. On the contrary, many of the literary themes and motifs of the poems come from outside the universe of concentration camps and aim at eternal human problems: divinity, time, love, nature, the purpose of the creator, etc. However, as suggested by the genesis of this poetry, the biographical element penetrates its lines. Nature in the poetry of detention is full of contrasts and often lends a tragic note to existence to suggest agreement with the inner states. The paper tries to capture the elements that make up the imaginary nature in the poetry of political detention, illustrating with Radu Gyr's lyrics, perhaps the most popular poet of detention, and the lyrics of those who have found creative calling in prison. Very often, the nature elements comprise very suggestive metaphors of detention poetry.*

Key words: *imaginary, nature, detention.*

Poetry of communist political detention forms a special but a controversial chapter of contemporary Romanian literature, which is part of hesitation, but cannot be forgotten.

Poetry of the camps as dimension and literary value is a Romanian phenomenon, unique in the world as shown by Zahu Pana in *Edition notice* in his collection *Prison Poems, 1982* (Pana, 1982: IX). Therefore, by discovering and knowing it, the poems of detention will find a privileged position in our culture by its double value as a document (record of the author's tragic existence) and genuine poetic expression.

The present paper highlights that the poetry of communist political detention does not exclusively define its image in the existence and daily condition of the isolated author. On the contrary, many of the literary themes and motifs of the poems come from outside the universe of concentration camps and aim at eternal human problems: divinity, time, love, nature, the purpose of the creator, etc.

This proves that poetry was a way to escape from reality and, therefore, "a release "- without a note - from prison, in other words, a higher spiritual experience, with the soul plunging into dream and imaginary. However, as suggested by the genesis of the poetry, the biographical element penetrates its lines. "The poems uttered by the Romanian political prisoners in handcuffs is an archipelago of resistance. It is, in its way, a gulag Archipelago of lyricism, a testament to the number of witnesses-martyrs in Romania "(Popescu, 2000: 10).

Nature in the poetry of detention is full of contrasts and often lends a tragic note to existence to suggest agreement with the inner states.

Since the poet is threatened by death: „Temniță, mireasă slută, / spulbera-ți-ar vântul praful / c-ai pus moartea cu taraful / să ne zică din lăută" (Radu Gyr, Cântec de nuntă), his vision of nature takes a few defining features, standing out above all the negative values of the nature symbols.

However, as will be shown further, the elements of the nature-imagery also have a positive connotation, for the lyrics themselves, arising from this tragic experience are evidence of spiritual victory. Very often, the nature elements comprise suggestive metaphors of detention poetry.

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I. The poetry of detention reveals evil, harsh elements of nature: *thorns, thistles, nettles, weeds, dwarf elders* etc.

With their rugged appearance, these "instruments" of space purification (Sav Ilisie, 2000: 198), evoke the idea of obstacle, difficulty and oppression: „Din inimă s-o ridica o mireasmă amară / de floare de soc, / de cucută, de brusturi" (Radu Gyr, *Când voi muri*) ; „spinii îndoielii" (Demostene Andronescu, *Peisaj lăuntric*), „ce venin de stârvuri, ce otravă / adună spinu-n vârful lui îngust" (Radu Gyr, *Sevă*); „Să-mi dau în suflet una cu piciorul, / Prin mărăcini să-l dau de-a rostogolul" (Demostene Andronescu, *Vrăşmăşie*); „scoate-mă din viață ca pe-un spin" (Demostene Andronescu, *Sonet 10*); „Prin parcul plini de spini şi de cucută // Doar luna-şi cerne colbul argintiu" (Dumitru Oniga, *Sonet 5*). Love also reveals new meanings: „Mi-e dragostea ca trăsnetul, ca spinii, ca vâjâitul apelor pe scocuri" „şi mi-e asemenea şesurilor arse / adâncii nopți cu jerbe şi eşarfe" (Radu Gyr, *Dragoste*).

The dwarf elder (herbaceous plant with unpleasant smell, white flowers and black fruit) is a specific element by its frequency in the text which suggests, on the one hand, bitter and grotesque life in captivity, even death, since in popular language it is associated with death: „În bozii şi cucute trag să moară / Surpate gânduri, fulgerați ereți" (Demostene Andronescu, *Peisaj lăuntric*).

On the other hand, the dwarf elder, like other elements of nature invoked above, acquires other connotations in these verses, such as endurance, strength, defense, intact but tragic freedom to which we all aspire. The dwarf elder thus becomes the leitmotif of resistance and hostility to the danger of coercion / oppression: „Ca bozia de pe maidan, semeață, / lupt îndărătnic, fără cer şi ploaie. / Cu brânciuri printre hârburi şi gunoaie / fac loc pentru nemernica mea viață. / Şi ca urzica sunt. / Mă-ndes cu fierea, cu ticăloasa mea amărăciune. / Ce dulci mi-s țepii când le ştiu puterea, / ce tare-s în superba-mi spurcăciune!" (Radu Gyr, *Ca bozia…*). There appears a paradox common in all literature of political detention (especially in Nicolae Steinhardt's text of memoirs, *Jurnalul Fericirii*): physical confinement could mean total getting of inner freedom, self-awareness and discovering inner strength.

II. The flowers often appear in the lyrics, generally as moral symbols, signs of sacred land, materialization of light, or to prevail over sensitivity to smell. In the tragic poetry of detention flowers suggests a sense of life, they are essential symbols. Their ability of suggestion in essential when choosing them.

One of these flowers is the lily, which is often a symbol of extinction, especially in Radu Gyr's poems.

As a matter of fact, in antiquity, the Romans considered the lily a symbol of death; in this sense it is taken by Christianity, which associates it with the Virgin Mary. "Featuring an urn geometry" (as in Eminescu's *Miradoniz*), the lily "becomes the bearer of funeral meanings, as the seed of any kind embraces enthusiasm and extinction" (Amado Alonso, 1982 : 109). In Radu Gyr's lyrics, even when it symbolizes white and purity, lily is associated with the idea of death: „Mâinile Lui, păreau crini pe morminte, / ochii adânci ca nişte păduri" (*As' noapte Iisus*). In Demostene Andronescu's *Nestatornicie*, the lily takes only positive connotations, meaning spiritual uplift and purity: „Şi de-adorm pe smârcuri rele, / Mă trezesc pe munți de crini", as expressed by the lily of the valley: „În loc să-mi fac din lacrămi stropi de soare, / Din plâns în loc s-adun mărgăritare, / În loc să-mi cresc din răni păduri de crini" (Demostene Andronescu, *Psalm III*).

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Moreover, the rich symbolism of the lily also comprises the connotation of the glory flower (lily is the emblem of the kings of France).

The lily as an important element is chosen in an attempt to capture sometimes chromatic features of the landscape; it is on water and symbolizes the duality of human nature, by encountering the two antagonistic, but complementary colours: blue water evokes infinity, freedom, and the yellow flower suggests light and warmth of life. A cold and a warm color make up the balance sought by the doomed poet. In the poetry of detention, the lily is most often associated with trust and hope: „Păreri de rău ca gene de pădure / Ascund sub umbra lor un ochi de iaz / Ce tulburat din dedesubturi sure, / Doar nuferii speranței-l mai țin treaz" (Demostene Andronescu, *Peisaj lăuntric*).

Chromatic of flowers is enriched by the poppy, a bright red flower, usually associated with longing and suffering that overwhelm the imprisoned poet.

„O pajiște de dor, cu maci de patimi / Și peste toate-un gând ca un erete" (Demostene Andronescu, *Peisaj lăuntric*).

"King" of flowers, the rose, great in beauty, form and fragrance appears in the poetry of detention in only one variant, wild rose, to suggest, on the one hand, life harshness in prison, and strength, persistence, strength of the soul that knows how to defend from evil, on the other: „Sfârâind ca pe jeratic / Rana iar mi s-a deschis, / Roşu trandafir sălbatic / Înflorit din paradis" (Demostene Andronescu, *Iar îmi vine să muşc zare*).

Carnations become the symbol of continuous suffering: „Și tu, cel de mâine, tu, poate, vei frânge / nu lujere moi, ci mâna de-acum / cu care-am cules garoafe de sânge…" (Radu Gyr, *Garoafe*).

The bunch of flowers is completed by irises, metaphors of purity: „Turnăm în irişi profanări / şi, zilnic, pângărim zăpezi, / dar vine-o lacrimă şi vezi, / se aureşte-n zări…" (Radu Gyr, *Identități*) or white acacia flowers, metaphor of love: „nici dragostea nu mi te-astupă / sub alba-i floare de salcâm" (Radu Gyr, *Poetul către moarte*).

Vegetal elements often occur in the poetry of detention, grouped, twined in bowers, crowns and shrubs, marking the transcendent character of accomplishment. The circular shape of the crown indicates "perfection and participation in the heavenly nature whose symbol is the circle" (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1993: 371).

III. The tree is the axial symbol of verticality: „alții vor vrea să plece mai curând, / unii-n genunchi, iar alții ca gorunii" (Radu Gyr, *Nu ştiu cum o să fie clipa-aceea*).

The tree must be the world axis, *axis mundi* of collective mythology, mentioned by Mircea Eliade in his *History of Religions Treaty*. The tree is a symbol of ascension. Therefore, if the root that plunges deep into the earth means strength, durability, the rising trunk and branches stand for liberty. The doomed poet comes to long for "stalks" and "branches" and dreams to become "oak": „Sunt numai rod şi rădăcini. / Din mine pasăre nu pleacă. / Aştept în primăveri o cracă / şi jinduiesc după tulpini. // […] // Şi iar mă-ntorc şi lunec iar / prin galeriile de tină, / aştept aprilie să vină / şi-n somn visez că sunt stejar" (Ion Omescu, *Numai rădăcini*).

Rhythms of rise and fall make up a spiritual romantic bipolarity in imprisoned poets, which betrays the highest inner tension. Exhausted flight and ascension and impetus, threatening hell and saving island harmonize each other.

It is understandable why oak is the most common tree essence in the poetry of detention. This tree is the power that the imprisoned poet needs to face the Calvary, longevity and height both in a material and spiritual way.

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However, there are multiple meanings. Life is a "great passing" through light, thought Lucian Blaga who was mainly concerned with the issue of nothingness. Mihai Buracu's poem *Trunchi sfânt de Maramureş* is similar to Lucian Blaga's *Gorunul* and is an elegy on inevitable death. Wood is a genuine material of annihilation and organic dissolution: it grows from earth and returns to earth. The tree connects with Geea, the earth, draws saps of it and predicts a further state of the poet transformed into inorganic matter: „Lemn vechi, lemn sfânt, lemn frumos, / prin trunchiul tău trece timpul duios, / prin rădăcină, înalt, / ne legi de tărâmul celălalt. // Lemn frumos, lemn vechi, lemn sfânt, / frunzele tale cresc în pământ / şi fructele dulci, în care rodim, / sunt ţintirim".

IV. From the cycle of seasons, the imprisoned poet first chooses autumn, when the heat, diurnal, solar element loses its power and is overcome by cold. It is a battle already lost, as many impulses and obsessions struggle inside of him, in futile revolt, a hostile alienating area in which the poet is a victim. Autumn becomes a spiritual season, generic autumn of the self, and the world in captivity, in the opaque area of dissolution: „Un cer de plumb, apăsător şi scund, / Se sprijină greoi pe zări opace / Prinzând sub el, ca sub o carapace, / Cernite lumi ce-n văluri gri s-ascund" (Demostene Andronescu, *Peisaj de toamnă aiudean*).

The image of death is tragic-grotesque: „Toamna dezgroapă morţii şi-i duce-n noaptea groasă / călări pe vânt, cu luna pe umeri ca o coasă" (Radu Gyr, *Toamna*).

The wind (" air of the dead" at Bacovia) is the evil messenger of death taking human being into the "thick night" – the cold space of nothingness, relating human existence to the unfathomable universal force. The preference for the sad season of autumn reveals similarities between some lyrics of the poetry of detention and the symbolist poetry in general, and George Bacovia in particular.

Even in the *Preface* of Dumitru Oniga's volume of lyrics *Iubiri*, Maria Toaca has noticed that the poet's lyrics bear some influence from Bacovia or other symbolist poets living in isolation: "Affinity with Bacovia's lead verse is obvious: the same horror of reality and routine, the same discouragement and mute revolt, embodied in the sense of isolation coveted by all spirits condemned to suffering" (Toaca, 2004: 8). But she further observes a distinction, because Oniga Dumitru's artistic destiny has a trajectory different from the symbolist predecessors. "He does not make poetry of the tragedy of his life, but is poetized by the torments that have eaten up his being and still have not left him" (*Ibidem,* p. 9). Bacovia's echoes get through these lyrics, in which mournful autumn is associated with despair and resignation: „E toamnă, dangăt lung de-ngropăciune, / Perdeluiri de neguri funerare, / Trăim un timp absurd, o disperare, / Pe lespezi reci, genunchi în rugăciune. // Octombrie mai ţese-o resemnare, / O piatră grea pe pieptul nostru pune / Şi-nseamnă cu un deget de tăciune / Chenare mari de doliu, de-ngropare" (*Sonet 1*).

Even some poets' preference for grey, dulness, pressure, monotony, signifying death sends to Bacovia's lyrics. Demostene Andronescu entitled his poem *Bacoviana* in recognition of affinity: „Am însurit de-atâta aşteptare / Şi sufletul de dor mi-a-ncărunţit, / Pe lespezi reci şi sure de granit / Trec umbre sure-n pas de defilare". Or a stanza from *Peisaj de toamnă aiudean*: "Prin aerul vâscos şi sur se cerne / Lumină sură, zvonuri cenuşii, / Zvâcnesc pe fondul gri, nuanţe gri. "

At Radu Gyr, autumn is fragrance: "Adulmecăm doar mirosul ei bun ca aburul ciorbii", colour: „steaguri de purpură", „şi-o simţim lunecând ca o cătea mare roşcată".

The imprisoned poet can not admire its beauty, but think of it and "touch it" with his imagination: „Toamnei, în temniţă, nu-i vedem lămpile – aprinse", „Toamna, în

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temniță, n-o vedem niciodată, / o pipăim ca infirmierii, o mirosim ca dulăii". Therefore, autumn becomes a metaphor for *the longing for freedom*.

In other verses, autumn is a metaphor for *loneliness* that torments the imprisoned poet: „Sunt parcă mai singur şi plouă, şi-i toamnă" (Vasile Blănaru, pseudonym of Cezar Flamură, *Toamnă aiudeană*). This season of rain invites the poet to meditate on the futility of life: „Și-i toamnă târzie, şi plouă, şi tună / şi zilele noastre se scurg şi apun".

The rain water gets a purifying role since it can "wash" the heart "old" of weaknesses, passions, memories that hurt, giving to those in prison a new strong heart, suggested by the metaphor "burning leaf" : „O, de-ar intra printre gratii o frunză incendiată, / i-am duce la buze pâlpâirea văpăii, // apoi am pune-o în piept şi-am scoate inima afară, / şi inima veche ploii i-am da-o, s-o ia şi s-o joace / prin mahalale uitate şi pe maidane sărace, / unde, desculți, anii noştri în bile jucau, odinioară…".

But autumn remains the season of *nostalgia:* „Norii suri arată toamna ruginie, / Sufletul mi-l scaldă val de nostalgie" (Corneliu Deneşan, *Toamna*). Autumn then creates a heavy, gloomy and dense atmosphere, a universe of waste and human degradation, suggestive for a high tragic sense: „Piere veselia din natura-ntreagă / Și din chinga vremii anul se dezleagă. / Zile de speranță, biciuiri de soarte, / Sunt în urmă moarte".

"Trembling" leaves know longings and passions of those "patient in suffering", and their fall in "vârtecuşuri" symbolizes the death of hope for man. Also, the rain still dripping in nature is associated with man's mourning: „Picurii tristeții inima-mi înmoaie, / Curg în lungi şiroaie". Years of sadness are counted this time in "withered" autumns: „Ani şi ani trecură, toamne veştejite, / Părăsit în ocnă m-au lăsat grăbite, / Curge lin răbdarea, rănile să-mi spele, / Eu mereu acelaşi, stau după zăbrele".

Autumn, more felt than seen by those behind bars, awakens in them the need to mark neighboring with a shiver of eternity. Thus, this season of great questions becomes a metaphor for *the end*. The death of nature is presented in parallel with the death of the isolated man: „Taci, poate vom auzi în clorofilă / primul suspin din elegiile toamnei / şi începutul marei întoarceri în argilă" (Gheorghe Stănescu, *Preludii la elegiile toamnei*).

As in other lyrics of detention, death in this poem, "returns to earth" (as in the Bible: "We will return to earth, for we are made of earth") is accepted with a higher human attitude, because it means peace, merge with the universe, return to the primary light: „Aşteaptă, poate semnul va fi şi pentru noi / cu plantele odată să coborâm în lut / şi când ultima frunză va tremura sub ploi, / vom fi poate-n lumina din care ne-am născut!". The idea of end and death is supported by the prepositive adjectival epithet "the last (leaf)" and the verb "to tremble".

The poet's death of hope with fading nature is again illustrated by Radu Gyr in the poem *Ştiu de ce toamna…*: „speranțele şi-au legat de gât pietre grele / şi s-au înecat toate".

This time, the poet transmits his inner state to the elements of the cosmic plan: moon and stars, symbols of ascension: „Știu de ce luna pare o rană: / prea mult s-a uitat la inima asta. / Știu că fiece stea are lacrimi pe geană, / dacă îmi pipăie coasta".

Therefore, autumn in the poetry of detention is the season of the soul which does not last only three months, but most of the year. But spring, the season of renewal, rebirth, and youth gives the condemned poet inner strength to pull himself together, to speak creatively and to conceive original poems, dedicated to this season: „Flămând şi rupt, cu spinii m-am încins / şi-nsângerat din ocnă mă ridic" (Virgil Mateiaş,

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Primăvara). Almost all living poetry of spring gets hymn tones by celebrating the rebirth of nature, as in Vasile Alecsandri's *Pasteluri*.

Terrestrial nature is heavenly and blissful: „A pogorât din-nalturi Paradisul / şi-a-mpodobit toţi pomii din grădină" (Virgil Mateiaş, *Primăvara*). It is full of fragrance: "waves of fragrance" sending the "thrill of spring", the song: „Ascult cum cântă-n crângul de la drum / Privighetori şi mierle şi un cuc", colour and light, suggested by the metaphor "crown of petal and light" on the "foreheads" of plums and apricots.

The image of spring is depicted by blending harmoniously the visual, smelling, hearing and dynamic images, as in the metaphorical induction of the lyrics: „Peste pădurea de salcâmi a nins / Cu flori şi scânteieri de borangic".

The enchanting beauty of spring reflected in the clarity of the sky is caught in the metaphor "fairy sky".

Therefore, personified spring does not only set in nature, but also in the human heart: „Cu buze calde prier sărută livide feţe".

Radu Gyr illustrates in the poem *April*, the contrast between nature and spiritual season. Life bursts out in nature, while his heart is mastered by disappointment. As in other poems of his, *Prefaţă la cântece din temniţă,* the poet expresses the vitality and freedom of nature, using several verbs of motion: „palpită", „fuge şi nechează", „a dezgolit", „plesneşte". Fertilization power of nature and full life are suggested by the metaphor „pântecul grădinii": „Şi-a dezgolit grădina, femeieşte, / un pântec vegetal care tresare" and comparison of spring sky with female hymen: „Azurul fin ca un himen plesneşte / în cosmica, vibrânda deflorare".

The womb can get here another meaning: "It is a symbol of the mother, analogous to the cave, but mainly reflecting a need for tenderness and protection" (Chevalier, Gheerbrant, *op. cit.,* vol. III : 103), the poet thus living the acute sense of loneliness.

The last two verses of the third quatrain of the poem include two rhetorical interrogations: „inima mea, mai ai trăsuri albastre? / Mai creşti şi astăzi herghelii sirepe?" with *trăsuri* and *herghelii* as metaphors for hopes and ideals. Even the color epithet "(trăsuri) albastre" is synonymous with hope in the colour language, while "(herghelii) sirepe" suggest exuberance and unleashing youth.

The negative answer is in the last quatrain, because nature, with all the beauty and vitality fails to bring up the poet's soul enthusiasm: „Aprilie, zadarnic mai împrouri / porţile mele sparte şi oloage. / Dau foc la grajdul putred cu mârţoage / şi-arunc în flăcări resturi de landouri…". Life in prison turned "hergheliile" into "mârţoage", made everything grow old, perverted everything, leaving behind only "resturi".

The winter picture, as any genesis, gets greatness in the winter poetry of detention. Contemplation of wonderful winter landscape is a moment of excitement, of revelation, that the poet wants to turn into eternity: „Vreau să iau cu mine clipa / Şi pe-o pânză s-o opresc" (Virgil Mateiaş, *Clipa*).

The visual register is predominant in shaping the winter landscape. Everything is under the sign of a cold brightness, suggested by metaphors accompanied by colour epithets: „sită de lumină", „pulberi de argint", „flori de gheaţă", „fulgi în roiuri", „nestemate", „încântarea asta albă".

In these lines, the white picture does not stir anxiety and fear as in Alecsandri's poems, but the poet intensifies his longing for freedom.

For George Stanescu, the quasi-deserted winter picture of the world covered by ice inspires fear and danger. The frost is devastating, killing any trace of vegetation: „gerul acestei Siberii / în care cresc gânduri în loc de licheni".

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In such an almost surreal picture, human pain seems to combine with awful time, the artistic images containing unique associations of words: „cercul polar al durerii", „vifore de dor", „lacrimi de gheață", „iaduri de ceață".

The element that brings a wave of movement in this petrified landscape of sadness, „sania albă, trasă de reni" is missing completely: „Dincolo de cercul polar al durerii, / nicio sanie albă trasă de reni" (*La Valea Neagră, iarna*).

Everything is frozen and wild in Valea Neagra and men' hearts. Yet, troubled by pain and torment, people here are helped by someone else, by God, who does not forget them: „doar Tu, în ceasuri de azur ai să ne vezi / cum rătăcim prin iaduri de ceață".

Hope thus remains alive and unfrozen. Moreover, the poetry of detention is permeated with a strong religious emotion.

Therefore, the elements of nature frequently penetrate the poetry of detention, full of connotations. Nature becomes a metaphor for the soul. All the elements that make up the nature-imagery and its manifestations contribute to the individualization of the lyrics in the context of Romanian literature. Even though there is no direct reference to the condition of political prisoner, there is something specific to the isolated soul, a touch of bitterness and meditation, an obvious introspection, a projection of nature as an expression of longing for freedom. The poetry of detention strongly insists on its therapeutic function.

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