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Pădurea Spânzuraților or the Multifaceted Dimension of Love

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Abstract. The article debates the dimension of love in Rebreanu's novel *Pădurea Spânzuraților* [*Forest of the Hanged*], love seen as rapprochement, reunion between two peoples, and a genuine phenomenon of cultural exchange. Thus the image of the Hungarian people is shaped due to Romanian literary works created with Hungarian characters. The multi-faceted approach of love in the novel comprises: protecting love, paternal love, Christian love, and universal love (meeting Ilona). Eros overcomes the novel's tragic tune, faith and universal love between two people of different nationalities conquer it into eternity.

Keywords: universal love, Christian love, Hungarian-Romanian literary-cultural relations, eros

"The relationship lived with God primarily as divine love present in man" (Velasco 113) – is the dimension of Christian love rendered in Rebreanu's fiction, an axiom which relates to "universal love" as a means of soul to access the heavenly realm.

The paper proposes to seek the holy in the feeling of love between two people of different nationalities: Apostol and Ilona, highlighting meanwhile the Romanian-Hungarian literary and cultural links. Love thus becomes a celebration of the existence of a close cooperation between these two peoples, moreover a

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phenomenon of cultural exchange, a common language of the interethnic dialogue. The interferences of this kind have always constituted a clearly defined reality and they are part of the vivid substance of both nations.

Adrian Marino, in his preface written for Károly Köllő's *Literary Confluence*, outlines the importance of writing a history regarding literary-cultural Romanian-Hungarian relations: "I believe it is time to emphasize the existence of a void regarding the history of Hungarian – Romanian cultural and literary relations. Both in Romania and in Hungary. And by 'history' I do not mean fragmentary, documentary, or bibliographic contributions, which do exist and are indispensible as well as extremely useful, but a true synthesis regarding these relations" (7). The Hungarian-Romanian cultural and literary contacts favor the quest of one's own image of the Hungarian readership in Romanian literature with Hungarian characters.

Literary critics have issued a wide range of opinions. Ion Simuț, in his volume *Rebreanu, beyond realism*, suggests the revelation of "another Rebreanu." The novel *Pădurea spânzuraților* [*Forest of the Hanged*] is "the most important religious novel of our literature. Right from its very beginning it is portrayed as a novel of mystic crisis. . . . The metaphysics, symbolic values, discrete poetry of mystery constitute attempts to enrich the dimension of the novel, to multiply the levels of significance" (295). Love for Bologa is a divine principle, craving for the holy, as well as the search of the "other," revelation of "universal love," the great meeting with Ilona.

As a child, Bologa was brought up by his mother who instilled a mystic mood, having thus the manifestation of God.

> Right at the moment he knelt at the end of his prayer, the sky suddenly opened and in an endless remoteness but yet so close as if it had been in his heart, there appeared a curtain of white cloudlets, in the midst of which God's face was shining as a golden light, blinding, frightening and at the same time as comforting as a maternal kiss. Out of the godlike brightness a lively look could be discerned, infinitely tender and great, which seemed to peer into all depths and nooks.
> . . . This wraith lasted just one second and was so boundlessly sweet that Apostol's soul stopped throbbing, and his eyes were filled with a strange and sick glitter. However, his soul was so full with love that he would have been happy to die right there, then, looking at the godlike wonder . . . When he returned to his place, his face seemed to have changed. His blue eyes on his white cheeks were like two sources of light.
> – Mom, I have seen God! mumbled the child with ardor while Mrs. Bologa was trying to wipe her tears with a handkerchief bathed in tears. (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 33)

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The first form of love, i.e. "deity's revelation," is identified, according to Liviu Petrescu's vision, with a paternal, guardian love "born of a childish portrayal of life," the unveiling of a "completely other " located beyond the intelligible world of childhood, which used to fill one's heart with amazement, tempting the imagination through miraculous events, a harmony of contrasts and love (Rebreanu, *Realitate* 65-81).

The sequence of revelation is followed by the confession about the loss of the divine role-model, the denial of divinity in individual existence because of his father's death:

> 'I have lost God,' flashed through his mind, closing his eyes with fear as if he had wanted to prevent the blight. He clearly felt that he was crashing into a chasm without bottom and he could not stop, he could not get hold of anything. But this lasted just for a minute, or maybe even less, and in the end he remained with a fiery horror in his heart as if he had woken in the middle of the night, alone, in a huge graveyard, not knowing which way to go . . . (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 35)

Seeemingly, we witness our hero's inner fall due to the loss of deity.

Another dimension of love present in the novel is "Christian love"—it is the moment when Bologa's soul is annoyed by doubt hearing that the Czech officer Svoboda has been sentenced to death. "No duty in this world can enforce me to kill my comrade, says Gross, slightly frowned . . . Nothing is more than man!" (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 44).

Right from the beginning of the novel, Bologa senses the solution of love in the convict's "bright gaze."

> Even the death sentence was welcome with a smile and eyes . . . Of course, such people do not fear death nor are they envious. (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 23)
> The damned human eyes seemed to mesmerize him with their contemptuous look at death and beautified by a huge love. In the end, Bologa thought that the mouth of the condemned would open and give a terrible cry of redemption, exactly as the first believers, whom ground at the point of death, could see Christ. (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 26-27)

The size of Christian love is emphasized also by the reality of war that circumscribes the relations between Romanians and Hungarians, the pain in the souls of all people. Romanians, Hungarians, Czechs, Germans, all men in their liminal state of existence, were united in their sufferings by this death-machine/machinary.

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> The aspects of twinning that social condition creates shared by all oppressed do not miss from this novel either. The hearst Vidor gets along very well with his Romanian townsmen. People speak both languages.[1]When Romanian peasants are hanged for no reason, their terrified Hungarian neighbors condemn such acts.[2] Bologa lives his last moments accompanied by Ilona's love, his father-in-law Vidor, the mayor of the village, and other simple people of different nationalities. (Slămnoiu 41-42)

Bologa advances to lieutenancy, becomes an "apostle of war " in which he begins to see "the true source of life," a situation that triggers in his soul another moment of inner change, a new religious stage.

Experiencing the crystallization of religious feeling, the author passes from the events to an ascetic attitude—pensive, Bologa's evolution being decisive. "Love lives eternal, without beginning and without end . . . Through love you discover God and you high heaven" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 294). Priest Boteanu is to Apostol Bologa a touch with divinity, the amount of eternal values ("Our ideal is God").

"Universal love," another dimension of love in this novel, is meeting Ilona. She was "a girly about eighteen years old, with a red kerchief on her head, with big black eyes, that seemed to smile, with full and wet lips" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 92) — She appears for the protagonist as a light, as an opportunity of recovering springs of life, a materialization of light. "Through the window from the garden, the sun was shining from the east. A strip of gold was shaking awry, over the table onto the yellow floor, up near the door, separating Ilona from Apostol as a bridge in fairyland" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 198).

Falling ill the night he had decided to cross the lines, the girl stayed incessantly next to him, watching over. He could feel "the caress of her look on his forehead, and lips, so he did not dare to wink for fear he should dispel his heart`s joy" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 93). Breaking engagements with Marta enhances his moral shock; the reason of his decision had also been Ilona, whom meanwhile had fallen

[1] "The church yard was full of people. . . . Among peasants who jammed around the priest, Apostol Bologa saw many soldiers with faces transfigured by piety, stammering prayers. But he was astonished when catching sight of the Hungarian sergeant of his chancellery with a candle lit, edgeways" (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 205).

[2] "– My poor sister-in-law cried as a madman, pitying them, said the hearst! Two of them are from Faget, well-known men, Romanian, and one is a native, . . . Poor Horvath, dear priest, you must know him, from the railway station street . . . woe is his!" (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 205).

"Henceforth, Apostol Bologa has lost the track of time. Doctor Meyer used to come twice a day telling him he was alright but he should stay in bed till he would bring him a miraculous medicine that would cure him right away" (Rebreanu, *Pădurea* 133).

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dear to him. Seeing Ilona again disturbs his soul's waters.[3] The girl looks at Apostol with "a fearful curiosity and especially waiting eagerly for a miracle to come" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 132).

They share triteness, "Apostol watched her and listened to her attentively and still understood nothing. Her voice with its rough flexuosity as that of a wild song would trickle into his heart, through all its pores pampering his nerves" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 133). They look at each other coyly and anxiously. Then they embrace with an "angry passion," sparkled by love.

In the novel, the woman' body is not individualized, she is purified by natural elements. Divinity and womanhood seem to dispute primacy in Apostol's soul: "she vaguely realized that between God and his love there is a great gap, and he could not understand what was the purpose of that clash? If God is love, why isn't she an innate part of Him?" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 204). However, femininity is still a human feature. Daniela Gabriela Tăpârlea believes that "the chromatic symbolism of the novel contributes to the creation of color correspondence and the emotions felt by the characters" (41).

"Here and there, yellow, blue, green and red blossom the line of action" (Tăpârlea 42). Ilona is a girly about eighteen years who wears "a red kerchief," her lips "dark red and wet" were moving jerkily. The first exchange of glances between Apostol and Ilona is highlighted in red. "They sipped one another's look with so much excitement as if in between their eyes there had been stretched a red silk thread" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 155). Even the sun rejoiced in their idyll that was why there seemed to rule a "white silence over which floated the sun's smile, as a golden powder" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 140), and "from all gardens laughed blossomed trees, and on the verge of streets they had light petals shed, just like in fairy tale weddings" (Rebreanu, *Opere* 140).

The novel's tragicness is defeated by Eros, for a moment, because faith and universal love between people of different nationalities conquer him in eternity. Love rekindles the sacred, purifies the self, thus Liviu Malita considers that "Rebreanu does not oppose this world to a transcendent 'beyond' but prefers to make it occur in this world, i.e. a 'beyond,' by a fullness and a wealth without comparison" (305).

[3] Călin Teutişan considers that ''his love towards llona and the hallucinatory act of desertion are both subscribed to the coordinates of a pathetic and paroxymal solar feeling which encloses, quite undifferentiatedly, the love for a woman, love for people in general, divine love, sacrificial idea and suicidal decision which brings his life to an end'' (*Dicţionarul analitic de opere literare româneşti* 311).

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