THE I IN THE BACKGROUND. IDENTITY AND OTHERNESS IN HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU'S SHORT PROSE

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Abstract: *When reading the early prose of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu we cannot ignore the fusion between the voice of the characters and the authorial one, as well as some details regarding the inner construction, springing up of a profound psychological analysis of she who writes her work. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu makes use of the concepts "identity" and "otherness" in her analysis of the search for the self; even if there is a boundary between the real I and the fictional one, we don't know which one of these concepts has a bigger share in the relationship between the narrator's I and that of the author; the writer assumes the role of the characters as if getting into their skin, which is why their identity is like a reflection of that of the author. By changing herself into each of her characters, she manages to hide behind the otherness, allowing the readers to catch a glimpse of her identity – by or against her will: "…but I am one of those people that watch how others live. I have a huge shortage of life." (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 93).*

Keywords: *short prose, identity, otherness*

Introduction

In her early prose, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu catched the feminine character either as a central one (Manuela, Adriana, Bianca), or as an alter-ego making a confession in the 1st person, taking over the role of the narrator character, as we can see in *Femei, între ele,* (Women, among them) (Zaharia-Filipaș, 2004: 31). In each of these poses, despite the masks of the characters, it is easy to observe the author's face – the seal of loneliness.

The I in the background

Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu makes use of the concepts "identity" and "otherness" in the analysis of searching for the self, as Liviu Rebreanu noticed: "usually, as he creates, the writer stands still, looking on the world and on life from the same angle. Mrs. Papadat-Bengescu does things the opposite way: in her works, the world and life stand still, while the writer incessantly changes his observation angle, as if he wishes to capture life as it flows, in its simultaneous evolution." (Rebreanu, 1920/1921: 291). Moreover, as Maria-Luiza Cristescu observed, *the other* is the voicing of a condition, sometimes of death (*Marea-The Sea*), other times of sensuality (Sephora); the feminine characters are not truly characters, but rather only carriers of some ideas and thoughts. Therefore, the writer is interested in the psychology of the feminine character, and not the existential path (Cristescu, 1976: 29). The woman in *Ape Adânci* (Deep Waters) is just like Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu -the person: she writes, she dreams, she submits every situation to the psychological analysis and she philosophizes.

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In *Marea* (The Sea), the author brings to discussion death and a woman's way of thinking in front of it. Her confessions about the ideas, the feelings and the entire experience are composed of a series of letters with suggestive titles: *We're at the Seaside, Casino-Music, Sea Bathing, The Dance, The Passers-By, The Suicides, Memory, The Hymn of Life, Strange Disease, The Adriatic Wave, It Goes Well, You've Seen Dying, A Beautiful Day, Lyrics by Nietzsche, What Matters*. The topics chosen by the author of the letters in the prose *Marea* (The Sea) are similar to poems or songs of her senses which are amplified, interpreted and richly commented, showing a complicated and bewildered psychology. The author also uses letters in the prose *Lui Don Juan, în eternitate* (To Don Juan, in eternity). The addressee of these letters hears, but he cannot answer, so that the sender cannot tell if he's a friend or an enemy (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 148); actually, she doesn't even try to find that out. The character created for the writing of them is Bianca Porporata, a woman "as pure as snow and as warm as fresh blood" (*Ibid*: 160). Of course, these letters are the manifestations of freedom that served Hortensiei Papadat-Bengescu in her literary demonstrations, as she would confess, years after, to Ion Negoițescu: "Yes, indeed, I'm an impenitent letter-writer, especially – I was – while I was living in the province and, dissatisfied with the group of friends and colleagues, I would write to Don Juan himself, in eternity, whatever crossed my mind."[1] (Papadat-Bengescu, 1969: 16). And what crossed the writer's mind? To capture the image of the woman resigned while facing a hostile fate, to talk about pain, unhappiness, disillusionment and renouncement, the woman who was trying to cast loneliness out; sometimes she makes use of romantic motives: "I was alone, with no friend; I put my hand on the back of the cart and then the moon put her light on my hand and, closing my eyes, I thought that the moonlight is a warm hand." (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 148). The moon theme keeps the same watcher role in the evocations from *Autobiography* too, when the writer narrates her memories from the years spent in the boarding school:

> […] during the full moon nights there are forbidden vigils in front of the window through which, along with a few friends, we stare at the star up to getting a migraine, close to a hypnotic state. From a few voluntary allies, the epidemic spreads in the entire bedroom. I didn't incite anyone, but I continued. There are no punishments; we were never *caught* or the vice is considered to be harmless (Papadat-Bengescu, 1937: 6).

The garden which Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu describes in *Femeia în faţa oglinzii* (The Woman in front of the Mirror) is another proof that her literary stories are inspired from something real: "Then, from the deep bottom of the garden, from the cornfield as tall as a man, Puicuța, Alina's daughter, came out wearing on her the marks of an injured life." (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 379). These lines in which the garden is mentioned appear as an extension to an older description in a letter addressed to G. Ibrăileanu: "[...] In front of us summer is a garden and behind the house we seed corn. Sometimes, when the wind passes among the soft leaves, you can imagine you are at the country-side."[2] (Papadat-Bengescu, 1966: 34).

In the above mentioned *Autobiography*, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu reinforces the idea that her letters are inspired from reality by making an account of the circumstances that led to their apparition:

[1] The letter addressed to Ion Negoițescu is dated on the 2nd of March 1942.
[2] In a letter from the 19th of February 1914.

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> A summer over the gardens, over land, beyond them... A sovereign, overwhelming. Under it, wilted, there are people, thoughts... Only towards the evening there's a refreshing breath... every night I idly and delightfully tell *Vera* feeble words... They have a rhythm they might never have again... Later, that same evening, I mark on loose sheets, on sheets that can fly away, the brief verse of that summery rite... They are – *The Letters to Don Juan.* (*Ibid:* 5).

If in real life the correspondence had represented a means of confession, it appears that Hotensia Papadat-Bengescu sometimes uses the letter as a tool for confession in the subjective prose too; by letters she pervades the psychology of the woman who writes down on paper all her thoughts when she finds herself facing love or death; when she's away from the world and close to nature, she feels she merges into it:

> When I'm isolated in the middle of nature, I can no longer be alone, I cannot find myself anymore. It's clear that my kind is there and, surrounded by them, I feel surrounded by many. Maybe that is how it was meant to be at first – that I should be a plant.

or

> Ever since childhood, I took great joys in water. I love it just like others love people. I get from water all the bliss that others ask of human beings. Some other time, on an altar of the seas, I might have been a chaste priestess, away from human life, a passionate lover of the sea… (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972:5, 37).

So, we notice inside the text some kind of animism, a connection with the vegetable as if under a trance, but with the aquatic too, with reference indices to the idea of metempsychosis; the sea is masculine and seen as a hypothetical soul mate with which the author of the letters could have communicated in other lives too. Other times she brings to discussion the dance that borrows the rules of the natural laws of life, where the power always belongs to the strong, like in an eternal law of slavery, but it is precisely this rough law of obedience makes the woman discover and praise the dance with no partner, that dance of freedom: "Last night I danced by myself. You know our dream from school – to dance by yourself without giving the impression you're mad! […] The body cries… it laughs… it hides… it gives itself."*(Ibid).* Afterwards, she will be preoccupied by another type of dance, the one that takes the form of writing, from which derives joy, freedom and dedication.

> Those who do not know the taste of isolation don't know the price of an atmosphere either, or the need for a favorable animating rumor around, just like that rhythmical hand clapping and those exclamations that accompany the increasing enthusiasm of the dancer. In the atmosphere, in the affirmation I feel the increasing dizziness of the dancer – once the dance is over, I calmly sit on my place with the shyness caused by not having been able to give more, with the impulse of a noble publication. (Papadat-Bengescu, 1937: 5).

It's no wonder that in her works her writer puts music on stage, a domain which she felt attracted by, but without excelling, as she confesses in her journal pages: "For music I had what they call an unsuccessful talent, I very easily decoded it in detriment of a slow study, of touching every key; I understood the gap and I slowly gave up, even to decipher the musical themes for which I had much tendency." (Baltazar, 1962: 69). For instance, in *Adriana's Novel* she projects her heroine under the flag of this attraction as an answer to the expectations she had had in connection to music:

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> And when she sang there, like before, the moist shadow would startle on her sonorous and sentimental trill and the other partners would remain colorless and faded by the wide flight of the sounds that came out of her delicate bosom, as easy as from a deep and endless spring… Now, just as before, her grey figure would excuse the art's glow and would attract an envy above which her absence from the reality of everything would slip, just as it slipped above the sympathy gestures, ruining them. (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 222).

Right from the start of her correspondence with G. Ibrăileanu, the writer had wanted the reassurance of a constant friendship, and she even received the assuredness of it:

> When I was saying you adopted me, I didn't know I used such a good word […] Did you also adopt my needs, like you adopted me? I think that for me this consent is equally important as the success, and in case of failure I would still be left with half satisfaction. What a nice and rare thing is the soul's echo! […] I don't deserve that such good people should be so kind to me. I received great lessons in modesty from life and I took advantage. I generally have the nature of a good disciple. I don't say 'thank you' because thanks are much inferior to the feeling they spring from.[1] (Papadat-Bengescu, 1966: 40, 65)

This desire is also extended by the voice of the feminine character that praises friendship and searches for faith in people and in their warmth, feeling the lack of love as a wound: "to suffer and to be alone, but to know that somewhere someone loves you. To be tired, but to know that there are arms that would like to carry you. To be cold… and to remember the warm bosom of friendship. Not to rest, to suffer, to shiver, but… to know." (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 20).

The author's metamorphosis also includes feminine voices that weave their story in monologue-conversations; for instance, in *Femei, între ele* (Women, among themselves), the look becomes the pretext around which the stories of the characters on the terrace of a hotel are winding (including that of the narrator character). The writer brings to discussion femininity with its many faces, as she confessed to G. Ibrăileanu: "I have some *Femininity* ongoing, for which we are going to find a title together."[2] (Papadat-Bengescu, 1966: 46). It's precisely these faces that show the author's attempt to find herself; by changing into each of her characters, she succeeds in concealing herself behind the otherness, allowing us – with or without her will – to catch a glimpse of her identity:

> – I can't find anything to tell either; but I am one of those beings that watch how others live. I have always worn on my nose those glasses through which you look at others and I didn't realize what was happening to me. Considering my experience as a watcher, it would be easier for me to tell you that the lady with a black hat and a white dress is more sympathetically similar to the jacket with small squares and a soft hat considering the indistinguishable watching symptoms and the involuntary harmony of the steps that, when walking, come across the same spot, than if I could tell you something personal. I have a huge shortage of life. (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 93).

This shortage of life mentioned by the narrator character in *Femei, între ele* (Women, among themselves) is a theme often met in the author's correspondence, in interviews and even in the autobiography written at the request of G. Călinescu. Const.

[1] In a letter from the 20th of February 1914 and page 65 in a letter from the 14th of August 1918.
[2] In a letter from the 10th of October 1914.

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Ciopraga said that her work "appears while growing, like in the myth of the master builder Manole, by the exhaustion of the author, integrated in the essence of the created beings." (*Ibid.*: XX).

The author is in the background too when she indirectly stated by the voice of the character: "But it's more terrible to feel inside you hungry energies which shout and call for life and to remain forever paralyzed for lack of circumstances" (*Ibid*: 97); or "From time to time, Manuela would leave the surly silence of the provincial town. She would shift the pensive melancholy of the barren soul, the problem of vain existence and the mirror of interior reflexes on the loud and indifferent scene of the capital." (*Ibid.*: 279); but Manuela is not a singular case that feels the spleen of the provincial town and she states that without any shyness. Other characters from the early prose of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu live the same experience: Bianca Porporata, Adriana, femininities with which Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu intertwines. In what regards the author, the provincial environment is suffocating for her and not few times she confesses this deficiency to her friends. Feeling the lack of the intellectual environment while living in Focşani, she says: "It's very ugly [...] just coming out of the bookstore was the boy, the salesman, and when he's not there, you leave without buying pens for 10 bani, saying you'll drop by later. I told him passing by: 'Have you ever seen anything uglier than this town, sir?' and I felt at ease."[1] (Papadat_Bengescu, 1966: 33-34).

The character Manuela too from *The Woman in front of the Mirror* is similar to Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, as she is a version of the author because once again her face is reflected as in a mirror in that of the character's:

> She was no Amazon. Her Renaissance soul, of subtle feelings flourished sheltered from any danger, in a century tired of civilization, had known that 'yesterday' of humankind leaned towards the decadent, and now, suddenly turned from its way to renewal, was about to be the witness of primitive expeditions that would make the world a changing camp. She would sit there like a plant of the efflorescence ages or like a mysterious calyx of future forms (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 400).

The passage from *Femeia în faţa oglinzii* (The Woman in front of the Mirror) is only an echo of what she once confessed to Ibrăileanu in a letter:

> People with Renaissance souls, we all live a life full of excitement and of mental agitation in the middle of the events' nerves. In a way, I'm waiting and wishing for the brutality of the war as a cure for my much too sharp pains, I prepare for myself the soul of a tireless sister of physical pains, of a life savior, convinced that maybe I'm more guilty if I give it back than the calamity that takes it away and looking in the passion for charity for a drainage of an unused or unsaturated passion in nothing.[2] (Papadat-Bengescu, 1966: 52).

The sickness, the topic often approached in letters and even in interviews is a manifestation present in the early prose too, later growing into an obsession in the objective prose. In *Romanul Adrianei* (Adriana's Novel) the story is woven somehow *in* and *around* the heroine's sickness, as the author makes use of a series of words from the medical domain: sanatorium, doctor, nurse, white walls, treatment. Compared to the objective prose that adopts a more serious tone when dealing with the sickness theme, in her early works the characters' destiny doesn't reach such a high dramatic nature. The

[1] In a letter from the 19th of February 1914.
[2] In a letter from the 10th of July 1916.

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healing revolves around the white color: “Inside the white walls, on the white pillows, the feeling of existence was slowly advancing inside Adriana and her body was growing into a better shape under the white blanket. She rediscovered the sense of ponderability.” (Papadat-Bengescu, 1972: 246).

Conclusions

Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s confessions aren’t to be found only in her correspondence, journal or interviews, but they are just as well included in her early prose, an analysis prose with a powerful accordance between the character and the author. For her, literature becomes the area of intellectual happiness, of escape from the ordinary, of flourishing of the intellect. Although she appears late in Romanian literature, with no desire to astound, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu declares that she comes with the ambition of being a small Romanian writer. She proved more than that.

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