WHEN MOURNING GOES WRONG: THE NEW *TROADES* IN MATEI VIŞNIEC'S THEATER

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***Abstract**: This article offers a psychoanalytical reading of Matei Vişniec's play Horses at the Window, also observed in a comparative perspective with Euripides' The Women of Troy, the Ancient Greek tragedy that explores the archetypal figures of women in distress (mothers, daughters, wives, sisters), collateral victims of the Trojan War. Building on Freudian, Jungian and Lacanian suggestions, this analysis identifies the psychoanalytical complexes experienced by the characters of this play, and the improper mourning processes implied here, as a source of mental disorders and absurd suffering.*
On a different level of perception, the article also emphasizes the author's protest against the incessant wars performed by human race along centuries, and his attempt to change the aesthetic sensibility of our times.
***Key words**: Matei Vişniec, theater, psychoanalysis, mourning, Ancient Greek tragedy.*

Continuing the spectacular theatrical reforms initiated by his Romanian predecessors Ion Luca Caragiale (1852-1912) and Eugen Ionescu (1909-1994), but also internalizing the entire tradition of the great theatre of the world, Matei Vişniec is one of the most interesting contemporary writers and dramatists, and his constantly growing worldwide visibility proves that his unique vision upon the anthropological problems of the mass society intrigues and fascinates theater goers from various cultures, as his plays are translated in many languages and performed all over the world. The tenacious quest for new theatrical concepts, the tragic-comical dramatization of the archetypal abyssal circumstances, the lexical exploration of the grotesque, clownery, and puppetry, the omnipresence of incongruity, they all ensure a phenomenological impact. This theatre irreversibly transforms us through emotional mutations, forcing a change in esthetic sensibility, and thus labeling the author as a great dramatist of all times.

Born in Rădăuţi, Romania, in 1956, he studied history and philosophy at Bucharest University and had his début as a poet. In a way, he has remained a poet for his entire career as there has always been a strong connection between his poetry, his novels, and his theatre. He writes his plays in French and Romanian, but the English translations essentially contributed to his worldwide recognition. Speaking about recognition, I want to mention that in October 2014 Matei Vişniec was awarded *Doctor honoris causa* of *Ovidius* University of Constanţa, Romania, at the proposal of the Center for Research and Professional Development "Romanian Studies in International Context" (STUR).

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Horses at the Window, 2014, *Ovidius* University, Faculty of Arts, director Gavril Borodan

While the first half of the European nineteenth century, dominated by Western Romanticism, was charmed by the appeal of the exotic Eastern and Oriental world and invented the *Orient Express* in order to satisfy that longing, the last decades of the twentieth century reversed the process, so that all Eastern Europeans were dreaming about going West, and young Vişniec was no exception from that rule: in his early thirties he relocated to Paris (1987), only a couple of years before the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe. He confessed that he had decided to ask for political asylum in France the day before the programmed premiere of his play *Horses at the Window* in Bucharest, which was consequently canceled by the communist authorities. It thus becomes obvious that his desire to escape communism was indeed stronger than the excitement of his first encounter with the public. He even wrote a play symbolically called *Occident Express*, which builds on this propensity of his generation, and it was Moshe Yassur who spotted the phenomenon: "Vişniec creates paradigmatic images of the old Eastern longing for the mythical West as well as the contemporary globalization of popular culture" (372).

Five years after the failed Bucharest premiere, his play *Horses at the Window* was finally staged at the Célestins Theatre of Lyon, starting his fabulous career in France, and subsequently around the world. Then, in 2009, the English version was included in a performing arts festival in New York, called *Performing Revolution in Central and Eastern Europe*, marking the twentieth anniversary of the fall of communism. The event has also materialized in the publication of the first consistent anthology of Eastern European Plays in English, called *Playwrights Before the Fall. Eastern European Drama in Times of Revolution*. In his "Foreword", the editor Daniel Gerould confessed that he had chosen plays that "reveal the absurdities of an inflexible system based on belief in an abstract ideology that sacrifices the individual to dogma" and authors who "bear witness to the ravages of communism and to the traumas of its disintegration" (ix).

Thoroughly illustrating such reflections, Matei Vişniec has promptly qualified as one of the perfect case studies, as his play *Horses at the Window* was obviously coming from the solid Romanian tradition of the avant-garde and the absurd:

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the Romanian poet-playwright Vişniec through metaphor and image exposes the linguistic traps used to perpetuate endless conflict within families and among nations, renewing the avant-garde tradition of the absurd manifest in earlier anti-war diatribes from Central Europe (x).

In his preface to the same volume, called "Retrieved from Oblivion", Dragan Klaić reconstructs the background of the theatrical life in communist countries and offers a typology of the "serious playwrights", "exiles, dissidents, and boundary pushers" (xii), who made theater "inevitably metaphorical and symbolic" (xiii), and suggests that we could read Vişniec's play as yet "another exilic echo of the inability of the individual to control his or her own destiny under the assaults of big history and especially in Ceauşescu's Romania" (xviii-xix). He also associates the success of the play with the outpouring of sympathy for and solidarity with Romanians that came after the bloody palace coup/rebellion/revolution that liquidated Ceauşescu and ended communism in Romania during Christmas 1989. The parabolic features of Vişniec's play made the misery of Romania more universal and accessible for foreign readers and spectators (xix).

But beyond the possible impact of the historic context invoked by Dragan Klaić, I think that the huge international success of Vişniec's theatre comes from its acute mirroring of the human condition, which has always been subject to arbitrary options, to social and historic chaos, especially in war times, when history grows mad. The stories, the myths and the archetypes of human culture have always been the same, but great authors have relentlessly found ways to tell them differently, in the language of their age, reinforcing their impact, and this is exactly what Vişniec's theatre does.

It was also Dragan Klaić who plunged deeper into the metaphorical and symbolical substance of the *Horses at the Window*, keenly observing "the mechanics of death and loss in the futile grinding of history" (xix). Indeed, this is a major recurrent theme of Vişniec's theatre that I intend to scrutinize here. Like other war plays[1], *Horses at the Window* illustrates the post-war distress caused by the obsessively repetitive machinery of death and suffering in the name of endless wars, incessantly "performed" by human race, and asks the question: "why is this still happening?" It is a rhetoric question of course, since neither Freud, nor Einstein could thoroughly answer it, in their well-known conversation on the topic, published under the title *Why War?*

Speaking of Freud, Vişniec's *Horses at the Window* is a complex play and what I intend to propose here is a psychoanalytical reading, which illuminates interesting aspects. In his essay, *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), Sigmund Freud has examined the internal work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*), and the predicaments of the ego in facing the experience of death. Mourning is described as a conscious, normal, non-pathological response to a specific death, generally overcome with time, whereas melancholia is often unconscious, resulting from a loss that cannot be physically perceived: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (246).

Freud's model of bereavement, later on refined by various studies (Klein, Anzieu, Schoenberg, Raphael, Osterweis, Solomon, Green, Zisook, Rando, Cutcliffe, and others), specifically focussed on forms of complicated mourning (pathological, unresolved, or abnormal grief), can give us a hint of what happens with Vişniec's characters, experiencing not only the

[1] This article is a fragment of a more extended study on Vişniec's war plays, containing: *Horses at the Window*, *The Body of a Woman as a battlefield in the Bosnian war*, *The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True,* and *Why Hecuba*.

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turmoil and the intense pain of losing their loved ones, but also the anger and frustration associated with the absence of the corpses to grieve on. I think that their conscious mourning becomes problematic due to the unconscious chaos provoked by the physically unperceivable symbolic objects of their loss.

While proper mourning, by grieving and performing the mandatory funeral rites (magnificently illustrated in Vișniec's latest novel *Shoe-type loves. Umbrella-type loves…*), is a way of salvaging the inner stability, and gradually letting go of the affectional attachments to the beloved ones who were lost, when mourning goes wrong and emotional outbursts (crying, anger, anxiety, etc.) are repressed, melancholia and other pathological forms of disorder escalate.

The various figures of women in distress, whose souls were converted into mourning mirrors of the entire tragedy of the world, are unquestionably among the most obvious common elements in Vișniec's war plays. Like Euripides' *Troades* (*The Women of Troy*), they all have to suffer the consequences of the absurd wars and deal with their subsequent anxieties, enhanced by the fact that they cannot mourn properly. And they all become archetypal figures, whether they are mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, raped pregnant women bio-illogically hating their unborn babies, or psychologists from a different continent turned into mental patients after witnessing the excavation of mass graves.

Kate McNoil's case (in *The Body of a Woman as a battlefield in the Bosnian war*) proves that you do not need to suffer personal losses to be irreversibly distressed by the monstrous killing machine of the war; it is enough to be a woman, entrusted by gods (any kind of gods) with giving birth.

The recurrent motif of the window, so dear to the poet-playwright ("windows represent a reliable opportunity to establish contact with reality" in *Horses*, 380), has interesting mythological roots in the Romanian traditional civilization, in which the window is the gateway to destiny. Christmas carols are performed at the window in order to put away the uncertain future from mischief, garlic decorates the windows to prevent the entrance of the evil spirits, sick children are sold over a window, changing their names, so that the diseases cannot recognize them. Even the posthumous house has a window so that the communication between the white world of the living and the black world of the deceased could be possible. As an alternative to this traditional symbol of boundless communication, postmodern man has autistically sealed himself in his radical solitude. Overlapping these significances, Vișniec's window becomes an intriguing, complex symbol, a polymorphic theatrical motif, to be found in all these plays.

Each of the three dramatic episodes of the *Horses at the Window*, somehow corresponding to the traditional "acts", starts with the acoustic aggression of the drums, a symbolic reminiscence of the primordial sound, which is the very origin of manifestation, and generated the rhythms of universe. The incessant drumbeats (another constantly reiterated motif) are the psychological weapon of the warrior; their function is to induce terror and anticipate death, but also to announce the major events, like wars or theatrical representations, and this is exactly what the Messenger, a new Hermes, time-traveler through the entire history of mankind, does.

I am inclined to consider that The Messenger (recalling the disaster-prone messengers of Greek tragedies, cursed to communicate the disagreeable truths), who iteratively brings the bad news of the non-heroic deaths, signifies a kind of archetypal memory of mankind's suicidal impulse for self-destruction, as each and every death of an individual soldier corresponds symbolically to the end of the world. Similar to all the other characters, this man with "an immense capacity to experience sorrow" (380) is rather a theatrical metaphor, an insignia of death, an embodiment of the evil lot of mankind along history:

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Look me in the eyes a moment. I may still look like a man… But I'm no longer a man… I've seen horrible things… My eyes are already wounded forever… I bear all the dead in my mind… (393).

His eyes have been irreversibly damaged; no more horrors could be possibly witnessed, evoking the cases of Oedipus and his veritable *alter-ego*, the blind prophet Tiresias. Death has wounded him like an actual dagger, even if it is only an imaginary one, comparable to that which troubles Macbeth's disturbed mind.[2] Despite appearances (including the tragic-comical clownish behavior, his derisory speeches, his "cheerful" expression, and his little jugglery with his suitcase full of carnations), he may qualify as an almost tragic hero, as he was destined to witness and memorize, along centuries, the very type of "actions" ("incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions") that Aristotle described as the core of tragedy. (*Poetics*, VI).

The recurrent gushes of black waters which accompany all his visits recall the "showers of dark blood spattering like hail" (which is much more than a mixture of tears and blood) bleeding from the ensanguined orbs of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (1525 / 1280 in Greek editions)[3]. The sinister tempo of the dark waters, a symbol of the depths of the unconscious so brilliantly analyzed by the French psychoanalyst Gaston Bachelard, in his essay *Water and Dreams*, confirms the water's capacity to absorb human suffering and thus to become a dark water of sorrow, of death, muttering strange funeral whispers: "The subconscious is ceaselessly murmuring, and it is by listening to these murmurs that one hears its truth".[4] The truth is really unbearable, so it needs to be symbolically substituted with theatrical metaphors.

Like the mother-wife Jocasta, the only woman in Greek tragedy who questioned the prophecies of the Delphic Oracle, The Mother, The Daughter, and The Wife all hope for a mistake. Denial and bargaining are both natural defense mechanisms for fighting the absurdity of death:

The Mother (desperately): But how could this have happened? How? What if you mixed up the lists. Maybe you did mix up the lists. Are you positive you didn't mix up the lists? Could you perhaps show me the lists? (381).
The Daughter: Are you sure you haven't come to the wrong house? (392).
The Wife: Clearly I don't understand a thing (408).

What makes them special is their inability to thoroughly express their suffering, the repressed internal work of mourning, resulting in depressive post-traumatic experiences. Together they embody a figurative representation of the Greek goddess of magic, Hecate, with her three bodies, three faces, three roles, and with her power to unify the three levels of the universe: the earth, the heaven, and the inferno. We have to consider here her ambivalent symbolic nature as both a catalyst of fertility (motherhood), and the goddess of the terrifying, spectral, infernal creations of the nightmares, which qualifies her as an emblematic representation of the unconscious, the living inferno of the chaotic energies of the psychic.

[2] "art you but / A dagger of my mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?" (*Macbeth*, 2.1. 37–39).
[3] Translation by Ian Johnston of Vancouver Island University, Nanaimo, British Columbia, a revised version (2015) of earlier translations (2007, 2014). https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/ sophocles/oedipustheking.htm; Accessed 29 September 2016.
[4] Available at: http://www.azquotes.com/quote/834627; Accessed 29 September 2016.

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Also infernal, mysterious creatures, and also emblematic images of the unconscious, the chthonian horses are omnipresent. The horse in Vişniec's play can be assimilated with the red horse of the Apocalypse, bringing war and blood, an archetypal image which is therefore responsible for various types of fears and phobias. But it is likewise a new Trojan Horse, which deceitfully hits the Son "in peacetime" (383), "on a sunny Sunday morning" (383), and subliminally sends the message of the untrustworthy world that we inhabit, and of the tragic fate of any potential soldier.

The first episode is a possible illustration of the psychoanalytical *Jocasta complex*, a term coined in 1920 by Raymond de Saussure to describe the domineering and intense, but eventually non-incestuous love that a mother has for a son with an absent father. While commenting Matthew Besdine's ideas about the importance of this complex for creators (*Complexe de Jocaste, maternage et génie*), Didier Anzieu observed that a hyper-loving and hyper-caring mother is not enough to secure a complete personality, it also takes a tolerant, encouraging father (*Le Corps de l'Œuvre. Essais psychanalytiques sur le travail créateur*). The Son does not have the opportunity of being guided by a paternal figure as well, which explains his problematic self-confidence. The Messenger points out that he „didn't really know much at all" (382), yet „He knew how to stand at attention. He was very good at that, and my feeling is that while standing to attention he could quite easily nod off" (382). Standing at attention keeps him relaxed, as it is subliminally correlated with the vicinity of his domineering mother. He does not seem to have a proper will or a specific character of himself or even a proper silhouette; he is merely an indefinite body that fluidly takes the shape of a "military uniform" (375), which is neither "too tight" (375), nor needing any adjustments of the sleeves or the buttons. The Mother herself is more a voice, a "verbal trance" (378), than an actual body; she is trying to handle her anxieties by disguising them into torrents of stupid words and irrelevant questions, but this is only a defense mechanism, which helps her hide (repress) the main question, which she does not dare to ask: "why is my son going to war?"

Obsessed with the strange horse hovering around the window (incarnating his destiny which is ready to hit) and totally ignoring the concerns of his mother ("don't think of the red horse with the black markings", 378), the "strange and exemplary child" (382) mysteriously disappears after his death, leaving no body behind: "He simply vanished from the universe… He doubled over with pain, curling up more and more until he became merely a spot, then the spot itself disappeared…" (384). There is nothing to burry and mourn for his depressed mother, who has always been conscious of his unreliable materiality: "From the moment of his birth I realized how fragile his encounter with this world will be…" (382). Illustrating the same theatrical typology, Hecuba also knows that "If you give birth to life you also beget death." (*Why Hecuba* 3, 194).

The second "act" of the *Horses at the Window* stages an original version of the *Electra complex*. The psychoanalytic concept was created by Freud and refined by Carl Gustav Jung (beginning with his book from 1913, *The Theory of Psychoanalysis*), as a feminine version of the *Oedipal complex*, indicating a girl's sense of competition with her mother for the affection of her father. The Daughter's unconscious desire toward her dad is cautiously disguised in a daily ritual of tender carefulness ("Where did you leave your nightcap? Why don't you put your nightcap on?"; "Whenever you are frightened you should go to sleep"; "Come and lie down", 386-388) and repeated storytelling of the short ("six weeks", 389) marriage of her parents, ended by the war.

On the other hand, The Father's guilt-ridden surveillance of the hands of the clock becomes an allegorical representation of the devouring and time-consuming aspect of unleashed passions:

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I'll stay with you a little longer… I wanted to tell you something very important… This morning I noticed something … I tell you, there's something wrong, because of the clock. I think that the minute hand, every time it passes over the little hand, furiously devours a little bit of the small hand. (…) I've measured the minute hand as well as the hour hand after each passage… There's nothing wrong with the minute hand… But the hour hand gets smaller every time… See for yourself… thinner and thinner… Do you realize what's going to happen, do you realize? Isabel… Let me stay with you a little longer (388).

The Daughter's story about the toy-gifts that her shy *puppeteer* father had been piling in a wardrobe, not daring to give them to her, confirms the erotic nature of their "game", and recalls Lacan's option to talk about *the puppetry of sexual rivalry*.

But there is also an interesting connection between The Father's repressed possessive desires and his death-wish. He was "the only one who escaped" (394) the battle of Trebizond, after swimming "all night long among swollen corpses" (390), and he has learned that "Being afraid of deep water is the worst thing for a swimmer" (391) and that "You have to drink all the water that you will swim in. It's the only way to become a good swimmer" (391). The macabre experience deceptively evidences a strong instinct for survival, but he internalized death so exceedingly, that swimming into the deep dark waters of his own subconscious proves to be even more difficult: "The solitude made him lose his mind" (394).

The Father will spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair, after he was followed "with a vengeance day after day, night after night" (395) by a "nightmare" (395) horse, which is obviously an image projected by his subconscious, an alter ego ("the horse is no better", 395). Surviving is also a challenging experience as you have to confront the overwhelming deaths of the others, like Kate McNoil, Vibko's parents and sister, and Hecuba. His mourning also goes wrong, so after his nervous breakdown his death-wish becomes stronger than his survival drive; he withdraws into himself, like a living symbol of absolute solitude. His desperate effort to open the window for fresh air ("to let the smoke out", 386), symbolically signifying his need for a little bit of clarity into his dull life, fails, as more pestilential smoke is actually coming in from the burned trash, more opacity is invading his frail existence. (Kate will also try to bring some comfort into Dorra's life by opening the window to let the spring come in.) He finally transforms into a kind of ghostly living-dead, a presence-absence as The Messenger suggests: "The old man's madness is gentle and calm. His presence in a corner of the room will be like a beam of light" (395).

The Daughter is another ethereal presence and a problematic mourner who has repressed the painful memory of her father's accident ("Is it possible that you don't remember anything?", 392). Her father's attempt of teaching her to swim into the "deep", "black" "glassful" of water, signifying her own unconscious, has failed. She only confesses to be troubled by the light and the air: "In the afternoon the air collapses from such a great height…" (394). And so is The Husband, another victim of his aerial materiality, who stumbled and fell, and couldn't get up again, "Because of the air which kept collapsing over him" (407). All the characters of the play are truly "fairies", as the dramatist suggested in the programme of the French premiere of the *Horses at the Window*, a project that he described as a "macabre fairy play".

The last episode shows a rather dysfunctional, sterile (childless) marriage, as anxiety surrounds the idea that The Husband is fonder of his Colonel than of his wife. His superior is a kind of god whom he entrusts with ultimate authority ("The Colonel knows what he's talking about!", 400; "We really are lucky to have the Colonel", 405), and an ideal alter ego ("The most amazing thing is that the Colonel is also called Hans", 405). All his "musts" (cheap clichés) are

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introduced by the refrain "the Colonel says" (399, 400, 403, etc.). Brainwashed by "The Cause" (400), he is infected with a kind of war fever, but his militarism has an obsessional, pathological dimension and speaks a subliminal language, masquerading abstract ideals such as patriotism or service to the country. Vişniec himself characterized his play as a metaphor for the absurdities of heroism and the emptiness that is often hidden behind concepts like "homeland" or "duty", and Moshe Yassur confirmed that "It is a grotesque allegory about war and manipulation in the name of grand ideas." (370)

In Hans' upside-down inner world, generated by his perverted mind, the ordeal of the war is a creative energy: "war never kills! War creates! It creates real man, yes… yes, yes! Good man, true man…" (402). But it only crops brutes like him, and that is just in order to further crush them, to reduce them to nothingness:

His comrades trampled him underfoot. (…) No one could have stopped them. They crushed him against their will. (…) There was such a crush. No one realized what we were walking on. (…) There was nothing to pick up (…) All that's left of him is on the soles of the boots of those who trampled him (408).

His derisory sacrifice is grotesquely ensuring the continuity of the macabre ritual of endless wars. This choreographed fratricide violence acquires the symbolic quality of an ancestral ritual war dance, performed to energize troops and diffuse aggression, to fill their hearts with sacred rage. He did not die *as a hero*, but *like a hero* (shouting and running, thus pretending to be one) and I think that the *guilty* boots invading the stage confirms this sacrificial component.

The Wife intuitively experiences an irrational drive to misery, a Cassandra-like bad presentiment, or, in Lacanian terms, an anxiety connected with loss: "For a while now I kept expecting something bad to happen" (406). Her emotional sensitivity tells her that something will go very wrong with her Arian Husband ("My fair-haired, my wonderful!", 405), who behaves like a child playing with his toy soldiers. Apparently she is in a better position than The Mother, as The Messenger brings her the "10 000 boots… His last resting place" (408), to be washed, dried, greased, and polished, so that "to bury the dead properly" (409). But how *proper* is such a burial? Like Vibko's mother (in *The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True*), she has no other choice but to bury and mourn the *improper*, metonymical, remains: "The Wife (falling onto the pile of boots as though it were a real grave): Hans! Hans! (…) my little Hans" (409).

Vişniec is playing an inter-textual game here, by making use of the pseudonym used by Freud to describe the well-known case of little Hans, a five years old boy suffering with a phobia of horses, which he interprets as a confirmation of the Oedipus complex (*Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy*, 1909). Unlike The Son and The Father, Hans' death is not directly connected with horses ("This time it has nothing to do with the horse", 407) as an endorsement of the fact that Freud's little Hans was cured by his phobia. Actually none of the three Hanses (The Husband, The Colonel and The Messenger) fears horses. However, it is obvious that his accident is very similar to those of the other characters, and the comrades who crushed him "against their will" are not so different from a herd of wild horses running for their own survival.

By writing this play (among others debating the absurdity of military combats), Matei Vişniec protested against the incessant wars performed by human race along centuries, and tried to warn us to stop violence and brutal killing, forcing a change in the aesthetic (and not only) sensibility of our times.

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