# GAPS, SILENCES AND WITNESSES: THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN HENRIETTE YVONNE STAHL'S *MY BROTHER, THE MAN*

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**Abstract.** *Remarked from her very first book, Voica (published in 1924), and up to her last novel Le Témoin de l'éternité, printed first in France in 1975 and translated into Romanian in 1995, Henriette Yvonne Stahl turned from a promising female writer into a unique voice in the inter-and post-war literary life in Romania.*

*Starting from Rimbaud's illuminating pensée "Love has to be reinvented" (Felman 2007: 5), this paper aims to explore the identity of females in My Brother, the Man, drawing on identity and trauma as devised by Penny Brown (1992), Cathy Caruth (1995 and 1996), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992). In addition, the mixture of memory and narrative covers types of talk fiction (Kakandes 2005), the shift of focus from the subject of remembrance to the mode it takes place (Anne Whitehead 2009), and Beata Piątek who looks at how narratives impact readers (2014).*

*Are the main characters engulfed in a dense life texture able to explore their personal dilemmas, difficult choices and detach from the flux of their own passions and desires? Or are they going to fall victims to their own inability of understanding the meaning of life, paralleled by the lack of vision and humanity manifested by secondary characters? Both male and female characters display a dominant profile, their actions and inner voices are marked by subtle or abrupt shifts, meant to stimulate a noticeable response from those they love or hate. The omniscient narrator employs a vast repertoire of techniques, meant to nuance egos and changes, moving from a classically-structured narrative to a detective story supporting inner monologues and deepened psychological impasses, occasionally bringing fictional personae closer to realist and existentialist fiction.*

**Key-words**: Henriette Yvonne Stahl, identity, womanhood, trauma, love, death.



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## Introduction

Born in France into a family with German and French roots, a drastic medical verdict of a "non-viable" child (Cristea 1996: 211)[1] will mark Henriette Yvonne Stahl's (1900-1984) fragile constitution all her life. Educated at home in Romania where her family settles in 1901, Stahl studies drama in Bucharest (1925), meets prominent Romanian intellectuals before and while married to poet Ion Vinea and starts publishing her own volumes. In the 60s, she experiences the persecution of the communist system when her second husband, novelist Petru Dumitriu, flees the regime, but she later continues to write and translate. In the 70s and the 80s she becomes interested in Indian spirituality, as her unusual volume of confessions *Le témoin de l'éternité* (Stahl 1975) shows.

In Romanian fiction, feminine voices emerged slowly and quite rarely in the decades preceding World War II. Recent contributions examining the first half of the twentieth century and works by Henriette Yvonne Stahl appear in Năchescu (2008) and Filote (Panait) (2014), who look at female writers who stepped outside conventional, patriarchal views and themes. Bălaj (2009; 2013) endorses the novelist's presence as a 'case' in Romanian literature, by comparing Stahl's fiction to her autobiographical confession, triggered and published by Mihaela Cristea (1996). Other contributors explore instances of femininity in her writing (Nagy 2014) or reflect on Stahl's place in the literary arena, as well as her focus on a person's life journey, and the inter-war literary celebrities' interest for her personality, to the point that she is taken as a model for other writers (Mihăilă 2013). Mihăilă (2004) also discusses Stahl's interest in Oriental spirituality. The fluctuating political, social and literary environment of the epoch was carefully researched by Burța-Cernat, who, drawing on Julia Kristeva, believes that the inter-war decades allowed a certain 'feminization' (2011: 35). Crețu (2013) covers in detail Stahl's prose on drug-addiction versus elements extracted from her autobiography, including her first marriage, and continues his critical reflections on the influence of narcotics on femininity and imagination. In her article about George Călinescu's contribution to literary criticism, Wächter presents the critic's view as a major contribution to the analysis and discussion of Stahl's fiction (2011: 177).

In *About the Reality of Illusion: Talking to Henriette Yvonne Stahl*, Cristea decodes Stahl's style of framing events and characters, taken from the historical reality of her youth and adulthood, for a new complex

[1] All quotations from references in Romanian were translated into English by the author of the article.



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imaginary canvas. The result depends on her intense effort to grasp new meanings of life, to the extent that Stahl admitted her own bewilderment about her prose, distanced from the initial *reality*: "The mixture between reality and fiction is so amalgamated in everything I have authored that, after completing a novel, I happened not to realize how things really occurred. Fantasy became real and I saw reality through an absolutely personal prism of sensitivity and power of understanding" (1996: 22). The way Stahl leads her characters to delve into unthinkable possibilities, to occasionally feel the depth of an emotional abyss, and to struggle with their own nature was unique in the inter-war literary arena. In an article from 2009, Bălaj compares Stahl's memoir (*Le Témoin de l'Eternité*) and her fictional universe, covering *Voica* (1924), *Aunt Matilda* (1931), *The Star of Slaves* (1934), *Between Day and Night* (1941), *My Brother, the Man* (1965), and *The Pontiff* (1972). Bălaj analyzes Stahl's testimony against her rapport with literary critics of the time, her early formation and experience on stage, as well as her expression in fiction, highlighting the reading of her life based on memories and consuming personal relationships. In addition, Brown sees "a strongly autobiographical strain in female-authored novels" (1992: 8), which validates the writer's own vision and testimony presented in *About the Reality of Illusion* (Cristea 1996).

To understand the connections between Stahl's works and the cultural concepts embedded in her writing, this analysis starts from a view on memory expressed by Dori Laub: memory as a process and a struggle, based on witnessing events and reporting them in an oral or written format. Such a testimony validates, for an outsider, the reality of that experience and supports the struggle of the witness "to tell and to be heard" (1995: 63). In Stahl's case, fiction helps detailing intense psychological, sometimes traumatic, conflicts, in which both female and male characters move along or against their individual wishes and where their thoughts intertwine with actions in an either favourable or dispiriting sequence. According to Rudman and Glick, such emotional convulsions, impasses and indecisions are substantially attributable to one's "gender scheme" (2008: 9), which shapes close relationships and supports or obstructs actions undertaken by the main characters.

Considering memory as an imprint, a fragile screen on which its holder activates, deletes and resuscitates immaterial bodies, Anne Whitehead (2009) continues the debate on memory as a particular type of narrative, a psychological genre allowing an ongoing transformation. Drawing on her ideas, Richard Terdiman refers to "individual subjectivity" as the point that "is overwhelmed by the presence of the past and comes to seem dominated, indeed possessed by it" (1993: 84). Based on this perspective, the impact of memories and how perceptions shape one's actions towards the others is



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applicable to the four main characters in the novel under analysis: Olimpia (Pia), Adina Anestin, Gabriel and Matei Ventura.

The conceptual frame of this exploration benefits from the distinction made by Irene Kakandes between four main forms of talk fiction (storytelling, testimony, apostrophe and interactivity), when she inspects how narratives influence readers (2001: 1-2). According to Piątek, Kakandes thus widens the debate around oral versus written types of expression and interaction and her study acknowledges "that the recovery of the victim involves overcoming silence and withdrawal to witness to what happened" (2014: 42), which is the case of Matei Ventura's change. This perspective is complemented by the way Caruth deals with the "wound" as a condition that contributes to building a narrative, an idea that supports the examination of Stahl's novel, which could be read as "a breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world" (1996: 4), further detailed below.

**Waiting, Longing and Failing: Attributes of Femininity**

Women's fiction has a tumultuous and rather uneven history, both in (post)colonial and (post)communist studies. In her research dedicated to understanding the role of women in contemporary fiction written by women, Brown notes that the expectations and behaviour of individuals of one's social group strongly impacts "the internalising of these expectations [which] are often seen as a far greater obstacle than mere lack of opportunity" (1992: 6). For Brown, dilemmas familiar to a middle-class social background inevitably express the obsessions "with respectability and status" (6).

Represented through the actions and words of her heroes, Stahl's voice as a promising writer is accentuated by the revelation of Sandra Ventura's constant waiting in *My Brother, the Man* (1989), first published in 1965. The upper-class heroine continues to wait for her friend, Camil Tomescu, once a lover, to visit and boost her constantly low morale. The status of her inner life and unfulfilled expectations is suggestively explained by Stahl's glimpse into her relationship with her first husband (the writer Ion Vinea) in the interview taken by Cristea:

> "From the first chapter of this novel, what Sandra Ventura does is to wait. She waits for Camil Tomescu. She is dying waiting for him. I do admit that with Sandra's waiting I described my own waiting. Camil Tomescu, that talentless and failed poet, sexually obsessed, is a minor revenge for my waiting. It is a fact-driven rather than hate-driven revenge. I am glad to provide this example, because it clarifies the occasions one author has to transfigure, minimize or exalt one's experience" (1996: 181).



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Two sets of conflicting personalities dominate the narrative. One is the pair Matei Ventura and Gabriel Ventura, Sandra's two sons. The former is the dark masculine incarnation of will, consistency of actions and dedication to others' well-being as a physician, whereas the latter, his younger brother, blonde, chaotic, apparently angelic, actually spoiled, is unable to control his impulses and discipline his life. However, Gabriel appears to have inherited from his mother a certain inability to manage his actions and find meaning in his life. This masculine binomial has a feminine counterpart in Adina Anestin and Pia Anestin, their relatives and childhood friends: the beautiful, sensitive and musical Adina thinks that Pia, her sister and protector, really cares for her, supporting her career as a singer. In fact, Pia's jealousy of her sister, whom she thinks is infatuated with Gabriel, eventually makes her poison Adina, while Matei and Gabriel are both suspects and accused of murder. Gabriel's temporary stand as a criminal before the judicial authorities switches from suspicion to guilt, after Matei declares that he had committed the murder. Hospitalised for her hallucinations, Pia later thinks that she can pursue her happiness with Gabriel and recovers from delirium. Her failure to find fulfilment in a close relationship with the young fair-haired man leads to her late confession of how her hate against Adina resulted in her act of poisoning her eternally rivaling sister and in her subsequent suicide. Drawing on the perspective put forward by Brown (1992), the structure of the novel indicates that Stahl joins the group of female writers increasingly concerned with the development of their protagonists, their inner conflicts and the conflicts with members of their social groups and the wider community.

Waiting for the *other* is a permanent *status quo* for the main characters: Sandra Ventura waits for Camil Tomescu all her life; she divides her energy between waiting for him and taking care of Gabriel. Sandra's personality is far from the energy embodied by her disciplined elder son. Pia is also a quiet, solitary figure, criticized by Mira for her inability to lead her life independently. Although aware of her longing, Sandra feels resigned to her fate: "Still, it is better to have somebody rather than nobody to wait for" (Stahl 1989: 80). For Pia, waiting is not an issue about time. Her devotion to Adina is a means to fulfil her life, and when she discovers Gabriel, she sees a new opening, away from her permanent assistance to Adina. After the funeral, when the Venturas and the Anestin sisters are invited to the Tomescus', Pia's inner and quiet reflection casts light over her growing anxiety: "Pia suddenly understood that since the previous day, when she had fallen in love with Gabriel, she had done nothing else but chase him, look for him, wait in vain, that she had been in a state of mind that could not last longer" (85). Waiting thus relates to promising anticipation, a certain moral obligation to re-inspect the past (Whitehead 2009: 72) and the way



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protagonists plan or fail to unite their life with another being. Matei refers to this expectation in his desolate reflection, when the beloved other has a different agenda:

> "Camil was together with Mira, but who was 'together' with him? (…) That very morning, this girl was in his arms, he had kissed her, she had told him that it was easy to be happy. Had he wished, she would have been his. Trust? Frivolity? Anyway, they could have been 'together'! But how to be 'together' with someone, when you're yourself a fraud, when you don't stand yourself?
>
> On her side, Pia, intoxicated with wine, thought: 'together', hear, what a word! 'Together', Oh! But I must by no means be 'together' with Adina! If I could separate from Adina! If I could stop seeing her! Stop bringing her in front of my eyes! I know that she is no more! And then… to be 'together' with Gabriel! Together… Together with him!" (Stahl 1989: 88).

The feminine figures of the story stand for variations of femininity and identity marked by trauma and self-(dis)illusionment. Sandra Ventura is the loving, yet inactive, wife and mother, extremely subjective about her two sons. Adina and Pia display a high temperamental opposition: a highly talented singer, longing for authentic love, versus a silent, dark, often sinister female presence. Mira Tomescu represents the *mignone*, the constantly hyperactive woman, lacking durable relationships with those around her, as she is too centred on acting as the silent owner and apparently *imposante* patron of her brother's domestic and romantic affairs. Guided by conventionalism, she has no interest or willingness to engage with others, in line with similar female protagonists in Mary Sinclair's prose about whom Brown remarks: "the absurdity of the pretensions which are to become the mainstay of [their] existence" (1992: 41). Despite her typical gloves, ridiculous hats and conventional small talk, Mira claims to hold the secret of Adina's murder. Unlike other characters, she has a unique intuition which escapes the police and the interrogation of magistrates. She is the only character that combines a detective's flair with sheer misjudgement. Mira makes this hunch known to her brother only: "Listen to me, Camil dear, Pia is the murderer. Pia killed Adina. And I knew she would do it!" and continues: "But obviously, Pia is evil, evil, daft and now stone mad" (Stahl 1989: 163). However, she also voices a series of false deductions, which, despite their absurdity, strongly influence other characters' emotions and actions. At first, she tells Adina that Pia has fallen in love with Matei. Then, she informs Camil that Pia is after Matei, justifying it by an apparently moral resemblance based on strong will and detectable obstinacy: "Yes, dear! The two monsters have met each other" (122). She presents the quartet *amoureux*



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as follows: "Both girls, namely Adina and Pia, have fallen in love with Matei, and both boys, namely Matei and Gabriel, are in love with Adina. As far as I know them, this will end up in drama" (122). Mira's intention to please Gabriel and Adina, when observing a certain resemblance between Matei and Pia in terms of isolation and inflexibility, turns her into a *gaffeuse*: "Let's get them married" (110) she tells Gabriel, referring to Matei and Pia. She thus implies that a marriage between Matei and Pia could support the younger brother's independence.

She does not keep her suppositions only to herself and her brother. In a constant effort to prove her bright intellect, she tells Adina that Pia is after Matei, but Adina is, in this respect, as inert as Sandra, and takes no further action. Moreover, Mira tells the judges, after Adina is murdered, that she thinks Sandra Ventura was but "an unnatural mother", claiming that she loved her sons "too much" (167), and that she, Sandra, is the moral author of the murder. Therefore, Mira joins the set of female characters, including Sandra and Pia, who are torn between the desire to tell what they hold as *their* truths, and the impossibility of telling them, because of what Laub calls a "self-inflicted emotional imprisonment [where] she found herself surrounded by hatred and disdain" (1995: 64). In reality, the environment Mira creates for Camil and her complicity to her brother's affaires express her long-term frustration generated by her fiasco of her wedding night: "Shall I be like all your stupid women and let myself be disdained by other men? One was more than enough!" (Stahl 1989: 82) she exclaims in one of their *confidences* to Camil. Later, however, she finally discloses her vindictive attitude to men: years before, after her wedding, she had initially faithfully waited for her husband to come to her bed. Her waiting turned into utter bitterness and hatred when she realized that her husband was at that moment more interested in a game of billiards than in her. At that moment, Mira expressed her rejection of masculine superiority by actually pouring gasoline on herself and denying her husband the belated yet legal access to the consummation of their marriage. With a conclusive statement, "he had married my fortune, not myself" (123), Mira places herself in opposition to Sandra and decides to fight back against all males except Camil, who feeds her ambition for *la vie mondaine* and her financial comfort. Later, after Adina dies, Mira fights her own ambition to reject male intellectual superiority at the court hearing, when she almost succumbs to her self-assumed intellectual ability. This is the moment when she can demonstrate her brilliance in front of the judges, the ultimate male authority. During her testimony, the narrator suggestively points to her temporary hesitation: "At that moment, Mira Tomescu's temptation to impress these men was incredibly high" (168). During the hearing, the amount of details presented to the magistrates fails to support their understanding of the key murder



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suspects' actions. Mira thus misses the opportunity to act as a responsible and honest witness. Yet, her combination of intuition and failed inference is what makes her fully human. Emotions and logic do not work well together in her case, and the prevalence of one over the other emerges as a recurrent psychological expression.

The supporting motive hinting at hope, perception or insanity is the looking glass located in the main room at the Venturas: it is a silent yet powerful witness of the thoughts that the main characters reveal. Sandra Ventura's last moments occur in a dark atmosphere: "The light in the room was dim. A somewhat sweet smell of faded violets floated in the air" (1). The mirror reflects Sandra's passage from material existence to another unknown level. In the same way, the beginning of the novel suggests the idea of transition reflected in such a familiar item, the mirror. Reflections multiply further, depending on the vision of others, for example, Gabriel's reflection in the glass, which points out his immature personality:

> "Reflected in the mirror, he [Matei] also saw Gabriel, his younger brother who was behind Matei, on an armchair. Gabriel had wished to stay awake, but, tired, he had fallen asleep in the armchair and had remained there for the whole night; 'as everything Gabriel does, well or bad, Matei told himself, accidentally and unintentionally'" (1).

The narrative places the three protagonists on a dominant trajectory as passive or active actors in their lives, but the events that take place shatter their perspectives, resulting in a transformation unthinkable at the beginning.

**From Inability to Action: the Self and the Other**

Compared to the dark subjectivity of her sister, Adina Anestin's positive presence upsets the less gifted and generous women, Mira and Pia. Adina feels she has a life mission to fulfil, a feeling which surprisingly she does not share with Matei, but with Gabriel:

> "I want to sing so beautifully, with such love, that at least for the time I sing, the minutes I sing, people who listen to me should become better, should forget they are mean, their intrigues, and evil and hatred should fall asleep, and they should think of beautiful things" (135).

Adina is constantly afraid of Pia, as the latter does not understand her sister and cannot see that her beauty and talent dissolve animosity and resentment. Her communication with Matei is sporadic, based on rumours rather than on solid facts, both being unable to abandon worries and eliminate obstacles.

Pia's character is built on a straightforward dominant chord: the plain, unsympathetic female, eager to leave her sister and find an individual she



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can dominate and possess. Soon after Sandra Ventura's death, the two sisters arrive at the funeral. Without naming them, the narrator describes a beautiful, graceful and lively young woman, closely seconded by a paler presence: "The other girl, not so tall, looked like her, but she completely lacked grace, had a short neck, was stout, and her ankles, rather too thin for the rest of her body, were imperceptibly crooked" (28). Mira Tomescu introduces them to the Ventura brothers. The narrator adds another distinction, suggesting a personality gap between the two: while Adina gives her hand to Matei, being pleased to see him despite the tragic circumstance, Olimpia takes one step forward, but does not say anything, nor does she shake hands with anyone: "Her face was immobile, as a mask. Her eyes, unusually sunken in their sockets, had the colour of heavy oil, black with greenish lights. A darkness through which one could not see anything" (28-29). A rather uncanny silence is enhanced by her incomprehension vis-à-vis her own life, briefly suggested by an interior monologue:

> "Pia felt like a person struggling to remember a word, a familiar name temporarily forgotten. This time she seemed to have lost her very name or identity. Yes, who was she? What was she looking for in this room and why was there such an intense pain next to her heart, seeing these people fussing around and admiringly whispering round Adina? Why would she feel like shrieking and dying when seeing how Adina moves and responds gracefully? Jealousy? Yes, certainly yes, undeniably, but even more than that…" (29).

Pia's personality appears from the outset as dominated by illusion: she perceives the other fully against the perception of most protagonists. She takes Gabriel's kindness for genuine affection or Adina's talent for music as the unique reason of her social exclusion. While reflecting upon her existence and rivalry with Adina, Pia lets herself indulge in a rather comforting memory: the wish to see her sister dead turns into an interior invocation, "the same pain and the same longing for death, for her death, for everybody's death, for Adina's death, to see Adina dead!" (29) Thus, Pia projects her hysterical desires upon Gabriel, who practically embodies sexual and personal fulfilment in her relationship with the outer world, while she hallucinates about Adina, who eventually turns into a real ghost, according to the psychoanalytical reading suggested by Felman (2007).

The frustrated sister has an illuminating flashback when, in a group gathering, she perceives the mental abyss created by jealousy for the first time. She understands her own physical plainness, and the darkness covers her reason and heart. Pia's strain lies in a differentiation she grasps between herself and her sister, which inflicts increasing and reprimanded distrust and anxiety, rooted in their early childhood. This is in line with the observations



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made by Laub about the participant to a shocking experience as the first witness and "co-owner of a traumatic event" (1992: 57) and the interpretation made by Caruth of an individual possessed by a traumatic episode (1995: 4-5). However, it is the first time that Pia visualizes Adina as being dead while still young, and she thinks that this will dismay and anger people (equivalent to an involuntary "success"), while the thought of an aged Adina truly delights her: "But if she lives on, old, faded, wrinkled, lacking teeth, bald, people will run away from her and, alone, dead and abandoned, she would know…" (Stahl 1989: 30) Such emotions are interrupted by Gabriel's arrival: surprised at first, Pia recognizes him, and his ivory and candid appearance fills her heart with unexpected warmth. Pia's fierceness fades away and she silently follows Gabriel, absent-minded yet full of restrained anger. She prepares food and serves him, aware of their age difference: she is five years older than him, which explains her maternal and caring attitude. Feeling full and comforted, Gabriel gratefully raises his eyes and smiles at her. This small gesture will impact all Pia's further actions, as her instant reaction shows:

> "Look, this man gave me, perhaps, the most joyful moment of my life. Such a joy, meaningful happiness, unknown to me. What an extraordinary smile! He smiled like this at me. And in the years to come I will remember this moment, and his smile. I felt that, if happy, I could even be good!" (34).

She reframes this memory before she poisons her sister:

> "That moment, in the kitchen, when she gave him food and he smiled, was so real that Pia felt that warmth in her stomach again, and then her heart had its own twitch, a pain, as if it were alive and on its own. A moment of disgust, sacrilege, breaching the laws of life, the hell of sin, fulfilled here on earth, in her own body" (149).

She thus places herself on the fragile border between sanity and psychosis where her twisted thinking "can only occur in a world in conflict, within a conflict of thoughts" (Felman 2007: 51). Pia stands out not only because of her isolation and permanent frustration, but because her obsession with Gabriel communicates her sense of crisis to the reader. Can one feel any sympathy for her, or is she rather repulsive? How is it possible that only Mira Tomescu correctly reads her ambition and concludes that she is Adina's assassin?

Throughout the novel, identity depends to a great extent on one's reflection in the other, protagonists and readers, and their ability to react. The feminine couple (Adina and Pia) and the masculine one (Matei and Gabriel)



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relate to *the other*, the lover, but also to their gender counterpart (Adina versus Matei, Pia versus Gabriel). Such a reflection is sometimes interrupted by sounds, indicators of a violent breach. What Piątek observes about the reader turning into "a witness of trauma" is hence fully applicable to the narrative: a trauma and the reaction it creates in witnesses or readers is an "experience stuck in the mind" (2014: 33), turning into an ultimate expression of terror. The first instance occurs when Matei remembers his mother receiving the news of her husband's death. Matei, the witness, undergoes a traumatic revelation, which is passed on to the reader: "It was like an excruciating shriek heard at night during a deep sleep" (Stahl 1989: 3).

While Pia sees a way out of anonymity only by plotting her sister's death, Matei has a violent confrontation with his brother. The former returns to his intellectual isolation and plans his dutiful life, for the benefit of other human beings. However, he commits one involuntary error, telling Pia that he found Adina and Gabriel 'together'. His words induce Pia to seal her initial plan of killing Adina. To silence her own conscience, she first thinks about taking the poison herself, but in reality she hands the warm tea containing strychnine to her sister. Once Pia sees her sister dying, her lunacy reaches a climax:

> "But Pia, standing still in front of her, suddenly started shrieking. An inhuman shriek. Pia heard herself shrieking. Pia felt the first shriek in her heart, as sharp as a dagger. Then, as if the first shriek had killed her heart, she felt shrieks in her brain, fast, as a whirl of mixed-up thoughts. Her shrieks were clear, knife blade-like, playing above her head. Then she thought she had an angry hidden animal inside, howling wildly" (151).

In between painful shrieks, characters fall silent or numb, and the narrative abruptly turns into a visual canvas focused on "the oval and greenish mirror" (20). The looking glass further acts as an immaterial witness, the physical gateway allowing transcendental encounters: "He [Camil] saw himself hoary, aged, and there too, in the greenish water-like mirror. He saw Sandra too, her deliriously close head, laying down, young, severe, dead. In the mirror, they were shoulder to shoulder" (24-25). Soft or warm voices occasionally turn into a different kind of reverberation, able to sustain the intellect and to help the soul find peace, as well as into a reflection upon personal choices. Silence wraps moments of tension or covers them in a thick, substantial coating, supporting self-transformation or deepening confusion or anxiety. For Pia, the motivation for taking action after years of silent jealousy and discomfort is Gabriel's quiet and radiant smile, which determines her pursuit of happiness: "She was taken in by



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action. She was feverish. She had made up her mind about what to do next, she had decided each one's fate and there was no more time left for thinking…" (46) For Whitehead, memory allows humans to absorb the past and enable them to understand outer and inner changes (2009: 76). In *My Brother, the Man*, all female protagonists, Sandra, Mira, Adina and Pia, display the contrary: they lack the ability to reflect on their past and move forward in their lives without disruptions that affect themselves and the others around them.

However, Pia attempts to emulate Gabriel's smile, but her face appears as a twisted, disagreeable repetition of the young man's gesture:

> "A smile mirrored her cramped cheek and Pia involuntarily saw herself in the window, herself, her ugly face and that smile, and thus knew the weakness of her heart for Gabriel, her passion, her infatuation. In the window reflection, she also saw Adina's face, and once again knew the force of her charm" (Stahl 1989: 40-41).

On the contrary, silence brings back childhood memories to Matei, reminiscences of the day after Sandra's funeral when, before waking up, he intently listens to it: "From the other rooms of the house lively whispers came to him" (54). Later, noticing the placidity of people around him in a cafeteria, he suddenly feels overwhelmed by the meanness and futility of human life, which he instantly rejects in a brief monologue: "What about the obvious placidity on their faces? This world isn't my world. I can't accept it. And I don't accept myself, I despise myself too…" (66). Before meeting Adina, Matei had been guided in his life by the idea of pursuing a goal, of testing himself, as well as others. The emotions which the young woman musician instilled in his being stir an unbearable flux. He attempts to distance himself from a futile existence, but does not find the means to combine self-discipline and a high sense of duty with love. He is overwhelmed by the dilemma to which he needs to find the key on his own: "He felt lonely, sealed by loneliness and crushed by an unintelligible responsibility, wrapped into himself. He carried the immense sadness of his destiny" (66-67).

### Activating Altruism: a Lever to Sublimating Desire

While Camil considers himself a genuine benefactor, he actually shifts from narcissism-oriented encounters with Sandra, who silently confirms his masculinity, to opportunistic plans towards her sons. He aims to extend his role as a legal tutor after Ion Ventura's death. Thus, Camil comes into direct conflict with Pia, who remains silent but has no intention to share Gabriel's



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presence or wealth. Pia's reaction shows that she is fully aware of the benefits resulting from her anticipated affair: "How could he think that I would let him deal with Gabriel's wealth! I will deal with it! I" (99). Later, Pia wants to settle in the Ventura estate as a protector, to manage the practically abandoned *menage* of the two men, Matei and Gabriel. As this cannot happen without Matei's consent, she hides her plan under a generous proposal: to take care of their house means to support Adina, or even to protect her from falling in love with Gabriel. Matei unintentionally helps Pia get one step closer by giving her a key to their house. Pia is thrilled, planning to make this space hers too, and notes her resemblance to Matei's dark nature:

> "'This man resembles me. Not in terms of looks. His heart, his heart is like mine… we share something…' Here Pia made an effort, and then kept on thinking: 'His pain corresponds to mine. He is as bad as I am… as thirsty as I am, but of something impossible…'" (103).

She rejoices at the idea that Adina will suffer because of Matei, or that she will wait or weep for him. Unaware of her plan, Adina remains at the Tomescus, and when Gabriel finally arrives, Mira notices a particular trait they share: "…look, Adina and you [Gabriel] don't look alike, and yet… you do." Gabriel also notes: "Pia and Matei resemble as well, even if… they do not look alike!" (110).

After Adina's death, magistrates collect evidence and take testimonies from the two main suspects, Gabriel and Matei, since an upper-class female criminal was practically excluded at the time. The narrator then reveals one detail to the external witness, the reader: the red lipstick found on Gabriel's night gown is, based on physical evidence, believed to be Adina's; in fact, both sisters used the same lipstick. During the criminological inquiry, Matei temporarily echoes Pia's earlier emotions: "Jealousy – increasingly higher – tormented his soul." (179) Although initially denied a chance to read the last letter Adina wrote to him, Matei has access to it as legal evidence later, and understands that she had truly loved him, considering the document "a will and a verdict" (179). The young physician then goes through a second metamorphosis: for him, taking his life parallels Sandra's camouflaged suicide, her ongoing apathy. His decisive statement "I will punish myself for being human" is followed by the omniscient narrator's comment: "He did not realize that the decision he did make was yet but cold intoxication, a narcosis, self-satisfaction, which did not ground anything positive." (183)

In fact, Matei's decision to accept imprisonment accelerates the pace of events, whereas Gabriel can hardly believe that he would be released. Once free, the young brother cannot enjoy life, as his former friends shunned him.



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His visit to Pia, hospitalized for insanity, causes a reverse reaction. Pia abandons her immobile look and then, when Gabriel leaves her room, she voices her longing: "[he] heard his name desperately shouted, a groan, almost a howl" (199). Her abrupt recovery in the coming days has no substantial impact on her inner life. Pia's impulsive nature inspires Gabriel to tell the hospital management that she is well, suggesting she should be taken to his home, not hers. Gabriel aims to show his compassion and agrees on her plan. They immediately announce their engagement to hospital officials – Pia's idea – and she regains her self-control, while looking at him with growing "ardour" (206). She dreams of herself as a fiancé or a wife. Pia hesitantly looks in the oval mirror, in its greenish light, and sees her image superimposed on Adina's. For her, the border between a depriving reality and her fantasy of being loved by Gabriel is reflected in the looking glass, enhancing the edge between sanity and madness in the context of private and public trauma, as discussed by Piątek (2014). In an almost catatonic state, she fantasises about Gabriel returning home, accompanied by Adina, visualising them embraced over her body, a dream-like conceptualization similar to what Whitehead proposed, according to which "the past is relieved with an overwhelming intensity and immediacy" (2009: 118). In fact, Adina continues to haunt Pia, even more than she was alive.

When Pia inspects her image in the mirror, she notes the similitude Mira once remarked between herself and Matei. At the same time, the imprisoned young physician becomes aware of his empty heart, a timeless abyss he fights with, trying to achieve a sense of inner freedom. On the third day, he realizes the futility of his decision, that his mind is not the key to a life journey. His previous life only appears as a "thorough farce" (Stahl 1989: 239). Matei's plan is to escape that role, to devote himself to others as a doctor. In a symbolic episode which interrupts the narrative, he helps a self-mutilated prisoner, a female communist dissident, confined on political grounds. Thus, the story continues with a section referring to political activism, since the novel was written in the 1960s, under harsh communist censorship and strict cultural control.

Matei then turns from an inflexible, rather egotistic upper-class individual into an altruist: he helps the young female prisoner, leaving behind psychological dilemmas with no benefit for the wider society. His resemblance to Pia, in terms of detachment and strong will, stops at this point when his character is marked by real empathy for any suffering human being. This episode shows a quality he was incapable of before his imprisonment. During his days spent in the public hospital, he felt no sympathy for another patient's death, regarding it as a mere unsuccessful medical case. Comparing the initial resemblance noted by Mira between Matei and Pia with his developing moral profile, Matei's role is both a



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"statement" and a "reply" to Pia's reactions, if we consider the terms proposed by Kakandes (2001). Matei surpasses his jealousy of Gabriel and feels the imperative to work for the benefit of others. His lucidity does not diminish after caring for the young woman who had mutilated herself for a political cause. However, he realizes that social progress depends on each individual's contribution.

From an aesthetic point of view, this episode actually dilutes the narrative, despite Stahl's effort to make it credible with a well-contrived plot. However, the end of the episode presents Matei's illumination with distinct accuracy. In spite of his initial harshness, visible to all the other protagonists until Adina's death, Matei suddenly emerges as a highly sensitive and sensible human being. He resonates with the unnamed young woman's pain, and bandages her wounds with infinite care. The narrator's indirect statement related to the female – "She had thus lived the great measure of loneliness" (Stahl 1989: 256) – mirrors Matei's earlier thinking, when he acutely perceived how loneliness sealed his fate. What could be the factor behind his profound yet clearly dramatic change? Although it appears that the young woman's suffering triggers his unexpected revelation, the narrator's effort to follow his thoughts highlights two elements absent in the first part of the story. Firstly, it is Matei's switch in social status: the young and respected physician, part of the Bucharest bourgeoisie, becomes an apparently vicious criminal, rejected by the whole society. His name only causes concern, if not disgust, among the guardians and the other prisoners. Secondly, the loss of his social and professional status affects his previous unstoppable drive. From an individual constantly preoccupied with achieving a rational outcome, revolted by the lethargy of his upper-class elite fellows, Matei abandons his own intransigence and mental status quo. Freed from the initial simplistic opposition against his mother, his brother and Camil, actually against almost everyone around him, the young man focuses on survival, the wish to live on despite most depressing circumstances. In such a state, he feels inexplicable empathy towards the young woman. He needs to do something useful for another individual, even more so when he understands her intense pain. In terms of psychology, he becomes aware of a state of mind he had waited for all his life. As part of his life journey, his attitude towards the young dissident equals an epiphany: "The elevating certainty that, at last, he is in front of a human being as he expected to meet, as he wished to find, filled his heart" (255). By leaving behind his hostility and inflexibility, Matei sees himself as part of a wider mechanism, not only in terms of space and number of individuals in society, but also in terms of generations to come.



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In contrast, feeling more and more isolated, Pia can hardly benefit from her recently gained freedom and finally decides to take her own life. The end finds her confessing her obsession with Gabriel:

> "I didn't love him with my heart, Pia ardently whispered, as if these words were her prayer before death – I didn't love him with my blood, or my nerves – It was as if I loved him with my very bones – my bones ache when I think of him" (269).

She goes to say good-bye to Gabriel, but he has a violent outburst, blaming her for begging for compassion. "There was a while when, loving you and your angelic soul, I thought I would save myself from the horror of my own self", she says, eventually disclosing her plan and accusing him of being "a brutish angel" (271), before she drinks the strychnine. Before she dies, she confesses it was she who murdered Adina, whereas Gabriel, anxious but lucid, feels sympathy for her for the first time. Pia's testimony validates the hypothesis put forward by Radstone that "[a]n act of confession may have as its subject a murder committed and could lead, and in some cases still might lead, to the judicial killing of the confessant" (2007: 67). By taking her life before the judicial authorities make any decision regarding her crime, Pia completes two acts: firstly, she escapes the public opprobrium; secondly, she implicitly denies her access to eventual forgiveness or the support of the Orthodox Church. In this way, she takes the facile route of avoiding any higher instance, be it private or public.

Gabriel overcomes his revulsion towards Pia, who has never inspired in him any affection before, and comforts her while she delivers her confession. Listening to her is like a moral duty, a proof of brotherly love, a way to take all the guilt on himself. It mirrors the beginning of the novel, the shift from Adina's and Pia's images to Sandra as Pia, two women willing to possess a man-child (Gabriel). By witnessing Pia's death, Gabriel undergoes a process of purification: he abandons his selfish plans and hectic pursuits, looking for a moral condition he has seemed incapable of. In this process, Gabriel changes from a witness of human life and death to an actor of his own existence and moral growth: "I have awakened to a new reality, now, this very moment. I have awakened and will act in consequence" (Stahl 1989: 274). He finds within himself the power to help Matei regain his freedom by supporting Pia to deliver her testimony. His unexpected spiritual progress transforms him from a "fallen" angel into a genuine hero, able to play a constructive social role. Gabriel can be now identified with the archangel, a prototype of grace, whom he has been disconnected from.

The meandering journey of the protagonists from *My Brother, the Man* indicates that their route connects to the similarly sinuous existence of the



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author herself, who was constantly concerned to select real or autobiographical elements and reconfigure them through her writing. Moreover, Stahl's vocation for introspection and confession – her last book, *Le Témoin de l'Eternité*, proves it very well – emerges here as a projection of a strong authorial voice. In contrast, the route of the main characters follows a fragmented psychological pattern, despite the classical structure of the novel: they are part of what Radstone calls "a deconstruction of the 'individual' whose coherence and perspective constituted the essence of the realist mode of representation, positing that individual's coherence, unity and autonomy as fundamentally illusory" (2007: 30). It is more than a symptom, it turns into an obsession of contemporary fiction, which is the case in Stahl's subsequent novels as well.

**Conclusion**

For the central characters of *My Brother, the Man*, love is about waiting and suffering, which emerges in monologues, dialogues and brief descriptions where protagonists disclose and hide thoughts, emotions and intentions rendering their journeys to their own selves: more often than not far from clear to themselves. Both male and female characters are subtly and unexpectedly attracted to each other and their performance in complex social groups determines fluctuations of reason and emotion. Short calm intermezzos alternate with climactic moments, while the main actors visit and re-visit their worries, build apparently accurate plans, follow opportunistic or altruist goals, and interact with others in ways they cannot entirely foresee.

The protagonists continuously test the ground, attempt to or actually do influence others, act upon or react to external factors and often surprise others and themselves. They often act as prompted by others, which connects to the mirror as a symbolic presence throughout the story. The mirror either relates to the strength of crossing material boundaries, or to surpassing unbridled drives with the aim to authentically support the others' well-being. If both Matei and Gabriel accomplish such objectives, Adina and Pia cannot escape their personality frame, which is true for Mira and Camil as well.

The narrative often strikes a realistic note, especially when the feelings concern the death of close family members, when wills and desires are projected in a bleak realm, which the writer controls until the end. The result is a fabric comprising what Caruth calls "the complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it" (1996: 4).

In her novel, Stahl presents voices of both male and female characters, but the author's position, closer to that of a detached analyst, places her prose at the crossroads of femininity and masculinity, rather distanced from



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the mainstream fiction by women and the cultural pattern of her time. If this helps illuminate the fact that, according to Wächter, there is but limited constructive criticism of her writing (2011: 177), criticism still heavily impregnated by male authoritarian personalities who gave her partial credit for her themes and style, her novel is now usefully opened up to necessary further debates on memory, gender and trauma, as well as to nuances and connections with other areas of cultural studies.

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