THE BASHFUL PARADIGM (MATILDA)

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Abstract

The article explores the literary works and destiny of Matilda Cugler-Poni, one of the first Romanian *poetesses*, placed by Titu Maiorescu among the living promises of literary revival in his famous article *New Direction in Romanian Poetry and Prose* (1872). The present article argues that through her poetry the standard image of the feminine hypostasis might be detected: built from fragility, delicacy, sensibility and rhetorical passion and focused on suffering in love. Nevertheless, this pendant of feminity, worn with grace by the poetess until the period between the wars, will be corrupted by a first impetus of emancipation and translated in a violent type of sensualisation of the language, as well as in images that aspire to bodily concreteness and directness.

Keywords: Feminity, Sensuality, Body, Modernity, Romanticism

In his introduction to the *New Direction in Romanian Poetry and Prose* (1872), Titu Maiorescu establishes the defining group characteristics of the „new direction" which, in contrast to the old and forgotten one, is defined by its natural feeling, its truth and understanding of the ideas that the whole humanity owes to the Western civilization and, finally, by its success in maintaining and even intensification of the national element"[2]. Among the living promises of this revival there is also one of our first *poetess*, Matilda Cugler-Poni (a precocious poet which has her debut in 1867 at no more than 16 years, in the magazine *Literary Dialogues*), towards whom Maiorescu acknowledges, a few pages further down the road, „our pleasure – and, maybe it's not too much to say: a sort of recognition for her literary achievements"[3].

It's true, this recognition comes rather from the unpleasant contrast with the 'old direction' as well as with the 'wrong' contemporary direction: "Political intentions, emotional emphasis, forced expressions, crude language are at the order of the day for most of our poetry writers"[4], for those outside the new direction, obviously. Such mistakes – at last! – are not to be found in Matilda's literary production. When it comes to presenting her own poetry, Maiorescu assumes that 'what must have enchanted the readers' has to be, in them, 'the elegance of language' and – but this one only as a "maybe" – 'the honesty of the feeling'[5]. "A special merit" goes to the "precision with which the poetry is composed and that successfully avoids the long repetition of the same idea"[6]. It's true that the 'poetry of miss Cugler' suffers from the 'compelling influence of

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[2] *Opere*, I, Edited by *Georgeta Rădulescu-Dulgheru* and *Domnica Filimon*. Introduction by *Eugen Todoran*, Bucureşti, Editura Minerva, 1978, p. 158.

[3] Idem, p. 166.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Idem, ibidem, p. 178.

[6] Ibid.

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Heine and Lenau'[7], but at least it's Heine and Lenau, that is the general ingredients of the reigning whipping paradigm of the epoch! When, later, in the middle of some debates around the meaning of Maiorescianism (in 1943, in the article *Holes in Maiorescu's Critique*), Pompiliu Constantinescu will try to explain the stake in Maiorescu's wager, he will blame the 'team spirit' and the 'team critique' (necessary elements of a 'shock critique', as it was, in Pompiliu's view, the entire criticism of the XIXth century), whose first signs are visible even in this article[8]. But, around 1904, even Ilarie Chendi thought that one of Matilde's romances – *In the green forest* – 'conveys suggestively the last hope of a hopeless artist"[9] (so, again, a sort of honesty of feeling; and this kind of honesty, as is well known, is a kind of art) that even if it were only for this poem, the poetess should be included in the basic anthology of Romanian literature.

Matilda was not exactly a dull representative of the Junimea group. Apparently, by means of the group's effort[10], she got married, first, with Vasile Burlă, and after several years, with the chemist Petru Poni. Rumours had it, says Călinescu in his *History...[11]*, that she was courted even by Eminescu (rumour denied, however, by the poet); the fact remains that the saloon of the Poni family was frequented, at the same time, by Eminescu, Slavici, Creangă and by the historicist A.D.Xenopol[12] (which, according to the same rumours, seems to have also developed a passion for Matilda, as is reported by Călinescu), as well as by other Junimists. Thanks to Maiorescu's recommendation, Matilde's entry into Romanian literature was not exactly discrete, even if disappointment didn't fail to appear right after the prestigious letter of reference. When it will fall under Călinescu's scrutiny, her poetry will appear to the latter as "chaste as an angel with the hands joined together. It is a poetry for retirement houses scrap books, with small birds, little butterflies, in the pious manner of the young misses who are supervised by their nannies. The sentimental situations are conventional"[13]. (On the other hand, this other statement from Călinescu is not at all true, namely that in Matilde's poetry everything happens exactly like in pictures"[14]; on the contrary, in Matilde, one suffers almost helplessly, with rare moments of joy). We are talking, indeed, of a sentimental scrap book poetry, gracious and naive (or gracious in a naive manner) in its images and delicate in its feelings (even if sometimes, the author passes through violent, even angry registers); a

[7] Ibid.
[8] Pompiliu Constantinescu, *Scrieri,* III, edited by Constanța Constantinescu, preface by Victor Felea, Bucureşti, Editura pentru literatură, 1969, p. 544
[9] *Scrieri*, III, *Foiletoane, 1903-1904,* edited by Dumitru Bălăeț, Bucarest, Editura Minerva, 1990, p. 283. No wonder then that, after some time, Mircea Scarlat will put in a good word for her for the same qualities, tracing down in her poetry 'a genuine oasis of spontaneity, naivety and unstaged honesty' in a context of Junimism deeply saturated with studied Eminescianism. (Mircea Scarlat, *Istoria poeziei româneşti,* II, Bucureşti, Editura Minerva, 1984, p. 142).
[10] At least this is what Ion Nuță, in his *Preface to Scrieri alese*, Iaşi, Editura Junimea, 1971, p. VI, let's us understand.
[11] G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini pînă în prezent,* second edition, edited and prefaced by Al. Piru, București, Editura Minerva, 1982, p. 423.
[12] Cf. *Prefața* lui Ion Nuță, p. VI.
[13] G. Călinescu, *op. cit.,* p. 422.
[14] Idem, ibidem.

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melodramatic poetry, born out of a domestic romanticism, and made out of avowals and sufferings in love.

Articulated as a bashful mimosa (and very often tormented in love), Matilde Cugler's poetry no longer raises – supposing that it ever raised and that Maiorescu was more than simply polite – questions regarding its classification. (Dan Mănucă, the author of the articles on Matilde from the *Dictionary of Romanian literature from its origins to 1900*[15] and the *General Dictionary of Romanian Literature*, *C/D*[16], while going through the topic of the unhappy love, which belongs also to Matilde, underlines that 'the banal motifs and the fuzzy symbols, as well as the language without brilliance and the improper versification… diminish a lot from the poems' value'[17]; that, on condition that they had enough value so that it could diminish, which, honestly speaking, was not the case. Not even Mircea Popa's judgment, the author of the article on Matilde from *The Dictionary of Romanian Writers, A-C*[18], is so far from this verdict, even if we are dealing here rather with 'technical' evaluations, that do no concord with Mănucă's appreciations: 'a spontaneous and simplistic eroticism, of a sugary feeling', which is deployed in verses that 'lack, in general, any vibration and die quickly because of short breath', but that might have had some success because of the 'discrete harmony of the rhythmic syllables'[19]). However, it is through this poetry that the standard image of a feminine hypostasis takes shape: a portrait built from fragility, delicacy, sensibility and rhetorical passion, a portrait which is focalized, of course, on the suffering in love and on its dialectic (in some poems, there is also a bit of coquetry psychology). It is a pendant of feminity that our poetesses will wear, with more or less grace, until the period between the wars, when this standard image will be corrupted by a first impetus of emancipation, which will be translated in a violent sensualisation of the language and in images that aspire to a sort of bodily concreteness and directness.

But for the time being, with Matilda Cugler, the feminine poetry is only in the phase of the bashful declamation and romantic feelings – mostly, erotic frustrations. Even the editor of the anthology from 1971 – Ion Nuță – must admit that 'Matilde Cugler-Poni's first creations belong to erotic poetry, most often deprived of any taste, with melancholic waves that build into a sort of annoying sweetness'[20]. Even less successful are the attempts to 'philosophic poetry'. The model must be, for Ion Nuță, Alecsandri, but probably most of all, Eminescu (in whose manner Matilde has been writing even before him – which, in itself, would have been a noticeable achievement, if only it was true). However, what is true is that Eminescu's model is one that is accepted by all the poetesses of the epoch, and most of all by those belonging to the Junimea group; and in what manner!

[15] Editura Academiei, București, 1979.
[16] Editura Univers Enciclopedic, București, 2004.
[17] *Dicționarul literaturii…*, p. 251
[18] Editura Fundației Culturale Române, București, 1995
[19] Idem, p. 741
[20] Op. cit., p. VIII

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Let's leave, for the moment, the flatness of these verses (highlighted enough and with very little clemency) and let us try to see what model of sensibility and attitude is taking shape inside them. Matilde places herself, from the very beginning, in the position of the worshiper, by borrowing the idealization mechanism that operated also in the 'masculine' erotic. Her idol is overwhelming and astral – even more, it is the center of fire and light of this world. Briefly put, by means of a simple analogy, he is the 'sun'; the worshiper, instead, is merely a 'small flower'. This is a mismatch not only of size, but also of species, which can lead to – and leads immediately to – dramatic consequences, which show, nevertheless, how dependent is the 'small flower'. Of course, the imperial sun doesn't even bother to notice her; he doesn't even know that her life depends on his sunrays: 'I know that the proud star of the day/ Will never turn/ Towards a small flower,/ That grows under its rays.// In the same way, you, my beloved/ Don't think, not even in your dreams/ That you could, oh my sun/ Love me, the small flower' (*One wish*)[21]. Such a love is nothing but a hopeless devotion. (The same situation, as a pure devotional relation, occurs also in Emily Dickinson's poetry; but, obviously, it is nothing but a worshiping cliché, hence universal). Of course, the feeling is only declared, it has no sensuous thickness whatsoever; the poetry of Matilde Cugler avoids the bodily corruption of the feelings; even the few corporal details are marked down in a purely 'idealist' manner. Love's vocabulary is strictly abstract and bashful. And the equation of the love relationship sticks to the same terms: he – a fascinating sun, regenerating star, life giving planet; she – the victim of this fatal seduction. It is enough for her to enter under the influence of just one sunray, for the 'love' to burst spontaneously in eternal flames: 'A quiet ray has fallen/ On me, from your eye/ And a never ending love/ Has burst in my chest' (*A quiet ray of light*). Love is always a substance made out of fire and light, not only in moments of pain, but also in joy. When in hope, love is the light that chases away 'the fog' and clears the sky, but most of all, 'fills' the poetess's chest with love: 'That fog is gone/ That painfully oppressed me/ And the sky is joyful again/ Like my heart.//…// And I, today, happy as I am/ Look towards the future,/ Because I wear in my chest a world/ A world of love' (*Happiness*). But the happy times don't last long; the seasons of love are not all the same; spring is short, the fall – eternal. Love's destiny is pain: 'Because only pain is eternal; pain never dies,/ Pain accompanies us from the cradle to the grave,/ Wearing on our heads its crown of tears and blood,/ As a sign of its dominion on earth' (*The pain*). The spaces and places of love don't suffer less than the abandoned lover; as a matter of fact, they are just as abandoned as she is: 'The garden is abandoned. Where we once walked/ Not even birds do sing with their gay voice,/ Grass is growing on the paths, on the small lake/ A boat floats, broken by the unmerciful time' (*The Osier*). All these disappointments end up generating a resentment even towards the sunny days; in fact, the cosmos itself should struggle anxiously and continuously, in order to be in touch with the poetess's soul: 'I don't like it when it is sunny and bright/ And among the leaves

[21] The quotes are takes from *Poezii,* Editura Librăriei Frații Șaraga, Iași, f.a. (the orthography has been updated by us).

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the peaceful wind blows;/ When all is happy, birds are singing/ And peace, profound peace rules the world.// The storm is to me what peace is for others;/ When clouds are filling the sky and they rage and thunder,/ When the wind blows through the woods and the trees are falling,/ Then I feel like I'm at home with myself, I feel like living!' (*I don't like it*). The ethos that the poetess would enjoy is, hence, the one of the intense living, of ravaging pain, life in its dramatic burning. Hence, not the domestic sweetness and the peaceful ray of feelings; of course, this is just a momentary burst of resentment, which Matilde cultivates from time to time, when in anger and deception. But after the disappointments, wisdom comes on the wings of experience, with its consolation, and then, knowing that all is lost, you give up 'asking for love till the grave' and enjoy the moment (*Just a moment*). This wisdom deduced from the fate of the world is, unfortunately, suddenly ravaged whenever the poet notices the contrast from her 'embittered martyrdom' and the indifferent joy of her lover: 'You spend your days in gayness/ I live in unspeakable torment./ Not even an hour without tears/ Has passed since you left.// The days seem like years/ The evenings without end/ And not even the night brings peace/ To my undying passion' (*You spend…*)[22]. When in the presence of her ungrateful lover, the worshiper is pretending heroically, to be happy, so as not to give him satisfaction: 'I keep quiet and suffer in silence/ With wild pride!/ I hide my pain/ And don't want no one to know about it!// You see my peaceful face,/ My smiling eye,/ My brow that doesn't bow down/ And you don't even know, don't even think that I'm dying' (*I keep quiet and suffer*). Obviously, it is only death which can bring peace to this torment: 'I struggled without chance,/ For a dream of immortality,/ I would have liked to have a place,/ In the world's remembrance…// Today, I cannot fight anymore,/ The weariness is overwhelming/ And slowly, on my mind/ The veil of night is stretching out…!' (*Resignation*)[23]. Love dramas do not find peace but in death's final relief. (And Matilde's ballads, her tragic idylls, lead unmistakably to death). Until this death, life is nothing but pure melodrama made out of small – and short – joys and happy moments, in an ocean of prolonged suffering, that the poet is trying to immortalize. The domestic sensibility prefers, with Matilde, the elegy, but this only because of its excess of suffering; it's not sure we're talking about structural melancholy, since the deceptions and disappointments are always caused by some ungratefulness. Quickly erased from the cultural memory, Matilda remained, for Iorga, at the time of her death, 'an example from all points of view' for the Romanian women, even if he admitted that her poetry was read only in the epoch in which poetry was, most of all, about 'sincerity, feeling and simplicity'[24], that is, in times of poetic healthfulness.

[22] Matilda Cugler Poni, *Scrieri alese,* edited by Ion Nuță, Editura Junimea, Iași, 1971, p. 42
[23] Idem, pp. 63-64.
[24] Nicolae Iorga, *Oameni cari au fost,* I-II, edited by Ion Roman, Editura pentru literatură, Bucureşti, 1967, II, p. 261

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