THE HEAVEN OF IMAGINATION. MEMORY AND FICTION IN RADU TUDORAN'S ACEA FATĂ FRUMOASĂ

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Abstract*: The subject of Radu Tudoran's book* Acea fată frumoasă *(subtitled novel, despite being an account of a journey around Europe) stands at a very ambiguous border between reality and imagination. Fiction continually overlaps reality, the narrator's confession leads to fiction, developping a fantastic story set against the background of Europe in the early 70s. The travel thus becomes a handle for a spiritual voyage: a journey enriched by love (through the couple Dominique – Vicht) that envelops the journey towards the self. The writer once said that it is the lack of notable events that makes an account transform into literature; concordantly with Mario Vargas Llosa's idea saying that escaping the objective reality through imagination is man's most specific pursuit, the narrating character appears as a lonely traveller, never alone on account of imagination, who, through his two travelling companions, substitutes the absences from his own life. The mysterious Dominique (and her gold earring) is ingeminated in fantastic figures (a young woman "licensed" in magic spells at Loreley Cliff - Germany, a little girl in St. James' Park - London, an enigmatic woman on Calle de Alcala - Spain, an old witch, an actress, etc.), as many reifications of death seen as a beautiful woman. Thus humanized, it becomes less gruesome, more easily accepted. Finally, why not, imagination itself might be "that beautiful girl", the catalyzer of all human ventures.*

Keywords*: imagination, journey, death .*

The novels that Radu Tudoran published until the year 1975 come under what Roxana Sorescu named an "essentially-aesthetic" formula applied through "the relating, in distinct variants, of the romantic gesture of departing for the unknown, of the adventurous journey over which the shadow of an unfulfilled love ever skims" (Sorescu, 1976: 46). Starting with the book *Acea fată frumoasă*, Radu Tudoran's work acquires unexpected valences in the context of the already established formula, through refining the old obsessions – the journey and love – in a solid and ingenious novelistic construction. Subtitled "novel", the volume is prevailingly an account of a (real) journey through Europe. The dissonance is the result of a blatant juggle with two plans, both equally well defined: the real and the fantastic. The explanation for inserting fictional elements in the travelling memoirs is given by the author himself[1]: accounting or transcribing reality transforms into literature and more precisely fiction as a result of a conflict between the writer and himself in moments lacking notable events, a conflict which, by deviating into fiction, creates another type of epic.

Acea fată frumoasă stands at a very ambiguous border between reality and imagination. Although most of the novel contains travelling notes – impressions, critiques, accounts – the first sentence calls forth a fantastic atemporality: "One night, on Rin Valley, I met a fantastic being" (Tudoran, 1975: 5). The world becomes a labyrinth and the journey covers first of all a spiritual geography. Spatially, the narrating character crosses a series of European countries (France, Spain, England, Germany, Switzerland), each sojourn being a handle for new reflections on local culture or life in general. History is more than once criticized, urban myths or clichés are

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[1] According to the writer's statement in an interview given to Ileana Corbea, reproduced in Ileana Corbea, Nicolae Florescu, *Biografii posibile*, Eminescu, București, 1975, p. 246-252

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deconstructed. Radu Tudoran marks almost topographically his entire trip, be it pedestrian or by car. The journey itself is hard to follow as the notations do not have a chronological order, so that each destination becomes part of a puzzle that eventually embeds a story told not only though words, but through images as well.

Although as a travelling book the volume is notable, what individualizes and gives substance to the whole is the fictional element. A traveller who runs away from the memory of death, the narrating character sets off on a voyage that, through love or imagination, will end precisely as an initiation in death.

Mario Vargas Llosa considers that evading in fiction is man's most specific pursuit, a defining tendency of the human nature:

> Coming out of one's self and of life as it is, with the help of a few throbs of imagination, in order to live, for a few minutes, something else than the objective reality, the one that we don't choose, which is fatally imposed through birth and circumstances, a life that we perceive, sooner or later, as a drudgery and a prison that we would like to escape. (Vargas Llosa, 2012: 11)

Concordantly with this idea, the narrating character appears as a lonely traveller, never alone on account of imagination and the real trip becomes a handle for a spiritual voyage: a journey towards love through the couple Dominique – Vicht, that actually translates as a journey towards the self.

The love between the young couple is governed by fatality and predestination. Their story is gradually unveiled and most of the time verges on the fantastic, even though at first sight it doesn't come out of the ordinary (except for some sensational elements): a sick young man falls in love with a perfume seller who is in a strange (to say the least) relationship with an older composer. After an almost devouring relationship, Dominique leaves Vicht, gets engaged to her former lover and eventually dies.

The rythm of the story is lively, full of dynamic images and accounts, but everything breathes an air of prifound loneliness and it is exactly this what generates the escape in an alternative reality. Vicht and Dominique are essentially projections of the psyche intended for subrogating certain absences. The mysterious girl with the gold earring appears for the first time in Spain, on Calle de Alcala, in a moment of vulnerability when the narrator confesses his need to believe in the existence of someone close; the gesture of buying two tickets for a bullfight that he intended to go to alone foreshadows the coalescence of the two plans (the real and the imaginary one): "I had nobody to go to the bullfight with and I wasn't thinking of inviting anyone, randomly, however, I bought two tickets, because no one in front of me had taken only one and maybe that night I wanted to believe in the existence of a close being" (Tudoran, *op. cit.*: 17). Thus, the female figures become a spiritual haven, annealed by the love relationship between Vicht and Dominique. The love for the journey can only be exceeded by the love for love: "What I saw then annihilated for the moment both the landscape and the distances, the thousands of kilometres that I had covered until I met them. It seemed then the most precious moment of my entire trip" (*Ibidem*: 34). The two spiritual components of the character can be best coordinated through the fictionalized memory. Time and space (represented in the novel by the calendar and the map) are abolished through alternating reality and imagination. The initiation in love determines a gateway out of the material so that the character's voyage is not measured in days and kilometres, but in images or experiences.

Imagination gets beyond the senses and becomes superior because of the liberty it allows; while the senses are limited to the immediate reality, imagination

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shapes the conscience or the externalized thoughts of the narrating character. Fiction continually overlaps reality and experience is replaced with imagination.

The female figures are embodiments of the subconscious - the narrator himself gives hints in this way: "She resembled an imaginary creature that is born in the most attenuate distance of the thought and from there it sometimes projects into reality" (Tudoran, *op. cit.*: 16). Thus, the character reaches self-cognition though the other, here a re-shaped extrospection: when the Other is actually a reflection or a reproduction of the self, cognition becomes a journey from the outside to the inside.

As a matter of fact, everything is embedded in the idea of departing, of distance. Even faith is subordinated to a gnoseological journey. At a certain moment the narrating character confesses:

> I am a Christian atheist lost in my own disbelief. I aim at denying, explicable after a lifetime of uncertainty and after much suffering, and I find myself exalted with what I rejected a moment before. But I didn't reject London […] and now, free on the sun-heated streets, I feel like praying like in a newly-discovered church, held by a new faith. (*Ibidem*: 138)

Under these circumstances, deprived of the possibility of understanding death from a religious perspective, the only way to fathom the inexplicable remains retreating in imagination; in order to sense death (more than to accept or understand it) the narrating character projects himself into another – Vicht – who lives under its omen: not just through illness, but also through Dominique, a "prefiguration of nothingness" (Popa, 1980: 17), in Constantin M. Popa's opinion, who "frames ritually what we may call the temptations of death" (*Ibidem*). More than Dominique, Vicht is the narrating character's double, an alter ego capable of an understanding that is initially inaccessible to the other. Death thus becomes a supra-character with multiple explanations: point of departure, terminus point, determination, cognition, initiation.

Dominique and her gold earring is ingeminated in multiple fantastic hypostases: a young woman "licensed" in magic spells at Loreley Cliff, Germany, a little girl in St. James' Park, England, an enigmatic woman on Calle de Alcala, Spain, an old witch, an actress etc. The narrating character's trip is reconfigured through the emotional valences of each meeting with "that beautiful girl". And all the more so as Dominique and her multiple incarnations make possible the access to a world in which the mystery needs to be deepened in order to certify its existence. Testing the veracity and confronting fantasy with reality causes the inhibition of imagination: "Then she disappeared. I don't know how; I found myself facing nothing. Neither the cutlery, nor the glass had remained" (Tudoran, *op. cit.*: 74). Dominique is a guide to the sacred, accessible only through the accepted and acknowledged imagination.

Tudoran's novel is also a book about creation. The work of art (be it literature, music, painting or architecture) is a process that needs an absolute commitment and, before anything, a "religion" of imagination. The creator becomes a presence that defies space and time: "Here happened most of Spain's history and, without remembering it, I consider that I witnessed it. In order to reach such a conclusion, you don't need as much imagination as you need a faith that you can multiply" (*Ibidem*: 379). Gaudi, more than an architect was a "mad child who transformed into a Cyclops overnight and with his sole, gigantic eye discovered the unseen face of Spain" (*Ibidem*: 483); creation thus becomes vision, which allows re-creating the self and re-creating the world through imagination or words, the primordial Word in its purest shape, without the earthly colour. Beyond a way of transmitting and emotion, art transforms into a projection of the self into the world.

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Dominique's existence and that of the other female hypostases (essentially one fantastic being) is presented in a natural manner, despite the extra-mundane connotations. Radu Tudoran, through the intrusion of the symbolic and the fantastic into reality to such an extent that the two levels cannot be separated, might be compared to the South-American writers who advanced the formula of the magic-realism. Nothing is explained, on the contrary, everything is accepted with a striking simplicity; only a tint of unsolved mystery persists. The apparitions of the girl with the gold earring only on night with a new moon marks the character's psychological inflexions, translated at a symbolical level through the image of death as a beautiful girl, in its numerous embodiments. Death, once accepted, becomes a presence whose echoes reverberate outside the initial border; the letters that announce the full moon in different parts of the world continue to come even after the character returns home. The spiritual journey does not end together with the geographical trip, it transcends space and transforms into life – life as an imaginary journey.

The initiation in death or in love is eventually an imagination exercise; materialized in the shape of a woman and thus humanized it becomes less gruesome, more easily accepted. Finally - why not? - imagination itself might be "that beautiful girl", the catalyzer of all human ventures.

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