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PETRU POPESCU'S WORK: THEMATIC AND STYLISTIC CONSTANTS AND VARIABLES

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper is to present Petru Popescu's work in a thematic and stylistic approach. After placing the author and his literary production within a social and temporal contest, attention is drawn to his incredible appeal to the reading public, trying to explain the mechanism behind his success in two different political and cultural environments. Apart from the 1st-person narrative and a propensity to the authentic human nature, which are the main constants of Popescu's work, the paper also highlights thematic and stylistic mutations due to various factors that could be equally traced in his biography and his outlook on literature.*

Keywords: *exile, literary success, authenticity, cinematographic style.*

1. Introduction

In a diachronic approach to post-war Romanian literary exile, Petru Popescu belongs to the early period of the last wave, roughly between 1965 and 1970, when writers benefit from a pseudo-liberty due to a certain thaw in the Party's political and cultural views. This wave includes other important writers, such as: Andrei Codrescu, Dumitru Ţepeneag, Ilie Constantin, Paul Goma, Eliza M. Ghil, Matei Călinescu, Ioan Petru Culianu, Ion Vianu, Gelu Ionescu, Sami Damian, etc.

It is his incredible success to the reading public—both at home and on American land—that particularises Petru Popescu among his fellow writers. The success of his novels—that determined Laurenţiu Ulici to acknowledge his merit as "the widest-read fiction writer of the late '60s and early '70s"—can be attributed to a vast complex of elements. Thus, Dinu Bălan notices in his doctoral thesis on Petru Popescu: "Several *textual* elements (the typical American energy, the literary convention of personal diary, the autobiographic nature of his novels), *paratextual* elements (the photo […] on the cover or the rhetorical-ironic title) or *autobiographical* elements (his love affair with Zoia Ceauşescu, his personal charm and brilliant mind) had all combined in creating a legendary figure for that times." (Bălan, *Petru Popescu...*)

To these features one may add the urban, authentic atmosphere and slight touches of revolt against the regime which render the early texts subversive—a key to success in the totalitarian period.

Apart from the much acclaimed reception the author enjoyed at the time—that brought him an inexhaustible source of sympathy—Petru Popescu bridges the gap between two epochs and two political systems: the *totalitarian regime* in Romania and the *democratic regime*—both American and post-revolutionary Romanian, with all its specific aspects.

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Moreover, Petru Popescu has undergone two stages in his development as a writer: one in his native culture and the other in his adoptive country. The former implies a continuation of the inter-war modern novel, concerned with authenticity, but equally entails a polemic attitude towards the proletarian culture and formalism of the epoch. The latter implies the contact with the American literary models—Conrad, Hemingway—as well as with the entertainment industry. Furthermore, it involves writing in the language of the adoptive country—i.e. English—a real challenge for any exiled writer. In an interview given to the TV hostess Delia Budeanu, Petru Popescu himself is aware of the fact that "To become the leader of a generation was easier by writing in Romanian. To produce valuable literature in a language spoken by hundreds of million of people is harder." English language got the writer to face his own limitations, to expose himself to a public insensitive to subversive innuendoes, but on the other hand it offered him the chance of revival with an all-new, cosmopolitan identity.

2. Thematic and Stylistic Constants and Variables

Scanning through the author's literary evolution, from his early debut at the age of 25, through the American experience, and back to his native language and country after 30 years of writing, we can identify the thematic and stylistic constants of his work, as well as the inevitable alterations due to various reasons, such as the author's adequacy to the reading public, his option for writing in a language of wide circulation to the detriment of his mother tongue, mutations in the author's sensitivity and artistic vision, etc.

Petru Popescu's views on the novel, theoretically well-established in the years of his debut, oppose to the ideological slogan the "capacity to create audience" by the revival of the authentic human nature, by an unaltered presentation of "man moulded by his environment", by replacing the novel understood in terms of "story-telling" with its perception as a "meaningful construction"—concepts used in his theoretical essay *De la Socrate la Xantipa* (*From Socrates to Xantipa*, 1973).

Throughout his literary career, the author never ceases to write with an eye turned to public success and the other in search of significant epic matter, thus producing a work with an extraordinary capacity to create audience, but nonetheless complex and valuable.

The "capacity to create audience" generates various pieces of writing, the early texts—catering for the young elite's taste in communist Romania—displaying a sharp contrast with those addressed to the American public.

The success of several Romanian novels such as *Prins* (*Entrapped*) or *Dulce ca mierea e glonţul patriei* (*Honey-Sweet Is the Homeland's Bullet*) originates in their subversive character, whereas *Sfârşitul bahic* (*The Bacchic End*) gains audience through a subtle, witty mockery of communist clichés. The reader's sensation of total identification with the characters caught in the turmoil of life, looking for fragile illusions of salvation, was actually a "rainbow" of hope in an age of cultural darkness. This made the author's writings genuine hymns or manifestos of the young generation: they were bestsellers of Romanian literature in the '70s.

If at his literary debut the readers made him famous—as he embodied their unfulfilled desires and illusions—after having fled the country, things are quite the opposite: the author gained the public's recognition by virtue of bidirectional negotiation, that is "on the one hand, the author's intention to write novels to the taste of his readers (a poetics of popular

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novel) and on the other hand, the reception of the books, effectively organized into popular genres by the entertainment industry (in other words, a theory of popular genre reception)." (Bălan, *Petru Popescu...*)

No longer capable of counting on Romanian public's intelligence and complicity, the author now applies the American recipes for success: he renders the message of his books accessible to a large audience. The author's writing, never shallow, displays an involution from deeply subtle, parabolic and allegorical novels towards detective stories or extended reports with easy-to-follow, mythic infusions—a sort of texts for "popularizing" some less accessible disciplines (e.g. anthropology, history, religion), but for which the public's interest is certified.

The disturbing, censored themes of communist society—the terror of reality, the limits of resistance, the drama of resignation, the melancholy of defeat, the impossible love or patriotism, the conflict between reality and appearance—are replaced by "pleadings for the common human nature and the plurality of cultural patterns" (Sasu 237).

A constant of Petru Popescu's writing—either in Romanian or English—is the 1st-person narrative. This option resides in the author's desire to "live frenetically" and identify himself with the character narrating the story, to shape inner conflicts through analysis and introspection.

The author imposes in the '70s a new type of character: the young man of a generation devoid of ideals, who enjoys life to the full. The narrator character, generally a male, shows little variation in his personality. In the Romanian novels, he refuses to live otherwise than self-aware and honest, following his deeply moral aspirations, yet the oppressive, enclosed environment of his existence dooms him to a loss of identity and significance: "Characters in Romanian novels are structurally inadequate to the reality of their time; they live according to secret codes and patterns of intimate nature. Their aggressive vitality is in deep contradiction with the norms, solemnity and the ideological codes. Therefore, the narrator male-character is not a John Wayne, but an introspective, reflexive […] and sad person, as the tragic history of communist Romania never changes." (Bălan, *Construcția epică...*)

The protagonist of Petru Popescu's novels is spontaneous and undisguised, with nonchalance in gestures and attitudes, as George Pruteanu remarks: "Men have always a frank and spontaneous posture, lacking any self-ridicule or inhibition; their charm is irresistible and the weaker sex is chasing them assiduously." In an attempt to struggle against convention and lack of social individuality, female-characters—whose conduct is filtered through the eyes of the narrator character—are equally a sum of outspoken attitude, self-consciousness and courage.

In Popescu's English novels, although a reflexive nature, the narrator character appears freed from the confrontation with a restrictive ideology, more athletic, more energetic. The preoccupations of some heroes like Ken Lauder to explore the paleo-anthropologic roots of mankind, or Loren McIntyre to discover the source of Amazon, or Pontius Pilate to rediscover common humanity beyond any religious and ethnic background seem mere hobbies as compared to the terrible crisis that the intellectuals in the oppressive system or Mirek the Jew in the concentration camp are confronted with.

Female-characters cover a wide range of human incarnation, from the murderer prostitute Hilke-Edith to the teenage figure of Girl Mary, from the young Jewish woman Blanka to the exotic, Kenyan lover Yinka.

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In his early novels, honesty is genuine and organic, in sharp contrast to the clichés of proletarian culture, whilst in his autobiographical writings like *Întoarcerea* (*The Return*) or *Supleantul* (*The Deputy*) it has taken the form of confession, and finally—in his American novels—it has rather become impudence, or the capacity to explore the most intimate feelings.

Apart from extolling the virtues of words in describing reality, the author also expresses his confidence in other forms of communication, like the cinema, much acclaimed for its accessibility. The cinematographic character of Popescu's work—on which there has been much debate among literary critics—is partially motivated by his experience as a Hollywood screenplay writer. In fact, in the above-mentioned interview, the author confesses his standpoint with regard to the seventh art: "Films have become classical landmarks in contemporary culture". This explains the fact that in numerous book reviews we find associations with films released in close proximity to the publication of his novels: *Jurassic Park* and *Quest for Fire* (for *Amazon Beaming*), *Schindler's List* and *Sophie's Choice* (for *The Oasis*), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (for *Weregirls*), while several books of fiction have been rewritten as screenplays: *The Last Wave*, *Death of an Angel*, and *Almost Adam*. Moreover, some episodes and scenes in his novels are obviously filmic in nature, such as the romantic encounter in Laguna's apartment (*Dulce ca mierea e glonțul patriei—Honey-Sweet Is the Homeland's Bullet*), or Ken Lauder and young Long Toes' fight with the lion (*Almost Adam*), or Zoia Ceauşecu and young Petru Popescu's date in a café in Bucharest, closely monitored by the intelligence service (*Supleantul—The Deputy*).

The author himself praises the great contribution of film to the art of prose writing, insisting on the merit of film in teaching novelists to create memorable gestures. Drawing a parallel between prose and film, Petru Popescu considers that "A good piece of prose is like a good film; unfortunately, the reverse is not true, as the film lacks intimacy, but has a great epic force."

3. Conclusion

All things considered, the epic force remains a major quality of Petru Popescu's writing, an essential ingredient of success both in Romania and the USA, in communism and capitalism, in novel and film, to a learned or ordinary public alike. The author's constant adaptation to the taste of his audience would not have been possible without this exceptional gift of telling stories in a thrilling and yet professional manner, specific to popular culture.

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