TWO WOMEN WRITERS
AND
THEIR FEMININE CHARACTERS THAT TRANSCEND REALITY

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Rezumat

Lucrarea face o paralelă literară între opera a două scriitoare aflate pe meridiane opuse dar trăind în acelaşi spaţiu temporal. Amândouă scriitoarele, venezueleanca Teresa de la Parra şi românca Henriette Yvonne Stahl au în centrul operei caractere feminine puternice care-şi trăiesc destinele într-o lume reală, în care suferă şi într-o lume fantastică în care-şi caută alinarea.

The birth and consolidation of new trends in art and literature often take place through contributions made in totally different parts of the world. Their synchronism does not exclude or shadow various sensitiveness but emphasises particular artistic factors, new national horizons. Thus there are two processes, one that unites the spiritual manifestations of exploring certain zones or problems of consciousness and the other that diversifies the vision about the world, deepening the study of different people sand traditions.

The apparent uniformity is given by the use of the same devices and thinking but the difference is determined by the national co-ordinates: a certain psychology, a particular history and the action of specific traditions. The attraction towards certain literary trends and moods had long ago ceased to be thought of as obedient imitation but is considered an active presence in the contemporary world. The Latin American literature has had a meandering and complicated way that led to this conclusion. It starts with modernism, actually from the effort of "Americanisation" of symbolism and shapes itself especially after the First World War. Then the American influence of the avant-gardism is full of specific flavours, getting their original traits. They essentially constitute the artistic independence of Latin America. (Păcurariu 1968: 215-38)

The fundamental feature of this literature is the gradual process that makes to die out the boundary between the study of existence and society and the analysis of consciousness. This process is realised through enlarging the lyrical limits and deepening the epic investigations of abyssal zones of the human brain. Here reality and myth mingle together being a wonderful and authentic material for artistic syntheses.

Realism flourished at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th in Latin America, being well represented in the works of Blest Gana, Azevedo, Payró, Gálvez, etc. Mdern prose developed at the same time with Rúben Darío's poetry and, leaving behind the social preoccupations, isolated itself in the detailed and often uninteresting study of the author's spiritual state of mind or revealed peculiar facts coming from an aesthetic and aristocratic conception about life.

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The social and political problems led the Latin-American authors to writing about major events of their epoch. This bias is also grasped in the work of some writers who did not intend to depict reality directly. One of them is Teresa de la Parra, who describes the slow decay of aristocracy. Like Proust, she observes the change of things and consciousness in the course of time and reality is just a winding mixture of recollections. Her novels, *Ifigenia, diario de una señorita que escribío porque se fastidiaba* (1924) and *Las memorias de Mamá Blanca* (1929) are constructed in such a way that the boundaries between reality and the author's subjectivity fade away. Nevertheless, she vigorously writes about the objective upheavals of the world, making use of particularly sincere charm and emotions. Her style seems to be spontaneous but it proves to be carefully polished and rich in metaphors. (Păcurariu 1968: 242)

Although considered a book for children, *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* is written for a far larger public which find delight in reading between the lines. This second novel of hers "is an anachronistic colony fantasy." Garrels further says:

"There is something perverse about placing this idyll of Piedra Azul in a time of such historical intensity, but this gesture is symptomatic of the voluntary dematerialization of de la Parra's fictional world. Adopting a more sympathetic perspective, one might call it an elegiac testimony to the disappearance of a particular social formation sacrificed by the advance of history. Be that as it may, the Piedra Azul of Papa and his little girls exists, albeit tenuously, in blissful ignorance of history and material reality." (1984: 136-38)

The true friendship between a little girl and an old woman, not being kindred, seems strange at the beginning even for the narrator. Not only was she accepted in the intimacy of the old lady but she also inherited the latter's diary, intended initially for her grandchildren. And most of all she did not want her diary become a public property:

"Now you know, this is for you. It is dedicated to my children and grandchildren, but I know that if it came into their hands they would smile tenderly and say: 'One of Mama Blanca's whims,' and they wouldn't even bother to open it. It was written for them, but I am leaving it to you. you read it if you want to, but don't show it to anybody. I couldn't bear to have my dead die again with me, so I came up with the idea of keeping them in here. This is the portrait of my memory. I leave it in your hands. Keep it a few years more in my memory." (de la Parra 1984: 12)

Being born on a sugar plantation Mama Blanca bears her early memories in mind until she dies. In fact she never separated from them, living in her own world an everlasting childhood. We do not know if she puts reality atop her imagination or the other way round:

"See, these daisies are vain, coquettish young ladies who like people to see them in their low-necked dance frocks. Those violets over there are always sad because they are poor and have no sweetheart or pretty dresses to show off at the window. They only come out during Holy Weeks, barefoot, dressed in their violet robes like penitents keeping their vows. Those gardenias are great ladies who ride about in their fine carriage and know nothing of what goes on in the world except what the bees tell them, who flatter them because they get their living from them." (de la Parra 1984: 7)

She knew how to talk to children because her soul never grew old. Her little friend, "not only liked her but I loved her, and as happens with every love worth the name, in the last analysis, what I was seeking was myself." Accepting this half-real and half-imagined world the narrator recognises that "life's splendour comes not from what it gives but from what it promises." (1984: 8) Under an unpolished cover Mama Blanca hides a multiple-karat diamond soul: she "…managed to conceal behind her halting French […] the temperament of a magnificent artist and a subtle, exquisite intelligence nourished not so much on books as on nature and on life's daily banquet." (1984: 9)

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But Mama Blanca's imagined experiences brought her casual unfortunate events like her loss in the lottery. "Therefore, if her unhappy speculations never brought her the taste of wealth, which is savourless and fertile disillusion, they did supply, in full measure, thanks to the magic charm of her imagination, the truly splendid part, that of the dreamer, which was Mary's choice in the Scriptures. Faithful to her vice, in her poverty she played the lottery." (1984: 9)

She inherited this dual existence from her own mother "whose poetic temperament scorned reality and systematically subjected it to a code of pleasant and arbitrary laws dictated by her imagination. But reality refused to submit. As a result, Mama's generous hand broadcast a profusion of errors that had the double quality of being irreparable and utterly charming." (1984: 17) Her memories of childhood are so dear because of her mother's harmoniously way of mingling art, fiction and reality. When she told them fairy tales she used the familiar setting of the plantation that "lent the events the august prestige of real history."

Being six girls in one family, imagination took a strange shape in embodying the never-to-be-son in one of her sisters: "I believe that in Violeta's body lodged the spirit of Juan Manuel the Desired, and this was the main reason he had never been born: for six years he had walked the earth disguised as a violet. The disguise was so transparent that everyone recognised it, Papa first of all." (1984: 35)

Childhood creates a realm of itself where reality transcends imagination and you never know if the child lives in this world or in his own. A good example is the "secret affinities and mysterious relations between the most diverse objects. […], we could take an old can and with a nail and a stone make a hole into which we fitted a stick as a tongue, attaching a pair of corncobs to serve as oxen, with two curved thorns stuck into each cob for horns, and with a reed for a goad. Our creation finished, we imitated the voice of the ox drivers, shouting at the stubborn corncobs: 'Gee-up, ox! Back, Swallow! Get over, Blaze!'" (1984: 89)

Moving from the countryside to the city of Caracas the miracle of nature and unspoiled human soul disappeared. The loss was for good and discovered during their journey to the new location: "Poor noisy little girls in the crowded carriage! Like others older and wiser than us, we were ignorant of a truth that is never really learned - a truth I have not yet been able to keep in mind more than five minutes - which is that the most enticing change, the most alluring travels, in their monotonous variety reveal to us only one transcendent, cruel, new thing: our utter human misery and our blithe ignorance of it, an ignorance for ever in which living was so sweet." (1984: 105)

H. Y. Stahl's first novel *Voica* was written in 1929, the same year when *Mama Blanca's Memoirs* came out and its conflict and characters belong to the rural life. The writer presents the facts in their cruel reality, without any idealisation. The feminine character is in conflict with her husband. Her drama is triggered by the fact that he wants to bring home and rear a child that he had with another woman during the First World War. To accept this, Voica asks for five acres of land. Although they quarrel in the beginning, and Voica leaves her house, a kind of armistice is settled between them, both of them being afraid of the other's tricks and interests. At the end of the day everything is settled by what it was to be "the prosperity given by the communist law of ownership." The plot of the novel lies in the discovery of hidden psychological reactions determined by harsh pecuniary motifs and an atmosphere of mutual waylaying. The writer emphasises the actions and words that show the reader a complicated inner life.

H. Y. Stahl definitely chooses the psychological analysis in the volume of short stories *Aunt Matilda* (1931). They are considered a prologue to the writings to come. One short story, *At the Battle of Port Arthur*, is particularly interesting. It is about the struggle between the heroine's soul, pure but desirous and the world around her. There is a special sensitivity in the observation of the gliding from violence to affectionate protection in a brutal and gross family medium, seized by tribal instincts.

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The second novel, *The Star of the Slaves*, deals with love experience in the feminine life. H. Y. Stahl proves to clearly know the feminine psychology, revealing it in a detached and almost manlike way. In this novel nothing is fake, rhetorical, imposed. Everything is natural, vivid, spontaneous, in spite of the facts that are often unusual and the people unpredictable. George Călinescu said that she proved an "exaggerated feminism" although he began the chapter on H. Y. Stahl asserting that her literature "is feminine because it discretely deals with the problem of women's happiness." (Crohmălniceanu 1972: 429-32)

H. Y. Stahl's fourth novel *Between Day and Night* (1942) depicts events that really happened in the writer's life but during a period of ten years, not one year as in the book. The main character of *Between day and Night* wants to achieve a moral purity through self sacrifice and supreme love. But the lover is not a man, it is a girl. The space of their experience belongs to sexual breakdown. Both characters burn in their devouring passion in different ways: one is taking drugs, the other lives all kinds of humiliations, trying to offer her friend the sham of an artificial paradise.

The novel *Between Day and Night* is the deepest inner analysis reached by the writer in her work. Ana Stavri, a young girl of an unusual inner purity, is close to some female characters met in Dostoievski's work: Aglaia Epantiskin, Katia Ivanovna. Just like them, she is stubbornly looking for the moral accomplishment through supreme devotion. She befriends Martha Vrînceanu (in a later version called with her real name Zoe, because, as the author explained in an interview, she wanted this name to be remembered as the priest mentions the names of the dead during the service) and tries to love her and help her "beyond facts and explanations." (Cristea 1998: 25) The experience is unbelievably tough. Zoe is unnaturally beautiful, but cold and stiff. She lacks the instinct of survival and thus she behaves unpredictably. She was abused by her father when she was a child and lost all her energy to lead a normal life. In order to survive and face reality she resorts to drugs. The novel is the story of Ana's sacrifices. She encounters the hostile and insane medium of the Vrînceanu's house, the disapproval of her parents and friends, the risk of getting the drugs. We are witnesses of Ana's companionship, full of pain and absolute devotion, up to the tragic denouement of Zoe's life.

The two feminine characters are excellently shaped in this tragic dilemma, leading us to ethical doubts: do we have to live anyway, with our sins hidden in far corners of our brain or do we have the right to put an end to such a life without being guilty of suicidal sin? Zoe suggests the fragile and uncertain universe of night where Ana enters. Vrînceanu's house, of a crazy architecture, gives a feeling of uneasiness due to its strange dimension. Inside it the rooms make up a terrible maze, suffocated by ugly and unfriendly furniture. This gloomy atmosphere is dominated by Zoe's eyes as well as her father's, that have sometimes an alien, greenish and sickly stare. In contrast with Ana's family, this one is composed of nouveau riche that show off doubtless taste, bearing in their genes terrible atavisms. Zoe has psychologically alienated relationships with her family, that unravel a dreadfully moral landscape. (Moraru 1989: V-XXIV)

The writer's prose is provocative from the very beginning. Her feminine characters always combine grace, suavity and cleverness with a real inner force and the capacity of enduring and even provoking tense situations. Some of them are neither adapted to the real and trivial world, nor can they solve their own situation. Her style is simple, objective, scarce, without any rhetorical complications when she describes the psychological level of human behaviour. She does not ponder on the environment. She determines the mental and affective stage, conscious or unconscious, where her characters live and act. She does not analyse their reasons too deeply, she only displays the facts.

Her novels are like medical records, where the patient's evolution is carefully and alertly taken done. "Clinical madness", as I. Negoiţescu puts it, "is monotonous and poor. If Don

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Quixote had been only a clinical case, his madness could not have interested us throughout an entire novel." Explanations are found only at the end and are ethically valued. They are drawn from the psychological context and given a solution from an intellectual viewpoint. Sometimes they have a Christian, Dostoievskian or even Oriental background. Her literature is dominated by the conflict of 'psychological categories', defining not individuals but types ruled by profound and abyssal impulses. (Negoiţescu 1967: 49-54)

Although the city where the action takes place is Bucharest, the location of the plot seems unimportant for the author. The same happens with *The Great Joy*, where the initial point is made by a bigamy case. This novel is a final proof that H. Y. Stahl is much better in giving shape to feminine than masculine characters. She gave up her ideas of sexual freedom for women, fighting for pure feelings. She pleads for abandoning the social prejudices in favour of an unchained eroticism. (Piru 1968: 310-13)

The writer belongs to the modern novelists of the 20th century due to her interest in mental activities and experience. They were keen to explore the human brain. Her feminine characters suffer from a kind of mental impotence in living up to the end their ordeal and free themselves from the imposed limits. Her women are not accomplished victims. They are surrounded by mystery and indecisiveness and the ambiguous end of the books keep them away from the classical 19th century literature.

The author never regretted that she was a woman and not a man, but because of being a woman, her novel *Between day and Night* was labelled as 'sentimental." Nobody realised that it was a social novel about a rising class of unscrupulous and newly enriched people after the war. They actually represented the unconscious epoch between the two World Wars.

When asked about how the difficulties encountered at the publication of her books influenced her writing about the experienced reality the author answered: "Reality and fiction are so mixed together in everything I have written that, after finishing a novel, I cannot realise how things really happened; fantasy became reality and I saw reality under strictly sensitive, personal point of view and with my own understanding. This fiction helped me express my own opinions and thoughts. I remember my father, when reading the manuscript of the novel, asked me: 'Well, did you see things this way, did you see Zoe Vrînceanu like this?' I asked him: 'Did you see things in another way?' He answered: 'Completely different.'"

A good end for this short presentation could be the words written by George Sion from the Academy of Brussels: "Voulez-vous découvrir une romancière? Lisez *Entre le jour et la nuit*, d'Henriette Yvonne Stahl. C'est un roman cruel, fuligineux, qui ne se rattache rien qui nous soit familier, mais don't la force terrible apparaît peu à peu et devient Presque intolerable…Ana est libre parce qu'elle accepte d'être liée aux autres. Elle a arré entre *le jour et la nuit* et il est evident que le titre cache une experience spirituelle decisive. Elle peut regarder le jour. Ce livre terrible est un bien beau roman." Moreover, the manager of the Seuil Printing House of Paris, Paul Flamand, wrote in an introductory letter for the novel: "le type d'Ana, par sa pureté et son drame est un des plus beaux de la literature mondial…" (Cristea 1998: 34-40)

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