THE EXPERIENCE OF THE MANIFESTATION OF THE SELF IN HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU'S CORRESPONDENCE AND SHORT PROSE

Mihaela STANCIU (VRAJA) [*]

Abstract*: Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is the author of the Hallipa series, as well as a writer of short prose; her short stories are nothing but the seeds of the novels that made her a reference woman writer of Romanian literature. Moving between the epistolary and the fictional compartments, I discovered with great pleasure incisions going from the person towards the writer. Many excerpts from the letters are nothing but flashes that trace an anamnesis route for the fictional texts and they have an important role in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's professional path.*

Keywords*: epistolary, short story, manifestation of the self.*

When it comes to a well-known author like Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, one can't ignore the extensive critical exegesis, and neither the published monographies. More than that, one acknowledges the fact that the sufficient existing reception takes the form of a double-edged sword on the path of the original literary research. Therefore, in dealing with this topic I chose not to tread on worn-out paths or to find slight nuances referring to Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's short or long prose, but to turn to a hardly known section: her personality.

This presentation is an exciting subject even simply because it analysis the epistolary and the fictional compartments at once; so, moving forth between these two domains, I discovered with great pleasure incisions going from the person towards the writer. Many excerpts from the letters are nothing but flashes that trace an anamnesis route for the fictional texts. Therefore, the compensatory role for the dismissal of solitude starts with the string of provincial cities and is manifested as a spiritual repression not only related to the hostile environment in which she was living, but mostly in relation to a domestic space which was not intimate at all, but rather a prison. Consequently, she finds a powerful salvation in writing letters, the more so as she had the vocation of friendship. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was never dominated by a spirit of emulation in her literary formation, but, as any other artist, she tried to understand her place in the world of writing. Then, we should also mention the fact that, however, she was lucky enough to also have the support, even from the shadows, of her contribution to the important magazines of those times.

I think Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is an obscure personality because she distinguished herself rather late in the literary life, she only gave few interviews, we have no journal of hers (except for some fragmentarily published pages from the journal that she kept, which no one has any further knowledge of). So, it is rather difficult to reach the soul of a writer when you don't have the required sources. As I was saying, the fundamental premise starts from the obvious overlaps between the person Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu and the characters from her early prose.

[*] Independent Reserchear, mihsta2@gmail.com

BDD-A29805 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 02:03:20 UTC)

As an observation regarding the relation between her life and her works, we can state that the author carries a magnifying glass oriented apparently towards herself, as we notice a clear overlap between "the atmosphere" from the letters and that from her youth prose; if the short prose is nothing but a literature of the feminine soul, then the letters are its micro-literature; if the province is a suffocating space that slowly crushes Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, many characters from her short stories feel just as rusty. So, the repertory of the letters and that of the few journal pages that were published can also be found in the discourses of the characters.

We can only speak of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's confessions considering the relation between her life and her works, because actually the pseudo-characters created and recreated in the author's imagination in order to find herself are nothing but a pretext – the starting point of the narrative discourse. At the end of the presentation, I inserted in the analogy fragments of her life/works that reveal two paths which overlap rather than being parallel.

Thus, the letters transcend from reality to fiction and they become a tool in the hands of the pseudo-character; through them, confession takes a therapeutic function for some of the author's heroines who appeal to correspondence (even directed to an imaginary addressee) as to a confession of solitude; for instance, one can make legitimate comparisons between Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's letters from her real life and those of Bianca Porporata to Don Juan or those from *Marea* (*The Sea*), as each text is a confession in itself, with insertions that revive episodes from the author's life without showing any effort to objectivize.

Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's short prose can only be read considering the overlaps between autobiography and fiction; her youth texts do not evolve on a very large stage and the themes tackled with have a contrastive identity content. For instance, the short prose reveals an intense cry of solitude manifested in writing as a deliverance. While reading the small stretch short prose, I noticed a simple evidence: the person Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, as she reveals herself through her letters and through the few journal letters that were published, intersects with the voices from the discourses of the characters (or those of the pseudo-characters); after all, they are created and recreated in the author's imagination as a pretext which is the starting point of her narrative discourse in order to find herself.

The author's destiny stands under the mark of the paradox; even if she is not a declared feminist, she allows women characters to dominate her works. Despite that she tackles with themes and motifs which are specific for feminine literature, she is presently regarded as an anti-feminist and the fact that she doesn't appeal to a hermaphroditic text doesn't stop E. Lovinescu from stating that her works are part of the great masculine literature. Even so, we mustn't forget that Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was the one to make the critics state their position with reference to the existence of a feminine literature.

Although she spent a great part of her life in provincial cities, destitute of a cultural environment, she published under aegis of two important voices of the Romanian critique (G. Ibrăileanu and E. Lovinescu). Even if at first she wasn't received with open arms in the masculine literary world, she has the merit of having been treated as belonging to this world. Despite the fact that she doesn't use stylistic devices, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is

BDD-A29805 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 02:03:20 UTC)

nowadays considered a refined writer. For her, literature becomes the land of intellectual bliss, of escape from everyday life, of the flowering of the mind. Even if she makes her presence known rather late in Romanian literature, without wanting to astound, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu affirms that she comes with the ambition of becoming a small Romanian writer. (Ibrăileanu, G., 1966: 69)

Her early literature is confession in itself and nothing else.

I. A letter to G. Ibrăileanu

"Nothing of the existing things interested me unless related to myself, after having first plunged entirely in the waves of my soul… This is my infirmity: to glide on the actual surface of things, on subjects, on shapes, stopping only at their profound essence."

"This is who I am: a stranger to people, disdainful of them, living, rolling, bathing and diving in the inner life of things." (***Marea – The Sea)***

II. A letter to I. Negoițescu

"Yes, it is true, I am an impenitent letter writer, especially – I was – while living in the province, dissatisfied with the group of available friends and colleagues, and I would write even to Don Juan to eternity about everything that crossed my mind." (Negoițescu, I., 1969: 16)

"Don Juan, I am going to tell you a lot of intimate things in order to take you as a referee for many exciting aspects for which you are skilled, but most of all I would have liked you to teach me some lessons. There are women who never sin, not even by one word, while other put their entire being on paper. I am like them, Juan! Little incurable manias, what can you do? A belief is a serious thing, Juan! And I am Bianca Porporata, a woman, not a maiden! This is all you need to know about me in our absurd relationship!" **(*Lui Don Juan, în eternitate – To Don Juan, for eternity)***

III. A letter to Ibrăileanu

"I am used to solitude. It is one of my lusts. There are many people in the house and certain obligations I have force me to communicate often enough with what they call 'society'. But sharing ideas, discussing, especially learning something is something rare for me, except for the correspondence with my dear Constanța, and no matter how much you have strengthen yourself in solitude, you sometimes feel the pleasure of letting your mind loose." (Ibrăileanu, G., 1966: 33)

"I feel well on my own, but I am alone everywhere and at all times. It is useless to tie and glue my heart to others… I still remain on my own". (***Marea – The Sea***)

IV. A letter to Ibrăileanu

"My headquarters are on the seashore and I see it as an honor and a compensation for the habitual deceptions of the riparian persons. Here everything is strange, isolated, exiled even, but I have the Sea. It is a lot, I can't say it's everything. Every now and then I escape and I find relaxation, and slowly, with little, the voids are covered or they are deceived." (Ibrăileanu, G., 1966: 111)

BDD-A29805 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 02:03:20 UTC)

"Even from my childhood, I found my greatest joy in water. I love it like others love people. Water gives me the happiness others ask from people." (***Marea – The Sea***)

"The blue waves, at times green like the emerald, are wonderful; they are rarely troubled, gray, black or of a color you cannot find a name for; all poisons stir from their depths as if they wash away all the sins in the world over night…" (***Marea – The Sea***)

V. Autobiography

"I was alone, friendless; I put my hand on the back of the cart and then the moon shed her light on my hand and, shutting my eyes, I took the moonlight for a warm hand. [...]." (***Scrisorile lui Don Juan în eternitate – Don Juan's Letters to Eternity***)

"In the nights with a full moon, there are forbidden vigils in front of the window through which, along with some of my friends, I stare at a star until getting a migraine or until entering an almost hypnotical state. From a couple of voluntary affiliates, the epidemic spreads in the entire room." (Papadat-Bengescu, H., 1937: 6)

VI. A letter to Ibrăileanu (about the provincial cities)

"Do not constrain yourself when it comes to Focșani. It is horrible. Especially now, with the melting of the snow. A couple of days ago I had to do some shopping; the town, the houses, the people seemed to drag themselves through the mud. I felt the need to cry out – the ugliness choked me that much." (Ibrăileanu, G., 1966: 33)

"Every now and then, Manuela would leave the sullen silence of the provincial city." **(*Femeia în fața oglinzii – The Woman in Front of the Mirror*)**

"A house, a corner of it reminded her of the provincial city she had left. No regrets. Just a relief. Yes! She had fled from them, from the people there, and nothing forced her to return to them. How wonderful that she had left!..." **(*Femeia în fața oglinzii – The Woman in Front of the Mirror*)**

VII. From the interviews

"One examines the truth through a magnifying glass and through a microscope. It is good to know that this is how all the pores of the examined object become visible. My rigor is the magnifying glass I use." (Valerian, I., 1926:1)

"The world and life remain organs for my dissection table." (Valerian, I., 1926:1)

"I can't find anything to narrate either; but I am one of those beings who look at how others live. I have always worn on the nose those glasses through which you look at others and I never noticed what was happening in my own life. … I have a huge life shortage." (***Femei, între ele – Women, among Themselves)***

Bibliography

Primary Bibliography
Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's Works
Opere, vol. I, notes by Eugenia Tudor (ed.), preface by Constantin Ciopraga, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1972
Opere, vol. II, notes by Eugenia Tudor Anton (ed.), Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1975
Opere, vol. III, notes by Eugenia Tudor Anton (ed.), Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1979

BDD-A29805 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 02:03:20 UTC)

Opere, vol. IV, notes by Eugenia Tudor Anton (ed.), text established by Viviana Șerbănescu, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1980
Sangvine, Preface by Doina Curticăpeanu (ed.), Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1973.
Secondary Bibliography
Bio-bibliographies
Andronache, Ștefan, *Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu: biobibliografie*, Biblioteca Municipală „Ștefan Petică", Tecuci, 1998
Mercheş, Dorina, *Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu: biobibliografie*, Biblioteca Centrală Universitară, Iaşi, 1977.
Works published in journals
"Autobiografie", 1937, *Adevărul literar şi artistic*, year XVIII, July 11, no. 866, pp. 5, 6; July 18, no. 867, pp. 5- 6.
Correspondence. Letters sent by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu
G. Călinescu și contemporanii săi, vol. II, edition, notes and index by Nicolae Mecu, Minerva Publishing House, Bucharest, 1985, pp. 231-234
"Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu către I. Negoițescu", 1969, *Familia*, column 'Texte și documente I', 5th series, year 5 (106), June, no. 6, p. 16; 'Texte și documente II', 5th series, year 5 (106), July, no. 7 (47), p. 10
"Scrisoare către Felix Aderca", 1970, *România literară*, III, No. 5 (69), January 29, p. 13
Scrisori către Camil Baltazar. *Studii şi documente*, Editura pentru Literatură, Bucharest, 1965, pp. 9-38
Scrisori către G. Ibrăileanu, vol. I, M. Bordeianu, Gr. Botez, I. Lăzărescu, Dan Mănucă, Al. Teodorescu (eds.), Editura pentru Literatură, Bucharest, 1966, Preface and pp. 29-116
Scrisori către G. Ibrăileanu, vol. III, M. Bordeianu, Viorica Botez, Gr. Botez, I. Lăzărescu, Al. Teodorescu (eds.), Editura pentru Literatură, Bucharest, 1973, pp. 167-168.
Interviews
Aderca, Felix, "De vorbă cu Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu", 1926, *Adevărul literar şi artistic*, year VII, July 4, no. 291, pp. 1-2, reproduced in *Mărturia unei generații*, Editura pentru Literatură, Bucharest, 1967, pp.165-180
Valerian, Ion, "De vorbă cu d-na Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu", 1926, *Viața literară*, year I, November 27, no. 29, p. 1.
Exegesis in articles or journals
Durnea, Victor, "Lungul drum al unei 'anexări'. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu de la *Viața Românească* la *Sburătorul*", 2013, *Cultura*, year VIII, November 7, no. 41 (445), p. 12.

BDD-A29805 © 2016 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 02:03:20 UTC)