FEMININE HYPOSTASES IN IOANA PÂRVULESCU'S NOVEL THE INNOCENT

Lavinia-Ileana GEAMBEI[*]

Abstract: Inocenţii (The Innocent), *published in 2016, in Bucharest, is the third novel by Ioana Pârvulescu after* Viața începe vineri (Life Begins on Friday*, 2009) and* Viitorul începe luni (Future Opens on Monday, *2012).* Inocenţii (The Innocent) *is built on the role of memory, especially of affective memory, as the author herself suggests from the beginning, by choosing Dostoyevsky's motto: "He who gathers as many such memories as he can for the whole life can be sure that at some point will find refuge in them" (Dostoyevsky,* The Brothers Karamazov*, in a speech given by Alyosha to the children). The novel proposes a „then" and „now" perspective on the world. As a matter of fact, the two perspectives stand for the basic feminine hypostases in the novel: Ana the little girl and Ana the mature woman who keeps the child alive in her memory and soul. The two hypostases of the same woman, each with her charm and peculiarities complement each other and represent two stages in Romania's recent history: communism and post-communism. Communism is the period that characterizes the first feminine hypostasis, Ana the little girl, while the second hypostasis always looks back with maturity, which makes the past to become a lesson about her history and injustices.*
There are two temporal plans that identify childhood: the one prevailing childhood spent in Braşov, especially in the 1960s, and the complementary one - at an adult age – that comments and completes the former, but in which the narrator still reserves the provocative role of the innocent.
In fact, the actions in the city at the foot of Tâmpa hill, evoked in the novel were experienced by little Ana, but they were only evinced by the testimony of her adult hypostasis. Starting from these premises, the present paper follows the way in which the two feminine hypostases are built and completed in the novel, rendering a cyclical perspective on life, childhood being both a starting point and a destination.
Keywords: *feminine hypostases, childhood, maturity, affective memory, communism.*

Inocenţii (*The Innocent)*, published in 2016, in Bucharest, is the third novel by Ioana Pârvulescu after *Viaţa începe vineri* (*Life Begins on Friday*, 2009) and *Viitorul începe luni* (*Future Opens on Monday*, 2012).

In her novels Ioana Pârvulescu is the same as in her essays and reviews, such as *Întoarcere în Bucureştiul interbelic* (*Return to Interwar Bucharest*, 2003), namely the author of texts "full of verve sliding continuously between retro and modern, not without a playful pleasure, stimulating the reader" (Alexandru Săndulescu, 2006: 147).

Inocenţii (The Innocent) is a novel built on the role of memory and, implicitly, of affective memory, as the author herself suggests from the beginning by choosing the motto from Dostoyevsky: ,,He who gathers as many such memories as he can for the whole life can be sure that at some point will find refuge in them" (Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov,* in a speech given by Alyosha to the children).

Understanding that reading is an act of enunciation, yet characterized by "the asymmetry between the positions of enunciation and reception" and that "the narrator is not a substitute of a speaking subject, but an entity that will not perform the narrative act unless

[*] University of Pitești, geambeilavinia@yahoo.com

powered by a reader” (Dominique Maingueneau, 2007: 45), the writer includes the reader right among those to whom the book is dedicated: “To Adina, Tudor, Mihai and Cristi. And to you, of course”, then accompanies the novel by a *Notice*. The text of this preamble plays the “negotiation part of the text”, as pragmatics calls it (*Ibidem*, p. 164), because it expresses the author’s need to justify herself. In this respect, Ioana Pârvulescu uses various strategies. She challenges the reader’s curiosity starting with the first sentence of this genuinely argumentative text, by expressing the idea of mystery, of the unknown: “The events which follow took place in another world”[1] (p. 9). The double temporal perspective that will characterize the entire novel is highlighted from the very beginning. It deals with two worlds, the world of “then”, with its history and its objects, and the world of “now” with a different history, other objects and gestures. It is man who links the two worlds: “Although these things did not exist, although history did not spare anyone, there was the man, however, always the same, with his desires and fears so very similar to ours who have the internet” (p. 10).

So, two perspectives upon the world, one of “then” and another one of “now”. The two perspectives actually represent the two female basic hypostases in the novel: Ana the little girl and Ana the woman, the adult, the mature who keeps the little girl alive in her memory and in her soul. The two facets of the same woman, each with her charm and peculiarities, complement each other continuously. Actually, the novel is characterized on cover III in the following words: “Two views of the world: that of a girl who sees things very personally and that of a woman who discovers the secrets drowned in the past. The comic naivety of the former voice defeats the melancholy of the latter”. Between the two hypostases there is a real game, often a game of irony and touching self-irony, as in this example: “I thought, back then, that all people were somebody. I thought I was somebody, too, which I am not so sure about today” (p. 75).

The two worlds communicate, unite through the reader, the “invoked reader” being present in the text, that “person to whom the text is explicitly addressed, its direct recipient” (Dominique Maingueneau, *op. cit.*: 48), which represents, in fact, “an effect of meaning that integrates into the text” (*Ibidem*). He/She is the one invited to meet and unite the two worlds, so he/she is permanently “alerted” by the narrator to them, to how to interact with them. For example, after she presents “great-aunt” Magda, the narrator points out: “We all called her Auntie and please remember this detail, because since now I will only call her so” (p. 14).

In the same *Notice*, the author shows that she knows well the expectations of the “generic public” since it is a heterogeneous public in many ways, including age:

> The problems of the characters in the house in Mayakovsky Street (former and future Saint John Street), four children, four adults and four quite young elders, can be understood without much effort even by those who, caught in the sweet traps of the digital age, do not know any longer, for example, what it’s like to miss someone for days on end and be unable to make a call or write a message (p. 10).

[1] Note that all quotations from the novel *The Innocent* are made from the edition cited in the Bibliography.

So *Inocenții* (*The Innocent*) is a novel of childhood as well as of maturity, "a novel about how to swim in time and in times without drowning", as the author herself characterizes it in its brief description on the back cover. Therefore the novel proposes a travel "in time", a return to the 60s Romania and Brasov and even to the interwar period through other characters' memories, but also a journey "in times", dealing with various periods of our history. The horrors and injustices of communism are "tamed", because they are viewed with the innocence and charm of childhood. Communism characterizes the first feminine hypostasis, that of Ana the little girl, but the other hypostasis permanently looks back with maturity, which makes the past become a lesson, but a different lesson about history and its injustices. All these stories are told not as the main focus of the story, but as something secondary to it. Innocence, which becomes synonymous to kindness, claims its redeeming, therapeutic function:

> Perhaps innocence is the age at which we should have stopped our growth in order to give a touch of decency to the human species. This book, beautiful as a real fairy tale, is the story of a world of children in which the "fall" has not yet occurred. Reading it, we sway with the thought that we could have been different. It's a kindness in these pages that awakens in us the nostalgia of a lost world (Publisher's opinion, cover IV).

The house in Mayakovsky Street (former and future Saint John Street) in Brasov becomes "a surprising character with memory and conscience" (cover III), „the house of memory" - a metaphor by which it is called in the end of the novel. And the street where this nineteenth century house is located became the embodiment of Romania's recent history, because changing the street name suggests the switch from one historical stage to another: "... our house with a cellar and an attic changed its address twice in its life: once in 1950, when it moved from Saint John to Mayakovsky Street, the second time in 1990, when it returned from Mayakovsky to Saint John Street" (p. 12). Because the novel mostly reconstructs the 60s, reference to the street is made from the perspective of "then", of the narrated time.

The same happens to the name of the city. The author's native city Brasov-Kronstadt-Brassó came to be called Stalin, to later be called Brasov again:

> In all countries after the division of Europe into two, there was now one city bearing this name: in East Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Albania and many other countries which, on the new world map, were called the Soviet Union. Auntie had an old atlas where there was no Stalin city. In the brand-new atlas, however, there were more than ten such cities, all variations on the same theme: Stalinstadt, Stalingrad, Stalinváros, Stalingród ... Auntie sniffed with her Jane Fonda lips, pointing at them from top to bottom with her index finger trembling (p. 100).

In this house live three generations: the grandparents "great-mother and great-father", Auntie (great-aunt) and Uncle Johnny, two couples of parents of the four cousins: the siblings, "Dina with her pigtails", "Doru with his always narrowed eyes" and the other two siblings, "Matthew with his knees always bruised" and Anna, the youngest of the children, "with her face like a moon that is always full". The adults illustrate the condition of the intellectual in the communism under Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej, but in various ways, because the grandparents and the “great-uncle and great-aunt” embody the intellectuals trained in the interwar period, who suffered after the war when the communism came to power and who live with the nostalgia of past times, while the children’s parents are the intellectuals trained during the communist regime itself.

The novel has a round structure, being divided - in genuine symmetry - into fourteen chapters, starting with the chapter “The House” and ending with “Our House”. In a classical manner, the chapters have suggestive titles, accompanied by metaphorical subtitles, most of them being lines inside the chapter itself, such as: “The antiquarian’s secret. When is your birthday?”. Since the entire novel can be read as Ana’s Bildungsroman, each chapter includes a life lesson and therefore ends with an implicit or explicit moral, such as: “And I remember my great-mother saying, «Everything is anguish in life, my little ewe lamb»!” (p. 72). Because the two perspectives that characterize the two feminine hypostases interweave permanently, the serious meditations on life are insinuated naturally, sometimes as in a game, so that they lose in gravity. They are uttered by the mature woman, but seen through the eyes of Ana the little girl: “Like many other things in childhood, after we were captivated for days on end by the stone and its drawings, they eventually went into the background ending up somewhere, among the numerous inexplicable things of life, starting with life itself, which is the most inexplicable thing of life” (p. 176).

Through Anna, who knows and explores the world, the communist imaginary is recovered. But all elements of this imaginary, carefully introduced, become a pretext for the mature narrator to express a bitter irony at history, a critical attitude, dissatisfaction, regret at it etc. For example, an important element of the imaginary of the 60s, the black and white TV set, is introduced: “At one point, on the chest appeared the first television set in our home: small, Russian, with round screen” (p. 29). But the additional information on how uncle Ionel repaired the TV set is an opportunity to criticize history: “When it was out of order, uncle Ionel punched it, as he punched the table when angry, and, ironically, the TV set started immediately. He said that was the best way to do with everything that came from the USSR” (p. 29). The Russian TV set was placed, symbolically, on a chest with six drawers, in the great-aunt and great-uncle’s room, she – a former geography teacher and he – a former elementary teacher, both being the first to leave the “childhood house”. The chest, which fascinated the children, by satisfying their curiosity, is the embodiment of another world, the interwar world, and so they consider it “another form of paradise, undoubtedly.” The chest is a witness of history that bears its traces: “a chest of six drawers, covered with a plate of gray marble crossed by white stripes and a sideways crack, like a scar” (p. 29).

Perhaps the most eloquent fragment illustrating the narrator’s bitter irony at history is the one related to the changes in Stalinist Romania, starting with the omnipresence of the portrait of Stalin - “the moustache man perched on an imposing pedestal,” and of his ideology, with Romania’s submission to whatever Stalin and the USSR meant:

> the great leader was everywhere, his big moustache, his big name, his great culture, his huge wisdom, his head of wood, stone, bronze, cardboard, his prisons, his red, his dead, our dead. Poiana or Schullerau were called nothing else but Stalin. Almost everything was Stalin, and Brasov, called, as I told you, the red town because the roof tiles seen from Tampa hill lent it

this color, had now become the red city of the Soviet power. And it was the center of Stalin region (p. 101).

Thanks to the great-uncle and great-aunt, who had been teachers, history is introduced to children as a story. A very interesting episode is the one where Uncle Ionel links cinema to history. Thus, watching the 60s TV series *The Invaders*, Uncle Johnny, understanding the film as a real dystopia, believes that the invaders were the Russians, because, as Ana noted, the invaders were also sometimes beautiful, but evil. As it is known, this hugely popular series created an obsession for the position of the fingers, because the invaders kept the little finger high and stiff. The novel also refers to the reality of those years. The narrator remembers how impressed were Ana and the other children: "After every new episode, we stared at people in the street to timely detect any invasion from another planet" (p. 146). After this comic naivety that characterizes Ana comes her adult reflection: "Since then I started to look at people's hands and have found that some look like their hands, others don't" (p. 146). Cousin Doru, understanding the similarity discovered by Uncle Ionel, asks him why the Romanians waited for the Americans, which leaves Ana "open-mouthed". But the answer is provided by Auntie, in a similarly allegorical manner: "We waited for them because Romania was like the emperor's daughter who fell into the hands of a dragon and relied on the arrival of Prince Charming to set her free", and Uncle Ionel adds: "But Prince Charming did not care for her and never came, and she had to get used to the dragon, to please him like a good wife, an' the wheel bend an' the story end" (p. 147). When Ana asked a puzzled question about this story she had never heard before, Auntie replied: "It's called history" (p. 147).

The two views of life illustrated by the two different women hypostases actually mean the innocence of childhood and maturity. For example, an incident of yore told by her father to Anna and her brother, about the danger of getting lost in the woods, in the mountains, with their mother, is understood differently by Ana the little girl and Ana the adult. Thus, Ana understood the story as follows: "God, who was like a good fairy, made a miracle when they prayed and took the trail from somewhere in the middle of the forest, and laid it to their feet like a carpet, on which they slid smoothly back home" (p. 317). Later on, growing up, the story told by the father is understood as a profound life lesson, whose message is that Man's power is in himself, that praying and faith are only forms by which man discovers this power:

Years passed and the story grew up with me, and now I understand it like this: the path was always right there, beside them, but, blind and deceived by their feelings as they were, they failed to see it. The prayer opened their eyes, cleared their look and they could see it - this is actually the miracle, and God does not intervene, he is not a fairy at all, he does not move a finger because he does not need all this. A prayer is not a phone call to God, but a phone call to you, to your hidden powers that you enable miraculously (p. 318).

To conclude, in evoking childhood we can identify two time lines: one belonging predominantly to the childhood spent in Brasov, especially in the 60s, and another one, complementary - located in adulthood – which comments and completes the former, but the narrator still keeps to herself the challenging role of an innocent. In fact, the events that took place in the city at the foot of Tampa hill, evoked in the novel were experienced by Ana the little girl, but acquired significance only by the testimony of her adult hypostasis.

The novel proposes a cyclical perspective on life, childhood being a starting point but equally a destination. Ana is the girl who lives the present overlooking to the future, discovering life, and her adult hypostasis is the one that recovers the way back to childhood by remembrance. This travel becomes possible by its being turned into a literary work: „ All I have written here is, perhaps, to get back for a while into the *other* house and to the only age at which you could visit it" (p. 334). Because, as the narrator confesses at the end of the novel, if in childhood she turned all the books she read into life, "now," her mature hypostasis does exactly the opposite, it transforms life in literary work, having the power, due to the affective memory, to "revive" the past: „The past is written with invisible ink. You need heat to see the letters reshaped, after they stayed hidden for a long time as if they had not even existed. You should put the white paper close to a flame or blow steam from your mouth over it, so that the invisible should turn into visible and, little by little, into meaningful sentences" (p. 335).

Bibliography

Maingueneau, Dominique, *Pragmatică pentru discursul literar (Pragmatics for Literary Discourse)*, (translated into Romanian by Raluca-Nicoleta Balațchi, preface by Alexandra Cuniță), Institutul European Publishing House, Iaşi, 2007.
Pârvulescu, Ioana, *Inocenţii (The Innocent)*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2016.
Săndulescu, Alexandru, in *Dicţionarul general al literaturii române (General Dictionary of Romanian Literature)*, P/R, Univers Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006.