BAROQUE ASPECTS IN ODOBESCU'S WRITINGS

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Abstract: *This study is focused on Odobescu's particular features that prove he used the baroque principles in* Pseudokinegheticos. *Despite the opinions of the majority of the critics, he is not only a classic and a romantic writer, but also a modern one who creates the new essayistic genre in Romanian literature.*

Keywords*: duality, disguise, baroque*

Being influenced by the ideology of *Dacia literară* Alexandru Odobescu gives a lecture about the *Future of Arts in Romania* at the age of 17, which proves his vast culture and advanced artistic vision for that particular age. As he is aware of the transformations that define the epoch in which he lives, Odobescu militates for a national and popular art, because this represents "the real expression of a nation's spirit" (Odobescu, Al., 1965: 131).

The writer considers that life and art are connected and he sustains this idea in many contexts including *Pseudokinegheticos*, where he uses the classic expression *ut pictura poesis*, which had been chosen by the followers of the baroque style as a formula of their artistic doctrine. In the author's opinion, the fusion between arts[1] represents a way for a better existence in the spirit of beauty, good and truth which can be obtained by eulogizing the masterworks belonging to some of the greatest musicians, poets and painters of all times. This way of seeing art turns Odobescu into a modern writer who is considered to be, according to Dumitru Micu's definition, "a rational person [...] who ignores the genre and the species of his creation" (see Micu, Dumitru, 1969: 53).

Contrary to his classic harmonious spirit which dominates most of his works, in *A Few Hours at Snagov* and especially in *Pseudokinegheticos* Odobescu reveals a particular "negligence" in choosing a certain literary category for his writings. This deliberated "negligence" represents a clue about the author's modernity as he initiates "the new essayistic genre" in Romanian literature (Streinu, V., 1943: 25). But the creation of new "irregular, free and mixted" genres and the belief in the progress of art are features of the baroque style (Marino, A., 1973: 250). These arguments are at the basis of the hypothesis that Odobescu is not only a classic and a romantic writer, but also a baroque one.

Another feature of the baroque psychology, which Adrian Marino writes about in his *Dictionary of Literary Ideas*, is the predilection for "ostentation, disguise, mystification, «masque»" (*ibidem*: 230). Leon Baconsky focuses on proving that Odobescu is not really an "antiquus" but a false "unconditional admirer of the Ancients" (Baconsky, L. 1986: 319). Therefore the author appears into society as a scientist and an academician who promotes the classic cultural values obtained through education. Instead, he hides the other Odobescu

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[1] Ion Istrate thinks that the fusion of arts represents "a formula for exchanging means of expression between arts" (*Barocul literar românesc*, 1982: 107).

who is an open-minded intellectual, but who does not trust his own writing abilities and censors himself as he fears to make mistakes or to become ridicule. Although Odobescu wishes that his works and techinques be examples for the descendants, he feels the pressure of the assumed educational role so he often prefers to use the classic models in order to justify his literary decisions. In time this attitude becomes "chronic" and turns into a method of saving the appearances. The defensive duplicitous state belongs to the baroque ethics (Marino, A., *op. cit*.: 230), Odobescu being aware of his inner duality which is considered to be "the most important innovation of the baroque art" (*ibidem*: 131).

The hypostasis of disguise is also felt by Vladimir Streinu but he talks about it from a different perspective: Odobescu "is what the level of the national culture and the Occidental spirit of the 19th century forced him to be" (Streinu, V., *op. cit.*: 16).

The elaboration of *Pseudokinegheticos* could be seen as a "creative"[1] game through which the critics are invited to decode Odobescu's real face that is hidden behind his classic erudition and his excuses for contingent imperfections. Getting the "password" means interpreting these excuses which are connected with self-ironies, feelings of doubt in his own writing abilities and advice about equilibrium that prove to be false as Odobescu divagates himself by disestablishing Pindar's learning: "People must always look for equilibrium" (Odobescu, Al. II, 1955: 216). The writer's spirit cannot find his peace in rules and harmony anymore that is why he embraces the baroque style in order to adjust some unspoken moral dissatisfactions (Marino, A., *op. cit.*: 228).

In order to obtain the composite aspect of his masterpiece, Odobescu insists excessively according to the baroque principles, on the sense of the shape that is „the triumph of expressions and techniques over innovations" (Tomuș, Mircea, 1986: 331). Odobescu convincingly inserts digressions which are defined as "demureness of literary greed" (Odobescu, Al., II, 1955: 143) in order to conceal the absence of a proper content. The connection between digressions is obtained through the formulae: "I stop here as I feel that I have lost the right way" (*ibidem*: 155), "it seems that I gave too many details" (*ibidem*: 142), "allow me to return to the previous idea" (*ibidem*: 143), "please, allow me for a moment to go fifteen hundred years back in time" (*ibidem*: 180) etc..

The writer is known for his ability to establish relations between ideas which have no initial connection. In building the persuasive process he relies on his logical subtlety and some abstract moral rules and he gets pictorial and concrete creations. This "ingenious verbal fiction" (Marino, A.: 243) is called *arguție* according to the baroque and mannerist principles. Odobescu is not on his first attempt at trying to establish the etymology of some words based on false suppositions. For example, in *Pseudokinegheticos* he creates an ambiguous theory and pretends that painting appeared as a result of the ancestors' hunting activities because the Greek word for painting *zoografie* could be translated into Romanian as "the animals' writing" (Odobescu, Al., *ibidem*: 187). Then, through a deformed argument about the fundamental principles of Darwin's universe, the writer gets to the idea that a human's life gravitates round two words: "hunt and love!" Odobescu creates a historical and philosophical "rough-and-tumble" about fieldfares, starlings and snow birds starting from

[1] The "creative" game has some baroque implications which offer, according to Adrian Marino, a great freedom of controlled initiative (*op.cit.*: 249).

his attempt to explain the French word *grive*. He seems to have a casuistic perspicacity that ends in a humorous way with a pun: "It is so different the *griva* (that is to say *la grive*) from the rabbit" (*ibidem*: 134). The same artifical pattern of mixing the information from different sources is applied in the contradictory discussion about the ideal lenght of a dog's tail (*cauda canis)* (Odobescu, Al., op. cit.: 159).

The lexical diversity which is specific to Odobescu's writings appears as a result of his subtle and excessively tweaked baroque style (according to Păcurariu, D., 1973: 396). The work *Pseudokinegheticos* leaves the impression of a kaleidoscope that unifies sceneries, impressions about works of art and personal activities in a plausible picturesque disorder.

From a baroque perspective, the education and the artistic cliché determine the author to create a "false" aesthetic reality by using the technique of describing works of art and sceneries (Marino, A., *op. cit.*, 248). When Odobescu describes the characters from different sculptures and paintings he focuses on the relation between reality and fiction but also on the mixture between exterior details and feelings generated by the analysed works. When describing a landscape observed from a hill near Bisoca village, Odobescu insists on accumulating pictorial images. The sun looks like *a red circle* with *warm and serene* rays which make the plain *to be bathed into a yellow and shiny light*; the bombastic tones of gold and silver complete this particular visual painting: "the face of a great table of gold" (*fața unei uriașe sinii de aur*), "silver tinsel" (*betelă argintie*). Like a painter, the writer uses not only the splash of colour but also the line technique: "the sinuous *lines* of the rivers" („*liniile* șerpuite ale râurilor"), "wavy *yarns*" („*fire* crețe") (Odobescu, Al.: 234). The same decorative and fluid imagism appears in the description of the Baragan Plain being obtained especially through accumulation of acoustic sequences: "a nightly susurration" („un susur noptatic"), "the breath of wind" („adierea vântului"), "the crickets' chink" („țîrâitul greierilor"), "gentle sounds" („sunete ușoare"), "soft sigh" („slabă suspinare") (*ibidem:* 130). These auditive notes are used to describe the nocturnal landscape, but they contribute to the amplification of the baroque sensation of fluidity through the dynamic gerund: "all those insects infiltrate into the grass by *buzzing, creaking, whistling, hissing and all those thousands of voices arise in the intensity of the night as a quiet response*" („toată acea nenumărată lume de insecte se strecoară prin ierburi, *ţiuind, scârţâind, fluierând, şuierând, şi toate acele mii de glasuri se-nalţă cu răsunet potolit în tăria nopţii*") (*ibidem:* 131). Odobescu also offers subtle information about the temperature of the environment: "The afternoon sun sends *voluptuous emanations of heat* into the open wood and under the *shade* of trees." („Soarele de amiazi varsă *emanaţiuni voluptoase de căldură* în rariştea pădurii şi subt *umbra* copacilor") (*ibidem:* 141).

Odobescu's pictorial synasthesias represent elegant tricks which contradict the traditional principles of some classic aestheticians and that is why Adrian Marino wonders how these people would react "if they had the opportunity to be at the Museum of Art located in Paris and see the works of art that represented hunt sceneries" (Marino, A.: 242). By decoding the technique of correlations between pictorial sensations Odobescu is exposed as a modern writer who releases himself from the stricteness of ancient models.

The combination between folckloric and academic knowledge determines Odobescu to excessively elaborate the tale *Basmul cu Fata din Piatră şi cu Feciorul de împărat cel cu noroc la vânat*, by inserting in this context certain romantic elements, but

mostly baroque ones. By doing so, the writer becomes once more an adept of the baroque style who uses the grandiloquence of romantism because "he has a rich perception and a great pictorial curiosity" (Călinescu, G., 1971: 20). D. Păcurariu observes that Odobescu does not lose anything: all the images, words, events and popular verses are harmoniously incorporated in mensurable phrases (according to Păcurariu, D., 1979: 228). The baroque spirit is emphasized when the hero is impressed by the girl's beauty and he feels antithetical sensations: burning fumes and ice thrills („când [de] aburi fierbinți, când [de] fiori de gheață") all of them experienced in a synaesthetic environment: "he imagined that the field bloomed and the sky brightened („lui i se nălucea pare că câmpul înflorise și cerul se luminase") (Odobescu, Al., 1955: 238-239).

The baroque influence is especially observed in the final sequence of the tale, when the author describes the hero's lamentation by using some verses from Cid Campeador's Spanish romance and from François Villon's work *Ballades des dames du temps jadis*. After that, Odobescu writes a moralistic conclusion about the transcience of life by inserting verses translated from Catullus's *Carmen* and from Lamartine's *Poetical Meditations*. The fragments are selected on purpose in order to emphasize the obsessive baroque vision about humans' pride being defeated by the transcience of their existence. (according to Marino, A.: 229)

Although in *Arta prozatorilor români* Tudor Vianu apprises of "the artificial and hybrid aspect" of the tale which is dominated by "an excessive and sentimental lyricism", the philologist does not continue the reseach in the direction of the baroque influence. In the study dedicated to the analysis of Odobescu's complex phrase, Vianu identifies and describes the main techniques of construction (the symetry, the inversion and the ramification - see Vianu, T., 1956:124-127) , without establishing any connections with the baroque procedure of abusive development of the shapes through their repetition and mixture (Blaga, L., 1996: 137). This procedure appears as a result of Odobescu's tendency for enlarging and excessively ornamenting his phrase. In other words, there are few critics who saw Odobescu as a modernist beyond his classic and romantic features that he had intentionally left at sight.

The last chapter in *Pseudokinegheticos* contains a whole page of dots and it is entitled *Capitolul cel mai iubit de cititor*. Ion Rotaru considers that this chapter is a subtle form of irony for those readers who do not understand the meaning of the author's work properly, but also for the scolars who are not content with the organisation of the information in *Pseudokinegheticos* (according to Rotaru, Ion, 2006: 272). By analyzing this final chapter through the perspective of the baroque influences, critics can find a different explanation: Odobescu's masterpiece has the capacity of elasticity and opening to shapes (see Marino, A.: 251), that is to say anyone can continue his work as the theme presented in the book is not completely analyzed[1].

[1] Other critics have a similar opinion and consider that *Pseudokinegheticos* is "an unfinished book" (Doina Curticăpeanu: 341) or "a book without a visible centre" (Zoe Dumitrescu-Bușulenga: 282) in *Repere istorico-literare* la *Scene istorice din cronicele românești. Pseudokinegheticos*, București, Editura Minerva, 1986.

Odobescu's modern formula of trying to get himself noticed contains a great dose of mannerist subtility, a cultivated phraseology and a phrase dominated by exuberance and ornamental proliferation.

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