VIRGIL TĂNASE: HISTORY OF AN ERA, HISTORY OF A LIFETIME

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Abstract: This paper aims at bringing to the foreground, in the eyes of the readers, a genuine and valuable writer only seldom mentioned in literary or theatrical performances reviews. Going back in time, one finds a young apprentice of the mysteries of literature, who succeeds, through craftsmanship, in the 1960s-1970s, to enter a puberal literary paradise, grown step by step by its dwellers through their harmoniously carved letters and through their profound senses. In this artistic refuge, known as Oneirism, Virgil Tănase has lived throughout the last three decades. Virgil Tănase's literature deals with life, ideas, hopes, with people escaped in the West from the burden of the totalitarian system. In his writings, Virgil Tănase reveals a deliberate will to break all the patterns, an unabated resoluteness to evade all the pre-established obligations in what meaning is concerned. In drama or prose, Virgil Tănase conceals another of his faces, mirroring it in his own way, by portraying a sensitive and dreamy character, one that is also sensible, rebellious and emancipated. Virgil Tănase weaves his narratives strategically, rigorously and, at the same time, as if they were complex musical compositions with interfering leitmotifs. Internal and external exile, harmoniously combined, have fertilised the themes of Virgil Tănase's prose.

Keywords: biography, postmodern, exile, totalitarian system

Virgil Tănase, a man of spirit and noblesse, comes from an intellectual family of people faithful to human values, always sharing other people's suffering and needs: "I come from a simple family, with no wealth mentioned by notaries and deeds, without extraordinary feats recorded in books, without family documents…" (Virgil Tănase).

In search for refuge: Oneirism, a reinvented paradise

The most important literary influences begin for writer Virgil Tănase with Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeur*s (*The Counterfeiters*), a novel that pens the path to the mysteries of literary works for the young novelist. He rejoices in reading Thomas Mann, Jack London, Mark Twain, Turgenev, but also poetry, being fascinated by the lyrical universe of George Bacovia. He excels in translation and fuses with Jacques Prévert's poetics, steeping himself, at the same time, in Barthes (*Sur Racine*, 1968), Tzvetan Todorov (*Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 1970), Beckett (*Acte sans paroles/Acts without Words*, 1971), Diaz-Plaja (*Garcia Lorca. A Monograph*, 1971) or Balzac (*Les Cent Contes drolatiques – Droll Stories*)

If we are to talk about Tănase's first literary success, the author is the most reliable source: "In my second year at the university, I also translated a few poems by Jacques Prévert. We were editing a large literary billboard at that time. A few translations, mine included, had been posted there. The next day, my translation of Barthes was missing: someone had stolen it. This was my first literary success".[1]

The true adventure of writing is triggered by the ideal communication with the literature of Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, Proust, and Gogol. He makes his debut in the journal *Luceafărul*, in 1969, with the story *Însemnările celor care merg spre somn* [*Jotting of those heading to sleep]*. Later, in 1970, he publishes the articles *Raţa sălbatică* [*The Wild Duck*] and *Desenat într-o parte* [*Drawn askew*] in the same journal, and a poem in prose about love, death and eternity, *Doamna cu licornul* [*The Lady with the Unicorn*], in *România literară*: "You are right, you are right all too often, I don't love you: I run away with you

[1] Virgil Tănase, România mea [My Romania], Bucharest, EDP 1996.

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from that death that I had glimpsed at the end of the straight road we'd taken and I'll stand by you only as long as we won't be able to see anything farther from us, leaving the wonderful train of the two hundred years of love flowing within us to the great herb fields to beam through the consummate mist".[2]

The writing of the stories in which imaginary dwells in real and life is wooed by death, as in an oneiric game where time and space seem endless and mirage fades only when struck by Mr Truth, announces the birth of a talent, of a painter who, conscientiously alternating the quill and the paintbrush, creates a picture of novelty and poetry: "The death who had black hair on the forehead and long, beautiful face, and loved horses, and had a only reed in her hand, and was wearing a green coat and was in a hurry to head to the mountains, yes, she had come there, on the porch, from the sea scenting of jasmine and touched them, first her, the gypsy woman, and they all thought she was now telling the gypsy man: Come, come to Semenic Mountains... but it wasn't true... he died right after the gypsy woman, touched by the same hand..." (our translation)[3]. The personalised language of the writing is often contained, sometimes exaggeratedly, by a poetical and metaphorical sense which obstructs for a few moments the reader's path within the natural development of the text. However, Virgil Tănase, with his keen spirit, with his excellent directorial acuity, mastering the modern and postmodern writing techniques, makes up an apparently illogical word-game which reveals, at the end of the narrative maze, an open, transparent, lucid writing, in a vivid and chameleonic style, often guilty of puzzling the reader.

In *Doamna cu licornul* [*The Lady with the Unicorn]*, Virgil Tănase resorts genuinely and significantly to the island symbol. For the island is no longer a refuge from the senseless world, nor is it the sacred, compensatory place coveted by the decayed and decaying human being, it only symbolises immovability. Even the syntax of this prose fiction is conceived to hinder, by displacing adjuncts or objects from their normal position: She reached out and embraced my neck and from the waters of the lake, dark, came out to the mirror which, draped in brocade, like in old practices, was held by the Lady, the unicorn (our translation)[4] . We find in *The Lady with the Unicorn* a Proustian sentence, lagoon-shaped, lazy, insidious, but, unlike Proust, whose sentence plays the part of 'substantiating the progression of the thought', with Virgil Tănase it becomes calculated, reined in, meant to ensure that immovability concentrated in the symbol of the island.

The man and artist Virgil Tănase **has stayed** and **will be staying** behind the curtains, allowing every once in a while to be known and acknowledged for his art, then finding a refuge in his unconstraint universe, waiting for the moment when he, the novelist, is absolutely necessary again. Otherwise, after a long and intense introspection, Virgil Tănase defines himself as 'a unique individual', moreover, analysing the context the artist is living in these days, he asserts: something must happen in this creation for my presence to become a requisite and my death, an aberration"[5].

The author of the ethical and aesthetic game which transforms personal existence in an adventure significant at the level of History and Art (understood as life) defies oblivion (a form of death, of course) and, by his rebellious conspicuousness on the social stage of exile, succeeds in never being "a lonely man".[6]

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[2] Virgil Tănase, Însemnările celor ce merg spre somn, Luceafărul, Year XII, No.47 (395), 22 November 1969, p. 5.
[3] Virgil Tănase, Desenat într-o parte [Drawn Askew], Luceafărul, Year XIII, no.18/1970, p. 5.
[4] I. Negoiţescu, Despre proza lui Virgil Tănase [On Virgil Tănase's Prose], România literară, The Weekly Journal of the Writers' Union , Year XXIII, No. 27, 5 July 1990, p. 7.
[5] Virgil Tănase, România mea [My Romania], p. 54.
[6] Crihană Alina Daniela, Scriitorul postbelic şi 'teroarea istoriei'. Dileme şi reconstrucţii identitare în povestirile vieţii [The Post-Bellum Writer and the Terror of History. Dilemmas and Identitary Reconstructions

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Exile confessions: a silenced Romanian writer speaks up

Before invading the historical-literary space of the Gloss in *Leapşa pe murite* (*Playing Tag with the Death*), published by Adevărul Holding, Bucharest, 2011, in which the Sisyphus myth is actually concealed[7], I have taken the liberty to announce the publication of the book *Ma Roumanie*[8] *[My Romania]*, an authentic spring of thoughts and feelings, a dialogical memory, an original literary construction published for the first time in France by Editions Ramsay-de-Cortanze, in 1990, shortly after the Romanian Revolution and re-published six years later in Romania by the Didactic and Pedagogic Publishing House. The volume seems to be a kind of a "travel back in time"[9], *a mix of memoirs, and a state of reflection on human existence* or, to put it otherwise, an amazing attempt at an autobiography with bibliographic accents (my emphasis). The title of the book may be misleading, as *Ma Roumanie* is not a "tourist's guide" with subjective implications or a historical exposition with propagandistic ends. In this work, remarkable through its stylistic refinement and elegant conception, a French journalist, Blandine Tézé -Delafon, "attempts to decipher the enigma of a country through a character, likewise enigmatic and contradictory"[10]: Virgil Tănase, named by the owner of Médias "an unconventional spirit both in France and Romania".

It is necessary to point out the fact that this book of conversations or confessions, *Ma Roumanie [My Romania]*, represents an interesting introduction to the writer's work and biography, a shattering testimony of the destiny and sentiments of a man born in our country and forced afterwards to choose exile. One reads between the lines the tragic fate of a whole country, of an entire people. Virgil Tănase is a character in his books, he insinuates from one story to the next, seemingly warning the reader that these films feature the destinies lived by many Romanian readers. Although Virgil Tănase's destiny as both man and writer is not at all banal, there are plenty of aspects in his biography which confirm the previous statement. Perhaps some of us may better understand Virgil Tănase, or even identify with him and his experience – if that is not too much to ask: "my destiny resembles that of my peers who didn't want to be heroes, who tried, more or less successfully, to avoid drowning in the cesspool which had overflown on us, who didn't want to be accessories to the crimes committed, but who didn't want either to become victims of a regime that we all felt like a historical catastrophe to which it would have been absurd to resist, the same way in which one cannot resist an earthquake or a deluge. Everyone had to deal as they could and as they considered fit, except for the recreants, of course, whose wickedness I wouldn't associate with the political system, but with their nature, just like beasts which remain unchanged when crossing the borders – and the Parisian exile experience came only to support this opinion".[11]

"Freed from the terror of provincial snobbism, Virgil Tănase considers himself, without hypocritical demureness, a provincial man, even a peasant: an heir of those who worked the land without other hallmarks than *the seasons, the sun, and the great rhythms of the world* (my emphasis). It is from this interiorisation of this austere genealogy what determines his caution in the face of certain events which he does not even try to

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in the Stories of Life], The National Museum of Romanian Literature Publishing House, Aula Magna Collection. 2013, p. 218.

[7] Andrei Grigor, Glosa, Mitul lui Sisif şi Omul revoltat al lui Virgil Tănase [Gloss. Sisyphus Myth and Virgil Tănase's Revolted Man of] in Caiete critice No 10 (312)/2013, p. 46.

[8] Mention should be made that My Romania reflects Virgil Tănase's genuine biography, related by the writer in an ample interview which he owes to Eades Delafon, the owner of Medias.

[9] Patrice Bollon, Un latin balcanic, Caiete Critice, No. 1 (207), 2005, p. 19.

[10] Ion Cristofor, Confesiunile unui exilat [An Exiled Man's Confessions], Tribuna, cultural weekly journal, Year II, No.23, 7 June 1990, p. 4.

[11] Istoria unei vieţi [History of a lifetime]

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appropriate, placing them in a wider, cosmic assembly. However, caution does not exclude dignity, or boldness, as Virgil Tănase dares to aver the independence of his thinking in full bloom of socialist dogmatism. The history of his humiliation is, at the same time, the history of his victory over the communist terror." [12]

His notes on the Romanian exile are not too flattering, with few exceptions: "Exile is not a value. It is a temporary and administrative situation. I have always considered that Romanian literary life can happen only in Romania. Not in exile. But the communists, the regime, censorship… Despite all these constraints, there is where it happens. Here is French culture, French public, French literature and French taste and a whole new stage of development."

"The writer must live in his natural environment, like a wild beast. He must be able to fight, to tear and be torn apart, to nourish and hide, to lie by for his readers, to lure and aggress them. This is what his freedom means. Exile is a zoo, a form of loss of liberty, if you accept this paradox"[13] He is saved from this exile through experiences, through creation, returning to the place of his rebirth and birth with a real novel, written without any external constraints, reeled off from under the cloak of another era. Finding rescue on the other shore, in Romania of the year 2011, Virgil Tănase cries out the destiny of a man thrown in a dangerous, but real game: **Playing tag with the death**.

Assured that Romanian culture and politics must be carried out in the country and not in a Parisian café, Virgil Tănase ascertains that he has nothing to do with this "ridiculous and pathetic exile". Ideological pressure of the dictatorial regime, obsessively marking the existence prior the exile, the constant harassment of the Securitate and the opposition to the "totalitarian machine" (Virgil Tănase), "the escape in the free world" and the recovery of inner freedom via "resistant books", the disappointment in exile and the state of "exile among exiles", the crystallisation of the dissident, anti-Ceausescu movement in exile, the unsuccessful attempt at political assassination, the return to Romania after December 1989 and the post-exile dilemmas represent reference points of the "identitary meta-history"[14]

During the first years of exile, French press is seen like a place "full of hasty and unprincipled journalists who do not bother to check the smallest piece of information. Media of today seems to me a simple society game – Virgil Tănase notes with a bitter scepticism in which one may sense the reflex of a moralist in whose judgement nuances cannot always find a place. In these confessions, *reflexion often coagulates in dicta which glimmer like a scalpe*l[15]. During the interview, the reporter's indiscretion is obvious – an opportune indiscretion, we would say, which succeeds in bringing forth snapshots of the novelist's life, his day by day experience mixing with the artistic experience. Here, the writer becomes the hero of his own story, in an indissoluble rapport between the literary work and his existence, whereas the confession becomes a plunge, often painstaking, into the "depths of memory". All biographic genres carry the mark of this duplication of the enunciating self, which is functional regardless of whether they are memoirs, an actual autobiography, an autofictional novel or a journal.[16]

[12] Ion Cristofor, art. cit., p.4.
[13] Virgil Tănase, România mea [My Romania], p. 99.
[14] Nicoleta Ifrim, Memorie şi istorie în naraţiunea identitară: Leapşa pe murite – Virgil Tănase, o carte-destin [Memory and history in the identitary narrative: 'Playing Tag with the Death' – Virgil Tănase, a destiny-book] in Caiete critice no 12 (302)/2012.
[15] Ion Cristofor, art.cit., p.4.
[16] Simona Antofi, The exile literature of memoirs – debates, dilemmas, representative texts and their formative-educative effects in Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences (ISSN: 1877-0428) by Elsevier Publication: 2013 indexed on the Science Direct, Scopus and Thomson Reuters Conference Proceedings Citation Index (Web of Science) vol. 93/2013, pp.29-34.

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This masked diary of an original and controversial figure is often remarkable through the accurate interpretation it gives to historic events.. This is because Virgil Tănase assumes his statements responsibly and is fully aware of what he can provide his readers or audience with his sincerity.

One may certainly assert that Virgil Tănase is one of the Romanian writers steadily integrated within the spirit of exile, who firmly resist the trials of life through his Romanian attitude, transparency, lucidity and scrupulosity. He is the man who lives through his art, amazes through his ability to present life in its social and psychological complexity and, more than anything, fascinates his readers through the poetry of his writing.

Drama and prose become one with his being. One study is not sufficient to amply and carefully assess Virgil Tănase's literature. It is, nevertheless, a starting point. His oeuvre remains open to interpretation. Perhaps this paper may seem a little bit encomiastic, but the shade on the face of writer Virgil Tănase was surely in need of some light.

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