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Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu: A European Writer

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HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU, EUROPEAN WRITER

Abstract

In the present paper, we endeavour to demonstrate that, through her vision and given the themes she approaches, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is a European writer.

The introductory chapter, „From a Small Writer to the Great European. Three Novelists with a Common Theme: Estrangement”, means to establish the general points of our study and to bring some terminological edifications.

We must mention that our paper is part of a wider research dedicated to our doctoral thesis: „The Aesthetics of Alienation. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Anton Holban, Max Blecher, Constantin Fântâneru”. Alienation, which we will be considering as a synonym for “estrangement”, is also the central theme of the present study. After consulting a representative critical bibliography on the matter we may conclude that it is one of the fundamental themes of modernism.

In order to demonstrate how the centrality of estrangement in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s writings marks the novelist’s place in the European spiritual family of her time, we’ve traced the theme through a couple of Virginia Woolf’s and Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette’s works. The writers, two important figures in the European literary history, are contemporary with the Romanian novelist. The chosen writings for Virginia Woolf are *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The New Dress*. As for Colette, we’ve selected *Chéri* and *La fin de Chéri*.

The chapter „The Writers’ Testimony for Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu” analyzes the texts written for the anniversary issue of *Tiparnița literară*, dedicated to the Romanian novelist. Its importance in the beginning of the present study is stressed by the fact that the title of our project itself combines the writer’s wish to become “a small Romanian writer”, which she confessed at the beginning of her career, in a letter to G. Ibrăileanu, and the title „European”, given much later by the mentioned journal.

The division of the project into three main sections, each having in its centre one of the mentioned writers, is not a rigid one, each encompassing revelations about all three authors.

In the modern text clothes are no longer used simply as a realistic detail, they fulfil many more functions. Starting from R. S. Koppen’s considerations on the matter, we analyze three of these functions in connection to our theme, alienation. Thus, in “Modern literature and clothes” we analyze the synecdochic correspondence between clothes and character in Virginia Woolf’s and Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s work through Miss Kilman and Lina Rim, two characters whose estrangement is that from the opposite sex. Just like the mackintosh coat and the crumpled dress, the clothes that represent them, the two women are not desired. At the opposite end we have the instance in which clothes contribute to the finishing of a deceiving exterior, one which

is in great contrast with the character's interior substance. Whilst in the nineteenth century novels the main purpose of clothes was that of expressing the character of the one wearing them, now they become the costume accompanying the character's daily mask. Coca-Aimée and Hugh Whitbread illustrate this instance. Clothes become part of the subtle literary mechanism that expresses the difficulty of getting to know *the other*, the *stranger*. Clothed by the silky material of his/her garments, the character's true self remains hidden.

The metaphorical function of clothes, the most complex and perhaps the most interesting, is illustrated in the subchapter "Mrs. Dalloway's green dress and Străina's white dress". Starting from Jeremy Hawthorn's considerations from his book dedicated to the theme of estrangement in Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway: A Study in Alienation*, we shall consider the green dress as forming part of the metaphorical ensemble of the party, seen as a manifestation of Clarissa's special gift: that of bringing people together, even if only for a brief moment. The evil spell of estrangement seems to be lifted for a few instances of genuine communion under the influence of Mrs. Dalloway's almost mystical presence, beautifully clad in her silver-green mermaid's dress.

In Hortensiei Papadat-Bengescu's last book, *Străina*, retrieved from the manuscripts by Gabriela Omăt, the protagonist's white dress attracts a constellation of metaphors. Associated with the dreamlike image of the famous dancer Loïe Fuller, the frock becomes the symbol of the unreachable ideal. Part of, as we have seen searching the files describing the novel's creative process, several of the variants written for the same scene, as well as of some of the episodes abandoned by the author, Ina's white dress is each time associated with the protagonist's death, be it her physical death, or a symbolical one. In the first instance, the heroine remains Străina (her name means „stranger”), the estranged one, the hypersensitive being who doesn't belong anywhere, whose sole closure is in death, seen as a passionate embrace given by the idealized man, the Leopard. In the symbolical variant, which the novelist has ultimately chosen, the protagonist suffers a split. The one dying is still Străina, but she has come to represent only a part of the heroine. The one that's kept alive is Ina Vergu, the wife of her cerebral husband, Lucian, a young woman tamed by her unhappy experiences, finally prepared to try to adapt to rules, people, places and times, to life itself.

With the third subchapter from the part dedicated to Virginia Woolf, „The question of identity”, we enter the incandescent heart of this European writer's concerns, a sphere from which Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is no stranger. By introducing the concept “frock consciousness”, which Woolf uses in her diary, we shed light on a new modernist technique. One could appear different at times due to the influence of many factors, amongst which the clothes one wears, the place and the people surrounding one. The representative image is that of the multifaceted diamond, used by Woolf in order to describe Clarissa Dalloway. Caught in this dizzying play of glistening surfaces, one finds it difficult to assert which one of the

consciousnesses is real, authentic. Not only are others impossible to know, but we can't truly know ourselves either, it becomes difficult to contain ourselves in one single immutable image. The matter concerning us at this point is that of self estrangement, the divided self. Characters such as Virginia Woolf's Mabel Waring, or Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's Străina, ask themselves questions about their own identity.

The tragedy we explore is that resulting out of the dissonance created by the clash between the character's ideal and social selves, as of the impossibility to firmly affirm the authenticity of either the one or the other. In the section centred on Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu the case study is dedicated to *Marea*, part of the novelist's early writings. In it we encounter a wonderful display of that essential theme of estrangement, a theme we can find later throughout the bengescian fictional universe. Another reason for selecting this text is that it presents, just like in Chéri's and Septimus Warren Smith's case, alienation taken to its final consequences: suicide. The First subchapter, "Three women – the same aesthetics. Variants" offers the portrait of the young estranged woman, a true pattern that we come across especially in the author's early writings. Here we can include characters such as Manuela, Adriana, Alisia, Bianca Porporata and, surprisingly, Ina Vergu – a late renewal of the pattern. In the analyzed text we encounter a feminine trinity: the narrator, Alina – the host and Lilia, the author of the letters. Similar due to their preference for solitude, a closer look reveals us the particularities that each has, unveiling three variants of estrangement. The subchapter "Early existentialism" deals especially with the part called "Versuri din Nietzsche" from *Marea* and with the fragment "Coincidențe" from the article "Momente", written by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu for *Tipărița literară* in 1930. Further on we analyze the progression of the protagonist's alienation, its pathological traits, how it transcends the sociological sphere, turning into estrangement from the human condition itself. The subchapters "The mysterious disease" and "Early existentialism" prove how, without knowing about certain books, without following certain directions, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu comes to express, through her own methods and in her own original style, the trends and concerns existing in the European literary world of her time.

The last part, dedicated to Colette, is built in a different way from that centred on Virginia Woolf. The first subchapter pleads that the solar novelist should also be seen as an author interested in the dark themes of modernism, such as alienation. *The intersecting realities and fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette* by Helen Southworth, one of the few vast studies dedicated to a comparison between the two writers, places them in opposition. We try connecting the novelists by analyzing in parallel two of their characters, Fred Peloux și Septimus Warren Smith, both exponents of estrangement.

In the second subchapter, “The hero’s alienation from *Chéri* to *La fin de Chéri*” we follow how the theme concerning us changes from the first to the second volume of Colette’s book, highlighting its importance in the character’s becoming.

The third subchapter, “Chéri – Suicide’s apprenticeship”, as shown from the title, consist of a reading of *La fin de Chéri* trough *Marea*. We try to see Colette’s book as a novelistic representation of the ideas Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu exposes in an essayistic manner.

The last chapter synthesizes the main ideas presented throughout our research, stressing the conclusions that converge towards Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu’s image as a European writer, and points out the coordinates of a future project that would develop the present paper, extend and enrich it.