

**The Theme of War in the Vision of Camil Petrescu and Liviu Rebreanu.
The Case of Novels *The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War*
and *Forest of the Hanged***

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Résumé: Tout en aspirant à la construction d'une vision objective sur l'expérience de la guerre, les romans « *La dernière nuit d'amour, la première nuit de guerre* » de Camil Petrescu et « *La Forêt des pendus* » de Liviu Rebreanu dévoilent la physionomie intérieure d'une époque historique, en essayant de saisir ce « souffle mystérieux et vital » qui donne justement le « rythme de l'existence ». S'intéressant à la vie intérieure des héros confrontés à leur destin dans le contexte traumatique de la guerre, les deux auteurs construisent de véritables trajets gnoséologiques dont les protagonistes cherchent dans la connaissance de soi une réponse au défi du monde. Le roman de Liviu Rebreanu débute « ex-abrupto » avec l'introduction du protagoniste dans l'atmosphère de la guerre, en se fixant sur les problèmes de conscience avec lesquels se confronte Apostol Bologa sur le front. Camil Petrescu est, à son tour, le premier écrivain roumain qui décrit la guerre en valorisant sa propre expérience, le journal de campagne de Gheorghidiu étant le témoignage d'un combattant et, également, l'innovation d'un artiste qui se confesse sur sa propre mutilation morale. Suite à l'expérience du front, les héros parviennent à dépasser la curiosité dévorante de l'inconnu, leurs actes devenant des prétextes pour leurs réflexions. Si les étapes de la connaissance de soi, intimement liées à l'expérience de la guerre, offrent à Gheorghidiu les prémisses de son ancrage dans le monde réel, Apostol Bologa se renferme en soi, « la connaissance de soi » signifiant la condamnation qu'il porte dans le monde présumé.

Mots-clés: thème de la guerre, l'expérience du front, la connaissance de soi, mutilation morale

Having their sources in an objective material reality, the novels *The last night of love, the first night of war* by Camil Petrescu and *Forest of the Hanged* by Liviu Rebreanu display the sequence of the internal physiognomy of a historical period, wanting to capture that “mysterious and vital breath” which precisely gives the rhythm of existence. Moulding in human pulp different psychological categories, the novels intersect in the vast land of their origin (the decade after the First World War of our literature), when the war became a favourite theme through which the authors aim to present the evolution of a hero who climbs the stairs of his own destiny, following the fight at the battlefield and the ravages of his inner nature, the self-knowledge being the hero's answer to the challenge of the world.

Liviu Rebreanu's novel begins ex abrupto with placing the protagonist in the atmosphere of war and conscience issues from the front line, circumventing both training years and the Apostle's death.

As nothing happens by chance, in Rebreanu's imaginary universes, on the contrary, any detail prepares thoroughly the reader and transforms the text into an “epic space full of symbol” [1], we see that the image meanings that begin Apostol Bologa's *Bildungsroman* go to the tragic end of his fate: “From the porch with flowered pillars, among the branches of walnut planted on the day of his (Apostol's) birth, his father's grave could be seen, adorned with a gray stone cross, which bore his name carved with gold letters: Iosif Bologa”. The reader cannot escape seeing the homology with the scene of hanging of the Czech Svoboda, which opens the novel: “On the right there was the military cemetery [...], on the left, a few steps away, there was the beginning of the village cemetery...”. Thus, we see appearing one of the horizon symmetries, in which, Apostol Bologa will live, from birth to death, his tragic fate known yet only by the narrator.

The pre-figuration of Apostol's death does not stop only at the meaning given by the emphasis on the cemetery image, but it seen through other ominous symmetries. Coming in a hurry, under the impulse of his duty, to control the course of preparations for execution, Apostol Bologa stops “just under the motionless noose”. When Klapka evokes *the forest of the hanged* Czechs, Apostol Bologa follows with a hallucinating attention the strange “ritual”, an image that will fall within Bologa's obsession: “He looked at the map and saw only the

captain's fingers, holding the compass and moving from here there, drawing a strange shadow having the shape of gallows...".

When the same Klapka announces that they will move on the Romanian front line, Bologna, surprised and confused, talks in a contradictory way: "But I cannot go there... I feel that I will die there... and I do not want to die! I have to live!"; after other "attacks" of the Czech captain, the Romanian officer gives assurances that will be antiphrasis of his fate: "If they were to catch me, I would shoot myself and die quickly!... In any case, I will not die hanged, I guarantee that!". From the point of view of the omniscient narrator, Klapka answers in an "oracular" way: "So they guaranteed, my friend, but the circumstances were stronger than their determination...". The second time, just the day before the test of desertion, Klapka says: "I do not know why I had and still have the premonition that they could catch you if you try to get to the other side... I don't know...".

These predictions are functional in the Romanian area as a reminder for the narrator to introduce, at the right place, the great scene, "they are like Wagnerian leitmotifs which accompany the protagonist through the tragic symphony of predestination which is *Forest of the Hanged*" [2].

Even if Liviu Rebreanu writes about the same war as Camil Petrescu, the author of *The last night...* is the first Romanian writer who describes the war as a direct experience. Gheorghidiu's campaign journal is a testimony of a combatant and the innovation of an artist who confesses his own moral mutilation.

After two agonizing days, "the first night of war" triggers the events that completely captivate the main character. As he was given the mission to build "the top avant-garde", the hero is caught by the fever of the preparations that are in disarray, an "unthinkable confusion" with a particular disorder. But he is convinced of his *historic mission*: "The fact that I will rush as in reading books [...], amazes me. [...]. For forty years there has been no war; the reading books have stopped at page 77 and now I begin the shooting. I find this one of those strange coincidences, big as a horizon".

Being keen on the principle of absolute, Gheorghidiu is sure that he was offered the major opportunity of overall experience: "a final experience" that cannot "miss from my entire soul".

This Gheorghidiu's affirmation can be regarded as a prediction, because, on the background of the terrible war, Gheorghidiu's intimate wound loses its importance, the hero's witness from the novel's end suggesting that very transformation from war experience.

The war in Camil Petrescu's novel is a moral experience, one of conscience. The organization of some directions, that produce mutations, understandings, maturations in the text, is discreet, so that the distant echoes of moments connect the whole through the suggested perspective of some "*decantations*" of lived meanings. One of these lines of inner redefinition is that of discovering the person that is by "his side", the people with whom the hero feels sharing the same destiny.

The involvement in the campaign life, in a joint community under the threat of death, means a new emotional option: "[...] for these people, my comrades, are the only hope for me now, and every their gesture touches me as the gestures of a dear child".

Apostol's maturation occurs through the prism of "the person that is by his side". This fact can be followed by how the characters are grouped. The very scene of Svoboda's hanging, in addition to the value of anticipation of the tragic, gets a symbolic value as well, the characters that assist at the execution being grouped not only according to military ranks, but also according their attitude to the convict: an attitude of blame or compassion.

Bologa's behavior – the excessive zeal in monitoring the preparing for the execution, accompanied by stereotypical phrases about state and duty – seems inappropriate and non-authentic. It is especially shocking in his discussion with the newcomer, the Captain Klapka: “[...] only the war is the true generator of energy”, says Bologa, Klapka's reply being said “with a gentle voice, colored by a gentle irony”: “- I thought that war is a killer of energy!”

The text contains another significant image: “[...] and in a few moments there was a crowd of people around the gallows”. The crowd suggests the closed circle of death, the destiny that unites them all.

Klapka's meeting and discussion, followed by the “flame from of the commander's eyes”, will be a second mobile trigger of Bologa's suffered shock.

The key scene from the beginning of the novel suggests that the great tragedy of war is not necessarily present in the first lines, but it is that of conscience. People were forced to respect their duty towards a country that does not belong to them and, hence, the death is seen as the only saving solution. This is the mystery revealed by Svoboda. While everyone else has the eyes full of tears, dictated by the humanity reflex, the feelings of the hanged are transferred to Bologa by the writer: “he was confused and felt that the palate of his mouth was dry”.

Unlike those from the novel *Forest of the Hanged*, the discussions about of war in the moment of “pause” at the officer canteen from *The last night* are affective, the officers having a unique point of view. But here, the death is seen as a saving solution, and the darkness increases the fear:

The last night:

“I know so well that I am going to die tonight [...]”.

The reactions of soldiers met with gunshots near Bran are dictated by the instinct of self-defence: they “[...] throw themselves desperately into the road ditches”. The morning finds the hero on the mountain, on the Măgura Branului, “like on an island towards the sky in light and death”.

Forest of the Hanged:

“How dark, God, how dark is on the earth”.

The state of confusion, of horror of finding a life lived in error seems to be transmitted to the environment that crushes him: “and the wet darkness was pressing more and more mercilessly his heart”.

The same as in *Forest of the Hanged*, the narration contains many details: beginning with the image of the night of fighting to observations about the army mess or discussions on a real battle. We can notice the views of Orişan, Gheorghidiu's friend:

“It was not serious and it is shown by the fact that we have moved as a herd. It wasn't a battlefield. A modern battlefield gives the impression of a desert. We shouldn't go like that, with the sword, as in the barracks yard. The troops threatened by hundreds of guns and thousands of cannons do not go forward, as we just have done”.

The comments of the soldiers from *Forest of the Hanged* do not hesitate to appear: “But that's not the army, Mr corporal...”.

Camil Petrescu's text creates the impression of the combatant that kills without any sense of guilt, thinking that the separation and the distance annihilate the guilt: It seemed that “those from 800 meters away” were “lead soldiers”.

Escaping alive after the first fight, Gheorghidiu, being only 23 years old, is marked by new experiences. He changes his point of view about love, recognizing that he owes to his wife moments of accomplishment that could become the only reminders of his life: “I should recognize that she deceived me only when I became rich”.

Bologa's ascent is a long one: the war finds him undecided to go to the front line. After becoming an officer and later a lieutenant, the end is another beginning in this long retrospect: “The war took the leading place in his conception of life [...]. Then there

were the gallows and commander's eyes... and the song of ordinance, which does not stop... as a reprimand".

We notice that the effect of the external time is always reduced. Bologna becomes more and more retired within his inner ego, as a result he does not participate with the same enthusiasm to the discussions about war and retains from them only what amplifies his disturbance: "Consciousness! captain Cervenco sighed suddenly [...]. This voice stuck like a needle in Lieutenant Bologna's ear".

Conversation partners have opposing views, according to the position of the country they serve.

What troubles Apostol Bologna most are Cervenco's words: "Love, dear people, love!". Cervenco's glance frightened him. He felt like being thrown "in the deep abyss that he had avoided all night".

Klapka was the one who saw Apostol's agitation: "You have a kind heart, Bologna! [...]. I saw your torment yesterday, [...] and I understood you...".

The meeting with Klapka represents the hero's awakening to reality, his detachment from the unreal world in which he lived until then:

"How ridiculous I was with that concept of life – he then suddenly thought. How could I not realize that a stupid formula can never resist to the life?"

Now, looking back, it seemed to him that life was empty like a paper bag".

He becomes more confessional in his discussions with Petre, complaining about war. However, Petre says wisely: "Death is not suffering. Life is suffering".

Bologna's existence is marked by a profound change which he calls a "regeneration", as if he started a new life: "[...] without heart, the brain remains a poor soulless bunch of cells". The mood changes now into exaltation: "[...] he was dreaming only of happiness [...]".

Unlike Apostol Bologna, Ștefan Gheorghidiu becomes more open to conversations being at war, his partners being like a whole. They all agree with Orișan's observation that individual destiny at war is not linked to the "huge fight" or to the "insignificant fight"; it is tied to the possibility to escape or not to escape alive; it is not important for one who dies whether it was "at Verdun or in a patrol scramble".

Gheorghidiu is always ready for acts of courage: he stands still during the attack on the way to Bran, while all are hiding terrified, he takes in his arms a shell "from the fanfaronade" only to awaken the admiration of his comrades.

Like him, Apostol Bologna is worried about destroying the reflector, but its breaking does not give, as at the beginning, the satisfaction of victory; on the contrary: "[...] he was astonished how he could make such a blackness...".

He will be particularly welcomed by the general for this military victory and he will ask to be moved to the Italian front line. Being refused and withdrawing definitely into himself, the thought of desertion creates a kind of alienation: "[...] it was an insistent thought, as a fly that you vainly try to chase away".

He confesses his present troubles to Klapka, his detachment from the past: "[...] when I look back, I realize that I wore the age of an alien [...]" and he has the courage to be himself: "The emptiness frightens me like the darkness".

Camil Petrescu's text is full of authenticity and seems to be written at the time of its living, evoking the suffering that war brings: "As if my skin was covering my bones, I feel their contours. I become stiff. Such a suffering is beyond my forces [...]. A new pain is added, a kind of humility that only I know tonight".

Gheorghidiu has a tremendous sense of detachment from his own past on the battlefield: "I really remember about my wife, about her lover, about all the turmoil as

about a childhood event. Even then I was suffering from things that today seem meaningless to me”.

The tragic reality of war is best captured in Chapter God's earth covered us. The advance to Sibiu gives Ștefan Gheorghidiu another opportunity to expose his views: “and it proves that our military leadership is unable, they ignore an essential principle of war: you should never deploy more troops than the enemy in the tactical field. [...] It's the army that engages fewer of its forces in the battle that wins the war”.

The comments, as the images from the battlefield, have as a result a demythologization of war. Orișan has clear views on disruption which leads to tragic incidents: “Haven't you seen that our artillery shoot its own troops yesterday [...]?”.

The detailed account of this day highlights the lack of training of the army:

“People run in all directions, like a crowd struck by lightning. [...]”

A second volley of lightning, suddenly splitting the air above, fell on the road and did another four round tombs. [...]”

I can't realize the loss, because all the soldiers lie where they find when the shells come. [...]”

We fall with broken hearts, on our knees; we throw ourselves down, as we can, then we run and we descend scared [...] covered with ground and smoke, like now. [...]”

The nerves burst, the earth and the sky split, the souls left our bodies to return immediately to see that we survived. [...]”

We are there, under the vast heaven and the earth does not want to accept us”.

War means panic and fear; people are guided by the instinct of self defence. People live the feeling of being buried alive.

The attack is audible as a “cosmic ghost”.

A crowd of verbs, whose sequences seem a film image, is remarked.

The use of the 1st person plural is appropriate to the collective drama which includes Gheorghidiu.

The individual is helpless; his face is marked by signs of degradation, he is dirty of ground and smoke.

The introspection gives the annihilating feeling of being caught in an apocalyptic universe.

A predicting limit situation for the protagonist is, again, that from *Forest of the Hanged*: “We must destroy the reflector, Bologa, my brother of suffering! Otherwise... *Forest of the Hanged* ... Apostol murmured with his starry eyes full of a new hatred, knead imperceptibly in his heart”.

Bologa will watch the emergence of the reflector light in a big strain of thoughts and feelings:

„Apostol Bologa, with his iron helmet on his head, in his military coat, went forward very carefully... His heart was beating so hard, that he did not even feel the rain.

In the first moment, Apostol felt only a devastating hatred against the light that embraced him without his will... The caress of the shimmering rays began to seem as sweet as the kiss of maiden in love, dazing him that he could not hear even the rumbles...

Instead of having an answer, the white light that he had just killed suddenly sprang in his soul... And its shine seemed... like Svoboda's eyes under the noose..., the same as the vision he had had in his childhood, at the church...

An hour before, all his hopes were in the others and he had no confidence in himself. Now he was sure that he would rather fight against the fate, than besmear his soul, because his salvation was beginning to rise in the light in his soul...”.

Apostol is instinctively driven to fulfil his well defined purpose, but the war does not spare him from fear that becomes stronger than the force of nature, the rain.

The light, even that of the reflector, will perform, after Svoboda's death, a polar attraction on Apostol, one of hatred and love, a “reminder” of his moral guilt but also of the lighting from his childhood. The erotic implication shows the complex meaning of light for the hero; “the erotic fantasy was merging into the ek-stasis of cosmic consciousness” [3].

Being killed outside, the reflector light is born in his spirit, suggesting him “to see” the identity between the light from Czech's eyes and that of the vision from his childhood.

The introspective scene ends in a new pre-figuration of Apostol Bologa's destiny, the reaching of the last concentric “salvation” circle, although the oscillatory way towards there is still very long.

Although they are wounded and hospitalized, the heroes manifest themselves differently:

Being wounded, Gheorghidui finds again the gap that separates him from his relatives, from his civil life in general, hence the preference for a provincial hospital, wanting to avoid Bucharest.

If he had previously been obsessed with love, the war takes its place and captures his inner attention that generates long debates: "We can have in our senses and our mind only our time and place. The rest is replaced with fake images [...]"

After the period of silence from the hospital (required for restoring his lung torn to pieces) meaning also a spiritual crisis prolonged after his healing through the brevity of his verbal relations with others, Bologna reaches the maximum degree of hatred, bursting into a confession made to pastor Boteanu: "Now the cap has filled, Father! An exhausting hatred wears my heart off". The writer does not insist on protagonist's intimate discussions and analytical "clarifications". He suggests their evolution through the known process of "rememorative symmetries"; thus, the father's grave appears twice in the vision of the one who came back from vacation, in Parva, and the parental admonition came to his mind twice: "Always do your duty and never forget that you're Romanian" (an echo from Caragiale: "he put at least three "r" in Romanian").

The guilt complex is emphasized when, called to be a translator for a group of Romanian prisoners, he gets a hard reprimand from one of them: "Your place would be there, not here, sir... But Romanians like you..."

Forest of the Hanged

The text becomes introspective by changing the person. As if Bologna confesses to himself: "As he put his head on the pillow, he felt his body numb. But his brain set off a wild rush. Thousands of pieces of thoughts sparked at the same time, colliding, mixing, chaining".

Hero's mood gets hesitating, living the present and abandoning the past: "[...] the time lags, going apart as a colourless canvas".

Also towards the end, the text becomes introspective, being dominated by the internal monologue: "A second more powerful than a human life...". "The human life is not outside but inside the soul. [...]. What's outside is indifferent... it doesn't exist [...]. By introspection, the author captures inner life where painful questions arise: "I will surely die after... after how many hours?"

This is not about "sleepwalking", as the critic Nicolae Manolescu notes, but about the tragedy of a man who waits for and faces death with "the disgust" of this life [...]."

The last night ...

The introspection communicates the inner feelings of cancellation: "It seemed that my brain was liquefied; the nerves broke like rotten ropes because of the strain. [...]"

I don't realize any longer if people's cheeks are dirty of earth or soot. I hardly understand the lament... as an apocalyptic curse...". – The depreciative comparison suggests the individual annihilation because of the resistance test that he has to live.

When he finally detaches from the past, he can do that not only because the war has reduced the doubts of love to their real size, but because he got the inner consciousness of a strong identity ("I wanted to test and identify my ego") given by "the dialogue, the communication and their influence on each other through the "parallel mirrors" of the dramatic conscience" [4]: "[...] "I wrote that I leave absolutely everything in the house, from price items to books... from personal things to memories. That is all the past".

We notice that the war is what enriches Ștefan Gheorghidui with a new experience. He becomes another man, distancing himself from his civilian life, so that he looks with superiority at everyone coming to see him and say "stupidities unrelated to the reality".

Identifying himself with his hero and being fully engaged in the tragedy of the attack, Camil Petrescu indicate in the footnotes the details of the experience reported to similar images of war:

"Alone with himself, squatted in the pit, you feel a blind will of destruction... You feel horrified that all your intelligence, qualities, intellectual gifts have become something trivial, ridiculous". It's a quote from war literature [5] that emphasizes writer's concern for the authenticity of the story.

Although the same as *Ștefan Gheorghidiu*, the hero from *Forest of the Hanged* faces a new experience through the war, the difference that occurs is that this is not his defining experience. The hero discovers, through God, the infinite love which also includes forgiveness, which resembles "that energy transfer of the initiated ones" [6].

However, the hero demonstrates, by his attempt at desertion, that he is Romanian and this conviction helps him to face with dignity the destiny of the whole generation:

"I wanted to compile my own generation prototype in *Apostol*. *Apostol* Bologa's hesitations, as well as his anxieties, are our hesitations, of everyone" [7].

We see therefore that the heroes succeed, through their war experience, to exceed the consuming curiosity of the unknown; their stories turn into reflection. If the steps of self-knowledge, completed in war, give Gheorghidiu a new breath in the real world, *Apostol*'s horizon is closed, the self finding meaning the "damnation" which he bears in the thickets of his imaginary world. Rebreanu's text fills up the premonitory signs without preventing the inevitable. According to *Dan Mănuță's statement*, even character's disappearance is "a victory of life".

Notes

[1] Mioc, Simion, *Anamorfoză și poetică*, Editura Facla, Timișoara, 1988, p. 131.

[2] Ibidem, p. 132.

[3] Ibidem, p. 140.

[4] Crețu, Nicolae, *Constructorii ai romanului*, Liviu Rebreanu, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Camil Petrescu, Editura Eminescu, București, 1982, p. 167.

[5] Miron Suzana, Roșca Elisabeta, *Creatorii romanului românesc modern*, Editura All, București, 1999, p.130.

[6] Ibidem, p. 67.

[7] Idem.

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