

Socio-political Context and Psychology of the Absurd in Virgil Tănase's Drama

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Résumé: Dans la dramaturgie roumaine de l'après-guerre, l'absurde est engendré par l'illogique ou par les ambiguïtés de la société totalitaire. L'appel aux conventions du théâtre de l'absurde y est censé exprimer une pensée politique et sociale. Par le truchement des allégories, cette dramaturgie permet des références indirectes et subversives aux réalités immédiates. Les deux dimensions du théâtre de Virgil Tănase qui font l'objet de notre analyse – la psychologie et l'absurde – sont à l'origine de la configuration d'une sphéricité théâtrale.

Mots-clés: drame psychologique, théâtre de l'absurde, existentialisme, crise

In full revolutionary bloom of theatrical techniques, when playwrights aspire to a different kind of writing, a reforming one, Virgil Tănase becomes *authentic* precisely because he does not completely give up the models provided by his predecessors. The novelty of his drama lies exactly in that *interference of modern and classic* artfully rendered, without disrupting the structures of the dramatic text.

His plays seem to be psychological dramas, or, to put it otherwise, belong to the genre of psychological drama. As in the case of A.F. Chekhov, one finds out that Virgil Tănase's characters have the same desire of living in happiness, of exceling themselves (one deals here with realism, in the contemporary sense, where the relationship with metaphysics and the transcendent is weakened), but, at the same time, know the existential disorientation, the confusion of the conscience before a world perceived as a chaos with mysterious laws. Such literature, with an artistic reflection different from the Chekhovian one (although one may find sources for the theatre of the absurd in Chekhov's drama), is to be found in the plays of Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Eugen Ionesco or Samuel Beckett. Virgil Tănase's plays are lost between the psychological and the absurd. His characters seem to originate in a theatre of old, like Cervantes's, in which the actants live a profound psychological crisis, in a political context under the empire of dissention.

Thoroughly analysing the dramatic texts, we tend to affirm that, in Virgil Tănase's drama, the characters that have a biography are stressed, unbalanced, anguished, they simply live or survive some great failures.

Luca (*Veneția mereu*) [Always Venice]:

De-atunci încoace, o viață goală, găunoasă. Toate lucrurile fără nici un gust, ca atunci când pui ceva în gură după o tărie. Asta este moartea: mișc încă, dau din mâini, dar nu-ți fă iluzii, nu sunt decât un înecat al cărui corp face tumbe, dus de curent. O viață de ratat, un bețiv tâmpit care nu știe încotro s-o apuce... [Tănase, 1996a: 70]

Ever since, a hollow, empty life. All things tasteless, as if you put something in your mouth after liquor. That's death: I'm still moving, I'm waving my hands, but make no mistake, I'm just the drowned whose body somersaults, drifted away. The life of a loser, a clod drunk who doesn't know where he's headed...

A drama close to life, to the day-by-day experience of its viewers is precisely a return to the precepts of pure art and to tradition, which endows Virgil Tănase's plays with energy and viability.

The conflict is traditionally constructed, as a struggle between the individual and his destiny. Living the conflict is what changes the perspective on the inclusion of Virgil Tănase's drama in the classical canons. The conflict between human reasoning, in search for order and sense, and the illogical, chaotic universe generates the absurd of the existence. "*Acesta apare ca o perdea opacă prin care nu se vede nimic, nici un orizont. Omul suferă fără să știe de ce, este vinovat fără vină.*" [It appears like an opaque curtain which shows no horizon. Man suffers and he doesn't know why, he is guilty without guilt.] [Ceuca 2002: 146-147].

However, one may easily recognize in Tănase's plays Ionesco's or Chekhov's characters, who come irrespectively whether they have something to communicate or not, apart from their unhappiness, to instigate the audience or the reader to revolt, but also the playwright, who is in tune with the drama of his characters. The lines are stark and banal, "*creând senzația unui pseudodialog*" [leaving the impression of a pseudo-dialogue] [Panțel Cenușer 2002: 59].

Paul (*Îngeri, melci și portocale*) [Angels, Snails and Oranges]:

N-am să mai lucrez niciodată, niciodată. S-a terminat. Refuz. Ca un cadavru din care ceilalți se-nfruptă: mort într-o șură și șobolanii ronțăie din tine, îți rod orele, zilele. Nu ne rămân decât momente estropiate, ciozvârte de sentimente, somnuri ciopârțite. Nu suntem întregi decât pe bucatele, zdrențe de om, ce-a rămas de la șobolani, de la șobolanii care au trecut pe-acolo. [Tănase, 1996a: 231].

I'll never work again. Ever. It's over. I refuse. Like a corpse which the others are making a feast of: dead in a haystack and the rats are chewing on you, chewing your hours and your days. We are left only with mutilated moments, quarters of feelings, mangled sleeps. We are whole only in pieces, human rags, what's left from the rats, from the rats that passed by.

The need for love, claimed with no reserve, lived, sometimes, with unbearable intensity is a romantic feature. The unforgiving lucidity of the prospect of the feeling in the relations between certainty and doubt, safety and the fear of betrayal, joy and suffering is, nonetheless, modern. But the views on love, which also create the conflict, remain of romanticist inspiration.

The aspiration of the characters is a unique, eternal, absolute love. At the opposite end, there is the acceptance of the compromise, of the perishable, ephemeral, and real. As is the case with the Romantics, the absolute can be attained but through death. Or, in other words, the characters are placed between *the erotic and thanatic impulsion* (my emphasis). The drama of love is reduced to the impossibility of living and loving at the same time. They exclude each other: one is freedom, while the other is conformity. Love leads to destruction and death. It is here an aspect of the tragic, falling in the category of hubris – what is too much, what goes beyond the limits, is destroyed. Loves destroys itself.

Veneția mereu is a play that its author wanted passionately to write. "*Veneția este orașul în care mi-ar plăcea să trăiesc și, dacă vreodată mi s-ar întâmpla să iubesc peste măsură o femeie, la Veneția aș iubi-o...*" [Venice is the city I'd love to live in, and if I'd ever fall in love madly with a woman, it should be in Venice...] [Tănase 1996b: 100]. It is the drama of the escape from any constraint; it is a breakout to the dream world, however, a lucid one. It is a play of passion, of the desire, of the ardour that dominates the being. Playwright Virgil Tănase creates a novel tableau, a love story: Luca and Maria are reflections, sentiments of the man behind the stage. Love is the sole legitimation, the sole form of identity, even though it is born from pain and reaches the absolute through death.

Luca :

Aș vrea să vă iubesc mai mult decât orice pe lume. Ar trebui să-mi fie frică, înțelegeți? Poate că-ntr-adevăr vă iubesc cu-adevărat. Nu râdeți. Marile dragosti încep ca și cele mai neînsemnate aventuri. Disprețuind orice „te iubesc”, dați deoparte și pe cel adevărat, singurul care contează, cel pe care vi-l spun acum: Maria, te iubesc. Dacă vrei viața mea, ți-o dau. Să mai dansăm, să trecem de la o orchestră la alta ca și cum am avea trei vieți: un vals, o polcă și o arie... [Tănase 1996a: 109]

I'd like to love you more than anything in the world. I should be afraid, do you understand me? Maybe I truly am in love with you. Don't laugh. The greatest loves set out as the most insignificant adventures. If you despise any «I love you», you ignore the truthful one too, the only one that matters, the one I'm saying to you now. Maria, I love you. If you want my life, you can have it. Let's dance some more, let's move from one orchestra to the next, as if we had three lives: a waltz, a polka, and an air...

This is an obsessive theme of Virgil Tănase's drama, brought to the fore in all his plays, either against a realist background (*De Crăciun, după revoluție* [On Christmas's Day, after the Revolution] and *Copilul acestui secol extraordinar* [The Child of This Extraordinary Century], or in Venetian mythology (*Veneția mereu*), but also in the spatial ambiguity of *Îngeri, melci și portocale* [Angels, Snails and Oranges] or *Salve Regina, muzică de Pergolese* [Salve Regina, Pergolesi music]. The heroine of the monologue *Salve Regina, muzică de Pergolese* and Cynthia in *De Crăciun, după revoluție* wear more masks, live more real or imaginary hypostases. *If one were to speak about the absurd in Virgil Tănase's drama, one should look for the absurd in the loneliness of the characters, in the communication breakdown, in misery and suffering (my emphasis).* For example, in *Veneția mereu*, or in *Îngeri, melci și portocale*, there are only two characters, a man and a woman, who seem to dedicate themselves to the problems of the couple. It is a state of aspiration towards a monadic paradise, but it is also the failure to reach it. Through the couple, humanity is reduced to its essential factors: the two interlocutors. The problem of the social relations is no longer an issue inside the couple – it is not about mending unity, but about living the drama of loneliness (as a duo). Existence is completely degraded. It consummates in the banality that annuls the ego through the failure of aspiration, in the hostility that devours the energies in a constant contradictory movement, meant to instate the nothingness within the relationships between humans (as a

break between the self and the others). The characters, dissolved personalities at the end of a disastrous social and existential experience, live the twilight.

Virgil Tănase's drama is placed in another horizon, one of contemplation, of disquietude, of rhetoric interrogations on the human condition, on the futile expectancy of a time in which a saviour to appear, on the adoption of a beneficial existential attitude, on the loss of identity of the character, on the problems of the couple, and on the Eros-Thanatos dichotomy, all – themes also present in Ionesco's drama.

From the literature of the absurd, Virgil Tănase assimilates the protesting formula that announces the descent of the world towards the irrational, the depersonalization of the human being, and the modern existential crisis.

An excellent prose writer, Virgil Tănase serenely confesses that the novelist in him, the one who provides multiple identities to his characters and who works in the depths of their psychology has found a perfect mate in the playwright.

Virgil Tănase has split his life between directorship and playwriting, and he was never interested to adhere to any theatre movement, thus always remaining a marginal author. Regarded in its entirety, the dramatic work of Virgil Tănase elicits admiration. Hardly can one say it better than the theatre historian Mircea Ghițulescu, with his admiring statement: "*Virgil Tănase este un redutabil cărturar*" [Virgil Tănase is a powerful scholar] [in Tănase 1996b].

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