

## Virgil Tănase - The Portrait of A Romanian Dissident

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**Résumé:** *Peux connu dans son pays, Virgil Tanase - un des écrivains représentatifs pour l'exil roumain - dépasse les difficultés de la vie grâce à son attitude, sa lucidité et sa méticulosité dues au héritage roumain. Même si la littérature roumaine actuelle a ignoré elle-aussi l'oeuvre complexe et unique de Virgil Tanase, depuis quelque temps on a (re)découvert son écriture tout particulière, cryptée, vivante et dynamique.*

**Mots-clef :** *exil, littérature, fiction romanesque, écriture*

Endowed not only with a quick-witted mind, but also with an analytical insight, Virgil Tănase amazes the reading public with its congenial, smart, rational, honest, but still reserved discourse. He serenely talks about the writing experience, without giving too many details on the metaphorical symbols hidden in his books, leaving us, the reading public, to infer the deeper meaning of his text. He endlessly recounts the exile experience, the same story of the adolescent uprooted from his universe, compelled to leave the garden, his home and town in order to go to university. This rupture from his provincial childhood and the leave to Bucharest will have such a powerful influence upon him, that his first novels will fully reflect this aspect. For Virgil Tănase, the exile is that lone traveler in a world where the unwritten law imposes *the walk in group*, accompanied by military music, and the literature of exile is considered to be “a literature in a zoo where the animals do not lead their natural lives”.

Through this investigation, modest I would say, I would like to put forward not so much a biographical or social facet of the artist Virgil Tănase, even though it is also appropriate to discuss this situation fully, but particularly an attempt to analyze his text both thematically and structurally, irrespective of the genre in order to observe the way in which the subtlety of his mind creates a special kind of literature. The personalized writing language is often controlled, sometimes intemperately, by a poetic and metaphorical sense, which obscures for a few moments the reader's way in into the normal course of the work. With its sharp mind, an exquisite directorial acuity, master of the modern and postmodern epic techniques Virgil Tănase creates an apparently illogical word game so that, at the end of the narrative labyrinth, the reader discovers an open, transparent, lucid, alive, chameleon like writing style, often guilty for confusing him. In theater, Virgil Tănase breaks all the canons, because there is no clear, predetermined pattern that he can keep in mind in creating his plays.

After the first journey into the epic and drama of Virgil Tănase, which I do admit I made with minor deviations, I consider appropriate a space of his own in the history of the Romanian literature.

### The Portrait of a Provincial Romanian

Over the time, in the mirror of the Romanian literature, it has been reflected the image of a sensitive, distinguished and original writer. Virgil Tănase, an emblematic personality of the Romanian exile in Paris, novelist par excellence, the opponent of the communist regime, was born in Galați in July, 16 July 1945, in a city where the river dominates the whole territory, and its lisp continuously announces the possible rise of a new value from the depths. “We lived in Galați, in the Bălcescu Street, formerly General Berthelot Street, in a boyar house with several rooms, distributed to several families, with plenty of yard and garden. Each night, my father took a key, which to me seemed enormous, and locked the gate of the huge iron fence which was guarding everything around”. The child Virgil Tănase lives his life as a story. Thus, in the mixture of real and imaginary, the young man finds himself somewhere in the middle of ruins: “The darkness, weeds, those remnants of the houses with unsuspected corners frightened and challenged

me ....” In the provincial town of his childhood, there were traveling “Swedish red-like matchboxes trams crawling, sometimes, behind the ox carts, and the streets were lined with linden” [1]

Virgil Tănase, a man of great spiritual nobility, comes from a family of intellectuals, ordinary people, faithful to human values, always sharing the sufferings and needs of the others: "I come from a family of simple people, without wealth and acts recorded by a notary office, without amazing feats written in books, without family documents." (Virgil Tănase). Originating from a peasant family, rewarded by the voivodes, magistrate by profession, graduated Law, his father Dumitru gives up his career as a judge at 38 years old in a time when the communist dictatorship imposed its own righteousness and justice up to the annihilation of individual consciousness and the elimination of any democratic values. Since 1948, his son's education passes in his care while the novelist's mother of Basarabian origin, Larisa, having finished her studies in Medicine, opened a medical office ensuring the financial equilibrium of the entire family. In an old house, with rooms that resembled the compartments of a wagon, with a huge garden, bordered by lilac and full of trees, there lived the little “adventurer” Tănase.

Though a bright student from the earliest years of study, however, the portrait of Virgil Tănase, as a son of intellectuals, represented the image of the class enemy. Thus, in the eyes of the thirteen years old child, the school became a place worthy of hatred, headquarters of infamy and incompetence, "donkeys disguised in lions, dressed in academic gowns" [2]. Expressing his disdain towards teachers, he writes a number of epigrams to them, which of course do nothing but attract even more dislike about him. The incident that took place then and looked upon with maturity announces a strong critical openness to literature, the first "escape" of a young "artist" eager to express himself. Throughout high school, the student Tănase will remain a misfit of the system imposed by the regime, often breaking the rules of the school community, which, after long and frequent conflicts with the teachers, whom he called "nullity and scoundrels", will bring about his transfer from one institution to another, "grades at school, following the Soviet pattern, were up to five and I had only five except for the carriage which has always been a weak point in my academic journey ..." (Virgil Tănase)

Since childhood, Virgil Tănase had inherited the sense of absolute freedom from his father whom he resembled with a giant tree. He went to the theater, concerts and cinema and was always followed by the feeling that he must tell all he had to say. From an early age (six years old) he has proven the abilities to assimilate several languages: English, Russian and French. Therefore, he chose to read more foreign literature, browsing the eight volumes Grand Larousse for hours, “lying on my belly under the dining room table, maybe because it was there that I was feeling protected, hidden under the black silk fringes of a plush tablecloth which almost touched the floor, I was browsing the seven impressive volumes of Larousse, which were so big I couldn't put away on the bookshelves, from where I started taking books by climbing a chair.” Furthermore, he discovers Gide and Marcel Arland. As a teenager, he stubbornly refuses to decipher Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgheniev, being convinced that the Russian literature could only be a mean of propaganda and imperialism. Later, these writers will be reviewed and will occupy a special place in the literary life of the novelist Virgil Tănase.

Starting with 1963, he becomes a student of the Faculty of Letters in Bucharest. With a sharp intelligence, he practices a kind of intellectual terrorism on the professors, whom he considers mediocre, coward and incompetent. He excels in structural analysis methods, studies *Phedra* by Racine, *Aeneid* by Virgil with interest (about fifteen hours per day) and at the same time, he translates the poems of René Char.

In 1966, Virgil Tănase was expelled from university because he had exposed his disagreement with the ideas of the Marxist thinking in a paper that was to be presented in the scientific circle at the Faculty of Letters. The writer made an essay on René Char, covering the topics that obsessed him at that time: the impropriety of the world, despair as

a form of energy, anxiety facing the unacceptable death. Starting from his study on René Char, a party activist made him guilty of literary rebellion: "You're a good, clever man. But now you are going to pay dearly, because instead of pulling the ox tail, you wanted to make it puff and pull the horn ... Let that be a lesson to you!" [3]

The life of the student Tănase turns into a veritable ordeal: for two years he is forced to work as "concreter" and then he becomes a permanent subject to a terrible interrogation, to be afterwards asked to collaborate to Security. Virgil Tănase is abhorred by the servility, elation, betrayal and this is why he chooses to retain its integrity up to the end and follow the model of his father, whose rectitude was adamant: "What they were asking was simply to compromise yourself, to admit that they were stronger, to understand that you are nothing, not worth anything and that, anyway, you're a scoundrel and a coward as the other ..." [4]

The most beautiful memory of the time he was a student remains the very moment he meets Doina, his future wife, the woman who breathes exuberance, passion and charm of life into her husband's existence. Together with her, the world now seems to be alive; through her, the expansive spirit of the twenty years old young man is now reborn.

He will graduate the French Language Faculty of the Institute of Foreign Languages in Bucharest in 1968. Obviously, this is only the beginning of his mission in the world of literary art.

### **In search of a refuge: delirium, a paradise reinvented**

For the writer Virgil Tănase, the greatest intellectual references are rooted in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide's novel, which will open the path of initiation of the young writer into the mysteries of literary creation. He finds inspiration in Thomas Mann, Jack London, Mark Twain and Turgheniev's writings, reads poetry and is absorbed by Bacovia's lyrical universe. He excels as a translator, merging with Jacques Prévert's poetics and assimilates Barthes' literary creation (*About Racine*, 1968), Tzvetan Todorov (*Introduction in fantasy literature*, 1970), Beckett (*Acts without Words*, 1971), Diaz - Beach (*Garcia Lorca - monography*, 1971) and Balzac (*Funny stories*, 1997).

As far as the first literary success is concerned, it is the writer himself who can talk about it: "In my second year at university I translated a few poems by Jacques Prévert. I published a sort of big wall newspaper. Many translations, mine included, were posted there. Next day, my translation of Barthes was missing: somebody had stolen it. It was my first literary success." [5]

The real adventure of writing is triggered by an ideal aesthetic dialogue with Dostoievski, Faulkner, Proust, Gogol's literatures, debuting in "Luceafărul" magazine in 1969 with the story *Notes of those who go to sleep*. Then, the articles *Wild Duck*, *Side Drawing* (*Luceafărul*, 1970) are published and, in the same year, in *România Literară*, a prose poem about love, death and eternity, *The lady with the unicorn*, is published: "You're right, you're far too many times right, I do not love you: together we run away from the death which I perceived at the end of the road, and I will stay with you only as long as we can see nothing of us, leaving the two hundred years of love which flow through us to the great green lands, shine in the infallible fog." [6]

In these short stories the imaginary lives within realism and life is courted by death, like in a dream-like game where space and time seem to be never-ending, the mirage vanishing only when, hit by Mr. Truth, he announces the new conception of a talent, a painter who, fully aware, alternates brush and pen, creating a whole new array full of poetics: "Death who had her black hair laid on her temples and a beautiful long face loved horses, held in its hands only a cane, was wearing a green coat, and was hurried to go to the mountains, and yes, she came there on the porch from the sea with a Jasmine tobacco scent and touched her first, the Gipsy, and they all believed that, in fact, she will tell him:" Come, come into the mountains Semenici ... but it was not true ... as soon as the gypsy had died, he died too, under the touch of the same hand..." [7]

In *The Lady with the unicorn*, Virgil Tănase authentically and meaningfully calls the symbol of the island: "Because the island is neither the refuge from the vain world, nor a sacred redeeming place coveted by the fallen, ephemeral human being, but a static symbol. Even the syntax of the prose is designed to prevent, by moving the attribute or complement off their normal position" [8]. "She stretched her arms and laid them around my neck and from the dark, lake waters, she came to a mirror that, adorned in brocades, the Lady held in her hand, the unicorn." [9] We find in *The lady with the unicorn* a Proustian sentence type, lagoon, lazy, insinuating, but unlike Proust, whose sentence is used to "substantialise progression of ideas", for Virgil Tănase it becomes calculated, designed to ensure that the static effect is concentrated in the island's symbol: "It was late and of course that no one was coming here by boat, so as to let us return to the village, so there was I, alone among the tombs of the condemned nobles, some perhaps for having spent nights of passionate love in the blood of the Lady, dressed in tall and thin, black and white clothes, lost here in these stretches before the invention of the compass and four masts and decks high above the sea ... The Lady with her neck, shoulders and breasts echoing the sound of adornments, alone on that island in an ocean that, never before, no one had ever passed through, to come back to a field beyond that, the bird Magellan, and in her hand with slender fingers, and slightly stretched forward, she held a silver mirror ... in which, the unicorn was looking, gentle and puzzled." [10]

Behind the curtain, there is and will always be the man and artist Virgil Tănase who from time to time leaves himself discovered and acknowledged through his art, afterwards taking refuge in his universe, one without external constraints, once again waiting for the moment in which he, the novelist, will be absolutely necessary. Moreover, after a long and intensive introspection, Virgil Tănase defines itself as "an unique individual and it is needed sometimes that my presence become indispensable and my death aberrant." [11]

A journey back in time outlines a portrait of a young aspirant to the mysteries of literature, who, between the 60s and 70s, manages to enter into a literary heaven, in which maturity is attained gradually through his harmoniously polished words and his deep feelings. And in this enchanting place, Virgil Tănase will live up to the present moment, preserving the genuine fragrance of the poetic literature with the loyalty of his writings.

#### Notes

[1] Virgil Tănase, *România mea*, E.D.P., București, 1996, p.14

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 27

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 41.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 45

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 51.

[6] Virgil Tănase, *Însemnările celor ce merg spre somn*, **Luceafărul**, Anul XII, Nr.47 (395), 22 noiembrie 1969, p. 5.

[7] Virgil Tănase, *Desenat într-o parte*, articol apărut în revista **Luceafărul**, Anul XIII, nr.18/1970, p. 5.

[8] I. Negoiteșcu, *Despre proza lui Virgil Tănase*, **România literară**, Săptămânal al Uniunii Scriitorilor, An XXIII, Nr. 27, 5 iulie 1990, p. 7.

[9] *Ibidem*.

[10] Virgil Tănase, *Doamna cu licornul*, **România literară**, Săptămânal de literatură și artă, An III, Nr.35, 27 august 1970, p.19.

[11] Virgil Tănase, *România mea*, p. 54.

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