

Prefrontal Lobotomy by Vasile Voiculescu – A Medical Dystopia

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Résumé : *Le communisme est l'une des idéologies totalitaires qui a laissé sa marque sur le XXème siècle. L'idéologie communiste soutient l'idée d'une société parfaite, où les individus sont égaux. Le système socialiste semblait être le salut de la majorité, cependant sa mise en pratique a eu des effets négatifs. La cruauté du communisme a détruit des fondements significatifs de l'humanité. La terreur physique et psychologique a déformé la condition humaine et les relations interhumaines, en créant le cadre propice pour l'exercice de l'utopie/de la dystopie dans la littérature roumaine. En 1948, quand le communisme avait déjà apparu sur ces terres, Vasile Voiculescu écrit **Lobocoagularea prefrontală**, une dystopie reflétant codifié la société oppressive où il vit. Notable pour le médecin et l'écrivain Vasile Voiculescu, mais surtout pour le nouveau système en cours d'installation, l'histoire reproduit la modalité la plus brutale du "lavage du cerveau." La vision de l'auteur est radicale : l'opération de lobocoagulation préfrontale, prolongée à l'infini, est une méthode d'extinction scientifique, dans laquelle l'individu est tué lentement.*

Mots-clés : *communisme, idéologie totalitaire, dystopie, société oppressive, vision radicale.*

Totalitarianism is a political regime where the power belongs exclusively to a person or a group of persons. The gap between state and society is practically annihilated within the totalitarian regimes, meaning that the power penetrates even the very private life of each citizen. Totalitarian ideology represents the opposite to the concept of open society. Communism is one of the totalitarian ideologies that marked the twentieth century. The communist ideology derives from the theory of social determinism according to which the behavior of a person is not induced by his own personality but by the class that he belongs to. Accordingly, education through the ideology of the new communist society became compulsory. Communist ideology promotes the idea of a perfect society where individuals are equal among them. In this respect, the role of literature as a means of propaganda becomes overwhelming, its main purpose being that of educating not only through the spirit of obedience to the political party and its leader but also through hate towards everything that antagonizes this attitude. Propaganda by means of literature oversimplified the mechanism of producing literary works. The aesthetic principle, the intrinsic state of art altogether, was replaced with the one of effectiveness in as far as reaching the propagandistic goal was concerned. As a result, the writer became a mere performer of the ideological command that came from the political party. Those who did not write in an accessible language and did not have lofty ideals about life, those who displayed the slightest inclination for poetical affinities, for naturalism, eroticism and entertainment, for analytical prose, detective or adventure novels would become unworthy as a writer in the eyes of the party. Intellectuals were urged to comply with the norms of socialist realism, as reality was not what the artist perceived but what the party decided it should be. The socialist system appeared to be the salvation of the majority; however, applying it had negative results. The cruelty of communism destroyed significant bases of humanity. Several prestigious intellectuals- Vasile Voiculescu being among them - were arrested and sentenced to many years in prison, having been accused of conspiracy against social order. For four years, between 1956 and 1960, Romania confronts itself with the persecution of intellectuals, starting with the students and ending with the great personalities of science and culture- some of them on the brink of retirement or over it, such as Voiculescu. Thus, midnight raids at people's homes would take place, arrests and prolonged, repeated inquiries would be followed by brief trials that would end in sentences decided long before the covering of all natural and logical stages or procedures established by the law. The arrest of Vasile Voiculescu, who was in his vale of years, was justified by his presupposed participation in conspiratorial deeds against social order. These conspiracies resided in the meetings at Antim monastery, also the conversations and readings at Slatineanu and Pillat houses or the readings from there or from Voiculescu's. Unfortunately, the ideas of justice at that time regarding the procedures of a trial were totally different from what fairness meant. The Security had already labeled Voiculescu as an enemy of popular democracy and as a result any defense had become

futile. The senior poet and the other defendants belonging to the group called the Blazing Pyre (Rug Aprins) were sentenced to extremely severe punishments as in all cases that were tried during that autumn. Vasile Voiculescu's arrest, on the night of 4th to 5th August, 1958, as well as that of the group of intellectuals termed by the Security as the Blazing Pyre came as a shock not only to those who fell victims of this arbitrary but also to those close to them. Observing the logic of the system, the small literary gatherings shed a different light in the statements given by Security (Securitate).

Generally, it can be said that the communist regime in Romania was hostile to the true spiritual values which it attacked and sought to destroy. Obviously, it did not succeed. Irrefutable works of art emerged nonetheless. This did not happen because of the regime but in its defiance. Physical and mental terror distorted both human condition and relations between people creating the proper background for the emergence of utopia/dystopia within the Romanian literature. If utopia as a literary genre is not considered to be spectacular because it is predictable thus becoming ineffectual, visionary, prospective and predictive, the dystopian model is much more stimulating, ultimately saving the utopian genre from routine, boredom and leveling. Every writer who suggests a utopia becomes implicitly a critic of the world that he lives in. Most often than not things and facts pertaining to a utopia are radical, revolutionary, the term utopia becoming an equivalent of idealism. Dystopia does not build but rather demolishes; it does not suggest happy islands but catastrophes, projections of the dehumanized man; it portrays an agonizing mankind, a range of images of deconstruction. It is a genre that annihilates the utopian model. Apart from its terrifying perspective, the dystopia has also a few happy endings. One of such endings is the cathartic one. Dystopia has the purpose of both warning and freeing man from the illusion that his utopian effusion can be achieved.

In 1948- the time when communism emerged on these lands- Vasile Voiculescu wrote **Prefrontal Lobotomy**, a dystopia which mirrored the oppressive society that he lived in by means of a code. Actually, this story represents an epic satire developed ironically which conveys a reversed message: the human being's estrangement in an automated paradise that deprives him of both the pleasure and the pain of living, programming every stage of his existence. Quite illuminating for the doctor-writer Vasile Voiculescu and mostly for the system that was being set up at that time, the story renders the most cruel way of "brainwashing". The vision of the author is a radical one: the operation of prefrontal lobotomy, extended endlessly, is a method of scientific extinction in which the individual is killed in slow motion. The story is inspired by a barbaric medical practice conducted in the last century during the 30's-40's. The text is eloquent especially for the sharpness of the perspective and also for its demystifying pioneering. Prefrontal lobotomy is the operation invented by the Perfect Permanent Presidium of the Peace Peoples (the communist camp) with the purpose of making the individual emotionally immune; the operation is performed three times, upon birth, during childhood and also when the child becomes of age. Each citizen must own a certificate that would prove the triple operation; otherwise, expulsion will become effective. The aim of the operation is to sterilize the patient affectively by targeting especially the nervous centres of anxiety and revolt making an example of loyalty out of the lobotomy crown existing in every house. As a result of lobotomy, a model citizen can be obtained while the individual loses his conscience as his self becomes amorphous. No matter whether the forbidden books were burnt, no matter whether the children were raised in public educational facilities("educatorii"), no matter whether eroticism was allotted scientifically and not anarchically, still the youngsters showed signs of anxiety as if they were not operated at all, discovering beauty, love, faith etc. In order to stop the epidemic of freedom, the authorities organize sterilizing sessions and even" the lead lining of the brains"[1] or cutting out the pineal gland where the virus of revolt is assumed to be germinated. After a time of inactivity, the epidemic breaks out again so that the presidium sets up huge collective experiments up to the shutdown of the whole brain, the main enemy of the authorities being, as they often admit it, the Spirit itself. Even though the population is dumbed down extensively, the epidemic breaks out again, the organic headquarters of freedom incitation being a heart with nervous fibres which undertook the function of the purged brain. The ending of V. Voiculescu's story is deliberately paranoid because the presidium decides that the

heart must be cut out, thus reducing the population to the structure of some bodies voided of their internal organs (the brain and the heart); however, the epidemic may break out again, given the circumstance of the virus being able to hide in another internal organ. The vision of the writer is a radical one: Voiculescu envisages a physical brainwashing, implying all consequences up to the making of human homunculus, purged organically of brain and heart. Assertively, the writer points that the institution of repression could even conceive the removal of all vital organs in order to obtain an individual voided inside made up of only blood and lymph. Eventually, the prefrontal operation, extended endlessly, represents a method of scientific extinction -that of killing the individual in slow motion, not in front of a firing party.

Prefrontal Lobotomy focuses on the requirement of material society - that of establishing the prerequisites for "gratitude and universal social peace" by means of a seemingly innocent" process of neurosurgery. The prefrontal lobotomy which Voiculescu considers did exist as an experiment of a neurosurgeon. The procedure focused on the coagulation of the two frontal lobes of the brain by means of a specially designed crown that was placed on the head, charged with high voltage radioactive power that would ultimately release two beams which were burning, emaciating the nervous fibres that connected the two lobes. The effect was shattering: the emotional component would fade away leaving the personality of the individual in question deprived of any traces of reflexes, ambition or aspiration. The individual ended up being calm, emotionless throughout all his life. By literary play, the writer goes on with his story. A blissful era, deprived of metaphysical turmoil and mystical exultation followed soon after lobotomy had been performed on all individuals, making no exceptions. However, after a while, the emotional part came to the fore. After extended researches and scientific experiments it came to the conclusion that the spirit purged from the brain and glands due to lobotomy, came to the fore finding another place that set on the move an entire army of scientists in order to be found. Eventually, after exhausting researches "being fierce on the brain only"[2], the scientists took also the heart into account: the spirit had indeed moved there, while the heart returned "to its previous function, that of the centre for emotional intelligence"[3].

In **Prefrontal Lobotomy**, not only the surgical procedure of lobotomy but also the miracles of salvation by overtaking the functions of the brain by the endocrine glands or other internal organs are scientifically confirmed, the writer merely projecting its expanded effects to the absurd in a parabolic interpretation enriched with meanings. The idea that no dictatorship and no physical constraint, maiming the very being, cannot completely destroy the emotional part, the inner existence, the intangible space of his feelings reaching endlessly to spiritual values, is thus based on a physiological reality well-known to the doctor, according to which mental life cannot be conceived without heart and cardiovascular system. "Symbolically, the writer alternates subtly and extremely eloquently prediction with retrospective, conferring his utopian writing a mythical ending; nevertheless, any utopia focuses chronologically on a beginning or an ending of the world, as it is born out of the need to suggest a solution, to point out a way of safeguarding reality"[4].

Alternating between parable and satirical utopia, borrowing some modulations from sci-fi stories, **Prefrontal Lobotomy** "is consistent with a plea of ideas: the failure of any attempt to suppress the emotional part"[5]. It is suggested the image of a society where man has exclusively the characteristics of the device as a result of cutting out the nervous centres in the brain: "the famous book of the scientist Karpman entitled: "Prefrontal Lobes, Enemies of Mankind" is actually the foundation of this crusade led persistently and successfully against the wretched nervous centres where all the insurrectionists of the self, dream, sensation, meditation, discontent, eagerness to perfection, misanthropy along other enemies of tranquility, social and individual order were nesting at some other time"[6].

"Didactic and ineffectual (the writer seems to have deliberately adopted the bare tone of the scientific paper), **Prefrontal Lobotomy** remains in the file of Voiculescu's work laboratory as a significant text mostly for the restless pursuits of the writer"[7]. An original writer such as Vasile Voiculescu finds the ways of revealing the oppressive society that he lives in by means of a code. The utopia described ironically even from the very first sentences turns back on its reverse; it is a

reversed utopia, an antiutopia, if one reads it as the writer wants one to, from whose desperation this vision comes to life. Dressed in his medical robe, concerned with the latest psychiatric research, authorised to handle the field technology, Voiculescu confers his prose the characteristic of a scientific essay, not being intended as fiction. The process itself, even symbolical, interested him.

Although he does not want to publish **Prefrontal Lobotomy** immediately, Voiculescu sends it to an article in *Presse médicale*, having a scientific related motto. In 1948, when the theory of the new man was being released, the quotation sounded like a threat: „the frontal lobes are the enemies of mankind. The lobotomized loses the emotional constituent of his activities etc.”[8] The irony as a reversed speech starts at this point. What comes next, the details of the script must be understood the other way round. What is portrayed within the story as the future, it actually represents the process that has already begun, that of changing the man so useful for the totalitarian society, where nobody opposes nothing, everybody listens happily to their great leader, neutralized of dreams and sensations. Irony is rendered as a form of solidarity with the suppressed people, because it has a political target. Irony is hidden behind a seemingly scientific speech.

Notes

[1] Vasile Voiculescu, *Integrala prozei literare*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1998, p. 610.

[2] Idem, p. 612.

[3] Ibidem.

[4] Nicolae Florescu, *Prefața la V. Voiculescu, Toiagul minunilor*, Editura Jurnalul literar, București, 1991, p. 8-9.

[5] Mircea Braga, *V. Voiculescu în orizontul tradiționalismului*, Editura Minerva, București, 1984, p. 124.

[6] Vasile Voiculescu, op. cit., p. 609.

[7] Mircea Braga, op. cit., p. 124.

[8] Vasile Voiculescu, op. cit., p. 607.

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