

Memory and its Fictional Reflections in Vasile Voiculescu's Narratives

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Abstract: *Vasile Voiculescu's narrative depicts a world full of meanings wherein the real and the supermundane realms come miraculously together. It is highly difficult to pinpoint such a world in time and space as Voiculescu's characters live in an utmost fabulous realm, rich in legendary atmosphere. However, Vasile Voiculescu's narrative is deeply rooted within the real, the writer going on extensive trips down the memory lane while taking elements from the Romanian folklore as bases for his stories. Voiculescu does not experience a comeback, a late conversion to folk spirituality, but develops right from it, without ignoring his own experience acquired within the rural universe. Many of the elements pertaining to his native land are scattered throughout his narratives.*

Keywords: *real, supermundane, memory, Romanian folklore, folk spirituality.*

Most of Vasile Voiculescu's stories originate in folklore and myth. Familiar with the scope of the folklore pertaining to the rural world, the writer polishes the folkloric motifs, people's beliefs, the practices of magic, all of them revolving around the unexplainable. "Displaying quite an interest for originality, the storyteller steps into the folkloric realm, questions its deep meanings, consequently developing peculiar, traditional motifs which make up the essence of certain happenings either funny or supermundane.¹" The description of beliefs and ancient practices is not of interest in this particular case but mostly hinting to them in order to depict profound experiences. In stories, particular characters are folklore gatherers, others are mere witnesses or interpreters of people's mentalities that prove Voiculescu's connection to folklore. To Voiculescu, the myth represents a literary technique shaped as metaphors, allegories and symbol; the myths, the miracles, the beliefs have a functional value in highlighting the less ordinary enigmas and psychologies.

The greatest prose writers do not avoid in their writings the childhood painting adorned with people and happenings, yet they used them either as background or as a reference point for fiction. Most of the toponyms in Vasile Voiculescu's narrative pertain to the landscape of Buzau where the writer spent his childhood. This particular land is described in full geographical details (mountains, hills, plains, rivers, thickets, moors), taking also into account its people. Vasile Voiculescu's prose displays a wide range of toponyms from Buzau: Parscov, his native village (*Amongst Wolves, Behaviorism, The Shepherd*), the river Buzau (*Zahei, the Blind*), the Ciolanu monastery (*The Recluse*), The Meadow of Buzau (*Zahei, the Blind*).

The two volumes of stories and short stories written between 1946-1958, point out a revival of folklorically allusive narrative, at a time when it was impossible to foresee any initiative of reviving the folkloric myth after the folklorization offensive belonging to the trend entitled *Sămănătorism*, but mostly after Mihail Sadoveanu, Gala Galaction, Ion Agârbiceanu și Mircea Eliade. Predictably placed, if we consider his poetry, within the space of folkloric mythology, the new writer goes down memory lane while the storyline is deeply rooted within the folklore. Nevertheless, his own experience acquired within the boundaries of the rural universe is not to be ignored. Voiculescu does not experience a return, a late conversion to the spirituality of the people, but develops straight from it: I was born in the countryside- he confesses, secretly proud- which I consider to be the greatest luck of my life... I would live an authentic rural life, paced by seasons, demanded by nature, interwoven with ancient habits and customs."²

The expressiveness of Voiculescu's myth has its basis, first and foremost, in the allusions derived from the folkloric resources which the storyteller wants to make the most of from the point of its artistic potential. "As a storyteller, Voiculescu has the preferences of a pagan. His world did not go through the spiritual world of Christianity. It draws its life out of superstition, of rites and magic movements, of fiction and archetypal symbols."³

Voiculescu's childhood develops in an environment where his father sets his clock according to the sun, where the plough digs out the bones mixed with cove from the times of cholera; amazing news were spreading through the village about bears that kidnapped girls, old village women who practiced witchcraft etc. Most of the elements pertaining to his native land will be encountered later in prose. The motifs of his native land are confined within the banks of the river

Buzau. The motif of the bear appears in the stories that have a mountainous background, this particular animal representing some sort of a required bridge in the crossing over of quotidian details, of human routine towards the ancestral. The plot in *The Shepherd*, *Mission of Confidence*, *The Snake Aliodor*, *Behaviorism*, *Boulder Pottage* or *The Recluse* takes place around his native land. Getting away from his native lands is done gradually in the novel entitled, *Zahei, the Blind* and also in the story *Alcyion or the White Devil*. Irrespective of the development of the plot, the language still preserves the expressive savour of the vocabulary encountered around Pârscov. The heroes use words like "târlă"/"sheep cot", "custură"/"unclasped knife", „putinică"/"tub", „urnit"/"budged", „tarhat"/"burden", „berbântă"/"keeve"). Even the toponyms are specific to the area (the horse thieves from *Alcyion or The White Devil* move to and fro between the Valley of the Wolf and Lipia, the plot in *The Shepherd* takes place in *The Beautiful Marsh*), and there are references even to Buzau and Parscov in many stories.

The Shepherd depicts an episode from the life of a dog originally lodged by a school, which, later on, driven by instincts, would set off to the sheep cot. An ill shepherd dog is left by the shepherd of the sheep cot in a village, hoping that it will eventually get better. Indeed, the dog recovers from its illness, but becomes sad till the day the children of the village restore its former cheerfulness and trust. By healing its soul, the Shepherd is reunited with its herd, the world of the mountain and its master. "It jumped on the shepherd's chest and leaned its head against the man's heart who embraced and welcomed it with a big feast, as if it were the feast given in the honour of the lost son."⁴ It is no wonder that the participants in the plot are actually children and it is not by chance that the plot gets supermundane overtones. The age of the characters allows for the most unusual connections. The childhood makes it easier to pass from the real to the supermundane and myth. The Urseiului Valley, where Samson's herd would go down during the fall and come up during the spring, renamed by children, The Shepherd, exists to this very day. It is within the same story entitled *The Shepherd* that the name of a hamlet of the village Parscov, the Beautiful Marsh, comes from (it is in the yard of this school that the shepherd dog lay ill).

The Recluse is a narrative built around the lycanthrope, a folkloric motif widely used in the Balkans. A monk from the Ciolanu

monastery who turned by night time into a wolf, is, eventually shot and his heart will be pierced by a stake in order to get rid of the curse.

The Snake Aliodor is an insipid anecdote on the topic of the mysterious soul of the non-utterers. The female character in this story dies of cancer, convinced that her body has been devoured by a snake as punishment for letting her folks throw such a being into the fire. The truth is revealed later when they find the snake drowned in a barrel of brandy. The happening has different references, from the folkloric motif of the house snake to the surreal characteristic and the biblical myth connected to the mysterious illness.

Alcyon or the White Devil is a story which evokes the romanian era of horse thieves and amazing events, some of them connected to magic: witchcraft (the guards can be killed with a dead man's hand), happenings with ghouls and other signs that interfere with the realist universe. Unlike other thieves, the horse thieves would not kill anybody and after having stolen the breeding horses would even leave their hacks as replacement. The elements pertaining to his native land are quite obvious in this story. There is a reference to Dragaica traditional fair, alongside other real topographic elements: Around Dragaica and its renowned horse fairs, the thieves would gather at the Bridge of the Horse, on top of Penteleu.⁵ Similarly, even the characters and the location are genuine: "Everybody heard of the famous squire dwelling around Buzau, by the name of Marghiloman, the old man"⁶ or the clergyman Stoian of Lipia, an old man with a hump on his back, two black piercing holes under his bushy white eyebrows and a pointed nose like a blade under which a wisp of hair was spreading to his chest."⁷ (these facts are certified by historical documents and the testimonies of the eyewitnesses.)

In *Boulder Pottage* it is depicted the mass hallucination from a poor village, Flămânzii-Vechi, where a bizarre character apparently endowed with supernatural powers lies and manages to make a pottage to the starved ones. ultimately, several solutions regarding the significance of the event are provided. True to a didactic and informative principle, Voiculescu always feels the urge to come up with further explanations, of reinforcing didactically what was no longer necessary to be explained."⁸

In *Behaviourism*, after a brief introduction into the atmosphere, it is depicted a bend from Buzau, where a group of hunters is prevented from moving forward by the blizzard that has just set out. The prologue describes the feast of the hunters, the dissertation on a trendy

topic and behaviourism advocated by a philosophy professor. However, the speech about the American behavioural psychology and its academic references is boring the audience and one of hunters, the mayor of the village, proposes an example of genuine behaviourism, an excuse for telling a wonderful story of the outlaws, inspired from a legend. A narrator tells a story about the behaviour of an ancestress, a nun from the Vodesele monastery (short for Voievodesele). At first, there are provided information about the monachal building, founded since the times of the Turks by a widow of a ruler, monastery wherein only females were allowed. The description of the small monastery reveals a real fortress, somewhere in the mountains where twenty nuns were living surrounded by poultry and cattle of female gender. the massiveness of the monastery adds a bit of mystery. „, for this purpose, the little monastery apart from the huge walls of rocks that protected it from three sides, was also surrounded by some high and thick walls with iron stakes stuck in pinnacles and ditches deep in the ground. One can access the monastery only through three rows of solid ironclad gates, with thick bolts and locks.”⁹ By a trick (two men ask for boarding for themselves and some frostbitten ladies in a sleigh; as a matter of fact three outlaws with pistols by their waists and knives in their teeth), the bandits get into the monastery so as to rob it. Among the nuns, there was also the courageous and skilled nun, Pelagria (former outlaw Pauna), who kills Ciopala, the head of the outlaws and restrains the others. The behaviourism of the nun Pelaghia was interpreted differently: mother superior considered her deed as an iniquity while the nuns considered Pelaghia an idol. In the end of the story there are provided explanations to this particular deed pointing to the sensational and miraculous resembling to the ones encountered in fairytales legends and mythology.

The life of people in the mountains is portrayed in the narrative entitled *Mission of Confidence*. In the beginning of the story, it is presented the useless attempt of a chirotechnician to find capercaillies with the purpose of catching them on camera. He was accompanied by a guide, three hunters and six forest rangers wearing hats adorned with little branches of fir-trees. Another sequence describes the entire herd, a bunch of people and animals: „The herd lain under an old crest was made up of over one hundred cows and mating bulls. During the day, the cattle were scattered in the mountains in search of food under the supervision of the haywards. At night, the cattle drew together in the wide enclosure surrounded with planks of birch bound with solid

ropes. The shepherds were resting in a girder barn where you could hear the wind whistling and see the blinding resinous smoke coming from the hearths with no chimneys on which the pots of palenta were boiling. They brought a few women along, some of them as assistance some others were there just to mount the bulls.”¹⁰ The hero of the story is a mountaineer by the name of Berbecea who enjoys living freely without obiding by the laws and customs of people. Young Bujor, nicknamed Berbecea because he would hit women), was a great conoisseur of the mountainous areas and an exceptional trekker. Ileana, a chatty and clever woman, describes him positively: each and every honest person takes to him and yields willingly, the cattle as much as the bees, the beasts as well as women. The reason is because he does not bring anybody any harm.”¹¹ In the end, the main character kills a bear which had torn a cow apart, but he does that remorsefully, feeling guilty all the time. He finds himself initiated within the secrets of nature. Bujor is not a hunter but a protector of the beasts whose language he understands especially when they bring him news.

The novel entitled *Zahei, the blind man* describes the tragic destiny of a disabled person in search of a cure for his eyesight. Before going blind, Zahei used to live in the underworld of Braila, being, in turns, a carrier, labourer, reckless drunk until he poisoned himself with alcohol at the tavern of a Greek. In Voiculescu’s novel, life balances between innocence and savagery, the fact that Zahei went blind has a parabolic meaning: apparently nothing miraculous in the creature as well as the destiny of this primitive hulk. All about him has an earthy elementary nature. He appears as an embodiment of human destitution.”¹² The novel is made up of four parts and presents an exceptional human experience, the narrative line going alongside the character through different stages of knowing the world in its instances of the lowest social strata. After having escaped from the hospital with the help of a certain Panteră, a brilliant mind of the underworld, Zahei reaches an outskirts from Bucharest and is used a beggar, leech gatherer, draft animal at a menagerie etc. Accepting even the lamest humiliations at the mere thought that eventually he will be taken to a monastery across Danube, at Dervent near Silistra where he heard that he could regain his eyesight, the blindman goes with the flow of destiny and of the others around him. It is in this very instance of a man guided by the light of his own thoughts that he experiences all sorts of things: he loses his friends in the river of Buzau, becomes a gardener on the domain of a certain Lagradora

where wrongly accused of murder (the squire's wife falls into his arms and after that is found dead, murdered probably by her cockhounded husband) goes straight to prison where he is made a witness to the inmates' most sinister morals. After getting out of prison, Zahei works as a brandy maker and gardener, raises money and reaches Derwent but the monastery had vanished. From this place he goes, accompanied by a woman, to the land of his childhood, Brăila. It is high time for a new line of events to be unraveled. The hero becomes, in turns, the keeper of a house for easy morals, a carrier and barrel unloader giving in to drinking. A woman claims that Zahei is her lost son but she is admitted into the hospital and the possible ending of the book is delayed. Hearing of the wonders that the clergyman Fulga from Cervoi village is doing, the blindman sets off looking for him. After having found him, he listens to his prayers in a deserted monastery, carries him on his back and has the feeling that he regains his eyesight. However, the clergyman commits a sacrilege, he dies and Zahei, hopelessly, stands beside him" waiting for the awakening of both of them on Judgement Day"¹³. The ending is a parabolical one: the crippled clergyman Fulga and the blindman Zahei remake the couple of the blind and the skinny from the Scripture.

Florentin Popescu tries to find out" where the writer's inspiration ends and the life imagined by him begins."¹⁴ Zahei's disability, the moment when the entire action triggers, takes place in the marshes of Brăila, in a back slum. The writer may have heard of real cases of people going blind from drinking poisoned alcohol. After being released from the hospital, Zahei reaches alongside Panteră (a character envisaged out of a blend of wisdom, contrivance, swindle and kind-heartedness) at the landfill, at the outskirts of Bucharest. Voiculescu went probably in its description, by the images kept in his memory since the times when he used to wander, as a physician, the districts of Bucharest: through piles of garbage and bulks of dirt arose a drove of shacks, hovels, cribs, huts and sties and all sorts of chimneys and stalls in all sorts of locations and unexpected aspects, from tragic to caricature: drowsy, as if on bended knees, tilted, fallen on their backs, standing aside dizzily, the hat of the roof on one side, crippled leaning on levers, ripped out of the eyes of the windows and the mouths of the doors."¹⁵ It is the first step for Zahei in acquiring knowledge, followed by the others: the hunt for leeches, the life of a comedian, of a gardener etc. The garden of Lagradora is not just a figment of the writer's imagination. There was a time when the

surroundings of Buzau were taken over by the Bulgarians settled here with their families who had taken up gardening. Thus, a connoisseur would make the connections to those realities when Voiculescu describes: "The garden that satiated the court and the town with vegetables began right from the mansion and spread on tens of hectares, in the marsh, along a circle of water that deviated from the river bed of Buzau."¹⁶ Except for the second part, *Ocna*, the writer brings his character back to the location of hills, which, although not mentioned, they can easily be recognized in those around the town of Buzau. The minutely detailed description of the brandy maker trade that Zahei performs can only be attributed to the writer's childhood memories. All of Florentin Popescu's remarks prove not only the fact that Vasile Voiculescu's prose is deeply rooted within the real but also the writer's great ability to gather in a new, original shape, facts, happenings and places to which he attributed literary and symbolic virtues, all in all under the sign of the biblical parable in the end of the book.

As a physician, Vasile Voiculescu belongs to the century that he lives in, being familiar to the latest scientific theories which he became profoundly acquainted to. As a writer he is nostalgic about origins, beginnings. For this particular reason, Voiculescu is portrayed as torn conscience, an archaic and modern man altogether. The supermundane element of his prose finds an endless source within the folkloric surrealism. The writer meditates on the meanings of life by means of myth, a convenient way for his spiritual character. By developing the story in its traditional purity, Vasile Voiculescu reestablishes its long time hard-set status threatened by the scouring of newer times. He give back the story its original appearance which is a mythological one. In literary way, the myths allow for the opening of new horizons and expressive virtualities, reveal new meanings and implications of the old artistic structures, thus producing literary communication. With Voiculescu, the myth is converted into symbol, in magical process, in allegory, in expressive rituals, all projections of artistic experience.

Acknowledgement: This paper is supported by Project SOP HRD - TOP ACADEMIC 76822.

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Notes

- ¹ George Bădărău, *Proza lui Vasile Voiculescu – modalități de realizare a fantasticului*, Editura Princeps Edit, Iași, 2006, p. 37.
- ² *Confesiunea unui scriitor și medic*, în *Gândirea*, XIV, nr. 8, 1935, p. 402, apud Ion Apetroaie, *V. Voiculescu – studiu monografic*, Editura Minerva, București, 1975, p. 171.
- ³ Ion Apetroaie, *V. Voiculescu – studiu monografic*, op. cit., p. 172.
- ⁴ Vasile Voiculescu, *Integrala prozei literare*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1998, p. 234.
- ⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 258.
- ⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 259.
- ⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 260.
- ⁸ Al. George, *Semne și repere*, Editura Cartea românească, București, 1971, p. 293.
- ⁹ Vasile Voiculescu, *Integrala prozei literare*, p. 116.
- ¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 246.
- ¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 248.
- ¹² Nicolae Balotă, *De la Ion la Ioanide*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1974, p. 364.
- ¹³ Vasile Voiculescu, *Zahei orbul*, Editura 100+1 Gramar, București, 1996, p. 170.
- ¹⁴ Florentin Popescu, *Pe urmele lui Vasile Voiculescu*, Editura Sport Turism, București, 1984, p. 279.
- ¹⁵ Vasile Voiculescu, *Zahei orbul*, op. cit., p. 14.
- ¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 56.