

## HORTENSIA PAPADAT-BENGESCU AND THE REFLECTION OF THE HUMAN OBSERVATION

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### Abstract

In this article, the author attempts an overview on the place occupied by the work of Hortensia Papadat Bengescu, remarkable representative of the "psychological novel", in the Romanian prose and on the way in which her writings were received by the literary criticism.

**Keywords:** *psychological novel, objective prose, decadence*

The great European prose writer, the one who was considered to be the founder of the Romanian psychological novel, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu - of whose writing I have been in love since high school, whose work I met much better in the student amphitheatres and through the study and the researches I often used to carry out as a student in letters in the reading rooms of the Bucharest Central University Library - has entered an shade cone!

In the "Dictionary" I have achieved, of the writers of Galați, the record is ... almost unfair to her literary achievements: Born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, in Ivești, Galați, deceased on the 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1955, in Bucharest. She was the daughter of General D. Bengescu and professor Zoe. She married in 1896, in Turnu-Magurele, the magistrate Nicolae N. Papadat. The literary career is postponed due to her husband's transfers from one city to another (passing through Turnu-Magurele, Buzău, Focșani, Constanța) and the maternal care shown to her children. She begins in the cultural press with articles in French (1912). She also writes poems in this language. In 1913, she published in the "Romanian Life" magazine, her shaping as a writer being marked by the personality of Garabet Ibraileanu, the one who helps her to debut. Editorial, this happens in 1919, with the volume "Deep Waters", praised by Garabet Ibraileanu. During the First World War she

worked as a volunteer nurse at the Red Cross, the experience being then narrated in the novel "The Dragon". From 1919 she begins to collaborate with the cenacle of the critic Eugen Lovinescu and to publish in his magazine, „Sburătorul". From now on, Eugen Lovinescu, one of the few supporters of women writers, has the decisive role in the orientation of the novelist towards the modern European novel. All her novels will be first read in the cenacle and then published. The writer's favorite writer is Marcel Proust, whose method of creation we find, more or less, in her novels. The author writes and publishes several volumes of short stories. It was called the "Great European" as an acknowledgment of her obvious merits in the modernization of the Romanian novel and its synchronization with the European one.

At Eugen Lovinescu's exhortation, she evolves towards an "objective" prose, as it will be seen in the Hallip's Cycle ("The Dishevelled Virgins," "Bach Music Concert," "The Hidden Road","Roots"). From 1933, she settles in the capital, where she also publishes "The Fiancée" (1933), and in 1946 he is awarded the National Prose Award. The rest of the novel projects remain unfinished. Prohibited by the Communist regime and living, at old age, almost inhumanly, without any means of subsistence, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu died completely in oblivion of her colleagues and literary critics, on the 5<sup>th</sup> March 1955, in Bucharest at the age of 79 . After 1965 she was gradually reintegrated into the literary and academic circuit.

Reading almost all of her work, you can not exclaim, starting not from the monsters she discovers, describing them, among her characters, that Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu is a SACRED

MONSTER, who must be known much more and that is why I also advocate and promote so much, both for the opening of that branch of the V.A. Urechia Library and for the achievement of a statue or at least a bust to adorn one of Galati's parks!

Obviously, here I am referring to the etymology of the word "monster", which in Latin would mean worthwhile to be shown! It is not accidental that Florin Mihăilescu, in the "General Dictionary of Romanian Literature", coordinated by my teacher, Eugen Simion, wrote that H. Papadat-Bengescu "is a female Goya of Romanian literature, she is, to put it in other words, in the most precious and original substance of her work, beyond surgical objectivity, a bitter reminder of the precariousness and inauthenticity of the human being."<sup>1</sup>

My inner structure, much more optimistic, can only partially agree with this vision, although, with all her lucidity, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, after, for example, was a nurse in World War I, taking care of the wounded and closing the eyes of so many dying men, after she raised her children, after she had endured so many hardships from her husband who did not understand the wife's creative side too well, the negative aspects of her work may also be reflected, but I do not think that it is only about the "bitterness", the "precariousness and the inauthenticity of the human being"!

In fact, a certain duality of the writer has long been noticed, but I believe that she is under the sign of coincidentia oppositorum, under the mystery of the act of creation. Since the beginning of her literary work, the "Great European" has been preoccupied with her understanding of how to report to the world, beyond any dichotomy, but resulting, as Ion Bogdan Lefter<sup>2</sup> notes, a mask game present both in the short prose, and in her novels.

If you look for, you will always find in her work an aphoristic temptation, which, among other things, demonstrates the ambivalence of life. She writes in "To Don Juan, in eternity ..."<sup>3</sup>: "Even water is not two days the same ... and neither you with it." Of course, the Writer is not only Heraclitic in expression, but the problem of the reception of her work has been questioned since the beginning.

George Călinescu masterly synthesizes this crisis of reception in his "History": "the critical

opinion is divided in the most contradictory way. For E. Lovinescu, for the "Prousens" in general, for those who are allowed to be influenced without deep examination by an attitude, H- P.-Bengescu is a great novelist, she is the creator of the Romanian city novel, she is a profound analyst of the invisible soul. For others (and here gather almost all the readers who ask from a book "truth, clarity, common sense," that is most of the readers) H- P.-Bengescu is an author of volumes impossible to read. Of course, an experienced critic is not to be intimidated by the resistance of the immediate contemporaries. But today, after a lengthy passage time useful to observation, examining without prejudice the writer's literature and using the broadest aesthetic understanding, we must recognize that both readers' reactions have, if not one justification, at least one explanation. There are pages in this work that suggest to the critic a possible depth, which excites even by what we think it could achieve. It is no less true that then we fall into absolutely arid areas, of frustration that discourage us. H.-ei P.-Bengescu's work is composed of great promises and defeats and the determination of its value must be made taking into account the aesthetic significance of this inequality."<sup>4</sup>

As it can be seen, the Great European may not have been to George Călinescu's own liking, the synthesis in the "Compendium" starting with more than a depreciative direction, the emphasis specific to the proletariat criticism, is also to be found:

"After a production of vaporous diary pages, interesting for psychology, and especially for the physiology of women, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu has dedicated herself to a series of "Proustian novels" (n.n: to notice the quotes!). However much as it may be said that the woman is not the most suitable for objective observation, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu undoubtedly brings a richer material than any other novelist, which is explained by the female condition itself. The writer believes in social values, lives and scrutinizes them, descends to that infinite little which is the great matter of the novel. The respect for the conventional world makes her give importance to the snob society, thus approaching the intimate formula of Proust's novels that transcribe the lives consumed in mundane nothings, the imperceptible tragedies of the

parlour. By definition, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu writes a pure urban novel, devoted exclusively to unnecessary processes of a class exempted from the harsh problems of existence. The heroes are rich. Above all, leaving aside the good observer position, the writer's literature deeply breathes femininity. First we notice in it the horror of the promiscuous and the degenerated, hence a whole gallery of physical and moral disabled (paralytics, hystericals, twins, hybrids, illegitimate children). The characterology is replaced by medical examination. The heroes are well-born or degenerate, healthy or sick. The disease is especially the climate in which the characters live, and the favourite place for development - the sanatorium. Cerebral congestion, neurasthenia, septicemia, tuberculosis, cancer, stomach ulcer, pernicious anemia, here are some of the diseases around which the intrigues come together. <sup>5</sup>

The dual personality, which was one of the sources of her work, leads to a same dual perception.

When the family life seemed to be faint, disappointing, the only rescue seemed to her the long letters to friends, understood as a rebelliousness (as a matter of fact, her marriage was an act of rebelliousness against the parents who refused to allow her to continue her university studies), but which were like a true school for writing: "letters in which impressions and thoughts pass into a cataract mixture. Their content, then even re-read, would have seemed surprising to my passivity ... Neither do I regret it - but always the passionate concern of not confronting one with the other the two lives. "

Hardly a debutant in "The Romanian Life", the Great European was speaking to Garabet Ibrăileanu, her first great mentor, the author of the immortal "Adela", a novel, the kind, no longer written today, when the swearing the and violence about „la double vie" are praised. Even in the opening of her writing entitled "Autobiography" it is stated without theoretical pretensions:

"Unity and dual personality: I live my artistic existence with my life every single moment of my life, yet no one has isolated more absolutely the artistic ego/self from the cursive experience. Even in the moments of total identification, an instinct shelters in me carefully, one from the other, the two inseparable conflicts. "<sup>6</sup>

Could it be a mask game, either conscious or unconscious? But how much of a life is actually found in a writing, how many mistakes in life time can you assume in your own literature?

In fact, by returning to those letters, from them too there comes the urge to write, even before literary critics such as Ibraileanu or Lovinescu being the Friends! How much they count in a literature! Let us remember as it should of Eminescu and Creanga!

In this spirit, Ion Bogdan Lefter concluded, regarding the importance of biography and self-biography in literature:

"The main data of the creation process in Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu approach are: the raw material, confessional, sincere, was in excess; but it had to be masked up, dissimulated. All the prose that followed was nothing but a continuous search for solutions to "alter" the subjectivity, to disguise the overflowing self-confession. (...) From this perspective, we will have to re-examine all her literature from the perspective of the degree of processing the original confessional matter. We might - then - find out that the opposition subjectivity-objectivity is in fact inadequate and that the work evolved according to an internal logic. "<sup>7</sup>

Whatever the problem, perhaps a young man nowadays might be convinced to approach the work of the great writer starting from the "Bach Music Concert". There are many critics and literary historians who think so. Such as George Calinescu:

"The best novel remains the "Bach Music Concert", a painting of a society on the way to aristocratic perfection, for the moment only in the snobbish phase, whose typical exponents are Prince Maxențiu and Elena. Maxențiu, consumptive, suffers from a very particular drama. He is not afraid of the disease, in the gravity of which he does not believe. He is bored with the fear of the disqualification that such a proletarian suffering could bring to the world. Elena is mad about the protocol. She sets up a concert from Bach, in her home, to which only select guests will take part. All her work is reduced to preparing the concert and editing the guest list."

The same titled Calinescu considered the following: "What alienates, and unfairly, many of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's literature is the



prolix style and even annoying, finally, a style of conversation, according to matter."

A Felix Aderca tried, as if sensing the clichés that would gather concerning the hermeneutics of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, to nuance:

"As you can not do more injustice to Mr. Gh. Brăescu than when compared to I.L. Caragiale - an author who has given his measure towards an author in full creative activity - I think it can not be done a greater injustice to Mrs. Bengescu than comparing her with Marcel Proust. Although Mrs. Bengescu in the last two novels - "Unworthy Virgins" and the present day, the "Bach Music Concert" - depicts a world of the aristocracy of money and culture of the country, apparently related to the aristocratic families described by Proust, it differs profoundly from this novelist, as a means of expression as well as psychological material. We will not insist here on these differences; suffice it to remind us that any attempt of comparison is at the expense of our writer, who does not need any unit of measure to recognize his value."<sup>8</sup>

What I also confirm, being, I believe, convincing, through two fragments of the most cherished novel for me, "Music Concert by Bach":

"Hallipa twins, without being at all stupid, but consistent with their double birth, had to be content with half of any kind of value. But they wonderfully completed each other in one person, which was not at all ordinary. Very meagre, with wide, transparent ears, and narrow, sly eyes, they were ugly, but so indebted and talkative, that you had to welcome them as good. Hardly arrived, they undertook a great trial against Doru Hallipa, their father, for a diversion of wealth, a process in which they had a joint attitude, so repulsive, that they were considered infamous at the Palace of Justice, where there was still the habit of looking at infamy. They were following the process in their private life too through an active propaganda of calumny; all their acquaintances and relatives were filled with their wishes. At the sound of their slander, Nory jumped, ready to beat them, and Mini took exception indignantly. Now they became assiduous in the Rim's house either prostrating themselves in front of the teacher or flattering the good Lina, in front of whom the slander was changing into the lamentations of victims. As

they seemed so obliging, and as they did not touch Lenora, Lina would tell them: "Boor boys," and they were invited to the table."

Attentive to all that is human (who may not know what a soul is, with its divine side, as Lica did not know!), the writer does not forget that the Beautiful can still master the human with its unnatural side:

"Music had fallen as a indictment. They always wondered in suspicious thoughts: Are they those who killed her? And at any movement of Rim, they moved into his shadow, inseparable accomplices and spectators of misfortune. So hidden, they escaped the ceremony of the good bye from Sia. Besides, no one now. As a matter of fact, no one besides the priests was concerned with the last salutation. Once the hypnosis of music scattered, they were all sneaking smoothly towards the exit. They were quick to rejoice in the joy of the wonderful day. Indifferent to the ceremony, they quickly forgot it and started like a gentle band towards the spring. The cars were waiting lazely. No engine noise, no car horn honks, stirred the silence. Outside the church, the assistants stopped in the green courtyard in silent groups talking about the sun, the heat, the music."

And as if we were all waiting, after the last sentence of the novel, the beginning of Bach's "Fugi" or "Tocatea", a sign that beauty exists, it really exists, there beyond human ...

And I can assert that, beyond all the shortcomings of the human societies grasped in her books, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu sought the Eternal Beauty. Even though, for example, quite recently, in a volume titled "Decadence and decadentism" written by Angelo Mitchievici, the chapter devoted to the writer is titled "Decadence in the school of psychoanalysis", the end of this chapter overturning somewhat the perspective, approaching what I want to prove, by way, of any coincidentia oppositorum:

"The Bach music concert around which is centered the action of the second novel of the cycle, which was issued in 1927, plays an important role in defining the relationships of this bourgeoisie, being a means of legitimacy in defining relations according the typically aristocratic one, and the bourgeoisie rebuilds the French aristocratic parlour tradition. Decadence

acquires here an affirmative role too, it is included in the noble escutcheon blazon and you can not recommend yourself without it. Music, art must be the factor of cohesion, they temporarily suspend dissensions, as the modern ceremonial euphemizes the brutality of certain accidents or inadequacies. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu manages to bring the pathology and the decadence into a bourgeois climate, adapting them to modern necessities the post World War One civilization. Decadence is, in this case, an indispensable complement not only of mondiness but also of modernity, blamed on its degenerative, hereditary side, aesthetically accepted as sophistication and aristocratic emblem, cultivation of sensibilities and of art. <sup>9</sup>

As we can see, there is also the... the "beauty" of decadence, which from Baudelaire and Arghezi until now, would somehow be synonymous with some sort of perception of the aesthetics of ugliness, which is, forcing the limits of logic, the beautiful but turned upside down.

After all, why would the "unbraided virgins" be something ugly, despite the fact that, morally speaking, as Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu notes, my dear fellow from Galati, the phrase "unbraided virgins" would be attached to women who had an adulterous relationship, resulting in a foundling, considered inconvenient for the conventions of bourgeois ethics. Of course, ethics and morality are often confused with aesthetics, the quality literature does not always judge, it only notes and describes letting the reader to give the verdict. Moreover, even indirectly, the writer does not blame the foundling, but the man who arrives, for example Mika-Lé, who through early sexual emancipation and the seductive instrumentalization of her charms, as observed by the same A. Mitchievici, at p. 565, leads to the introduction of a principle of dissolution in the family that wants to integrate it, but has to isolate it, at least to preserve appearances.

As very well Tudor Vianu observes, it is a jump in the "obscure life of consciousness." Comparing her with Liviu Rebreanu, another titan of our literature, to whom I am closely attached, even if only through a monography I dedicated to the novels, Vianu writes that the writer's "obscure life of consciousness" plays an important role, but it is accepted as such, described, but not enlightened,

while at Mrs. Papadat-Bengescu it is subject to the incisive scalpel and the enlarging lenses of the analysis until it is transformed into bright knowledge. Tudor Vianu also notes, in "The Romanian Prose Writers":

"Along with the subconscious fermentations, the writer's novels and short stories reserve a great place for the man suffering, to all kinds of physical and mental illnesses, to the great episodes of the clinic, the consumption of the prince Maxențiu in the "Bach Music Concert", 1927, or that of Ana in The Fiance, 1935, the myocarditis with its dramatic outcome in "The Hidden Road", 1932, the nevropaphis with psychoanalytic origins in "The Unbraided Virgins", etc. With all these there enters the writer's style the richest medical terminology ever known in literature. The physiological man of naturalism is presented once more, but with a somewhat technical competence, from the angle of a biologist and a clinician, who also knows that any suffering of the body is also a disease of the soul, a principle of moral dissolution, mercelessly tackled, objectively and accurately. "

So, though emphasizing the psychoanalytic novelty of Hortensia's prose, she is also a late Zolist. Elena Zaharia-Filipaș nuances, but in the almost the same conception: "The humanity in the Halli's cycle is devoid of intelligence and morality. A bourgeois world recently come in wealth and luxury, with a gloss education, mimicking the interest in art. A world attentive to social behaviour, to the group's opinion, always in competition and rivalry on the field of mondiness, watching its entrances on and exits outof stage, the errors of clothing, the signs of weakness. The complexity of the analytical discourse does not come from within the fabula, like Camil Petrescu's or Holban's, where the intelligence is a prerequisite and an existential condition. The analytical refinement of the author is often applied to low areas of existence, instinct, reprehensible acts, low impulses, and hidden dirt under luxury.

Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu often "works on" her characters with a technique of incisiveness, a mixture of irony and sarcasm, which mercilessly reveals vulgarity, vices, malice under the mask of modern customs. (...)

Even from her early writings, H. Papadat-Bengescu shows a true attraction-repulsion to physical and moral anomalies. The retarded,

rudimentary beings, possessed by primal motions, exert upon her a fascination just as illnesses and vices do (...) <sup>10</sup>

More than interesting is a fragment from the same autobiography I have already mentioned, interesting and emotional, revealing something of what was the impulse to write, but also aspects that led to that unity of the oppositions to which I resorted. The father encourages her to write while at an early age (it seems that the first "composition" was when she was five years old, at the mother's advice, a small text, of a few lines, about the seasons), but the father would have liked a writing that would present "pleasant shapes and colors, placed in select frames."

H. Papadat-Bengescu writes, not necessarily from the spirit of fronde towards the parent, but scandalizing him in a way:

"I have understood to decompose and recompose shapes and colors to prove them and to give away their essence. So much my writing scared him. He was, however, a revolutionary within the tradition, for I remember him in vivid controversy on church dogmas with a priest whom he was astonished and strained. He had faith, but he wanted to understand. And I myself come to everything with faith, but I want to understand." <sup>11</sup>

When her first book as writer appeared, her father combined satisfaction with "a moving deception (in voice, in spaces between words) to my nude of thinking. But I do not know if his torment was bigger or mine, from the same weird decency. I could not have dedicated worshiped him-whom I cherished so highly - this first book; but if it had been possible, would not have known my book, out of a strange wildness that can not be subjected to any judgment, so instinctive was, so personal." <sup>12</sup>

Almost, in other words, we can say that the whole life of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu was under the sign of a duality: let us not forget that she made her debut relatively late, at almost 43 years old, practically almost half of life she dedicated to the family, barely the other half devoted to the art of words.

As Ioana Pârvulescu notes, in an article published in "Literary Romania" (no.7 / 2002), her work as a whole was quite discreet, at least at first, until her novels appeared:

"In the journals of the time Hortensia, Papadat-Bengescu is a sporadic presence, perhaps because

she settled in Bucharest, Cotroceni, only after 1933, at the retirement of her husband. We meet her in a 1927 footage of Camil Petrescu linked to a past episode, Eftimiu's despicable behavior, who would leave the writer waiting in vain while he, the director, would leave ("would flee") on a side door. Later, Camil Petrescu mentions it, indirectly, in a statement about the priority of the one who imposed the urban novel. In Lovinescu's "Agendas" the writer appears often, but always telegraphic, mentioning her passing through Bucharest, visits or readings in the cenacle. Şuluţiu, still a pupil, then a fresh student, writes in the diary the reading of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's books and makes a detailed critical study plan, and Anton Holban asks in a letter the novel "Hidden Roads" (sic!) to publish later in "Literary Romania" in 1932 the article "Life and Death in the Opera of Mrs. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu". Rebreanu does not miss any opportunity to place her among the great novelists of the moment, and her name appears remembered with admiration in numerous literary surveys and inquiries. <sup>13</sup>

In 2002, when Ioana Pârvulescu published that article, she expressed her surprise that "it is incredible that after more than a century and a quarter from the birth of our only" classical "writer, that is to say, fully settled in the consciousness of the reader, her journal is still not published, although it exists. ", Although, knowingly, she had aesthetic reserves.

Finally, as a literary historian, I can only express my perplexity too, these texts being essential for the continuation of the research work on her life and work in this era of the IT revolution.

Ioana Pârvulescu also writes, almost "like among women: "The diary of this almost elderly woman who inspired respect the interwar world of young men should be an entrancing document. Unfortunately, although it was written - disorderly, with great interruptions, with either long notes, or almost stenographic, as I learned from Mr. Dimitrie Stamatadi - he has not published his yet. The transcription work would require an effort similar to that one which was made for Lovinescu's "Agendas". "

I wonder, rhetorically, who has finally committed to this effort?