

**VIRGIL TĂNASE'S 'LEAPȘA PE MURITE' / 'PLAYING FETCH WITH DEATH!' -
FROM PERSONAL HISTORY TO FICTIONAL RECOLLECTION**

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Abstract: Rooted in the historical context of trauma, Virgil Tănase's autobiographic fiction / his memorial discourses of (post)exile, project, on the ontological level, the scenario of the search for identity by the individual-peddler of the dominant Great History, recuperating in his writing the totalitarian-docrinarian universe of the communist age forged in the grid of personal memory, a strategy by means of which the self-centred narrative reflects identity as 'coherence of the self in time.' (Ricœur)

Keywords: autobiographic fiction, identity quest, post-communism, Virgil Tanase, personal history.

Assimilated as *difference* by 'European societies, de-centered to others'¹, the Eastern European cultural spaces organize their identity strategies by offering a literature of Memory through which the experiences of the communist period are 're-lived' in autobiographic or memorial register. The collective trauma and the experience of the 'totalitarian captive' (as in the case of Virgil Tănase's works) are fictionally transposed into 'ego-graphic' narratives², anchored in the dyad *identity-alterity* and legitimizing, in point of the European intercultural dynamics, *differentiating* discourses of the ex-Soviet East shaped by means of a recurring scenario of dialogic identity:

¹ Jean-François Mattéi, *Le procès de l'Europe. Grandeur et misère de la culture européenne* (Paris : PUF, 2011), p.27.

² The 'ego-graphic' narrative points out a special type of confessing text reshaping the narrator's individual identity facing the dominant totalitarian history, in other words, the re-written / re-lived personal past with its traumatic experience mirrored within a ego-focused discourse re-telling the story of one's life.

In other words, any self image that the subject proposes is conditioned by the recognition of the others. This recognition is part of the dialectic relation of identity and otherness, since it is necessary for the other to recognize the persistence of certain features that make up the uniqueness of the subject and which, at the same time, are capable to paint him as different from others.³

This double hypostasis, that of the individual 'thrown' into the great History which he self-reflexively projects into an initiatic scenario of the search for the Centre (re-writing his 'personal history' in the memorial fiction) and that of the East-European who validates his 'written memory' as a Eurocentric differentiating discourse, leaves an identity marker on the 'offer' of the post-totalitarian cultural space, especially the Romanian one within which Virgil Tănase's novels turn representative for their 'dissidence through literature'.

The following section of our study will analyse Tănase's Self-referenced book which we believe to be relevant from the 'peripheral identity in-the-making' point of view, as well as displaying the atypical nature of 'dissidence through literature' of a Romanian writer re-narrating his tormented memoirs. Rejecting the 'role of the professional dissident'⁴, writing functions, for Virgil Tănase, as a reconciliation strategy of the totalitarian memory with that of personal history. His book in confessional register, *Leapşa pe murite / Playing Fetch with Death!* (published in Bucharest in 2011), tackles the same obsessive themes of the search for identity, but this time under the form of autobiographical fiction, maintaining an ego-graphic discourse in which the autobiographical cuts are inserted in a 'detective and literary document', thus highlighting the adventure of the identity pilgrimage in History:

Why should you read this book? Which is not a detective story- even though it is full of all sorts of agents, sometimes stupid policemen who watch you from behind the corner of the street, and sometimes, secret agents, of those who provide the spy and detective stories with their charm! It's a book where one knows from the start whose dead body it is, if it were to have been:

³ Gilles Ferréol & Guy Jucquois, eds. *Dictionnaire de l'altérité et des relations interculturelles*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010), p.156.

⁴ 'Not wishing to play the role of the professionally dissident, having nothing new to say about Romania (others, coming from there, did, and their statements were legitimate, be it even due to the freshness of their information), hardly preoccupied by showing myself to the public's curiosity in different lights (having a plaza named after me, letting myself photographed with my white silk scarf, gluing myself to the grills of the Lipp beerhouse, dedicating one of my novels to baby-seals, and supporting the cause of surrogate mothers etc.), I simply sunk in the mass of anonymous citizens, who don't love, except to love a woman, who don't write except to simply write...!' – Virgil Tănase, *Leapşa pe murite. Document poliţist şi literar / Playing Fetch with Death! Detective and Literary Document* (Bucharest: Adevărul Holding&Institutul Român de Istorie Recentă, 2011), p.155. All translations from Tanase's novel are made by us.

me! And who the assassin is, sitting prettily at the head of the state, unable to find his peace unless he cut my throat. [...] Therefore, a book that, since you know the ending, no longer read breathless, which is regrettable, even though the stories it tells are sometimes so admirable, that they seem made up. They're not!⁵

The 'truths' of personal experience are projected in a signifying fictional register, thus offering the reader a way of decoding History, 'a novel, this time true, so as for the feelings that it nolens volens stirs in you to provide you with the opportunity of being, for a while and in fiction, participants in an age you didn't experience, but which, being more harsh than others, can help you, by dividing more clearly good from evil, to find the meaning you want to give to your life.'⁶ The confession-testimony – 'not of an age, as they say, but of our continuous, worthy struggle, with the mysterious monster which, by changing the century clothing it, doesn't change its habit, or its fierceness'⁷ – describes the status of the intellectual 'caught in the claws of History', trying to 'keep from drowning in the swamp that had surrounded us'⁸, retracing, under the personal mark of a narrated life, an entire, collective experience. Thematically polarized in two sections, Romania and France, standing for the two spaces 're-lived' by means of the confessional-fictional imaginary, *Leapşa pe murite / Playing Fetch with Death!* reflects, on the one hand, 'the individual and his autonomization as products of social history.'⁹ In other words, the personal choice of the writer 'ideologically captive' in the totalitarian era, as re-confirmed by the autobiographical confession of the novel, is not that to 'comply' to the social role imposed by the doctrinarian canon of the age, but that to *resist* by exposing the aesthetic forms of rebellion in his writing. On the other hand, the book defines the acceptance of exile as means for survival which causes, however, inner anguish and identity dilemmas. Moreover, the conflicting duality of the two 'experiences' – communist Romania and the France of the pre/post-Ceausescu exile – monitors the internal disjunction fuelled by 'our game, everyone's, with power'¹⁰ but also by the 'crossing over' which awakens, with 'passing beyond the Iron Curtain' a 'strange sensation of walking on the moon, of having beaten I don't know what gravity of history which kept me grounded in a country whose doors and windows seemed all closed for me, by force of

⁵Ibid., p.5.

⁶Ibid., p.7.

⁷Ibid., p.6.

⁸Ibid., p.7.

⁹Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *L'invention de soi. Une théorie de l'identité* (Paris : Armand Colin, 2004), p.53.

¹⁰Tănase, *Leapşa pe murite. Document poliţist şi literar / Playing Fetch with Death! Detective and Literary Document*, p.24.

implacable and fatal laws; a sensation of absolute unreality.’¹¹ ‘The recognition conflicts’ as ‘revealers of tensions that give dynamism to the identity production’¹² covertly double the autobiographic trajectories of the writer, moving from the ‘identity ideologically fabricated’¹³ to the problematic one of the Romanian in exile, in Paris, ‘a city present in my persona mythology.’¹⁴ If the ‘Prague Spring’ and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia are relived, in the logic of autobiography, from the illusory perspective of an escape from the totalitarian space, motivated by the imminence of a possible armed colonization by the Russians, but quickly repressed by the formula of ‘obedience as a patriotic act’ (‘advisors of all sorts prompted us to temper our protests and our style so as not to wake one day to the Soviet tanks in our yard’¹⁵), once arrived in exile, the narrating self turns its eyes towards the Romanian space left behind. It notes that

The atmosphere in the country has become suffocating, each person being afraid of everyone else, each stepping on their dignity (which is never easy), forcing themselves to participate in the collective masquerade so as not to become its victim. The priority is detaching the country from the clasps of a foolish politics, led by a hand of impostors who more than anyone do not believe in the virtues of the society they want to impose on us. Ignorant and limited, armed with a few simplistic convictions (class determination, the socio-economic vocation of individuals, the priority of politics) [...], they see a potential enemy in every individual, even in those who serve them. Stuck in their own obsessions, they transformed Romanian into a labour camp and the Romanians in prisoners who listen to fear and only dream of an escape, most often a purely theoretical one.¹⁶

The recollection of the stages in the precipitation of the Romanian dissidence in France around Paul Goma and Dumitru Țepeneag, legitimates the autobiographic profile of the ‘anti-ideological rebel’, an ‘identity-focused alternative’ by which, ‘through virtue of a single image,

¹¹ Ibid., p.181.

¹² Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Quand Je est un autre. Pourquoi et comment ça change en nous*. (Paris : Armand Colin, 2008), p.67.

¹³ The episode of the ‘collaboration proposition’ made by the Securitate starts the interior anxiety of the self confronted with the ‘identity theft’, now replaceable with the ‘pre-fabricated’ and superordinate one of the system: ‘I had the feeling that the totalitarian state [...] steals it to replace it with another, prefabricated and idiotic, which could not balance the scale on whose other pan was nothingness. [...] The members of Securitate, poor fellows (not that I pity them!), were not the instruments of the political power, but of another, much more frightening and more radical, against which my whole being rebelled.’ - Tănase, *Leapşa pe murite. Document polițist și literar / Playing Fetch with Death! Detective and Literary Document*, pp.82-83.

¹⁴ Ibid., p.188.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.103.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.189.

the self can become radically involved in a process of biographic reformulation and become a long-term other.¹⁷ In this specific context of autobiographic fiction, the identity construction of the self in exile, peddler of a dominant History against which he aims a programmatic retort, validates the structuring mechanism mentioned by Kaufmann, 'the design of the double propeller': 'the first propeller is the conservative component of the individual, where his past is deposited and which unconsciously provides him with rules for behaviour. The second, by the contrary, determines identity breaches, due to the imaginative subjectivity, which become manifest as permanent identity reformulations.'¹⁸ In its turn, the discourse marked by an autobiographic note, while fictionally projecting major events of the collective and personal history and generating the reconfiguration of the identity hypostases, ceases to be a 'smooth narrative', eventfully uniform, mediating in exchange 'the disjunctive odyssey' (Kaufmann) in which 'the event is used to produce an identity revival, as well as to mark it in spirit.'¹⁹ The ideological pressure of the dictatorial regime, obsessively imprinting the existence before exile, the constant harassment by the Securitate and the opposition against the 'totalitarian machinery' (in Virgil Tănase's terms), 'the escape into a free world' and the retrieval of the interior freedom by means of the 'resisting books', the disappointments of exile and the hypostasis of the 'exiled among exiles', the crystallization of the anti-Ceaușescu dissident movement in exile, the politically ordered failed assassination attempt²⁰, the return to post-December Romania and the dilemmas of post-exile are as many moments of 'bifurcation'²¹ for the identity construct, by which the self changes its world as a result of its passing through a reality crisis: 'his value system, certain behaviours and the content of the exchanges with the significant alterity will

¹⁷ Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Quand Je est un autre*, p.100.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.171.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.188.

²⁰ The circumstances of his failed political assassination ordered by Bucharest are recounted by Virgil Tănase in the chapter *Mort fără moarte / Dead without Death (Leapșa pe murite / Playing Fetch with Death!)*, pp.282-310). The novel *C'est mon affaire, sottie* published in Paris in 1983, projects into a ludic and intertextual fiction, 'the general political situation under the form of a bear hunt. The "multilaterally developed" Romania was becoming a burlesque circus show with an acrobat bride coming from the countryside, where it is not customary to wear knickers under the skirt. I had dedicated a chapter, *Temă cu variațiuni/ Theme with variations*, to the various versions that had circulated about the "Tănase affair", each of them in a different literary key: the idea of a plot of the DTS meant to compromise the new socialist President of France was portrayed by a confrontation between the Tenor and the Choir of brutes, like in an opera by Verdi; the supposition that it was all a Russian was painted as a ballet by Asafiev, *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai*; in a scene from *comedia dell'arte*, a servant tricked his two masters, heads of state. [...] Bedtime stories!' - *Leapșa pe murite / Playing Fetch with Death!*, p.312.

²¹ Borrowing the concept from the mathematics of dynamic systems or from non-Euclidian physics (Dang-Vu, Descartes or Prigogine), of morphologies, where 'the separation appears in singular moments when the trajectory followed by a system is split into several directions; only one will be realised, but they were all equally possible', Kaufmann proposes *bifurcation* as a notion associated to the minor biographical event, catalyst for the 'overturns', mediating the identity reconstruction. - *Quand Je est un autre*, pp. 194-197.

strongly contrast with what went before them [...] the bifurcations only account for a small part of the changes, where numerous identity reversals reign, as well as disturbances caused by ordinary events.’²² The successive stages of the phenomenon generating identity splits and ‘disruptions’ are: a ‘critical phase’ marking the uncertainty and confusion (‘Alternative imaginary identifications become more frequent, in conflict with the activated designs of implicit memory, causing dysfunctions [...], opening reflexive paths’), followed by ‘the open crisis and [...] reversal’ so that ‘the evolution of the biographic system is that for which the event is only a pretext, an element starting a mutation which, one way or another, would have occurred anyway.’²³ To that effect, the identity crises inserted in the autobiographic journey, fictionally recalled to memory by Virgil Tănase in *Leapșa pe murite / Playing Fetch with Death!*, legitimate the construction, in confessional register, of a history ‘I had not searched and through whose torrents I had passed as I knew best, striving to keep my cool and not let myself be diverted, a strange happening I had experienced [...], a cataclysm which destroys people at random, no matter their merits; an attempt as many others in a life time, neither good, nor evil in itself, a brick that gains its worth from the wall in which it is built.’²⁴ In other words, a novel-scenario of the ‘individual within history’, an identity-focused meta-history ended ‘in a victory which, as all other things in this world, proves to be another field overgrown with weeds and thorns. We ought to clear it with the same dedication, with the only joy of being able to say, in the evening, while praying before “going to sleep”, that we filled our day with a rightful labour, guided by the light within us.’²⁵ (Tănase, 2011: 342)

Therefore, in his book analysed above, the literary forms of resistance against the dominant political regime and the post-exilic dilemmas are rendered by an *exorcistic writing* within which the ideologically obstructive context, the identity-focused mythology of the fictionally reinvented narrator, the historical and moral pact become reference points in the search for the new scriptural identity set into dual perspective: that of a traumatic history that resonates in the egocentric mentality as a factor of internal coercion, being still active in the first years of the Parisian exile, and that of the post-December ‘openness’ to the values of dynamic

²² Ibid., p.195.

²³ Ibid., pp.195-96.

²⁴ Tănase, *Leapșa pe murite. Document polițist și literar / Playing Fetch with Death! Detective and Literary Document*, p.338.

²⁵ Ibid., p.342.

multiculturalism which apparently liberates - by offering a freedom inherently adopted - the self from the 'captivity' of doctrinarian ideology.

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