

IDA VERONA AND (MIMETIC?) TRANSNATIONALISM

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Abstract: This essay presents the artistic personality of Ida Verona (1863?1865?- 1925), a poet of Croatian origin who lived most of her life in the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Brăila, an important Romanian harbour on the Danube. Ida Verona was the sister of the well-known poet Artur Garguromin Verona. but as it often happens in world history, the sister’s personality got obliterated and her work was forgotten. Ida wrote poetry and drama where she re-read motifs that were very dear to the nationalists of the time. In this respect, she takes after other female writers of the nineteenth century (Carmen Sylva or Fanny Seculici) who adopt this strategy in order to blend in and make their transnationalism less obvious.

Keywords: poetry, drama, (trans)nationalism, Ida Verona

The term transnationalism was, apparently, invented by the American Randolph Bourne who defines it in an article on America published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in 1916¹. In 1940, transculturalism was defined by Fernando Ortiz, a South American scholar, based on the article *Nuestra America* (1891) by José Martí. Following Martí's idea, Ortiz thought that transculturalism was the key notion for the identities of the Western hemisphere. According to Ortiz, transculturalism is the invention of a new culture based on the metissage, mixed blood of two peoples and cultures. The new point in Ortiz’s approach is that this mixture is no longer unilaterally regarded from the point of view of a supposedly superior culture that integrates an inferior one which is doomed to acculturation. The reinvention of a new common culture is also based upon the subversive choice of certain elements from the culture of the invader/colonizer/settler by the invaded/colonized people according to the latter’s agenda of survival and endurance. Transculturalism is a syncretic process. Discussions followed about the effect of transculturalism upon the nation states. Hence the notion transnationalism which is based upon the breaking down of nationalist boundaries is extremely important in today’s globalizing world.

Transnational identities are not only a contemporary phenomenon although in contemporary world culture transnationalism is more and more obvious because for the first time in history huge masses of people look for work or better life opportunities beyond the frontiers of their homeland. This unprecedented and every day increasing mobility of the work force goes hand in hand with fast communications, and the easier transportation all over the world. All these characterize the twenty-first century. Transnationalism creates new identities which have a space of their own beyond the limits of nationalism, a hyphenated space which has multiple and complex allegiances and evolutions. Not only that transnationalism and transnational identities existed before the contemporary globalization of the world but there were always individuals who lived on the margins of their nation and

¹ For a more detailed analysis of this problem, see Hawley, John C. *Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Theory*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001.

transgressed ethnic boundaries. In the present paper I want to present such an example, a very interesting case of a transnational writer and painter: Ida Verona.

She was born in 1865 (1863?) in Brăila, a very multicultural harbour near the mouth of the Danube, where besides Romanians there lived together Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Roma, Turks, Russians, Ukrainians. They all tried to make the best of the economic opportunities given by the nearby mouth of the Danube. Ida Verona was the daughter of Francesco Spiridon Verona and Amalia Lucovič (Lucovschi, in Romanian sources) a family of merchants of Dalmatian origin. The Veronas were members of the colony founded in Brăila by run away Dalmatians from Kotor Bay, an area south of Dubrovnik which was disputed by the Austrian Empire and the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Because of the instability of the political borders, many Dalmatians ran away and settled down in Brăila. Ida had a younger brother Arthur Garguromin Verona (born in 1868, born also in Brăila. It is interesting that this brotherly couple follows the general pattern which gives high visibility to the brother and symbolically kills the sister doomed by patriarchal prejudice to subordination, neglect, and eventually oblivion. May I remind you in a very short list which is strictly Anglophone about Henry and Sarah Fielding, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Henry and Alice James, Charles and Mary Lamb. But the list may continue and many other examples be given from other cultures as well. The Verona brothers fit perfectly into this pattern. Arthur Verona is quite well known. He is included into Mircea Deac's dictionary of painters from Romania (476-477) and there is even a street in Bucharest which is called Arthur Verona. On the contrary, Ida Verona is completely forgotten.

Both brothers benefited from very good education but Ida received it in her home town, whereas Arthur was sent to Vienna to study in a military school. Ida became a student at Notre Dame de Sion, a very select Catholic high school in Brăila. She learnt several languages and was fluent in French, Italian, Romanian, and Serbo/Croatian (her mother tongue). In 1882 Ida published her first collection: *Quelques fleurs poétiques*, in Brăila. In 1885 she published her second collection of poetry *Mimosas*, which came out in Paris, in 1885. We do not know whether Ida actually spent time in Paris or she just sent her manuscript to the publishing house but the book exists and can be consulted at Bibliothèque Nationale de France. It is one of the few existing manuscripts. The circumstances of Arthur Verona's life are much better known. In 1894 he resigned from the army in order to become a painter. He studied painting with Seccession Austrian painters in Vienna, Baia Mare and then he went to Paris. In Baia Mare he worked with Hollosy, the master of the famous Baia Mare painting school. Arthur returned to Romania in 1902. We dont know when Ida Verona went to the native land of her family, the Kotor Bay in Montenegro. But she passed the last years of her life in Perzagno (Prčanj) where she is also buried. She died in 1925 and the following lines were engraved on her tomb:

Une âme dans l'immense mystère,
La terre a dévoré.
Mais dressant vers le Ciel, son regard si beau,
L'espoir sourit sur mon tombeau".²

² Information from Bakic.

(The original lines were in French and this is just an approximate translation.) Again the life of the brother is much better documented and we know that in 1927 Arthur Verona painted a fresco representing the Virgin in the church from Perzagno (Prčanj) where his sister was buried. Arthur became a very well known painter

All Ida Verona's work – besides poetry, she also wrote several plays – was in French, a linguistic translocation that tells us something about her desire to identify with a center of power. As Apter rightly noticed "Francophone might then, no longer simply designate the transnational relations among the metropolitan France and its former colonies, but linguistic contact zones all over the world in which French, or some kind of French, is one of the many languages in play" (87). Apter calls this process translational transnationalism. This kind of transnationalism characterizes the creative efforts of many writers who do not write in their native language, but in the language of a important power which would ensure both the market for the writer's work as well as his or her popularity.

In the case of Romanian culture I think we can also talk about a mimetic transnationalism, namely a transnationalism that not only transgresses borders but also aims at easing the blending in of the new comer. Nationalist themes and/or attitudes are adopted by the new comer in an effort to fill the gap that separates him/her from the dominant national culture. Trying to diminish the effort of being a transnational world citizen, these individuals try to belong by all means. Ida Verona is not a unique example. Her own brother, Arthur Verona painted or sculptured national themes. See, for instance his painting of Neagoe Basarab, a prominent medieval Romanian prince. Arthur Verona's ability with Romanian themes and style brought him a very special commission. Queen Maria of Romania asked him to paint frescoes in the chapel of her castle from Bran. The same drive made him insist on getting Romanian nationality, which happened only after many efforts in 1941. Arthur Verona died in 1946. But Arthur Verona is not the only case of this mimetic transnationalism.

At the beginning of the nineteenth Romania underwent a very profound process of modernization. Europeans, particularly Western Europeans were invited to Romania in order to facilitate this change which went top down. The king (Charles I) and his wife (Elizabeth) were brought from Germany. Specialists in railway, banking, industry, doctors were invited to contribute to the Europeanization of Romania. Writers were recruited from among the spouses or offspring of these expatriates. Here are some examples. Fanny Seculici (1868-1926), whose penname was Bucura Dumbrovă, was born in a family typical of the multiculturalism of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Her father was Slovak/Hungarian, her mother was German. Seculici, the father, was invited to Romania in order to contribute to the development of modern banking in this new European country. Fanny/Bucura started writing poems in German and she drew the attention of Queen Elizabeth, a writer herself under the penname Carmen Sylva. Fanny was encouraged by the Queen to write and she switched from German to Romanian both thematically and linguistically. She wrote novels about important men from Romanian history (Iancu Jianu and Horea) and she was one of the first Romanian eco-writers. She describe the beauty of the Romanian Carpathians in a very pleasant travelogue.

One way to structure transnational identities is the mimic one of the sources. This is also the case of Bucura Dumbrovă/Fany Seculici and of Carmen Sylva, who was obliged to mimetic transnationalism by her social condition and position. The relationship between

Bucura Dumbravă and Carmen Sylva is a reiteration at different social levels of the transnational trauma with all its psychological, linguistic, and cultural valences.

Another example of such transnationalism could be Mite Kremnitz (1852-1916) whose husband was a doctor and who was related to Titu Maiorescu, a prominent Romanian intellectual and intellectual of the time. The couple first came to Romania in 1873 on a visit, then in 1875 they settled down in Bucharest. Mite Kremnitz became one of Carmen Sylva's ladies-in-waiting and her husband was the doctor of the royal family. She translated Romanian literature and published stories inspired from the Romanian folklore as well as several novels authored by Mite Kremnitz herself or together with Carmen Sylva, in an admirable collaborative effort. Some of these novels, *Astra*, for instance, are located in a fictionalized Romania where landscapes from several Romanian provinces offer the background for Romantic and pretty lacrimose plots.

It is not accidental that these writes were both connected to Carmen Sylva, the poetess Queen of Romania (1843-1916). Carmen Sylva herself wrote several books relying on Romanian themes. Special mention must be made, for instance, of her *Stories of the Pelesch*. She encouraged the members of her feminine circle, her ladies-in-waiting to wear the Romanian peasants' clothes, i.e. the national attire. Travellers – we have, for instance, such a record from another transnational literary lady, Emily Gerard ((1849-1905) who spent two years in Sibiu³ and left a memoir entitled *The Land beyond the Forest. Facts, Figures, and Fancies from Transylvania*. Gerard writes with British humour about her shock when she saw near Sinaia, some young and beautiful female peasants wearing wonderful costumes and speaking ... French. Then she realized that these women were, actually, Carmen Sylva's ladies-in-waiting. That the Queen encouraged such fashion is more, I think, than the expression of her admiration for the beauty of the Romanian national costume and rather her desire to blend in with her subjects, to belong to the location that she was called to represent as queen. Her transnationalism has mimetic notes which can be explained by her understanding of her royal duties. The Queen was called to represent her subjects and in this theatrical representation which modern monarchies became more and more costumes were of great importance.

Ida Verona is also part of this transnational trend encouraged by the sovereigns of the then Romania as they themselves were transnational. Verona's poetry was written in the neo-Romantic key with touches of Parnassianism. A significant example is her poem "La valse des étoiles" from her first collection *Quelques fleurs poétiques*. The poem is influenced by the Romantic readings of the author but also shows that the author does have a voice of her own which she was not quite ready to bring into the public sphere. Verona uses the very common Romantic symbol of the star but she personifies it and makes the star waltz in a crazy vagabondage. Some personal identification may exist with this young woman who, most probably, had difficulties adapting to the bourgeois world of Brăila.

Qui sait? Là-haut peut être
 Vous avez vos douleurs;
 Le jour bruit, souffrant d' être,

³ She was the wife of Polish officer serving in the Austrian army.

La nuit même a des pleurs,
 Fuyez donc vagabondes
 En éclairs plus pressés
 Car vous fûtes des mondes
 Pauvres folles!... valsez! (5)

Her poetic philosophy is pessimistic and quite surprising for her young age (she was only 17). But again, probably easier to understand if you think of her poetical ambitions and sensibilities and the upper middle class milieu where she lived and where such artistic preoccupations could only be accepted as a pre-marital extravagance. Her sadness from "Une heure de philosophie" foreshadows, in fact, her short but exceptional life.

La vie est éphémère et nos jours tous comptés
 Notre destin marqué d'avance:
 Les souvenirs s'en vont l'un à l'autre ajoutés
 Boire les flots de l'espérance (6).

Sunset is the preferred moment of the day she prefers best and this resonates with her attraction to death, her precocious awareness that life must be suffering, and her Romantic taste.

C'est l'heure où sent flotter immatérielle
 Sa vie avec l'azur que contemplant ses yeux,
 Où l'esprit épurant l'enveloppe mortelle
 Se fond avec la nue et parcourt sur une aile
 Des mondes mystérieux (8).

In the poem "Enchi'io son Poeta!" she tries to stifle her authorial anxiety, which is quite normal taking into account her age and her cultural and ethnic in-between-ness. One feels in this poem that Ida Verona is desperately looking for some sisterly literary communion which could support her and reinforce her confidence in her authorial capacities.

Je suis poète aussi; je le sens dans l'angoisse
 Qui m'étreint tout à coup, sans cause, sans raison,
 Par les jets de chaleur, sous les frissons de glace
 Dont parfois je tréssaille et qui n'ont pas de nom (13).

The collection ends with "Tradition roumaine", a hypertext of a very famous poem from the repertoire of Romanian nationalism: the poem Stephen the Great's mother by Dimitrie Bolintineanu. The poem was inspired from a real historical event. In 1476, in the battle of Valea Albă, Stephen the Great, one of the most powerful and impressive medieval Romanian heroes and princes, was defeated by the Turks. Discouraged, the hero wants to return to find protection and assistance in Suceava, a fortress left under the authority of his mother, Oltea accompanied by her daughter-in-law, the young Vokiza (Voichița, in Romanian).

C'est Vokiza l'épouse aimante d'Étienne

Prince si brave et si fier qu'on l'a nommé le Grand" (19).

It is a symbolic return to the mother's womb. But Oltea, refuses to open the gates and scolds the man who pretends to be her son.

Étranger, que veux-tu? Roumains, quel est cet homme
Vomi par l'ouragan jusqu'à nos hauts séjours? (20)

According to the venerable lady's logic, if the enemies overwhelmed Stephen, he is dead on the battlefield. This vagrant begging admission into the castle cannot be Stephen.

Vai, vai!⁴ il faut que la terre inhumaine
Ait bu son rouge sang pour que ton accent prenne
Son accent fier, ton front son superbe dédain.
.... "Cesse
De me nommer ta mère, Étienne est bien mort,
Sinon je maudirais et mon fils et sa race
Je le repousserais ainsi que je te chasse
Guerrier vil; sans pitié, sans crainte ni remord" (21).

After this very tough harangue and encouraged by the stern patriotism of his mother Stephen returns to the battlefield without daring to cast a glance to his beloved wife who does not dare to challenge Lady Oltea and open the gates.

À son épouse en pleurs, un regard triste il jette (22).

It is interesting that this poem also inspired Carmen Sylva who re-read it in the collection *Stories of the Peleş*. In Carmen Sylva's variant, after his rejection the prince returns to the battlefield and defeats the enemy. Upon coming back to the fortress of Suceava where he is received both by his wife and mother, he says to his wife reproachfully: "My mother loves me better than you do" (101). Carmen Sylva tries to identify, in this text, with Romanian nationalism but she also shows that she is aware of the duties of a crowned head of state. The rivalry between the mother and the daughter-in-law leads to a Freudian plot. Stephen's attachment to his mother is the basis of the family and of the pretences of the family to power. In the womb competition, i.e. the competition between the mother and the daughter-in-law, the former wins because the biological tie is supported, reinforced by the severe understanding of political necessity.

In *Mimosas*, Ida Verona's second book of poetry written in French and published in Paris, probably in 1885, deals with something which today we would name "the women's question".

La femme ne sait rendre à l'homme les tortures,
Qu' involontaires même, il impose pourtant.

⁴ This is a Romanian exclamation of woe, inserted by Ida Verona in her French text. It gives more linguistic authenticity to the poem and also shows an interesting aspect of her mimetic transnationalism.

Jamais, pour l'egoïste, assez d'indifférence
et pour tant d'inconstance assez de fausseté (133).

In "Core à Core", Ida Verona explains, in the form of the dialogue with a man, that the woman does not exist only to enjoy her time but also to suffer with her man.

Verona is also the author of several plays that were lost. We only have reviews and critical articles about them⁵. Her title characters are women: Jeanne d'Arc, Catherine II, and again a Romanian national myth, a play (*La Tige dace*) about Dochia, the daughter of Decebalus, the last Dacian king, who committed suicide lest she should be raped by the Roman soldiers. All Verona's main characters are women who did not follow rules and who finally pay the ultimate price for being different.

An interesting detail is that Ida Verona sometimes signed her poetry with the drawing of a butterfly, which accounts for the fragility of her identity as well as her delicacy and beauty. In 1894 by Croatian poet Ivo I. Sisacki published a poem about Ida Verona. He insists on her Croatian origin and on her patriotism. The same year Ida Verona answered to him also in verses. She explained that she would like to be a fairy and would like to make miracles as in fairytales, but she doesn't believe in those miracles. She also responds to Sisacki that she appreciates the feeling of patriotism but she cannot feel it in the way Sisacki imposed it upon her. Verona's poem ends with the following lines:

C'est l'adieu qu'au pays de ta mère, te donne, Una Slave;
L'écho de tes chants, qui repond..."

Verona openly affirms that she is a Slav but she doesn't write her name. Instead she "signed" her text with the drawing of a butterfly and she added the date (10 September 1894), and the place (Perzagno/Prčanj). Brittleness, finesse, the foreshadowing of her premature death, all these and, probably, something more in this dainty signifier which summarizes a life and a literary destiny.

A Slav who never wrote but in French, Ida Verona is an interesting case of transnationalism. She used French in order to obliterate her ethnic and social transgression. A female writer was not something common in a merchants' family more interested in safeguarding their property and wealth than in creative efforts.

According to William Mazzarella, transnationalism needs some nodes of mediation and reciprocal influence between cultures. Ida Verona's Brăila proved to have been such a special place where personalities growing inside-out develop fascinating hybrid identities. Between the new comers, such as the Veronas, and the local culture, the desire of belonging grows and finally overwhelms most of the initial attachments. Instead of "the romance of authentic, intuitive identification" (Mazzarella, 348), with Ida Verona and the other women writers mentioned above, the awareness of a painful displacement and a mimetic intervention which tries to transgress boundaries grow. This is, I think, the essence of Ida Verona's

⁵ One such play entitled *Aecathe*, authored by Garguromin Verona exists in the collections of Bibliothèque Nationale de France. The first names of Ida Verona's brother were Garguromin Arthur. As the painter Arthur Verona is not known to have written plays but this title appears in the inventory of Ida's plays according to Ivo Hergešić, it seems that Arthur appropriated the work written by his sister.

transnational creative personality which mimics a Romanian identity in order to find a home and give a more coherent meaning to her existence.

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