

RE-READING SEASONS (NOTES ON MIRCEA IVĂNESCU'S POETICS OF TRACE)

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Abstract: Since Mircea Ivănescu's debut, in 1968, critics and scholars have repeatedly tried to find the right frame for interpreting his poetry. (Re)read today, most of their statements might seem incongruous or contradictory; some of them insisted on those strategies meant to capture the "ineffable" (ignoring the evidence that this poetry has almost nothing to do with such categories as "obscure", "prophetic", "high" or "oracular"); others – especially those belonging to the younger generation of the '80s – have underlined Mircea Ivănescu's connections with the postmodernist esthetics, given his bent towards a (self)-ironical attitude and towards narrative patterns. In anyway, few have noticed that, in Mircea Ivănescu's case one of the irony's main functions is precisely that of revealing a strange sense of frailty, or – in Matei Călinescu's words – a cold "shiver in front of the Absence". Starting from the assumption that Time plays a crucial part in our poet's writings (as well as in his implicit poetics), this article intends to analyse the strategies used by the author in order to harmonise memory and oblivion, writing and remembering, autobiography and textual games. In this context, the concept of "trace" becomes a key-word, helping us to map out an uncommon poetical universe, pervaded by that melancholic intuition of literary immanence, of the fact that everything has already been said, in a book, in a text or in a film.

Keywords: memory; trace; reading; intertextuality; autobiography

Mircea Ivănescu is one of the few Romanian poets who have never ceased to confuse the conformists and, simultaneously, to "seduce" those readers fond of playing sophisticated intertextual games in the unconfined realm of the imagination. His writings represent an exception in the the landscape of the Romanian poetry, a landscape dominated rather by grandiloquence, by a general tendency to highflown metaphors and symbols and especially by the writers' propensity towards flamboyant gestures and bombastic attitudes.

In contrast, Mircea Ivănescu's lines – as an alterative to the main poetical trend of the '60s – propose a more natural dialogue with the reader, a rhetoric very much similar to that of the common language and a poetical "I" eager to take an ironical distance with respect to its own inventions. Besides, the writer uses narrative patterns, constructing his poems around various epic or dramatic pretexts, in a moment when a frantic reappraisal of the lyric was the main tendency in the Romanian culture. His main purpose was not necessarily that of infringing the modernist-symbolist precepts according to which in poetry one should not tell stories ("you mustn't tell stories in poetry – i read/ this advice to a young poet", as he writes in the opening of the poem entitled *is poetry different?*). As a matter of fact – although he methodically uses elements of the rhetoric of fiction (prosaic topics, divided in chapters or scenes, with characters, settings and phantasmagoric "events" etc.) – our author does not actually tells stories, but rather sketches frames for some virtual narratives or performances, all of them gravitating around one and the same obsession: that of the presence of the absent, a mystery that memory and imagination have in common.

For instance, in a poem from his 1968 volume, Mircea Ivănescu designs the framework of what might be called a “poetics of the trace”, as an attempt – constantly failed, perpetually resumed – of capturing the fleeting instant or finding again those things that “simply refuse to pass and endlessly return, as parts of a recollection-figment, displayed in various projections and retrospections”¹: “words must be chosen with care./ words leave traces – you remember them/ a long time after – like footprints lingering in snow [...] anyone can place a word following a word – / anyone can talk – this isn’t/ the point – perhaps we must choose/ exactly those words that won’t confide too much./ and then, each of these words/ like traces in snow...”²

It would not be exaggerated to read this text as a disguised *ars poetica*, since we can decipher here a host of hints to some of the constant topics and obsessions of our author, such as the relationship between writing and memory, the melancholic quest for the right word (as a corollary of his pursuit of sincerity), the endeavour of maintaining his discourse within the boundaries of a minimalist design (always choosing “those words that won’t confide too much”), and, above all, his propensity for a wintry atmosphere, recalling that of German romantic tales. This ambience represents one of the distinctive features of M. Ivănescu’s poems, being inseparable from his concern with time and its divisions (it has been noticed that in our poet’s everyday scenes, weather alterations are quantified with the accuracy of a weather forecast).

It might be not mere coincidence that many of the writer’s poems either contain the term “winter” in their titles (*wintry jealousy*, *mopete’s early winter afternoon*, *winter happiness*, *winter dream*, *winter memories* etc.), or display, in and between their lines, references to a distinctive, bookish-wintry ambience (with rooms barely illuminated by the wintry reflections of the early snow, with deep snow like antique silver or piled high over fences, with terraces from where “you can admire the noble stillness of snow in the valley”³ or listen to the “annoying tick-tick of snow tapping the window”⁴ and with mysterious women “with freeze-frame movements fixed between layers of turbid regret”⁵, who scarcely could be distinguished from the “memories of other shoulders, other arms folded across the chest”⁶).

Gradually we become aware of how the exploration of these melancholic, claustrophobic and strange imaginary spaces turns into an exploration of the self. Besides, Mircea Ivănescu’s method is very much similar to that of Walter Benjamin who, in the autobiographical book about his Berlin childhood, narrates, for instance, how a certain corner of the zoo in Berlin seemed endowed with magical properties, anticipating on things to come. It was, in short, a prophetic corner, where everything that might happen, seemed to already belong to the past. The same thing may be said about our poet’s visions that articulate themselves around a central question: “How one could fix and translate into words the lost time or the time experienced in the twinkle of the instant?” In such a context, the trace

¹ Simona Popescu, “*Splendoarea dens-fulgurantă și încercarea de a fi fericit*”, foreword to Mircea Ivănescu, *Biografia imaginare* (Bucharest: Casa Radio, 2012), 11

² Mircea Ivănescu, *lines poems poetry*, trans. by Adam J. Sorkin and Lidia Vianu (Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2009), 31

³ Ibid. 65

⁴ Ibid. 78

⁵ Ibid. 40

⁶ Ibid. 64

becomes not only mark of the absence of a presence (the originary lack), but also a magical device for crossing ontological boundaries, while making the work of inscription, identification, and – most importantly – of ambiguity, possible.

Returning to Mircea Ivănescu's debut volume, it would be useful to read again the poem that opens it. In its very first line (which repeats the title), the poet confesses how he "walked around carrying a memory": "once i too walked around carrying a memory,/ gripping it tight in my hands so it couldn't escape me/ across the floor. i polished it with my coat sleeve./ i wasn't worried. my memories are rubber balls –/ they never break. only if they escape me,/ out of my grasp, they can roll a long way –/ and i myself am much too indolent to give chase, or even/ stretch myself to my limits, to reach a hand/ lower and lower and retrieve the memory."⁷

At first sight, what strikes here is the "skillfulness" of the main character (for, no matter how surprising would seem, Mircea Ivănescu allows characters to enter in the poetry's hieratic space!), his capacity of "juggling" with worlds – more or less real, more or less fictitious – systematically transgressing the boundary between autobiographical and intertextual memories: " (...and i thought with a wicked/ grin , that in a well-known book i forget who it was/ walked in hell carrying his own head to light/ the way). And isn't this more or less the same thing?"⁸

Inhabited by entities more or less fictitious, more or less "real" (such as mopete – an *alter ego* of the poet – sanseverina, el midoff, the young nefa, gogo zagora, v. înnopteanu, vasilescu's father's friend, miss malvida, dark rowena etc.), Mircea Ivănescu's poetical universe is definitely placed under the sign of a reconciliation of so many potential figures of "reality" as possible. Therefore, the "worlds" that he imagines succeed in capturing that flashing, providential instant of all interactions, interweavings and crossings. The starting point is usually represented by what he calls a "scene" – resumed, projected, "transcribed" after intertextual models (gothic/ French/ psychological/ Victorian novel, romance, fantastic tale, yellow back etc.) It is obvious that, for our author, the *mis-en-scène* represents more than a stylistic procedure among others; it is basically a spellbinding manner of melting, as in a huge crucible, echos of all existing phrases, the present moment and the lost time, recollection of all sorts (true, actual, fake, virtual etc.), inventions and derisory episodes from the never-ending adventure of being: "Mopete utters – but what if we'd say now/ that any of the instants of this or other day of ours/ would become a scene unfolding itself in a slow stream/ of episodes – as in a novel in which / misty characters get together [...]"⁹

"As if", "if we imagine that...", "lets pretend" are phrases that bear a double role: on the one hand, they function as pretexts for multiplying the melancholical reflections on lost time, on small gestures and other apparently ordinary, unpretentious things, and, on the other hand, they open the realm of virtual objects, where, as Gilles Deleuze has taught us, "the absence is the opposite of a negative"¹⁰, entering the endless circuit of perception-images and memory-images. In this equation, amnesia is –paradoxically – the other face of hypermnesia, while the essentially disguised character of real objects parallels the essentially lost character

⁷ Ibid. 30

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Mircea Ivănescu, *poesii vechi și nouă* (București: Minerva, 1999), (my trans. C.P.)

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London, New York: Continuum, 2010), 126

of virtual/ remembered objects. It is not a case that in a very beautiful and equivocal poem, oblivion itself becomes the main “character”: “Oblivion, what an inverted time/ A tree reflected in a greenish occurrence/ Accumulated around its roots after some rain/ Which climbs its fake light on its trunk/ And the great deceit of the leaves pretending at times that they are real/ And then someone passing on the road/ And gazing/ And believing that he’s carrying the truth on the tree slowly crumbled in that/ Tiny pool of rain/ And, in fact, nothing is true here./ This tree had never imagined that it rested for a while on the edge of a pond/ That waved in the wind and altered its shape/ In the same way, vasescu’s father’s friend didn’t write to mopete/ He forgot, although he had promised him.” In spite of its apparent transparency this poem is, in truth, as difficult to decipher as any of the texts which are part of Ion Barbu’s 1930 volume, *Joc secund* [Mirrored Game].

Composed around an ontological paradox – that of the presence of the absent, an enigma which makes possible the work of memory, as well as that of the imagination – this text conveys a peculiar “sense of frailty, some sort of evanescent music and cold shiver in front of the Absence”¹¹. Although it has almost nothing to do with such categories as “obscure”, “prophetic”, “high” or “oracular”, nevertheless it succeeds in producing effects similar to those of Mallarmé’s poetry. Matei Călinescu was right when sustaining that “surprisingly, out of the most unpretentious verbal material, from an apparent commonplace organization of the discourse and pseudo-lyrical tones [...] emerges the spirit of Mallarmé”¹².

Brief tale is another poem which can be mentioned in connection with the dialectics oblivion – remembrance, which is emblematic for Mircea Ivănescu’s work as a whole. We witness here a remarkable endeavour of resuscitating the inflections of a lost voice (that of the writer’s suicidal brother), in a register that values the extreme precision and an apparently neutral tone of the recollection: “very many years ago, i spent an evening in this town/ where the sunlight seems weaker and the sea/ opens out at the end of the street, just as i thought/ the blue eyes of some lover would gaze back at me/ sometime in my life, who knows when./ i was a little boy (we had the chance / to visit this town for two or three days,/ mother was so happy she could take me along – / i’d finally get to lay eyes on the sea). i fell ill the moment we arrived – / (in childhood, i often ran high fevers)/ all evening mother stayed with me in the hotel room – / brought me tea from the restaurant downstairs/ in a glass cradled in a silver frame [...] /now i’m here. sitting at a table. writing/ it’s night. the day was very clear, the sunshine white,/ the sea blue at the end of the street past the corner with the restaurant.”¹³ As if written in order to show that there are “true memories as well”, this sad tale is also an illustration of the way in which writing, representing are operations which convert real presences into *traces*. In order to grasp the particular importance of this text, one should be familiar with some aspects of Mircea Ivănescu’s biography (among which the traumatic event of his brother’s suicide represents a sort of *biographeme*).

In *brief tale* the poet mentions a visit in an un-named town, a suitable pretext to recall his mother, with whom he had been there with another occasion, in his childhood, at a moment when his elder brother, Emil Ivănescu, was still alive. Abandoning all the masks and

¹¹ Matei Călinescu, *Fragmentarium* (Cluj Napoca: Dacia, 1973), 107

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Mircea Ivănescu, *lines poems poetry...*, 48

all the signs of apparent poetic intentionality – we can no longer discern here the marks of (self)irony or intertextuality –, the poet opts for a bare, neutral presentation of some insignificant details (that can acquire consistency and significance only in the multilayered process of remembering). The “setting” (a restaurant in a mysterious town near the sea), is scarcely specified. We are offered only several prosaic, flat details (the weak light of the sun, the sea “blue at the end of the street”, as the eyes of a lover from another time). Nevertheless, these specifications prove adequate enough for composing a minimal setting, suited for “conjuring” specters. These latter appear one by one, as part of other brief tales, with pseudo-events, suspended gestures, inflections of hunting voices etc., indirectly pleading for the unavoidability of considering writing (an reading) under the heading of a dialogue with the dead.

Paradoxically, this *récit inachevé* witnesses, in the end, precisely of the redemptive power of autobiography. It is, simultaneously, an oblique way of fighting “the utter degradation, ridicule, and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence”¹⁴, as well as a strange emanation of past-future reality, rather magic than art, facilitating a sort of an up- and down-stream return, a reflection upon the origins of experience and language as such. What matters, after all, has less to do with object and form, and more with Time, intensity (Roland Barthes’ “that-has-been”) and their representation.

Mircea Ivănescu’s obsession with Time and its traces is a topic that could hardly be exhausted in an essay of several pages. Connected to it, the pervading feeling of ontological anxiety and the awareness that the only reliable reality is that of fiction, bears important consequences on his work – a realm of fictitious projections, after all, since “reality as well can falsify nostalgia”, as the author writes in one of his poems.

In this context, the only consolation can be found in dis-membering and re-membering, scences, seasons, spaces of the “real” world(s). This melancholic intuition of literary immanence, of the fact that everything has already been said, in a book, in a picture or in a film, transforms Mircea Ivănescu’s quest for the lost time into a quest for lost self, and ultimately, for the primary, undistorted Word (which might be, after all, always a “was”).

¹⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (New York: Putnam, 1967), 297