

## HENRIETTE YVONNE STAHL OR AN ANTI-TOURIST'S JOURNEY TO A TRANSYLVANIAN RESORT: ANGST, ALIENATION AND DISPLACEMENT\*

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*Abstract: The present paper focuses on the analysis of Henriette Yvonne Stahl's short story entitled “Casa Albă”/“White House”(published in Revista Fundațiilor Regale, in 1940), which represents in fact introspective literary examination of the psychological mechanisms involved in the apparently ordinary tour taken to the Transylvanian popular spa resort of Sovata, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It proves to be an audacious attempt of overcoming the fear of displacement and rupture from an introverted style of life in order to face the modern society's life standards characterized by continuous motion, snobbery and lack of authenticity. In her distinctive psychologist - naturalist analyses of the feminine nature, the Romanian author describes her character as overwhelmed by her desire of authenticity in life and death on the one hand and her contempt for her snobbish, shallow-minded companions on the other hand. “Tourist angst” (Paul Fussell, Alan Brien) is a feeling of rage against the egalitarian, popular and stereotypical appearance taken by authentic travel to become mass tourism which sells well. She gives up what Milena Ivanovic calls the “authenticity” and “uniqueness” of “subjective experience” in favor of the “object related authenticity” (the fashionable Transylvanian resort). Her “tourist” experiment becomes an almost scientific study of the psychological rupture between her authentic self (that might have been diagnosed with Thanatophobia or an authentic fear of death and agoraphobia or an authentic fear of people) and her will to follow the rules of modern life standards. Her fear of death is translated into reality while approaching Sovata by car. A stupid accident proves the inevitability of her destiny and authenticity before arriving at Sovata. At the frontier of life and death, the character understands the warning and feels relieved in front of the certitude of life.*

*Keywords: intermediality, psychological quest, tourist angst, authenticity, self-awareness.*

Henriette Yvonne Stahl's existence and literary destiny unveil an inclination for boundless intellectual mobility in-between spaces of cultures, languages, identities, social statuses and psychological experiences. Born in France, Henriette Yvonne Stahl (1900-1984) spent her life in Romania and became an important representative of the Romanian inter-war literature. She wrote her novels and short stories in Romanian and French, won literary prizes both from Romania and France, she became acquainted with Oriental philosophy at a time when Eastern models were en vogue, and translated from universal literature into Romanian.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For details concerning her biography and work see Marian Victor Buciu, “Proza Henriettei Yvonne Stahl”, *România Literară*, 7 (22-28.02.2008) [http://www.romlit.ro/proza\\_henriettei\\_yvonne\\_stahl](http://www.romlit.ro/proza_henriettei_yvonne_stahl) Accessed 13.12.2013; Bianca Burță-Cernat, *Fotografie de grup cu scriitoare uitate. Proza feminină interbelică*, București: Cartea Românească, 2011; G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române. De la origini până în prezent*, 2nd Edition, București: Minerva, 1982, p. 742; Clara Mărgineanu, “Henriette Yvonne Stahl: ‘Puterea fără iertare a senzualității’”, in *Jurnalul Național*, 17 Aug. 2012 [http://jurnalul.ro/cultura/carte/henriette-yvonne-stahl-puterea-](http://jurnalul.ro/cultura/carte/henriette-yvonne-stahl-puterea-senzualității)

This paper will not insist on her biography or on the integration of her prose into clear-cut literary trends or genres, like either feminine and psychological, or naturalist and realistic prose. If her personality and inner life often seem too enigmatic to define, so is her work. Nonetheless, at a deep analysis her writing uncovers a fascinating intermediality between reality and imagination, femininity and universal wisdom, psychological states and biological description of effects, social and realistic slices of life. Nor is it mystical, occult and abstruse as superficial reading may determine, but it is a profound and tumultuous quest for one's place and destiny in the world. That is why it escapes categorization.

Nor is my aim to subordinate her literary destiny to the fame of her father and brother, or to the almost mythical aura of the men she cherished and admired. Thus I will not describe her either as the daughter of the writer Henri Stahl and sister of the sociologist H. H. Stahl or as life partner of Ion Vinea or Petru Dumitriu. She stands for herself as an outstanding personality in Romanian culture and literature. And thus she escapes categorization.

Her most important works are *Voica* (1924, short novel, debut), *Mătușa Matilda* (*Aunt Matilda*, a volume of short stories, 1931), novels (*Steaua Robilor/The Slaves' Star*, 1934; *Între zi și noapte/Between day and night*, 1942; *Marea bucurie/Great Joy*, 1946; *Fratele meu, omul/My brother, the man*, 1965; *Nu mă călca pe umbra/Don't step on my shadow*, 1969; *Pontiful/The Pontiff*, 1972; *Le Témoin de l' Éternité*, Paris, Caractères, 1975/București, Universal Dalsi, 1995).

“My novels, almost all of them, confesses *Henriette Yvonne Stahl*, have been written in different epochs of my life, from the age of twenty to the age of eighty, analyzing facts, people and social difficulties inherent to each lived period, searching to remain centered on certain essential and permanent problems of life”.<sup>2</sup> She is convinced that “the reality of life, taken in its entirety, that of Being, is sufficient to fill with awe anyone [...] studying the psychological potentials of people”.<sup>3</sup>

If her first writings mainly represent social-psychological explorations of human characters and their biological manifestation, her works in the 1930s brought about a new orientation, from the enquirer and object of his/her psychological quest to the realization of a perfect unity (oneness, nonduality) of subjectivity and the reality of existence. This turn in her philosophy of life was the fruit of Jean Klein's teachings on *Advaita Vedanta*<sup>4</sup> and her readings of Shankaracarya, René Guénon, or Mandukya Upanishad<sup>5</sup>, at that time when

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[fara-iertare-a-senzualitatii-621382.html](http://fara-iertare-a-senzualitatii-621382.html) Accessed 13.12.2013; Marian Popa, *Dicționarul de literatură română contemporană*, București: Albatros, 1977; Aurel Sasu, *Dicționarul biografic al literaturii române*, Pitești: Paralela 45, 2006, pp. 596-597.

<sup>2</sup> Mihaela Cristea, *Despre realitatea iluziei: de vorba cu Henriette Yvonne Stahl*, București: Minerva, 1996, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> For more details related to Indian idealist metaphysics, the philosophy of the Upanishads in their definitive form given by Adi Shankara or Shankaracarya, see Rom Harré, “Indian Philosophy in the Second Millennium”, in *One Thousand Years of Philosophy. From Rāmānuja to Wittgenstein*, Malden, Mass.; Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2000, pp. 56-76; Mircea Eliade, Ioan P. Culianu, “Hinduismul”, in *Dicționar al religiilor* (1993), 2nd Edition, trans. from French Cezar Baltag, București: Humanitas, 1996, pp. 150-161. Henriette Yvonne Stahl acknowledges Jean Klein as her spiritual master in Mihaela Cristea's interview with the novelist: *Despre realitatea iluziei...*, pp. 200, 203, 242-243.

<sup>5</sup> Mihaela Cristea, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

“Eastern philosophy was in the air”<sup>6</sup>. Her first suprasensible experience of freedom, ecstasy and pure bliss took place in 1933 and influenced her subsequent writings.<sup>7</sup>

The short story entitled *Casa Albă/White House* (published in *Revista Fundațiilor Regale*, in 1940), marks this turn in her literary creation and philosophy.<sup>8</sup>

In an article written in 1937 and published decades later, in 1982, Cella Delavrancea expressed her admiration for Henriette Yvonne Stahl’s personality and work, particularly for her recent short story that she had read in manuscript.<sup>9</sup> Cella Delavrancea did not name that piece of literature, but, later, Henriette Yvonne Stahl would confess that it was about *Casa Albă*.<sup>10</sup>

“With the obstinacy of a character that is aware of its power, observes Cella Delavrancea in the above mentioned article, she did not hesitate to write now a short story – which will soon be published – where she minutely describes a neurotic fear that is lasting for five days and consumes itself in an accident. All the phases of this restlessness are wonderfully observed, and with perfect mastery she calibrates the intensification of anxiety up to the climax. This new work by Miss Stahl will bring decisive recognition for her talent”.<sup>11</sup>

*Casa Albă* expresses liberty of movement, by describing a two-sided journey in search of authenticity, both in the innermost resources of her soul and in the real space as an “anti-tourist” to the fashionable Transylvanian spa of Sovata. Consequently, my analysis will follow the stages of self-awareness, during the journey into the real world and the intimate experience of intense pain and near-death.

The description of her actual journey to an apparently distant and unfamiliar place represents in fact introspective literary examination of the psychological mechanisms involved in the deceptively ordinary tour taken to the Transylvanian popular spa resort of Sovata. It proves to be an anti-tourist’s audacious attempt of overcoming the fear of displacement and rupture from an introverted style of life in order to face the modern society’s life standards characterized by continuous motion, snobbery and lack of authenticity. In her distinctive psychological - biological analyses of the human nature, the author describes her character as overwhelmed by her desire of authenticity in life and death on the one hand and her dislike for the snobbish, shallow-minded, extravagant tourists on the other hand. “Tourist angst”<sup>12</sup>, as defined by Paul Fussell and Alan Brien, is a feeling of rage against the egalitarian, popular and stereotypical appearance taken by authentic travel to become mass tourism which sells well. She only apparently gives up what Milena Ivanovic calls the

<sup>6</sup> See Jean Klein, *Transmission of Flame*, Guernsey, CI: Third Millennium Publications, 1990, p. IV.

<sup>7</sup> Mihaela Cristea, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

<sup>8</sup> Henriette Yvonne Stahl, “Casa Alba”, in *Revista Fundațiilor Regale. Revistă lunară de literatură, artă și cultură generală*, București, VII. 10 (October 1940): 82-124.

<sup>9</sup> Cella Delavrancea, “H.-Y. Stahl”, in *Dintr-un secol de viață* (First Edition, Cella Delavrancea, *Scrieri*, 1982) ed. Valeriu Râpeanu, București: Editura Eminescu, 1987, pp. 540-541.

<sup>10</sup> Mihaela Cristea, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-87.

<sup>11</sup> Cella Delavrancea, *op. cit.*, p. 541.

<sup>12</sup> See Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 49; Alan Brien, “Tourist Angst”, in *Spectator* (31 July 1959): 133, cited by Paul Fussell. See also a synthesis on tourism as a quest of authenticity by Caren Kaplan in *Question of Travel. Postmodern Discourse of Displacement*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996, pp. 55-57. Dictionaries entries define *anxiety* as “1. a: painful or fearful uneasiness of mind usually over an impending or anticipated event; b: a cause of such uneasiness. 2. a: a strong concern or desire mixed with doubt and fear” (*Webster’s New Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Cologne, Germany: Könenmann, 1994, p. 44).

“authenticity” and “uniqueness” of “subjective experience” in favor of the “object related authenticity”<sup>13</sup> (the fashionable Transylvanian resort). Her “tourist” experiment becomes an almost scientific study of the psychological rupture between her authentic self and her will to follow the rules of modern life standards. Her fear of death is translated into reality while approaching Sovata by car. Before arriving at Sovata, a stupid accident proves the inevitability of her destiny. At the frontier of life and death, the character understands the warning that authenticity or self-awareness can only be attained by the solitary journey (inquiry) into one’s consciousness toward the fulfillment of an absolute, perfect state of freedom, peace, love and bliss. She thus feels relieved in front of the certitude of life-death oneness and continuity. She also realizes that her mission is to offer her love and compassion to her fellow beings. This moment of *prise-de-conscience* seems echoing Nietzsche’s teachings voiced by Zarathustra: “*One must learn to love oneself – thus do I teach – with a wholesome and healthy love, that one may endure to be with oneself and not go roving around*”.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of Stahl’s short story, love for oneself finds its correspondent in an ecstatic state of self-understanding, -knowledge, and -consciousness, which once attained, can be re-directed toward humankind in the form of pure love. It is a supersensible experience and knowledge of the harmony, continuity and oneness of pure consciousness and pure existence manifested in life and death, pain and happiness, inner torment and peace, etc. It is achieved in moments of ecstasy, as Henriette Yvonne Stahl states in her interview, as a readers’ guide: “... *the whole Being, from atom to cosmos, is organized through laws of progressive harmony, where man has the freedom to move according to his possible means of orientation [...] Pain could be the proof of this freedom, the proof of the possible pain done by man to the Being, and not the opposite. The cycles of life and death are almighty. We find ourselves conscious that we live, but unconscious of why we live. What does nature want from us? To repeat unceasingly birth and death. What does Life use this constraint for? Pain and joy are intimately amalgamated in all we do. The palliatives abound. But no solutions [...] I state that by living the ecstasy, absolute freedom through participation is directly experienced*”.<sup>15</sup>

However, as described in the short story, the way to self-awareness and enlightenment is long, demanding and painful. It was what Stahl’s master, Jean Klein observed and, consequently, taught her by his philosophical works: “*Just because I had not found freedom and peace in objects and situations I came to a stop of accumulating knowledge and experience and was brought to a very deep inquiry. How can I find fulfillment, if not in objects? I lived for a long time with this question, in not-knowing. There was a giving-up of everything which was not essential, which did not refer to inner beauty, inner freedom [...] There was still a lack of total fulfillment and I felt my search was still conditioned by the belief in a seeker. I knew consciousness related to objects but not consciousness free from objects*”.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Milena Ivanovic, *Cultural Tourism*, Claremont, South Africa: Juta & Company Ltd., 2008, pp. 322-323.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Trans. Thomas Common, London: Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 1997, p. 188.

<sup>15</sup> Mihaela Cristea, *op. cit.*, pp. 234-235.

<sup>16</sup> Jean Klein, *Transmission of Flame*, pp. V-VI.

The message of *Casa Albă* cannot be unveiled without references to Henriette Yvonne Stahl's formative readings into Oriental philosophy, out of which Jean Klein's works are essential. In *The Ease of Being*, he gives the milestones of his inquiry of the self: first, one feels a "tremendous" "urge of freedom", which can be "learned or acquired" only by "self-inquiry". In the process, "there appears a fore-feeling" that brings a "tremendous ardor". While inquiring you "may first feel a lack", without being able to define it and that is why you will move to all directions to fill it. Each direction is in fact a new initiating experience that may bring "*a moment when there's no longer a lack and the desire it brings*". Despite this moment of peace, you are not aware yet of this state of "desirelessness" and you still concentrate your attention on the object or cause of your "satisfaction", which brings you again to a state of "hunger"<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, these "dead-ends" or "cul-de-sacs of experience" lead you to "a kind of maturity" because "*inevitably you will question more deeply all the happenings and their transience*". "*It's a process of elimination. You must inquire, inquire like a scientist, into your life. Take note that whenever you attain what you want you are in desirelessness itself where the initial object, the supposed cause of your desirelessness, is not present. So that this desirelessness is really causeless and it is you who are attributing causes to it*".<sup>18</sup> It is thus a process of maturity during which, at a certain moment of enlightenment, you will have a glimpse, a "scent of reality" that gives you orientation: "*The scent lures you and gives you a fore-taste of reality [...]*".<sup>19</sup> It is a fore-feeling of a superior, pure, undefinable state of consciousness, different from "the ego in objects", and in unity with the absolute, eternal, undefinable, and pure reality beyond the surrounding objects and past events. The ego becomes "more transparent" and thus "*the energy that was fixed by the ego in objects of dispersion is transferred to orientation*".<sup>20</sup> Suffering plays an important role in this self-inquiry. When feeling a lack of fulfillment, suffering may produce "*the dynamism to explore more deeply [...]* Of course these difficulties lift you out of a kind of complacency, a habitual way of living. They wake you up to interrogate, to inquire, to explore, to question suffering itself".<sup>21</sup>

From the very beginning of *Casa Albă*, the character wakes up with a fore-feeling that something strange is going to happen to her: "*When I woke up, something stranger to me woke up together with me. Something that I could not define in what it consisted of, how it came, and where it was. It was diffuse in all my body. I tried to understand what I felt, but I could not clasp anything. Everything was slipping, melting devoid of consistency, without reducing nevertheless its intensity. It was intolerable. Sad like a funeral song, frightening, viscous, lacking air and sense*".<sup>22</sup> From this moment on she faces the "tremendous ardor" (Klein) brought about by her fore-feeling. She keeps relating her feelings to objects or events (residues) from her life, which could have caused it. It was the fore-feeling of something terrible and unavoidable that would happen to her: "*I felt as if caught into a net woven of happenings that had been and would be, and in which, even if I played the main part, I did not*

<sup>17</sup> Jean Klein, *The Ease of Being*, Durham, NC: The Acorn Press, 1984, p. IX.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. X.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> Henriette Yvonne Stahl, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

have any power. My part was already decided. I would play it whatever it was, with no previous recollection. Memory was only for each moment of the present. That is all. What was coming was an abyss, but the vivid fore-feeling was watching and made me understand by its evident poignancy, that human mind, even if acuteness itself, cannot understand everything [...] Not being able to pervade my deep thoughts, my anguish grew even more intense”.<sup>23</sup> It was a personal, solitary experience cut from communication with other people, be they family or friends. Her diffuse and contrary feelings troubled not only her state of mind but also had biological effects that she was studying with great attention. She could not understand yet her desire to fill the void of her soul. Nevertheless, from time to time, she began to have moments of exaltation and lack of desire to understand what was happening to her. Those moments were brief because she was still aware of them: “*In the moment of that exaltation, I escaped fear, panic and I understood how, in order to free oneself from a thought, there is but one way: that of a exaltation, challenge, escape into something more violent, more elevated*”.<sup>24</sup> Step by step she was approaching the climax of her extraordinary quest, even if “its meaning was floating by my side without touching anything and without being able to comprehend it”. All she knew as certainty was that it was God’s will to prepare her for the great discovery, since “*the soul comprises a miracle that can overturn and solve any value*”.<sup>25</sup> Despite her fore-feelings of terrible happenings, she decides to follow her friends who were making a tour to Sovata, as a necessary step to the ultimate moment of her quest, which had to coincide with the awakening of her true, liberated soul. She has several moments of awareness and she has a sense of the unity, harmony and incomprehensibility of the Being, beyond good and evil, but nevertheless containing them. She leaves for Sovata with the feeling of a last journey made to meet great pain and death, as a marionette pulled by invisible strings. Even the actual way to Sovata is difficult and painstaking, having no direct means of transportation. She decides to take a train to Sighișoara and from there a bus to Sovata. There was no bus taking her to Sovata so that, against her fear, she accepts to go by a private car to Târgu Mureș, where she could most probably find a bus to Sovata. On the way to Târgu Mureș a terrible accident occurs. From that moment on she lives an appalling experience at the border of life and death. Taken by an ambulance, she arrives at a small white house, a hospital in Târgu Mureș, where her severe wounds are treated during several days of agony. Nevertheless, the almost insupportable pain and the imminence of death, make her quest more profound, more efficient. She experiences a great relief, peace and freedom. Liberated from the connections with objects and events, the tremendous energy of her ego bursts free in a moment of enlightenment and bliss: “*I woke up at night. There was a transparent light in my thoughts, such a soft light that everything seemed to take its flight. I did not dare to delineate anything, to descend into details, but it seemed to me that in that moment I was promised wholeness. This “wholeness” did not comprise any expectation, not even the one of recovery, but exaltation, exaltation maintained on a high and pure line. God...God...*”<sup>26</sup> She thus attained supreme happiness and certainty, knowing that she was living in communion with the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 83.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 124.

supreme Being, that is with God, the unique power and intelligence in its infinite manifestations.

This fictional inquiry of the self is more dramatic and painful than the author's actual experiences described in her interview. Stahl had the inner resorts to attain self-awareness through meditation, without searching to fill the "lack" in her soul and to transform the dispersion of her thoughts into a well-directed inquiry by travelling to remote places. Her first experience gave her "*the absolute certitude that, beyond the ordinary daily life, there is another dimension open toward a sacred meaning that was the very foundation of life, the power of life, and that life was not a chaos where man is irremediably thrown ...*"<sup>27</sup>

Henriette Yvonne Stahl offers in her short story *Casa Albă* a synthesis of her philosophical understanding of existence and human psychology. It thus becomes a key to further readings of her subsequent works and represents the outcome of a turning point in the development of her personality and creativeness.

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<sup>27</sup> Mihaela Cristea, *op. cit.*, p. 267.

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