

CONSTANT TONEGARU: BEHIND THE VEILED DISCOURSE

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Abstract: the world as play, as theatre has long been a recurrent motif in literature; however, it is the Avant-Garde literature and, especially its poetry that brings the condition of the poet as clown, actor, buffoon under the attention of the public, in an equally comic and tragic attempt to resurrect the condition of the poet, to deal with the new reality of poetry, of language and of reality. Dramatic irony will be a solution chosen by many of the post-war poets, Constant Tonegaru among them, in order to bear the colliding tensions they were struggling with.

Keywords: dramatic irony, post-war discourse, mask, role, actor, tension.

It is well known that Romanticism is synonym with distance, as well as with the fall. When it comes to poetry, however, the distance of the poet from his object allows him to better manipulate it. The poet is no longer inhabited by the god, but is his own master and, at the same time, the master of his own poetry. The consciousness of convention is thus born, and the limits of the poetic game become the limits of the poetic language, proudly separated from the mundane one. The game of poetry as combinatory art marks the artificiality of the poetical universe, exulted by the Symbolists, acknowledged with self-irony by them and defended from a profane public, felt more and more acutely, until the Avant-Garde rebellion of the spectacular game, its flamboyant and mocking use of the poetic props, its persiflage of the poet's masks, degraded to clown, buffoon, tumbler. After the Avant-Garde comes a period of lucid consciousness regarding the inevitable conventions of the poetical language, compensated by the freedom given by the parodic setting up of dusty lyrical forms, "intr-o innoită comedie a literaturii, ca purgatoriu necesar expresiei"¹. The fact that they have become permanent in Postmodernism must be understood as an active connection to tradition, rejected and embraced at the same time.

¹ Ion Pop, *Jocul poeziei*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cartii de Stiinta, 2006, p. 18. Our short history of poetry as game is indebted to his work.

In our previous research² on the poetical forms of irony, we suggested a type of irony defined as dramatic irony, whose meaning was derived from the game theory, and which became manifest through *paidia* and *ludus*, on one part, and through *simulacrum*, on the other part, both preserving from the usual concept of dramatic irony the character of the theatrical play, of the setting up, of the dramatic representation, as well as the complicity with the reader. We thus suggested the *agôn-al* irony as that type of irony where the competitive function of the game is prevalent; in the case of poetic irony, we may speak of a competition between the poet and himself, a showcase of his poetical abilities, of his skills in using words. The *simulacrum* irony or the *travestied* irony translates the mimicry of the game, where the player, in the case of poetry, the poet, plays, making believe or believing himself to be someone else. It means, just like mimicry, the temporary acceptance of an illusion, of a second rang fictive universe, after that of poetry, for whose sake the ironic poet-player may use entire theatrical props. The *travestied* irony or the *simulacrum* irony means framing the text and using an entire array of masks in order to create the necessary illusion.

The gesture has a double meaning: beyond a propensity for the dramatic, the poet of the *travestied* irony enforces a new convention; he knowingly uses a convention, the theatrical one, in order to be able to deal with the convention of poetry. Irony will thus make poetry emerge in the dramatic, in order to point both to the convention of theatricality, and to what it supersedes it, to what falls to free, unprogrammed, unmasked expression. The dramatic is not a simple decoy, nor does it have the degraded function to show as a negative example for what poetry should not mean or be. Were that the meaning of the dramatic in the case of these ironic poets, their poetry would simply be hypocritical, sarcastic, or, in the best of cases, satirical in its intentions for aesthetic reform. On the contrary, the dramatic becomes here, with the poets of *travestied* irony, a convention embraced as a necessary condition for art. Poetry is necessarily a convention, one from which the poet cannot free himself; even more, while he writes within the norms of the genre, he implicitly accepts it. But he can, nevertheless, point to what overcomes convention, towards the freedom beyond it. One may not escape poetry, but one may hope to overcome it.

There will thus be poets, like Geo Dumitrescu or Constant Tonegaru, who will thicken the norms of convention only to imply that there is more beyond it. The gesture is ironic: they will use the very convention of the scene, of the role and of the mask, which all point to the

² Veronica Buta, *Formele poetice ale ironiei*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cartii de Stiinta, 2015.

existence of an actor with a clear individuality behind the mask and the role, as well as to a world behind the scene. And even if the implications of the motif of the game and of the scene are well known and can be extended to the world as theatre, the world that plays, plays itself and is played, the infiltration of the dramatic beyond its limits as artistic convention prove that there is a world which can be corrupted by the dramatic.

The poets of the lost generation change gears; their refusal to act as ministers of poetry and immerse themselves in the lyrical mysteries which only they could translate or communicate has not been accepted or understood as a programmatic gesture by all literary critics. Al. Piru³ thus warns against the Tonegaru's inability to take himself seriously and to bring to good use the brightness of self-irony. Always posing, "poetul nu e in stare a-si impune figura de cabotin, cazand mai intotdeauna in arlechinade grotesci, ori in exaltari baroce", like he does in: "Nu stiu daca sunt indeajuns poet mare,/ sa fiu papuse de ceara langa Marat si Camille Desmoullins? Sa n-am inima sau fitil ca orice lumanare,/ pe bulevardul Montmartre in muzeu Grevin./ Totusi am o inima simpla ce bate cu disperare/ sa intre in femeile cu sanul fierbinte si crud/ pe care desenez cu cerneala o mare albastra,/ inchipuindu-mi ca sfarcurile sunt atolii din Sud./ Noaptea caligrafiez curtezanelor epitaful meu pe ferestre;/ "Sunt condotierul Tonegaru, fara spada;/ mi-am tocit-o ascutindu-mi ultimul creion/ sa scriu cum am dat in poezie cu o grenada"/ Iata, sa-ti aduc de la lupta femurul meu sub balcon/ am trecut un fluviu ce-si suna solzii in galop arbitrar,/ ducand in alte sfere, ca pe un calaret fantastic,/ armatura mea proletara de var.// Un inger isi desfrunzeste din aripi albul arctic,/ amintindu-mi cum am fost un apostrof, o virgula pe cer;/ trist, trist, langa trombarina cu coardele sparte,/ astept sa plec cu o garoafa alba la rever."

Another critic of the post-war poetry of the "Albatros" poets, by far the most bitter, is Cornel Regman. Writing about a certain type of young poetry written in Bucharest, post-surrealist, he sees it at: "poezia acesta nu e lipsita in punctul de plecare de un puternic fond de lirism foarte valabil esteticeste, ea este inainte de toate, prin definite, o poezie a posturii, a mastii insasi a poetului si, ca atare, nu plastice si contemplative, si mai degraba teatrala, dansanta, de reactiuni fermecatoare ale actorului, de arlechinade, ce pot fi rand pe rand nu numai gratioase si decorative, dar si sarcastice, caricaturale si bufone, uneori evoluand chiar pana la tragicul sublim ori grotesc. O poezie asadar a rictusului si a pozei totdeauna de mare efect, cand e autentica si originala (la noi: Macedonski si Bacovia), altminteri subminata tot

³ Al. Piru, *Panorama deceniului literar romanesc 1940-1950*, Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură, 1968, p. 170

timpul de facilitate și puerilități. E pericolul care amenință și pe tinerii noștri poeți exploratori de originalități scump platite, într-o supralicitare fără măsură, ca în aceste versuri, probabil roade ale rivalității Tonegaru-Geo Dumitrescu”⁴: “Cum stelele s-au urcat pe cer nu știu,/ nici cum trei au rămas pe-o etichetă;/ scrie: JAMAICA virgula COGNAC IMPORTAT/ și pe poza o creolă zăbăste cocheta.”

Cornel Regman⁵ then refers to an indefatigable joy, bereft of all meaning, quoting the verses: “De mult astrii murisera de gripă și cu excepții/ unii mai aveau două colțuri ca jandarmii italieni la chipiu,/ iar alții pastrau integral geometria în oceanul celest...” or “Nu știu cum dracu făcuse domnul cu gambeta/ avea în baracă o cusca cu tigri lihniti/ rontaind printre grății oaze de vacă/ și-n fund mai era un loc cu galben drapat/ unde corbul celebru nemiscat croncanea:/ - Nevermore!”, despite the fact that the last quoted poem is actually a quite grim and grotesque vision of a county fair, meant to inspire the exact over-bearing joy at the surface, which proves to be faded, artificial in depth. The poem is the very denunciation of what Regman accuses it off. Moreover, the downfall of all the noble landmarks of poetry are the signs of a crisis deeply felt by the lyrical persona, who still believes in them, only to realize, at the same, their painful inadequacy. Here lies the essence of Tonegaru’s game: “romanticul, cavalerul, trubadurul din el intra în concurență cu un alt nivel de conștiință, cu un alt limbaj. Refuzate, acestea fac din durată ‘trubaduresca’ un melancolic refugiu fantezist; acceptate, ele îi dezvăluie ‘inactualitatea’, o transformă în pur spectacol, în poza și bravada. Lirismul tonegarian e alimentat de o astfel de permanentă oscilație ce traduce, de fapt, o stare de fundamentală incomoditate”⁶

However, Regman is no more satisfied with Tonegaru’s “serious” poems, which he sees as mere improvisations *à la manière de* (and he goes on with an impressive list of poets whom Tonegaru seems to just copy): Poe (“Lumina se prelingea în lacrimi de faianță/ pe bratul meu stâng caligrafiat de destin;/ caligrafiata de destin pe bratul meu stâng duceam straveziul/ o ancora de galera, un cuvânt: “desnădejde”, alta vorba: “speranță””), Emil Botta (“s-ar fi putut scrie pe mine: “acesta e cutare” și să fiu pus pe soclu,/ căci într-atât eram cuprins de tenebre pe unica bancă,/ încât nu puteam să clipească de parcă purtam la ochi monoclu”), Al. O. Theodorescu (“Mai era un profet al mașinii de cusut,/ Insa Cain din limuzină/ l-a strapuns cu lancea în sezut./ Ca unul ce fugise neisprăvit din uzină/ aveam și eu trupul înseilat..”), Urmuz

⁴ Cornel Regman, *Carti, autori, tendințe*, Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură, 1967, pp. 302-303

⁵ Ibidem, p. 303

⁶ Ion Pop, *Jocul poeziei*, p. 197

(“Poetul Veniamin era rasucit/ ca o rufa stoarsa de atata venin./ Pe dusumele salta ca o broasca inima poetului/ cat o banita de porumb”) or Dimitrie Stelaru (“Un nufar pe cer inflorea noaptea,/ Un nufar cu petale de zinc,/ brumata cu sange dimineata/ Floarea Noptii murea.”), Demostene Botez (“Tramvaiul vechi era tras pe linie moarta,/ la o casa o fereastră era deschisa la etaj...”), Blaga (“Cu verde de lucerna in sange subtile/ Umbla femeia venita din ani,/ pasari smintite fumegau de pe planeta/ sa intalneasca cenusa ratacita de vulcani”), Minulescu (“Meduzele palpita lent in golf/ si papagali multicolori isi dau pareri/ din tufe-n tufe de agave/ silabisind pe tonuri grave ca si studentii din Manilla/ cum se rosteste boala aceasta rostita vag de infirmieri.”).

All in all, Tonegaru’s entire poetry appears to Regman as a pastiche and facile improvisation⁷. Not even Tonegaru’s protective ironies are agreed upon by Regman, even if he understands the poet’s need for contrast: “pentru sublinierea contrastului, grozaviile sunt spuse cu anume voiosie sprintena, nepasatoare”⁸: “am pus capat disonant valsului boston ce-l/ leganam in gand,/ c-un pocnet stingand dincolo de linii nu stiu/ pe cine cu o tigara”. This entire type of poetry, as he calls it, is under blame for Regman, in a fragment which constitutes one of the most severe convictions of post-war poetry, on the fault of not being “reasonable”: “genul acesta de poezie, asa cum e practicata de tinerii sai inventatori, nu e ‘rezonabil’. E, dimpotriwa, burlesc si dement, ceea ce, la urma urmelor, n-ar impiedica spiritele subtile sa-l guste ca pe un act gratuit fantezist si absurd si totodata irreverenta delicioasa la adresa fortelor guvernamentale ale Logicii si Bunului Simt. De-a dreptul suparatoare este insa ambitia industriosa a poetului si a celor de-o seama cu dansul, carora zeci de poeme nu le ajung pentru indestularea unui capriciu poetic totusi minor, ale carui virtualitati s-ar fi consumat in modul cel mai firesc intre limitele decente ale ciclului-curiozitate”⁹

However, Gh. Grigurcu¹⁰ sees justly this refusal to take himself seriously as Tonegaru’s way to set forward a different and paradoxical perspective for the renewal of the poetical language, by simulating that he ridicules it. “Punctul sau de sprijin e o exploatare a realului, discontinuu, disparat, desolemnizat, capabil de o combinatorie al carei resort nu e, ca la suprarealisti, dicteul automat, ci ironia. O ironie, deci o regie lucida aplicata perceptiei lirice,

⁷ Cornel Regman, *cited work*, p. 307

⁸ Ibidem, p. 309

⁹ Ibidem, p. 310

¹⁰ Gh. Grigurcu, *De la Mihai Eminescu la Nicolae Labis*, Bucharest: Minerva, 1989, p. 379

care isi ingaduie a folosi vechea recuzita, inclusiv poza trabuduresca si spumoasa asociere goliardica.”¹¹

Tonegaru’s protest is, nevertheless, different from Geo Dumitrescu’s. The former played the card of the natural, of the wholesome expression, systematically refusing the poetical aura of the lyrical discourse. We support Ion Pop’s opinion¹², who sees Tonegaru as a Romantic forced to censor his effusions without hiding his displeasure of having to do so. Two poems with similar themes, the contrast between the reality of war and its image for the younger poet, prove the differences between the two poets. In *Libertatea de a trage cu pusca*, Geo Dumitrescu counterbalances the image of the war with the heroic image of war pictured by a teenager, mimicking his own naïve previous impressions and, at the same time, an entire type of patriotic poetry: “asediul Trebizondei”, with “Bonaparte, cabotinel” at whose side he saw himself “rostandizand pe pragul unui veac”, fighting “viteaz si inutil si graseiat la culme”. Tonegaru’s *Plantatia de cuie* plays with the same image of the absurd war, counterbalanced, this time, by the legendary image of war depicted by every child; the contrast between the toy soldiers and the atrocious mask of the real soldier is painfully felt: “Ceata legendei cu aburii sangelui/ isi dadea mana undeva pe campul de lupta,/ fireste, peste sarma ghimpata de care in salon pe covor/ invatam sa ma feresc tarandu-ma savant pe burta”, or “Pe urma o racheta -/ rosu-alb alta racheta pe nor;/ Iata, imi spuneam, incepe cel mai mare atac la baioneta,/ in sfarsit, iata, imi spuneam, e ceva sa fii gladiator”.

But where there is irony, there is freedom and Tonegaru’s poetry was seen more like the means by which the instinct for freedom celebrates itself¹³, with all its exotic features, the grand escapes and the colorful landscapes invoked. This exotic is thus the expression of a substantial lyrical protest against the arbitrary conditioning of individual life.

This image Streinu wrote about is somehow contradicted by Grigurcu, who noted not only Tonegaru’s role of rebel, but also that of a prisoner: “Un rebel fara indoiala, Tonegaru nu inceteaza a fi si un prizonier. Cetatea, sediu al obligatiilor exasperante, al cliseelor alienante, e inamicul sau, dar si forma sa de damnare, tiparul vietii sale cotidiene. Climatul acesteia i-a fasonat sensibilitatea, i-a impregnat reactiile. Un citadinism residual devine descifrabil chiar in anticitadinismul sau violent. Protestul sau se dizolva in ‘smaltul’ lucios, arderea se invaluieste in

¹¹ Gh. Grigurcu, *cited work*, p. 379

¹² Ion Pop, *Jocul poeziei*, p. 196

¹³ Vladimir Streinu, *Pagini de critica literara, II. Marginalia, eseuri*, Bucharest: Editura pentru literatura, 1968, p. 129

rafinamentul reflexelor ei”¹⁴: “Din timpul oraselor cu tigri protectori de smalt/ cobor de-atunci si marginea nu mai ating;/ doar aripile-mi arse din drumul caderii/ se scutura cu scrumul lucirilor care se sting”.

This incessant duality, these counterbalancing opposite poles that deeply characterize Tonegaru’s poetry are possible through the use of the dramatic irony, which allows the persona to act on both its instincts: the Romantic sensibility and the contemporary lucidity. His lucidity will mock the soft Romantic core of his sensibility, while mourning it, at the same time, for its inadequacy. A possible escape from this constant inner conflict are the exotic adventures, a more ‘modern’ substitute for the Romantic-Symbolist one, and a game where his fantasy is free to roam. The poem *Ultimul de la 1200* clearly states the poet’s condition: “Atat a fost - / Un inger refuzat si un blestem:/ ‘Te vei risipi ca apa din izvoare,/ in alt ev vei purta palarie,/ ghetete cu talpa de carton si baston’/ Flamand de stele, el a murit pe trotuar”, “N-am banuit ca tarziul a venit,/ ca sunt singurul de la 1200 printre roboti si cai-putere”. Tonegaru not only lives within a role, he directly confesses it and assumes the role of an actor for his persona. He never hides the tricks of the trade, never shies away from applying his make-up in public, looking to express the moment the actor steps out of his role, all the while remaining an actor: “universul sau adesea romantic-poesc si estetic trebuie sa apara dezafectat, iar poetul demis din functiile sale ‘nobile’ de cavalier si trubadur: ‘Sunt condotierul Tonegaru fara spada:/ mi-am tocit-o ascutindu-mi ultimul creion/ sa scriu cum am dat in poezie cu o grenada’ – scrie el undeva, ca sa adauge, totusi, ca o corectura estetizanta a tinutei deteriorate: ‘trist, trist, langa trombarina cu coardele sparte, astept sa plec cu o garoafa alba la rever’ (*Cantec pe hartie*)”¹⁵.

Hence, the role of the tragic clown, a theme widely used by modernist poetry. The poet’s anguish is thus redirected under a tragic mask who lost not its shadow, but its man underneath: “Sunt Peter Schlemihl Altfel”, or “cavalier al ordinului ‘Lancea lui Don Quijote’”.

When he repeatedly and insensately denies all Romantic props, he does so realizing that they are no longer adequate or fit with the times, and, at the same time, that he cannot do without them. What he can do, in order to avoid the condition of a marginal poet, is to deny them, to refute them, to mourn their artificial condition and to note their expiration date, never missing a nostalgic beat while he does so. As Ion Pop wrote, “Tonegaru retraieste, astfel, ruptura romantica dintre lumea interioara infinit deschisa si ‘cercul stramt’ al intelegerii unui

¹⁴ Gh. Grigurcu, *cited work*, p. 382

¹⁵ Ion Pop, *Jocul poeziei*, p. 198

public opac, in varianta, adusa la zi, a divortului dintre sensibilitatea poetica, prin excelenta umana, si ambianta desensibilizata a acelui ‘om nou’ al veacului supertehnicizat, persiflat si de un Geo Dumitrescu”¹⁶.

It is dramatic irony the form of sensibility, the only form of sensibility, which allows the poet to impersonate both attitudes and gestures: to affirm and to deny, to dissimulate and to denounce. The crisis is not only a personal one; it marks and brings under question the very statute of poetry and of the poet.

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¹⁶ Ion Pop, *Jocul poeziei*, pp. 200-201

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