

Blending between occultism and scientism in Vasile Voiculescu's short stories

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Abstract: *Vasile Voiculescu (1884-1963), besides being a well-known writer, was also a prominent, much respected physician who practiced between the two world wars. He attended the courses of the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Bucharest for a year (1902-1903), but gave up on them in order to attend the Faculty of Medicine. The literary debut took place in 1912 in the journal Convorbiri literare. He published the first volume of lyrical poems in 1916 and in 1918 he was granted the Academy Award for lyrical volume From the Aurochs Country and other poems. In 1935 he became a member of the Academy of Sciences of Romania and in 1941 he received the National Poetry Prize. The following volumes of poems are: Ripeness (1921), Poems with Angels (1927), Destiny (1933), Ascent (1937), Gleams (1939). His work also includes a short story: The Demiurge (1943). Shakespeare's last imaginative sonnets in Vasile Voiculescu's translation (1964), and the novel Zahei-The blind (1966), Sentimental Gymnastics (1972) are published posthumously. The present article is aimed at revealing the world of Voiculescu's short stories.*

Keywords: *medical studies, abyssal psychology, scientism, mystery, obscurity*

Although the most analyzed part of Voiculescu's work seems to be his poetry, he proved his worth in the same manner in storytelling. His creative enthusiasm needed several means of expression as Voiculescu the poet was sometimes haunted by a "spirit of storytelling manifested as a spontaneous eruption." [1]

His inspiration manifested itself as prose also because creative adaptability seems to grow with age: "As the man seemed to «bend under the weight of the years», the

creator received new powers, as a sum of his life's and artistic experience by a high level of expression, in a veritable eruption of poetry, in verses and prose." [2] The surprise comes from the chameleonic nature of the author who took on prose with different motives than those in his poetry, coming out as a writer who was: "(...) a perfect master of his own means, not related in any way with the poet." [3] Voiculescu's stories are that much more appealing as they give the sensation of combining some fantasies from the folkloric supernatural, amusing stories, hunting adventures but also "(...) oddities to be told at midnight, parapsychological medical cases etc., which the author attributes a narrative density, emphasizes their equivoque and gives them a superior meaning through the means of literature." [4]

What characterizes the doctrinal physicist's stories are miraculous happenings populated by divine characters

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with an occult composition, "(...) in which «the efficiency of symbols» is not alien to the writer's anthropomorphic manner." [5] Some of his stories seek to demystify beliefs: the conviction that the shadow building can lead to death (*The shadow*, 1935), even to the actualization of some pseudo-scientific procedures of rejuvenation fashionable at the time, among which the method of doctor Sergiu Voronoff for grafting of some glands called by him interstitial, a method that was widely debated in the periodicals of the time [6] (*The Demiurge*, 1943) [7]. The connection between certain life forms represents the main theme in the physician's novellas. The influence of medical studies is present due to the fact that Voiculescu combines the folkloric preconceptions with scientific revelations and with: "the hypothesis and conclusions of modern experimental psychology (...). [8] The reason for his leaning towards folkloric heresies was the fact that, being in a permanent search for answers, the literate-physician did find them even in practiced medicine. Unlike other prose writers with folkloric roots, Voiculescu's characters are fantastic with occult origins. Some critics noticed his short stories astonishing capability of entwining the new with the old, and of "discovering pathways of the archaic in the modern, some depths of existence itself, this causing Voiculescu to write some of his best prose." [9]

Supernatural, mystery and obscurity were what fascinated him, ticking his interest even before his medical studies in: "(...) heresies, magical symbols, in one word the occult part of existence." [10] Unavoidably, the permanent dispute in his soul between objectivity and belief can be seen in his work. A proof in this sense is represented but the fact that in his short stories, the author uses characters that, if not belonging to the medical world, at least belong to the scientific one, meant to shed an accessible perspective of fantastic events to the reader. These characters can be considered an alter-ego of the author, his nature of undressing every fantastic element by finding a clear explanation, or are either introduced in order for the reader to decipher the message. In a world in which the occult loses ground to the prosaic, these characters anchored in the real world have the task of opening doors through

which a new reality can be either seen or understood.

The separation of social and personal life is impossible. This can be seen in Voiculescu's work. The contaminations from one to another: living scientifically but sensing aesthetically can be found in written pieces: "(...) the diagnostician and the therapist can be found, in way or another in writing (...)" but the physician-writer relationship can reside in other places too and can be the subject of a study on man, as a professional in medicine but also in prose, who borrows aspects of the life and work of the former." [11] This combination can only occur by presenting bizarre medical cases, almost always pathological.

To prove this deduction, Florentin Popescu brings the example of the short story *The cursed cow* (written by the literate-physician in only one day, 27th February 1947) which portrays the morbid case of zoophilia between a spoon maker who satisfies his sexual urges with the cow, Dumana. The short story *Dead season* (2nd June 1948) from the volume *Magical love* appeals to psycho-analysis. This time, the character dominated by rationalism- physician Charles and his dog Azor are preyed upon by a mysterious force. Azor mates with a fox and the medic with a peasant. Everything comes back to normal when the mystical element, the fox, is slain. The explanation that the rational man-Charles-tries to attribute to the semi-hypnotic event is insolation and the effect that the moon had on him: "Meaning that his brain was struck by the too powerful light of the moon. Like others get insolation, there are some more sensible to the magnetic waves of the moon." [12] Some exegetes saw this piece as a case of "ecological Freudiansim" [13], a way of setting loose the sexual restraints. The same as in other stories of Voiculescu, the deeds are described by a narrator which seeks to be objective, doctor X, "... medic and poet in his free time." [14] This same narrator has the role of arguer, even if he doesn't acknowledge his ability to psycho-analyze the events "I am not a psychologist and less a Freudian (...) I never sought an explanation for humanism that erupted in him covering the self-imposed artificially to himself." [15] The writer does not judge, and nor does he incline the scale towards cabalistic or rationalism, he just offers

facts left for the reader to judge and decipher. "His interest goes towards a magical underlay in the peasant's spirituality, which he does not judge or condemn." [16]

Dramaturgy represents another aspect under which the inner torments of the Voiculescu, the physician-literate, developed on paper. Among his plays are *The wanderer*, *Sentimental Gymnastics* and *The Demiurge*. In *Sentimental Gymnastics*, a commoner, Ion Ionescu, comes in touch with psychological elements from William James' doctrine when he receives training, from an ex-colleague – Puiu Moldovian, in repressing affective emotions. The purpose of this training is that of freeing the character from doubts and boosting his self-esteem. If professionally this turn of events is favorable to him, sentimentally it ends in a failure as he becomes too attractive to the women in his town who will fall prey to his charm.

The influence of Expressionism can be seen in the short story *On the miracle doorstep* (1934) also named dramatic poem in which the issues of religion and fantasy are exposed. Itic Holzfleisch carries the burden of introducing a new religion to mankind. Because of his lack of credibility he is arrested. In prison he hangs himself behind the door where passers could not see him. Because of his supposed disappearance Itic is thought to indeed possess supernatural powers and can become invisible. The miracle though is not fully completed, hence the key in the title – "on the doorstep" – meaning on the edge. Ovid. S. Crohmălniceanu identifies a Verkündigung Drama in this short story. By not respecting any canons, this short story presents itself as an "authentic modern «mystery»." [17] Religious in appearance, the short story could be labeled in the template set by Gândirea, but by shedding light on the main character's inner feelings, the critic perceives it as expressionistic. The same Ovid. S. Crohmălniceanu considers another two short stories belonging to the same literary current, *The shadow* and *The bear's girl*, both published in 1930 and then included in 1943 into *The Earth's spirit*.

The short story *The Demiurge* (1943) precedes the nightmare that Europe would live three years later: the second worldwide conflagration and the Nazis' experiments for perfecting the pure race. This time,

the main character is yet again a medic: Mușatin. Descendant of an old family he seeks to refresh his family's genealogy by gene amelioration. In order to do this, he focuses on experiments, at first on animals, and later on human beings. Lucian, his son, does not agree with his father's conceptions and becomes his victim, having his passion and sexual characteristics removed. The critics saw this short story not only as a S.F. one, but also as a mockery, from a scientific standpoint, of certain theories that would later become a nightmare, thus providing: "a virulent and convincing satire on the dangerous fascist theory of race amelioration and dramatically-beyond value, resistance in the face of critics and posterity- probes the lucid, realistic and healthy position of a physician in the face of some aberration which humanity has lived at a certain time in history." [18]

To narrow down *The Demiurge* to either the categorization of a satire or a S.F. short story is a narrow angle of analysis. The short story represents a new phase for the political drama. The utilization of science to the damage of mankind and the certainty that a scientist can replace God make this short story an outpost of Romanian novellas with political connotations, resembling with "The physicists by Durenmatt" [19] in its intrigue. Just like Faust, Mușatin defies morality, makes a pact in which his own son will fall: the physician transplants his son's genital organs to an elderly person. Other critics claimed to Romanticism the doctor's ability to fuse the real with the fantastic, by embracing revelry and creation. Belonging also to Romanticism is his approach on national history, as an "(...) altar on which he issued canonicals." [20]

Voiculescu's characters take on magical properties, through spells and calling upon magic being able to access a world separated from the perceivable knowledge. This can be seen in the short story *In the middle of the wolves* (written 2nd May 1947). This time the reasoning main character is a magistrate that collects folkloric elements. To his astonishment, people around him think greatly of him because of his belief of having supernatural powers. The character meets Lupar, the one that used wolves instead of dogs. The influence of the studies attended by the author

can be seen in the characterization of Lupa, which resembles the physiognomy of the criminal noted by Cesare Lombroso, Italian physician and criminalist. In order to get closer to this bizarre character, the magistrate admits that he is no stranger to magical practices, as he practiced spiritism. The physician-literate, as Eugen Simion also noted, has the ability to reiterate mythical elements, through refinement, he refreshes them without fatiguing the reader: "V. Voiculescu uses folkloric syncretism which grants him the ability to update the myths without seeming outdated or suggesting their social death and without sociologism and ethnography." [21]

If it is natural to appreciate the pages which send you towards the abyssal psychology thanks to the knowledge Voiculescu gained in his years of medical study, other critics see those writing that forego scientism and appeal to the fabulous as having a real value: "The storyteller Voiculescu finds his own space in those stories in which he steps in not as a psychologist or a social-moralist but as a character in contingency with the unnatural and supernatural." [22] These short stories filled up with an electrifying combination of the profane and sacred, a world which the prose writer does not reveal to the reader but rather lets him discover it, make the author a homo religious. [23]

This effort to reveal the intangible needs to be appreciated even more so knowing that behind the author hides a rational nature, a man of science dominated by practicality and who values systems of rational thinking and deductive judgment: "The positivism of the physician and the rationalism as the love of beings and things of the spiritual man impregnated Voiculescu's stories with the resin that makes objects durable, giving them good clerical fragrance." [24]

Originating from an urban environment, the characters from Voiculescu's short stories are townfolk which fight a battle of regaining the right to dream, opposing the civilized world which estranges them from their fabulous origins, as the society from which they originate alienates the human being "through the abolishing of humanity." [25] These urbanites fall prey to devouring love, as humanly as

possible, and the magic is given off by "beings with a htonic power." [26] Voiculescu remodels reality enriching the means of sensible knowledge: "Sooner a systematic try of apprehending reality through abundancy of sensations, though the equity of perception." [27] As any men of science, Voiculescu is inclined towards explaining in a somewhat scientific manner, in a rational way all deeds that appear irrational." [28] And these explanations are given through the prism of psychoanalysis and psychology.

Treated by some critics as epigrammatic dystopia, Prefrontal Lobo coagulation appears in 1948, meant as a caustic response, a counterweight to the work of the American psychiatrist Benjamin Karpman, entitled Prefrontal Lobes, enemies of humanity. The work references a practice which would end up serving communism through the psychiatric reprogramming of individuals, of creating "new" people and through eugenics. Voiculescu's short story has the merit of constructing itself in a "revelatory text specifically for Voiculescu's harsh perspective and for the pioneering that is represented by his work." [29] Written on the 27th of July 1948, the short story will be printed only later in the journal Transylvania, in its 9th number of the year 1966. Another source of the short story is found in an article signed by Pierre Wertheimer published on the 10th of July 1948 in the French periodical Medical Presses. Voiculescu's short story is not just a S.F. story, even though many a people identified it as such, but also a ridicule of such deviant practices which were used by the Nazi as well.

The new social order is imposed by the Perfect Permanent Presidium of the Nations for Peace and the newborns are subject to an operations that have as a goal the removal of the prefrontal cerebral lobes, whose physiological function is the adjustment of personality. Initially, this intervention has as subjects, those who belong to certain classes, such as: "the sick, anxious, melancholic, suicidal, perfectionists, schizophrenics, mad men, which often times brought them back to normal." [30] The goal was that of neutralizing possible revolutionary elements though the "affective sterilization, aiming especially for the nervous centers of unrest and revolt." For a bigger impact the medic Voiculescu goes through with the

description of the inhuman procedure: “But then it was a barbaric procedure. The medic would make two holes in the cranium and then search blindly and cut the roots of the required fibers.” [31] Later they would resort to a less invasive method, automated radio coagulation, which is applied to all people, striving for the numbing of emotions.

To the stupor of all scientists who saw the operation as the perfect way of relieving people from sentiments and emotions, the youth would first present physiological secondary effects such as: “dyspepsia, problems with digestion, lack of appetite, anemia, and especially constipation” followed by reactions that danger the procedure itself: “the disorders took a psychological turn among the youth, the cases of soul sufferings started to stain the once impeccable epithelium of the P.P.P.P and the wanderings started to multiply.” [32] People become more and more independent and are surprised by waves of feelings, daring to feel and even love.

The danger proved way greater: people try to be conscious of spirit. Although these manifestations of revolt are harshly punished, scientists try to answer the question if: “not somehow those blasted fibers had awakened some other hidden branch, untouched by the coagulator?” The answer seems to be found in the pineal gland, responsible for sexual impulses and as such it is the next organ which will be annihilated through radio coagulation. In vain, as people continue to be affected by affection among which “dreaming, sloth, glittered with names such as meditation, thinking, the work of inner searching, the inclination

toward sadness, jealousy, the fight against competitors for a woman, for a job, all kinds of shortcomings, and most of all the fear for the future, all the metaphysical fears, and the sentimental complications took all kinds of shapes, as never seen before” [33] The search for the source of evil continues and end on the conclusion that the hearth modifies itself physically obtaining a new cerebelous structure because:” (...) it changed not only its aspect, form and weight, but also its histological architecture. It was heavier, redder, more globulous, less muscular, and full of nervous fibers and autonomous ganglions” and more striking is the fact that “in the upper part, on its globe, underneath the exit of the aorta, there were some curly buds that resembled brain buds.” [34] Voiculescu ends his story in a more optimistic way and once again proves the power of his medical studies even in building good quality literature.

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