

# Camil Petrescu - The mask game with/ without mask

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**Abstract:** *In Camil Petrescu's opinion, life cannot be subordinated to the idea, because complexity of Life is much more deeper than the Idea. Precisely for this reason, Camil Petrescu's characters do not live sumptuously and far from the heights of some ideas or principles, but they are angry, boiling, changing their minds, conflicting with the hostility of the world, looking for their way, suffering. Petrescu's characters are not easy uninvolved spectators living in their own minds, isolated from what surrounds them, they are intelligent people, they problematize and look for solutions to dilemmas that are most often out of reach. In the absence of this turmoil, the drama would be deprived of its charm, fluidity and timelessness that life offers.*

**Key-words:** *Camil Petrescu, theater of ideas, fighting ideas, psychological drama.*

## 1. Introduction

Even though the literary critics have always labelled him as a theatre of the ideas writer, the great Romanian writer Camil Petrescu has strongly rejected the title he has been given. In an article published in *Rampa* newspaper, Camil Petrescu mentioned that, „The theatre is not and cannot be anything else but an event involving humans. Any work that has deviated from this principle was doomed. The theatre of ideas is an endless confusion. The ideas falter while the humans endure. The events with ideas involved share the fate of ideas. They all fade; they all go out of style, some of them, in a thousand years, others in a century, many of them in a decade and as many in a single year. What gets old sooner is what seemed more striking. The pretentious surface”<sup>2</sup>. This dramatic creed Camil Petrescu confessed is resuming his conception regarding the free-flowing idea, that cannot exist anywhere else than in a consciousness thrown in the world, in a character who takes note of the surrounding universe and relates to it, conflicts with it or simply accepts it, embraces or brutally rejects it. What Camil Petrescu means is not the fact that the ideas lack value, since a literary work devoid of an intellectual stream would not be only lacking value but would be practically impossible, but that the ideas squared in a perpetual auto replication, the simple thesis the author enunciates fastidiously, not subjected to the sovereign inspection of experience, of concrete, of life in a single world, cannot be memorable, cannot surpass its own transient condition. According to Camil Petrescu, Life cannot be a subordinate of the Idea, because Life is much more complex and deep than the Idea.

This is precisely why Camil Petrescu's characters do not live sumptuously and distantly in the shadow of certain ideas or principle, but they tremble, they simmer, they change their mind, they are opposing the hostility of the world and search their patch while suffering. Petrescu's characters are not simple and uninvolved bystanders who live in their own mind, isolated of what surrounds them. They are intelligent people, who question everything and look for solutions in matter that many times are without escape. In the absence of such turmoil, the theatre would be devoid of charm, of the flow and the restlessness that life offers. „An eloquent proof of the kinship between the two literary genres (essay and theatre) consists of the proliferation, especially in our century, of the dramas in essayistic style which often

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<sup>2</sup> *Rampa*. 1931, April 9. An XVI, no. 3965.

include simple confrontations of theses, aspiration accomplished many times by sacrificing the classic dramatic scaffolding. These dramas suffer of schematics, they are guilty of dissolution and pulverisation of the character, the action lingers because there doesn't happen anything, the dialogue becomes irritating, boring as the intellectual interest of the text decreases once the quality (we are referring to profoundness and subtlety) of the theses discusses begins to look doubtful<sup>3</sup>. All of Camil Petrescu's heroes seem to search for their fate, for their path through the labyrinth of life, which is seen as a path of self-knowledge, as a continuous discovery, as a fight between the ideas in a sober and lucid consciousness.

## 2. “He who has seen the ideas becomes unmanned”

This search for a patch, for a way is also the tragic journey of the main hero of the psychological drama “Jocul ielelor” (*Play of the Wicked Fairies*). Gelu Ruscanu, “Dreptatea socială” newspaper director is a perfect exhibitor of Camil Petrescu's dictate, “where there is clarity, there is also existence and as much drama”. Gelu Ruscanu seems a character built around the concept of absolute justice, put in front of a decision which is the starting point of a terrible inner turmoil. The wicked fairies are nothing else but the absolute ideas, the ideas that haunt Ruscanu's mind and throw him in a drama of contradictions he cannot get away from. Camil Petrescu's character ends up by taking his own life. „Jocul ielelor (Play of the Wicked Fairies) constitutes at the same time a denunciation of the moral ambiguities that threaten the consciousness yearning for absolute. It is a drama of the intellectual who, trying to take a position in the last instance outside the classes ends up by excluding himself from the social circuit. It would wrong though to consider the play only a drama of abstracts. It represents of course the confrontation of certain ideas, but before anything else, it embraces the fate of a human being, forced to check himself in front of a woman he loved, an enemy who is also the woman's husband and his past protector, a war comrade he feels close to, by always feeling followed by the memory of a father he believed in and ended up disappointed with. We actually are witnesses to a dialogue between a conscience that wants everything and a diversity of characters and social positions which always show him reality”.<sup>4</sup> The play is centred around Gelu Ruscanu, son of a magistrate, a strong person, which puts the character in agreement with Camil Petrescu's opinion where he states that “a drama cannot be based on ordinary individuals, but it has to focus on strong persons, whose views embrace controversial areas”.

The action of the written play, in its first format in 1918, is placed in 1914. The drama begins with Gelu Ruscanu's decision to publish in “Dreptatea socială” newspaper a letter from his former lover, Maria Sinești, where she reveals that her husband, Șerban Saru-Sinești, killed a rich old woman in order to put his hands on his fortune. Ruscanu cannot secede himself from the feeling of complicity he has regarding the incriminating letter and resolves to make the truth come out. This decision is however always postponed as various characters, including Ruscanu's aunt, his best friend, the Ministry of Justice himself but also his wife, try to make him in various forms and arguments, give up on his plan to make the truth come out about the crime committed. As the action unfolds, Gelu Ruscanu's inner turmoil grows more and more. He finds out that his father was helped by the Ministry of Justice in a delicate moment of his life, after he had been dilapidated an important amount of money he eventually lost playing cards. Another terrible reveal contributes to the main character's loss of balance, when he discovers that his father did not die in a tragic accident, but killed himself. Slowly, the massive confrontation between the principles Gelu Ruscanu loves so much and the world around him becomes so tense that he eventually follows his father into committing suicide.

<sup>3</sup> Ghidirmic, O. 1975. *Camil Petrescu sau patosul lucidității*. București: Editura Scrisul Românesc, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> Elvin, B. 1962. *Camil Petrescu. Critical Study*. București: Editura pentru Literatură, p. 98.

This act is lucid that it does not denote despair, but mostly the refusal of a man to let him bow in front of life, in front of a world he cannot accept in its twisted shape. It is a form of inadequacy. The visionary director and the creator who deciphers the mysteries of Gelu Ruscanu's soul and offers the viewer a relevant key in the interpretation of this drama is Penciulescu, who declared that "He who sees the ideas becomes unmanned". The suicide represents though a conscious and perfectly lucid choice in Camil Petrescu's character's case. „All these questions will lodge in a dilemma that the hero will embrace in an extreme way and whose terms are the following: the world he lives in is unfair. If he accepts it, he becomes its accomplice and "life is not worth living with such a price". If he tries to change it, he will not know when he is the executioner or the angel of justice. Then, is he sure that the absolute intransigence is capable of creating human relations between humans? On the other hand though, always having to decide, keeping into account a circumstance or another, various factor, doesn't he leave a certain criteria for a thousand confusing ones?"<sup>5</sup> Another important play in Camil Petrescu's drama is "Act venetian" (*Venetian Act*), published in 1929. The action of the play takes place in the 15th century, in Venice, in a corrupted Italy. The play illustrates the absolutist conception of Camil Petrescu concerning the idea of love. To Camil Petrescu, love can turn the world upside down and it is eternal, undefiled by the outside world, isolated of everything that means filth and disrespect, isolated of the concrete routine. This is also the type of love that his character, Pietro Gralla, former privateer who became commander of the Venetian fleet grace to his remarkable braveness, feels for his wife, Alta, a former actress. "Pietro loves in Alta the perfect woman, capable to discern, brave, highly responsible, loyal to her and to everything that exists in the world and he makes out of this love his ultimate support in life"<sup>6</sup>. Even though she is adored by a man who gained everyone's respect, by a military man with a brilliant career who left behind many opposing existences, we find out as the plot unfolds that Alta was seduced by Cellino, a snobbish and mediocre courtier, who obtained his title of commander of a war fleet and who is profoundly disregarded by Pietro Gralla, who is disgusted by his complete levity and his cowardice.

Pietro Gralla soon discovers that the love like an island he was dreaming of is not possible and the woman he was willing to give his life for was strongly despising him. In the moment when he interrupts the meeting of Alta and Cellino, Pietro Gralla, blinded by rage, tries to get back at the young patrician. It is then when he discovers that Alta would be capable of stabbing him in order to protect her lover. „It is not sadness what Pietro feels in front of the failure of virtue, it is not a moral outrage, but suffering the error of intelligence and depression regarding how little we know the ones we love: "I believed in you... You didn't cheat, I cheated myself... and this tears me apart today". It is not even pain for the dead love (as the quote above reveals), but for the betrayal of the intelligence. Pietro remains stunned realizing that a feeling he knew based on thinking is so frail, that a woman who has the conscience of values can cheat on him with a man such as Cellino and that between two persons who seemed to have told each other everything there was no solid bridge in communication".<sup>7</sup>

The stance where we find Pietro Gralla at the bitter end of his love story he imagined to have been living with Alta is a classical one for the heroes created by Petrescu. They have a real cult of honour that translates itself constantly and critically for the nuances of their feelings with intelligence, with spirit. This is the main reason why *Act venetian* is not only a story about the betrayal of a man, but also an implicit one about knowledge, about its limitations sometimes tragic for a man. Pietro Gralla's defeat is more likely a surrender of his own reason. „The erotic drama has stayed way behind, but it is now that the hero goes steadily

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<sup>5</sup> Elvin, B., *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>6</sup> *Idem*, p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> Elvin, B., *op. cit.*, p. 11.

toward dissolution. Of a strong complexity, a play of ideas and dramatic situations, Act venețian lends itself to an infinite semantic exploitation. A drama about love, about honour and knowledge, at the same time a drama of lucid, open and brave contemplation of failure, Act venețian represents one of the major values of the Romanian theatre”.<sup>8</sup> The apparition of “Suflete tari” (*The Strong Souls*) represented a facile and hollow occasion to some critics to accuse Camil Petrescu of semi-plagiarism, as his main character, Andrei Pietraru, reminds of Stendhal's protagonist in *The Red and the Black*, Julien Sorel. There are indeed certain similarities between the two characters, but it appears as if Andrei Pietraru was created as a response toward the idea of careerism exposed by Sorel. “Suflete tari” is ultimately an anti-stendhalian reaction to *The Red and the Black*, as it puts in circulation in obvious posthumous polemic with the French writer, the idea of existence of a “spiritual careerism” apart from the social one already known. Andrei Pietraru does not intend in seducing Ioana Boiu, daughter of boyar Matei Boiu-Dorcani, to obtain a social position, but an absolute free thing, without a practical and immediate purpose, the insight into the world of spiritual elites”.<sup>9</sup> The story revolves around Andrei Pietraru, de librarian of boyar Matei Boiu-Dorcani. The young man wishes to have a marvellous fate, to go higher spiritually, not materially, believing that since he is a noble soul, he deserves to receive everything such a person is entitled to. In his reveries, he is a fascinating character, strong, confident and loved but unfortunately for his terrible ambitions, Camil Petrescu's character is not capable of actual action, he lacks the necessary traits of those who make a name out of themselves. He has no energy; he has neither appropriate instincts nor the ingenuity of ascension as the one in his dreams. There is in this character also Petrescu's known classic drama of a rift that separates the world of ideas, the mental, the cognitive structure with its infinite resources and possibilities of the surrounding universe. There is a structural incapacity of this character to integrate with the requirements of the space where he wishes not only for a peaceful adjustment, but also a resounding victory, a complete, definitive and irrevocable success. The wilful momentum of the existential context where Andrei Pietraru lives is too strong to allow his stunning expectations from his own fate to unfold in the wholeness he longs for. Unlike other heroes created by Camil Petrescu, endowed with a particular spiritual force, doubled by strength of character, Andrei Pietraru proves weakness in front of the challenges of the living moment, even when he faces the chance to reach out and grab the object of his desire - the lord's daughter, his employer. While Gelu Ruscanu is as character close to the idealist in love Pietro Gralla, there are certain similarities between Andrei Pietraru and Danton. „Andrei Pietraru announces Danton. First, he has a superior purpose compared to Julien Sorel: observed from the height of his purpose, Julien Sorel seems more mischievous and related to Andrei Pietraru, who aspires to an aristocracy of the spirit, Stendhal's famous hero is nothing else than a brutal careerist, who acts more instinctively”.<sup>10</sup> Danton is considered by many the brightest dramatic work of Camil Petrescu. The monumental drama which revolves around one of the decisive leaders of the French Revolution consists of 100 characters and is an enormous construction structured in 20 panels. Camil Petrescu explained from the beginning that the work is a “dramatic reconstruction” and he has the intelligence to not waste his character in a frozen and repetitive tribute to the famous Danton. Camil Petrescu managed a genuine psychoanalytical work in his attempt to reconstruct from the parts he had access to the spirit of the one who marked the history of France and consequently, of the entire Europe. „In the construction of his character, Camil Petrescu summoned the use of the gestaltist method, which was in style back then, and consisted of putting together the parts, in summing up the elements of the most disparate and contradictory in a complete image, plausible and

<sup>8</sup> Ghidirmic, O. 1975. *Camil Petrescu or the pathos of lucidity*, București: Editura Scrisul Românesc, pp. 71 - 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup> O. Ghidirmic, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

convincing, grace to an intuition ordering in essence. (...) The author avoids cheap and corny sentimentalism and runs away from conventionalism and confusing picturesque".<sup>11</sup> Following thorough analyses we can observe how Danton truly represents Camil Petrescu's separation of Gelu Ruscanu. Danton is an applied spirit, strongly anchored in reality, concrete, and endowed with an impressive physique and a brilliant intelligence. Camil Petrescu's character is a man of his era, an era he knows, understands and accepts it nevertheless. In his case, there is no impossible rift between the world of ideas and reality. For Danton, the action is a natural extension of thought and from this feature stems a perpetual dynamism that yields attraction and suspense, even though the space where the play takes place is one before the viewer's time. Danton finds himself in a continuous movement along with his brethren, subordinate to the purpose he doesn't lose from his sight and that he translates in every moment in facts, even though not always brilliantly. The perfectibility of the character itself is what puts him closer to the viewer. In opposition, Gelu Ruscanu doesn't manage to find reconciliation between the world of principles he tries to live by and the reality appearing in front of his eyes as hostile and unjust. Danton seems to speak directly to Gelu Ruscanu in, "But life doesn't fit in the straitjacket of your accounts". „According to B. Elvin, Danton is a reply for Gelu Ruscanu. This time, the author condemns Gelu Ruscanu, whose ideological position is expressed in the play through Robespierre. Just like the hero from "Jocul ielelor", the incorruptible is slave to some abstractions he opposes to reality. In the name of virtue and with a cruel logical device, out of which he make a divinity, he judges and condemns, leaving himself carried by a temper with vast aversions and terrible vanities. The violence of this man is emptying because it does not express a temper disposition, but claims itself from a severity of the idea".<sup>12</sup> „Danton is the illegitimate child of Camil Petrescu, born out of an irresistible thirst for life, through the surprising detente of a resort long compressed, through the ripping of the dams of the soul by secret energies, hidden ones of the spirit. Danton is a rebellious character, mutinous in the author's field of imagination, threatened at some point by stereotyping, a revolutionized character".<sup>13</sup> The scene where Danton appeals to Robespierre's understanding is certainly a representative one for Camil Petrescu. The moment created by him represents at a certain level a type of dialogue between Life and Idea, situated in a never-ending contradiction, a theme we discover especially in the works of the great Romanian writer, an attempt to reconcile the two spaces where the human being manifests itself. „In the work of Camil Petrescu, Danton is not a simple barbarian, grotesque, shaken by the fever of the ceaseless pleasures. He is the ordering will, the constructive head, in the political order, an enlightened patriot and a democrat in his structure. The remarkable merit of the dramatic reconstruction presented consists of a strict psychological realism, analytical and synthetic, out of which is banished the false idealization and the melodramatic staging of hard situations. Danton manifests alive and uncensored: his plebeian verve, his primitive and healthy sensuality, his ability and will, his historical pride and his naivety as comrade build the spiritual complement of the political man. (...) Camil Petrescu managed to create the human verisimilitude of a historical hero".<sup>14</sup> In what concerns influences, Camil Petrescu was strongly influenced by the works of the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, considered the father of the European modern theatre and one of the most important representatives of drama of ideas. There are many similarities between the works of these two authors and certainly, a spiritual affinity that cannot be denied. Also, Camil Petrescu never hesitated in expressing his admiration for Henrik Ibsen, whom he considered "the northern giant". „The theatre of both is a dialogue of ideas, an intense debate between opposite way of judgement and sensibility, a plead against

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<sup>11</sup> Idem, p. 78.

<sup>12</sup> B. Elvin, B. 1962. *Camil Petrescu. Critical Study*. București: Editura pentru Literatură, pp. 121 - 122.

<sup>13</sup> O. Ghidirmic. 1975. *Camil Petrescu or the pathos of lucidity*. București: Editura Scrisul Românesc, p. 80.

<sup>14</sup> L. Călin. 1972. *Critical Library. Camil Petrescu*. București: Editura Eminescu, pp. 25 - 26.

the common places, a dramatic reveal of the essences behind appearances. Camil Petrescu certainly found in Ibsen's work some of those indispensable requirements of the absolute drama, the only dramatic formula that, as long as his thinking moved in the space of the idealist philosophy, he admitted and illustrated it: the triggering and the consummation of the dramatic conflicts in the field of conscience, the great role given to the conscious fact in the characters' attitude, the high level of intellectuality, strong personalities".<sup>15</sup> Camil Petrescu also did not avoid the theatre theory. He wrote important pages about the aesthetic of the phenomenon, trying to systematize an area where there existed at that particular moment few relevant landmarks. „The aesthetic manner of theatre is, actually in the form it appeared, the first systematic theoretical incursion, effectuated from a high spiritual altitude, from the level of a solid philosophical and aesthetic culture, in the art of the spectacle”.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, p. 123.

<sup>16</sup> O. Ghidirmic, *op. cit.*, p.50.