ALEXANDRU VLAD'S PROSE. REALITY AS FICTION

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Abstract: Alexandru Vlad's prose is distinguished in today's Romanian literature by its expressive force, distinction and refinement, the writer also exhibiting, in novels, novellas and publicistic interventions, a very distinct style. A style of living and creation alike, a style that does not accept useless ornament, relying rather on sobriety, direct exposition, precise capture of the behaviour, speech and existential logic of problematic characters with symbolic imprint and dilemmatic identity.

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Postmodern short prose resorts, as is well known, to relativization and irony, to playful and parodic instinct, to lucidity and detachment, but also to the closest possible proximity to reality. The tension of the dynamic relationship between referentiality and self-referentiality, the dialogue with the immediate world and the exploration of interiority, the rediscovery of the everyday, of common gestures and the banal are some other features of the postmodern short genre. In a survey of the "Vatra" magazine on the state of the short prose, Alexandru Vlad captures the articulations of this way of drawing the world in concentrated epic strokes: "One can say of the short prose that by its comprehensible nature it teaches us to understand things as a whole. It is the elements of composition that provide perspective and shed light on the content. Studying and becoming familiar with this fact helps many more people than, say, those interested exclusively in literature. In some American universities (Yale, for example) students are encouraged to study and write stories. Not necessarily to become writers, something makes me think there is no crisis of short prose in US literature, but precisely to learn to present things in writing, to be able to perceive them as a whole and not as a sum of factual and disparate elements. Short prose has, despite its sometimes truly small size, interesting and fertile confines. The essay may be conversational (the famous English conversational essay), or it may have narrative elements, it may be a moral portrait, a "physiology" - as it is known in our classical literature, it may well incorporate elements of the epistolary genre. And in postmodern conditions these may well coexist, enriching the endless variety of prose smaller than the novel. The versatility of the genre is designed to ensure its survival, beyond its transitory vicissitudes."

Reticent towards the experimental side of optocentric postmodernism, Alexandru Vlad is, by focusing on revealing fragments of the world, by his repositioning of perspective and writing, a prose writer who exploits the possibilities and chances of an eclectic realism, in which the firm notation of the everyday and the oneiric sidekick are intertwined with an interest in the fluctuations of the imaginary and the refinement of the livid, elements (pre)visible in Griffon's Wing, The Road to the South Pole, or The Cold of Summer. All of Alexandru Vlad's short stories testify to an extremely precise authorial lucidity, with impeccable attention to the problematics of the composition of the narrative text, its apparent or implicit tectonics, its fluid and yet so concrete relief. Radu G. Țeposu outlines, with sufficient precision, the epic profile of the writer ("Alexandru Vlad's prose is the product of a great subtlety of observation. The refinement of notation, of a strange poetic austerity, produces admirable sequences and details that imply stylistic and psychological finesse in equal measure"). At the same time, Norman Manea is also right to point out that "modern vision, narrative fluency and ideational bearing, scrupulousness of nuance, mystery and lucidity, melancholic chromaticism and counterpoint, sarcasm of observation, rhythmic appropriateness are the qualities which, we believe, make up the seductive specificity of the new prose writer". The narrative pact thus involves a risk of choice, a tension of the exploitation of the subject, of the articulation of life in the frame of a

destiny, in which chance and predestination meet ("I ran up the four flights of cold, empty, clean stairs, not letting go during the ascent of the suggestion that I was missing something even though I had the reins in my hand. I had dropped a story, the elements of which were all in my possession, for nothing. Not that I had drawn anything concrete, but I know from experience that the elements of a story can be almost any, simple or random, elaborate, borrowed, of all kinds, provided they don't lack the ability, the disposition, to take the deal with you)."

An inimitable and fascinating "storyteller", in life as in his work, Alexander Vlad is rather suspicious of the possibilities of the word to reveal the hidden reflections of things, the mystery hidden in a corner of the landscape, the revelations of the human soul exposed in a fragment of a sentence or an unfinished gesture. The writer succeeds in selecting, from the amorphousness of a grey nature, the revealing detail, in placing ontological or ethical accents on banal sequences of everyday life, in carving the diaphanous from the insignificant with expressive force, with the plasticity of the phrase, with a sense of the precise drawing of the world, capturing the imprint of a meaning hidden in the profane reflections of passing ("In September the streets seem wider. The excess of light, the almost empty parking lots, the free flight of doves through the central squares, the still green lawns, the new angle of the slightly more pious shadows - all this makes me wander through my own city like a happy orphan. Bereft - if I have to use one word. The world on the street seems troubled by the same condition. If we were to talk to each other we might burst simultaneously into a series of monologues. Equations and sibilant snatches of verse, secrets uttered in the coded languages of childhood, axioms and harmless obsessions would rise into the air, disturbing for a moment the flight of doves, shadowing the reflections of shop windows and making newspapers flutter, ringed in clamps at the press kiosks"). Alexandru Vlad's prose is made up, as has already been said, of sequences that seek one another out, of springs of the imaginary and detents of the livid, which make the appeal to the real an imprecise, vague starting point, encrusted in symbols and recoiling before the miracle hidden in the banality of everyday life ("Reality was unconvincing, and I should have made a gesture, intervened with something, taking things out of the static relationship in which they found themselves").

Alexandru Vlad's prose is distinguished in today's Romanian literature by its expressive force, distinction and refinement, the writer also exhibiting, in novels, novellas and publicistic interventions, a very distinct style. A style of living and creation alike, a style that does not accept useless ornament, relying rather on sobriety, direct exposition, precise capture of the behaviour, speech and existential logic of problematic characters with symbolic imprint and dilemmatic identity. In fact, referring to the conjunction of inspiration, constructive effort and experiment, Alexandru Vlad remarked in an interview published in "România literară": "The initial idea is a small revelation, it contains everything, like a DNA cell. No wonder it is also called inspiration. You have to watch over it like a germ, then like a plant, then like a sapling, and eventually you give it a name. I preferred this metaphor because it is closer to the truth than any technical assertion. The experiment should not compromise the Romanesque approach, but highlight it. Occam's principle applies." A renowned author of short prose (Griffon's Wing, The Road to the South Pole, Olives Almost Free), Alexandru Vlad has also established himself as a novelist (The Cold of Summer, The Double Rainbow, The Bitter Rains), a novelist with the knowledge (and art) of rigorously assembling the narrative and mobilising the characters according to the needs of the epic scenario and the meandering architecture of the human soul. Radu G. Țeposu was right when he observed that subtlety of observation and psychological finesse are the strengths of this way of writing: "Alexandru Vlad's prose is the product of great subtlety of observation. The refinement of notation, of a strange poetic austerity, produces admirable sequences and details that imply stylistic and psychological finesse in equal measure". Acute vividness, imaginative ardour, ironic deference meet with the cutting out of apparently banal details, which are given an unusual ontic accent: "We look with amazement at the wrinkles of those who are of an age with us; as soon as we

are alone, we detach ourselves from our own past as from a baggage that is too heavy and we experience a sense of timeless weightlessness. Until one day, when the ticket inspector tells us on the tram, in front of everyone: "Uncle, this ticket is punched wrong. Do you have another one in your pocket?". Moreover, in a confessional text, Alexandru Vlad himself explains the unpredictable, paradoxical game that makes up his literary work, with its sinuous relief, made up of fragments of the real and of the imaginary, of sequences of life and of pages read, of the miscellaneous fact and the revealing metaphor: "I sometimes have the impression that my characters intrude into my real life, as neighbours sometimes intrude into my texts. The poverty of fantasy? But why does fantasy have to be richer? Isn't it enough to blur the line between fact and fiction? Strange, though, how people who become characters lose some of their day-to-day concreteness. Like retouched photographs that manage to somewhat compromise the originals. They have an air of déja vu, like pages read a second time, like birds marked and set free."

Alexandru Vlad's methodical, orderly writing, ordered to the point of minuteness, without logical or affective cracks, a writing that knows it cannot capture without rest the infinitesimal fragmentary world, is one that fervently absorbs gestures and details, faces and masks of the world, fervors of the immediate and immersions in the magma of the past, dramatizations of the corporeality and tensions of a referent often lacking semantic breadth. The Double Rainbow (2008) is a novel in which the truth of life and fiction intertwine, legitimising the heterogeneous status of a narrative construction with the role of a self-portrait made up of collages, in which the epic levels are made up of confessions, flashbacks, details of the countryside, incursions into the dreamlike or mythical space, raids into the everyday and presumptions of a well-camouflaged transcendent. The social meditation, anchored in the immediate reality or in the social-political context, meets the alert notations of environments, scenes, events of the contemporary village, in which kitsch, disorientation, imbalance, lack of secure reference points, the grotesque of forced modernization and deritualization stand out. Moreover, the demystification of a space that is by definition dedicated to ritual and myth, such as the countryside, is acutely and sharply remarked upon by a writer who in no way hides his nostalgia for the old, authentic image of the village, through a contrasting mirroring of two eras, two spaces and mentalities: 'Young girls used to come out of those old houses and I waited for them with bated breath, smelling the smell of silk heated with an iron. Old people come out of these new (already old, in fact) houses. Around them has gathered a heap of useless objects, collected in the idea that a repair, an improvisation is always necessary. Clothing is out of control, second-hand family clothes are worn, work clothes from the construction site, fancy clothes sent by the kids from town, the former groom's suit, the former militia uniform. If that village no longer exists, how can childhood? It lacks visual and auditory cues, smells"

In The Double Rainbow, first-person confessions, publicist or essayistic excursions are combined with reflections on the present or poetic insertions. The part and the whole are here situated in a tense relationship, the part presenting itself rather as a whole with autonomous structure and functionality. A careful and precise observer of reality, possessed of a fresh perception, with decisive strokes that capture the world in all its sensory breadth, the prose writer constructs his postmodern fiction through an evocative collage with heterogeneous chromatics, suggesting a set of revealing antinomies: traditional/postmodern, village/city, dream space/real space ("What is missing? The roar of the cows in the evening as they came in from the pasture, the lantern in the stable at milking time, the crowing of the roosters before dawn, the creaking of the wells' ridges as the cows were watered, the noises of a working mechanism. Or the feeling that all things are in the course of time, not out of it?"). Nostalgia for the traditional horizon stems from an acute awareness of the perversion of values, the falsification of the authentic articulations of traditional ethnicity, the lack of respect for the past, for the intimate being of the nation. The disappearance of the traditional village is equivalent to the disappearance of childhood itself, which becomes a disused Eden, with semantic articulations devoid of content and value ("Young girls used to come out of those old houses, and I waited for them with bated breath, smelling the smell of silk heated with an iron.

From these new houses (already old, in fact) old people come out. Around them has gathered a heap of useless objects, collected with the idea that a repair, an improvisation is always necessary. Clothing is out of control, second-hand family clothes are worn, work clothes from the construction site, fancy clothes sent by the kids from town, the former groom's suit, the former militia uniform. If that village no longer exists, how can childhood? It lacks visual and auditory references, smells"). Gheorghe Crăciun's notes on Alexandru Vlad's prose are very precise. The author of the novel Pupa russa stresses the importance of the "awake body" and the symbols of coporality, measuring the angle of refraction of sensoriality in the architecture of the "logocentric space" ("The diffuse states of consciousness are in Alexandru Vlad's prose an expression of the awake body. Too much attention to the senses disturbs the logocentric space of the intellect - this seems to be the hidden message of the immanent moral plane to which the lives of the characters relate in every situation. Perception makes the intelligible harder to bring into the space of consciousness and the numbing of the channels of communication with the outside world does not help to clarify the truth. Between the two stages of being, thinking and feeling, there is an original mismatch and misunderstanding. The subconscious is perhaps even the informal result of this rupture.")

One of the books received with the greatest interest is The Bitter Rains (2011), a narrative evocation of the floods of the 1970s, an occasion for an x-ray of the community of the Transylvanian village, but also for the presentation of monologues or dialogues that circumscribe careful analyses of experiences of broad and subtle psychological resonance. Such is the monologue, of a dense, symbolic, unrestrained sensoriality, of the Greek-Catholic priest, who hides from the authorities and is secretly visited by Anca: "He looked me in the eye as if he wanted to see with my eyes. A simple and essential scrutiny, as Eve must have looked at Adam before sin, when there was no language. [...] Her eyes were a deep brown and their whites were pure, like porcelain. That look nullified words, and I knew no other weapon or shield. [...] He came to me with food and news. Her femininity filled the room, she was downright aggressive, and I perceived her hypnotically. She was walking, sitting and standing, proud of her feet without seeming to know it. Because if she had been aware of it, she would have died of shame. She didn't assume this quality - beauty, it was but a given of nature. [...] She would come to me buttoned up to the neck, in her headscarf, in long clothes, like a nun. To show me she could be like me if she had to. It was her naïve desire, as if she didn't have the warmth of her breath left, her dilated eyes, with which she followed my every reaction and tried to read beyond it, her fingers that twitched with a life all their own, betraying her emotion. I could even smell his clean laundry, his soap and iron-hot silk, the cold he brought to the folds of his coat."

The Bitter Rains is a narrative built on the principle of intermittency and fragmentation, staging autonomous episodes and recurring, symbolic, ex-centric characters (Pompiliu, Brodea, Alexandru, Dănilă, Kat, or Zaharie) with dense scenography and firm cut-outs of situations that detach themselves from the day-to-day logic, communicating metaphorically with the depths. In fact, the flood itself (with its starting point in the floods of 1970) gives the narrative an aura of the fantastic, of unfathomable mystery, with hints of a symbolic apocalypse, not lacking in plastic expressiveness, in diffuse colours, restrained drawing and barely sketched out contours ("The fact that the horizon was missing, lost in a whitish mist, made this small world seem endless [...] Now the sun had not been seen for weeks, and the light was falling simultaneously in the sky and in the waters. Nature seemed a mechanism that had broken down for good. Someone up there had forgotten how to stop the rain. Surviving in an enormous puddle, the village seemed simply an island, like a pot of corn in a bowl of milk."). Or the moment of the end of the flood, with an opening of the horizon that does not exclude possible recurrences ("Light underneath, the clouds seemed to have become even more consistent, as heavy as a concrete dome, mouldy from so much unpressed humidity. The sky had risen like a lid, and under cover of darkness it could very well fall into place.")

The tectonics of the narrative brings together the tense dialogue, the existential scream, the melancholic and ample writing, the velvety tenderness, but also the refined descriptions of the landscape, the scholarly mounting of the gestures and affects or the appropriate direction of the epic causes and effects. Rigorously articulated, the script of the book fixes in the framework of the narrative human destinies and events, parabolic scenes and social contexts, symbolic initiations and innocuous dramas, dilemmas and mysteries, in a cut-up without shrillness, able to highlight the profile of characters with status precise and mysterious at the same time (Pompiliu, doctor Dănilă and his wife, Livia, Brodea, Marta, Alexandru, the collective president, etc.). The strength of the descriptions and the evocative delicacy of the phrasing, the gradation of the epic tension (the climax is represented by the moment when the graves are broken and the stone is removed from the grave of the activist killed two decades ago), the exploration of the world, in the extension, but also in the intensity of its rhythms prove, beyond the "depth of moral and existential observation" (Cornel Moraru), unswerving attention to detail, multiplication of observation angles, alternation of perspectives or the sliding of temporal landmarks, which suggests the dialogue between interiority and exteriority, between the characters' identity stamp and alterity, expressed through the various poses of an alienating history. It is no coincidence that Pompiliu is the one who matures through the perception of an abject infrareality, of an indisputable grotesque ("A slot had opened, a visor, towards a world that he would have preferred not to know existed. If it existed"). The endless rain, the flood with a symbolic allure acquires an evil imprint, and nature is reduced to a traumatic scenography, in which the destiny of a fallen humanity unfolds, with broken moral contours.

Alexandru Vlad's prose imposes through the show the alternation of perspectives, through the contrapuntal perception of details and the overall image, of the concrete and the bookish, which suggests the persistence of an atmosphere of waiting, of postponement or of perpetually renewed illusion, in a world with firmly drawn contours, in dense strokes, from which the vibration of a melancholic and chimerical undertone is not absent. A work with multiple and subtle layers of narrative and writing, Alexandru Vlad's prose is atypical for the eighties context in which it evolved, in which it set its benchmarks and developed. It is a prose that captures, with equal epic justification, the fervor of the word and the paradoxes of corporeality, the mechanisms of the dream and the translucent springs of an imaginary transfigured into concreteness, the part and the whole, the immediate and the absolute.

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