

# Romanian Poetry Tackled Through Medieval Imagery and Theatricality

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Andrei C. Şerban, *Respirația cavalerului/ The Breath of the Knight*, Ed. ULBS, Sibiu, 2021, 297 pages.



This volume, authored by Andrei C. Şerban, lecturer at The Faculty of Letters and Arts, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu and literary secretary of Radu Stanca National Theatre from the same city, deals with the poetry of Virgil Mazilescu from the viewpoints of theatricality and medieval imagery as mentioned in the subtitle. The foreword entitled *Who's Afraid of Virgil Mazilescu?* drawing on the Edward Albee's 1962 play and the 1966 drama film directed by Mike Nichols that saw Virginia Woolf from the same perspective, renders Andrei C. Serban's intentions to provide us a monography of one of the most influential Romanian poets of recent literary generations. The postwar poet is hard to label and the choice of directions in literary criticism to analyze his works, even harder, according to the author who felt necessary to go to the deep structures of the text, hence his references to medieval art and theatre terminology (pp. 1-2). Divided

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into four chapters, the work of the poet is approached from his reception in Romanian literary criticism (ch. 1) to the medieval imaginary (ch. 2), theatricality and ceremonialism (ch. 3) and defiance of the generation criterion (ch. 4).

In the first chapter we are told that the Romanian poet Virgil Mazilescu was received in our culture as a ‘problematic’ author whose work was limited quantitatively, yet versatile due to his appurtenance to surrealist aesthetic, the oneiric and similitudes with masters of European literature such as Kafka, Kavafis, Saint John-Perse or Deguy. He was also labeled a pioneer of postmodernism (p. 15) based on seminal Romanian criticism and our most important periodicals (pp. 16-17). Thus, it was argued that Virgil Mazilescu could be more easily defined through what he was not than vice versa: neither Parnassian despite his adherence to ‘lucid impassibility’, nor symbolist even if melancholy and boredom marked him decisively, he was not a romantic, yet he made use of confession in a dissimulated manner. Despite his use of dictation, he was not a surrealist and despised traditional orthography and punctuation. However, his poetry consisted of the mixture of the distinct traits above<sup>1</sup> (p. 24). In one of his writings, *Fragmente din regiunea de odinioară*, Ed. Cartea Românească, equal in value to his first volume, *Versuri*, the poet gives us monochord verses that devour themselves, the poetry is ‘tighter’, ‘more programmatic’, he is naïf in his ceremonial poetry, he infantilizes, a seminal feature of the work, whereas the title of the book referring to one of Klee’s drawings, grasps in a subtle characterization<sup>2</sup> (p. 35). Mazilescu was compared to a *director* that defined his own scenography, he was considered a writer that shaped his fictional universe as if it were a scene where an actor’s role and a mask are mandatory (p. 37). As a general remark, it could be noted that before 1989, a tendency of deepening the political in the discourse was noted to the detriment of detached criticism, hence the regression in the reception of Romanian literature during the period; this showed in the falling into oblivion of Virgil Mazilescu as a result of unfortunate circumstances. (p. 57)

In the second chapter, after a comprehensive overview of the term *imagery*, Andrei C. Serban discusses its relation to Virgil

<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Nicolae Oprea, „Din propria-i cenușă”, *Viața Românească*, year LXXIX, no. 11, November 1984, pp. 87-89.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Dan Cristea, “Virgil Mazilescu: *Fragmente din regiunea de odinioară*”, *România literară*, anul III, nr. 8, 18 februarie 1971, p. 14.

Mazilescu's work. Emphasizing medieval imagery as understood by Jacques le Goff who recommended bringing into play literature or art to account for an imaginary cathedral such as Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*<sup>3</sup>, the author argues that Mazilescu did not simply imitate troubadour poetry and its rhetoric, but proceeded to a genuine dithyrambic which he would consolidate against the background of theatricality. From the triadic perspective of image-imagination-imagery, the fictitious medieval universe with literary or mythological names given to poets, troubadours, knights and ladies affords the critic the interpretative stance required (pp. 61-62; p. 74). The author argues that medieval imagery left quite a mark and its reminiscences can be seen to this day (chivalric literature, Dante's visions on paradise and hell, Bosch nightmare paintings, the rise of Christian Church architecture). Animal and vegetal representations in medieval art and literature, be they real or imaginary, displayed great variety in artistic forms and were strongly influenced by the notions of good and evil, angelic and demonic. The healing tradition in medicine or witchcraft (magic potions) and Christian influences (the apple seen as symbol of temptation) also had a say in vegetal elements and their symbols which extended to heraldry, politics, literature or decorations (pp. 75-76). Animals are parts of medieval bestiaries as extensions of archetypes, deep strata of unconscious and the instinct, symbols of cosmic, material and spiritual forces and principles and are associated to diseases (as in the case of the rat that brought the plague and implicitly, death)<sup>4</sup>. Among the heroic figures, there is the knight, along with the saint and the king as part of the triadic model proposed by historians<sup>5</sup> (pp. 77-78). The author will further relate the medieval elements he outlined in his analysis to Mazilescu's poetic images and his obsession for the medieval semantic field (p. 79). Yet, verses such as '*respirația cavalerului printre cavaleri e cea mai galbenă/ the breath of the knight among knights is yellow*' should not be regarded as a clear reference to medieval imagery, argues A. C. Serban unless completed by the image of the castle in the following verse (p. 80). The poet shapes love based on the troubadour pattern completed by other essential elements as understood by the medieval soul:

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *L'Imaginaire médiéval*, Gallimard, Paris, 1991, p. II, *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant (coord.), *Dicționar de simboluri/ Dictionary of Symbols*, translated from French by Micaela Slăvescu, Laurențiu Zoicaș (coord.), Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2009, pp. 75-76.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Le Goff, *Héros et merveilles du Moyen Âge*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 2008, p. 16.

impossible love, the etheric hypostasis of the woman loved, affected suffering, feelings over bodily love, etc. (p. 81). At the level of lexis, flowers and trees are most encountered, the rose, also symbol of Christianity (the body of Christ, immortality) (p. 85) is associated to the fox compared to the poet's eye in his stanzas (p. 86). In another text, the rose stands near the chess game thus suggesting peace versus war, domestic fights, a protocol of political conventions in the medieval age, empathy overruling political ceremonials (p. 87). Many of the plants in the works of medieval painters can also be encountered in Mazilescu's poetry, lilac included next to other chivalric elements such as swords, honour/ betrayal or fights similar to tournaments (p. 92). Intimacy and reclusion are ensured by vegetation, surrounded by fences that bring peace to poets (p. 93). Trees on the other hand, are a reference to the body, the concrete and degradation; the poplar is associated to inferno, pain and sacrifice, tears, it fulfils the role of a funerary tree symbolizing the regressive forces of nature, memories, not hope, past time ruling over a future of rebirth reflected in Mazilescu's poetry as death and suggesting the idea of punitive isolation (p. 95).

Andrei C. Serban argues that animal imagery is a result of medieval sensibility that marked the encyclopaedic spirit of the poet who personalized his own symbolistic and the allegorical dimension of the mentality in the Middle Ages (p. 97). Many of the animal elements in medieval culture have double significance: for instance, the eagle is associated with the Saviour and one of the four Evangelists in Christian symbolism. However, in the legends of Greek Antiquity the raven is viewed as an avenging and malefic creature, whereas in Scandinavian mythology it corresponds to the great god Odin in his wisdom. Last but not least, Christianity associates this bird with the devilish part of the human soul (p. 98). Domesticated animals in Virgil Mazilescu's work include the lamb present in the first text of his debut volume. Usually associated with nouns that define the semantics of the spirit, moral and spiritual values, Christ sacrificed for the sake of truth and love in the Christian tradition, in Mazilescu's work, the animal has Christian connotations of purification (p. 102). Another important element is the dog that suggests domesticated space, while keeping the positive-negative ambivalence medieval imagery endowed it with (p. 103). Good versus evil in the animal is doubled by chromatic ambivalence ('white dogs playing in a cemetery'); the dog descends from the comfort of the *domus* as a symbol of Thanatos in medieval

nightmares painted by Bosch as can be seen from a detail of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*<sup>6</sup> (16<sup>th</sup> century, Prado Museum, Spain) Andrei C. Serban includes in his research (pp. 104-105). With respect to the cat, Virgil Mazilescu draws on its malefic traits accounted for by medieval imagery reflected in a twilight universe and the numbness of insomniacs (p. 106). The author employs an image from a 13<sup>th</sup> century English bestiary to support his interpretative arguments (p. 107). The rabbit is invoked by one of Mazilescu's texts as a subtle reference to Jeanne d'Arc, one of the most prominent figures of the Middle Ages born in 1412, "*iepurele s-a născut in anno domini 1412*" (p. 113) / *the rabbit was born in anno domini 1412*. In medieval paintings, the animal is represented as active warrior, a knight (Jeanne d'Arc in this hypostasis, included) despite the negative emotions of man (fear, cowardice) it was later endowed with (p. 113). Birds such as the nightingale contribute to the atmosphere in the discourse of love (p. 115). The snake is viewed as a symbol of wisdom under the influence of European folklore, whereas the Basiliscus is portrayed in medieval poetry with its negative connotations as cunning, cruel, allegories for the torments that the lady inflicts on the troubadour (pp. 116-117). Virgil Mazilescu receives the animal biblically as a symbol of the fall, of spiritual involution recalling fallen angels such as Lucifer, whereas the lizard accompanies the troubadour's love promises (pp. 117-118). Among insects, spiders mark the passage to a lower stage of evolution and they are grasped by the poet as they harm people or are simply present in the decorum as silent witnesses of time, nocturnal beings fearing light (p. 119). The fish symbolism does not go beyond the perimeter of Christ as fisherman and is given as attribute, the old, mystic man as opposed to the modern one (p. 120). Mythological hybrids are rarely employed; a monster that recalls the sphynx or gryphon in Bosch's paintings draws on the heraldic dimension of medieval imagery in the context of tournaments, the fight for territory or barbarian invasions. In Mazilescu's poetry, sea monsters, similar to Poseidon's sea horses, complete an oneiric landscape in a declamatory courtship ritual (pp. 123-124).

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<sup>6</sup> The garden held a special role in the Middle Ages and art historians recreated it later. This is the case of the garden of the Museum of l'Œuvre Notre-Dame in Strasbourg founded by the museographer Hans Haug as he imagined it under his pen name, artist Balthasar. See Valentin Trifescu, "Alsacianism și muzeografie. Despre istoricul de artă Hans Haug (1890-1965)". In *Artă națională și specific regional în istoriografia de artă din perioada interbelică*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2023, p. 90.

Medieval architecture is functional for Mazilescu, a trigger of the socio-politic context of the medieval spirit in the troubadour's discourse (as knight, rebel spirit, martyr). The castle, as symbol of medieval urbanism, intertwines with the image of religious ruralism (p. 129). The Romanian poet also proceeds to a series of social micro universes, evoking medieval hierarchical stratification, depending on the place occupied in relation to the seniority nucleus which anticipated the disposition of social strata specific to later urban configurations (p. 134). The wise beggar is illustrated in a topos of exclusion, space of exclusion, oblivion, destruction and degradation (p. 135). The obsessive image of the angel becomes a divine extension on a spiritualized and religious plane of the mask-characters. The terrestrial and the celestial meet and we are at the crossroads; as a result, the mundane aspect is also given by the appearance of a fair, not only a place of transition between the interior and the exterior of the fortress, but also one of theatricality. On the forecourt of the cathedral, the mysteries and the passions of medieval theater rewrite passions and lives of the saints in Mazilescu's poetry (p. 140). In his preliminary conclusions to the most extensive chapter in his work, Andrei C. Șerban underlines his aim already stated in the introduction: of attempting to identify the similitudes between the medieval referent and Mazilescu's poetry, at times achieved at surface level or alluding to it (p. 146).

His postmodern label is also debated by the author, Andrei C. Șerban claiming that further justification is required in the matter (p. 152) and, based on the analysis in this volume, the comparisons between Mazilescu's work and postmodern poetry seem to lack applicability (pp. 153-154).

The third chapter purports to account for the Mazilescu's poetry from the perspective of theatricality and ceremonial justified by the musicality of his work (p. 157). After an extensive overview of the concept of theatricality, the author tells us about his intent of dealing with the discursive elements in Mazilescu's poetry based on the principles of spatiality that imitate a theatrical text (p. 168). Literariness is also aimed at and Virgil Mazilescu took it to the extreme in his poetry by mutations in his texts pertaining to theatricality (p. 174). The poet's text is full of annotations of space and time, his volumes testifying to a well-shaped geography with horizontal and vertical axes in the zone of unreality through the unexpected term associations and the nostalgic illusory tonality (p.

177). Mazilescu employs cultural nominal references (to Beethoven, Shakespeare, Konstantinos Kavafis, Eminescu, Franz Kafka) for discursive playfulness, makes use of an actor's affected emphasis, brings into play characters as masks that the discourse addresses, drawing on a premeditated director's plan (p. 203). The conclusion reached in the chapter is that Mazilescu's poetry is not simply a superficial figurative carcass, but adopts an entire arsenal in theatrical discourse specificity and, due to the multidisciplinary approaches, counterarguments for a possible surrealist aesthetic in his work can be found (p. 234).

The fourth chapter deals with Mazilescu's poetry as defiance of the generation criterion, the author justifying Mazilescu's anti modernism of troubadour inspiration pertaining to the principles of a Romanian neomodernism/ the generation of the 60s that is strictly limited to the historical sample it descends from (p. 268). In criticism he is remembered as a poet whose 'stylistics of shirk'<sup>7</sup> gave specificity to a 'depersonalized' poetry, thus providing the profile of a writer suffering from 'the horror of being understood.' (p. 274)

In his final conclusions, Andrei C. Șerban advises us not to be afraid of the author suffocated by so many labels and terminological conventions as pertinent as they may be to enjoy Virgil Mazilescu's work for the pleasure of reading as R. Barthes coined it. Therefore, we recommend this book to all those interested in Romanian studies in general, poetry in particular, and a multidisciplinary perspective that Medieval Studies can afford in modern times. Theatre and drama specialists could also benefit from the know how afforded by the approach, not to mention (visual) artists that could find poetical correspondents for reputed paintings or manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages.

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<sup>7</sup> For more details, see Eugen Negrici, *Postfață* to the volume *va fi liniște va fi seară*, Ed. Cartea Românească, București, 1979, pp. 111-115.