

# **The theme of death in the vision of Camil Petrescu and Liviu Rebreanu**

## **The case of the novels *The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War and Forest of the Hanged***

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### **Abstract**

*Seen as a challenge of the destiny, death appears in the novels, along with the experience from the front, symbolizing the transition into a world where the verticality loses its significance and where people think "horizontally", that is to say, by detaching themselves of the daily values and aspirations. Thus, the pre-figuration of Apostol Bologa's death does not stop only at the meaning given by the emphasis on the cemetery image, in those two hypostases, but proves itself through other ominous symmetries too. These are, firstly, Bologa's stop "just under the still gibbet" and then, his response to the notice that they will be moved on the Romanian front. Romania's joining the war, meeting the interests of the veiny and corrupt bourgeoisie blinded by their class interests, is depicted in Camil Petrescu's novel as a betrayal of people's interests, as a tragic adventure.*

**Keywords:** *The death, Destiny, The front, "Forest of the Hanged", "The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War", The solitude, The crisis, The drama, The war, The fear, The faculty of self-analysis.*

Seen as a challenge of the destiny, death appears in the novels, along with the experience from the front, symbolizing the transition into a world where the verticality loses its significance and where people think "horizontally", that is to say, by detaching themselves from the daily values and aspirations. Even if the theme of war, through its generality, summed up the theme of death, the latter should be separated, however, from the war, because its effects are those that

produce changes in the mental development of the heroes, encouraging them to look for another option, in the conscience, where real sentences are taken from.

“Of course, *Forest of the Hanged* is a war novel, superior, we dare say, to all other works about this event throughout the third decade (*The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War* appeared in 1930)”<sup>1</sup>. “All the horror of this disaster of humanity, which devours itself, lives with an impressive authenticity within the solid construction of the writer”<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, the pre-figuration of Apostol Bologa’s death does not stop only at the meaning given by the emphasis on the cemetery image, in those two hypostases, but proves itself through other ominous symmetries too. These are, firstly, Bologa’s stop “just under the still gibbet” and then, his response to the notice that they will be moved on the Romanian front: “It’s there that I cannot go... I feel that I will die there... And I don’t want to die... I have to live!”. These sketches are like some Wagnerian leitmotifs accompanying the protagonist during the tragic predestination symphony which is *Forest of the Hanged*<sup>3</sup>.

Within the structure of great symmetries of *Forest of the Hanged*, the symbol of light marks, in the continued deployment of Apostol Bologa’s destiny, two crucial moments: that of trapping the deserter by Varga and that of Bologa’s execution, which restores Svoboda’s scene in gestures and meaning: “Apostol arranged himself the gibbet, with his eyes thirsty of the light of dawn”.

Correspondingly to the symbolism of light, to the opposite side of beginnings of a crisis or obsession, there is a symbolism of closure, of darkness which includes the human being. The first inner confusion in the teenage years is due to the sudden death of his father, Iosif Bologa, when the consciousness of the grieving son is flashed by atheism: “I lost God [...]”.

After Svoboda’s execution, the impact of darkness, which overtakes the whole world, is in a range of aesthetic signs, specific to the technique of suggestions according to the tragic vision of Liviu Rebreanu. The protagonist “follows the path to the village after the others, as if he were afraid not to be caught here by the *night*”. Even if he is still within normal and rational justification, that of achieving his duties towards a deserter, he has a lack of answers, showing, in fact, his inner confusion which begins its ravages: “Captain, the punishment, the crime, the law, mumbled Bologa, ...”. At the end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Z. Ornea, *Tradiționalism și modernitate în deceniul al III-lea*, Eminescu, Bucharest, 1980, p. 533.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 533.

<sup>3</sup> Simion Mioc, *Anamorfoză și poetică*, Facla, Timișoara, 1988, p. 132.

chapter, the narrator thickens the symbolic veil: “The darkness strengthened around, so that it stung your eyes... On the field, as you could see, black silhouettes moved here and there, as if all people would have been turned into restless ghosts...”

Another moment of solitude and crisis, triggered by the news that they will be moved on the Romanian front, is also sealed by a symbolic invasion of darkness: “Apostol found himself alone, nailed in the same place, with his eyes staring in darkness, dazed by visions. [...] Bologna was *shaken by the darkness*, but his burnt lips persistently whispered: - That’s not true”.

Attaining its climax, the drama of the Romanian officer turns to opening the light in the deepest place of his soul: “The darkness and the silence covered Apostol with a harsh blanket... In the bottom of the soul he clearly felt as the love for light was flickering, gentle, comfortable...” The repetition of light attributes *gentle, comfortable*, has to be regarded as a return to the perimeter of “the normal phenomenon”<sup>4</sup> with its strong specificity printed in the author’s vision.

The attempt of desertion, as in a trance, is a compelling answer of the *human* Bologna, who cannot repeat, even for “the law” or his conscience, the conviction gesture, as a member of the Martial Court. His road to the Romanian lines is an *ominous closure*<sup>5</sup> in darkness, fog and *death*: “but the fog swallowed the horizon and the darkness with heaven and earth”. After catching Apostol Bologna by the patrol led by Varga, the prisoner “looked only forward, with his head up, with his widely open eyes drinking the darkness...”.

Romania’s joining the war, meeting the interests of the vein and corrupt bourgeoisie blinded by their class interests, is depicted in Camil Petrescu’s novel as a betrayal of the people interests, as a tragic adventure.

The front reveals to Gheorghidiu an unknown dimension of his personality - that feeling of a “pathetic gentility of the friendship, of the community with the ordinary anonymous soldiers who were bran to the war”<sup>6</sup>: “When I saw the people worshipping last night, I wanted to smile, but I became suddenly serious, for these people, in a convoy with me, my comrades, are the only spirit for me now, and every their gesture smooths my heart as the gestures of a beloved child”.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 143.

<sup>6</sup> Matei Călinescu, *Aspecte literare* (I), For literature, Bucharest, 1965, p. 133.

Thus, the individual slot of a soldier or an amputated leg counts more than the full battle plan for novelist: “If history is interested in great battles which use great armies, the novel reflects rather the overlooked and neglected aspects of the war: the cold, the stomach aches, the funny and absurd incidents”<sup>7</sup>. The Stendhalian origin is obvious. If in Rebreanu’s work the war is still visible, in the novel *The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War* “its mythical figure is vague and divided into more small details, anonymous bodies and meaningless gestures. The war moves from the stage of History to that of individual consciousness”<sup>8</sup>.

Camil Petrescu’s novel does not sing hymns to heroism and does not combine sublime situations. “What we call a hero, in a rhetorical voice, is a poor man harassed by hunger and boredom, struck by bullets and shells, shaken by *death* fever and frozen with fear, degraded by superstitions and attacked by madness. The human character of war is sad; its morality is selfish and reduced to the present moment”<sup>9</sup>.

Gheorghidiu captures and analyzes his fear, superstition, cowardice and panic without any hypocrisy. The superiority of the intelligent man in war consists only in the faculty of self-analysis.

The evocation of a shooting barrage, with the deafening madness of the shells, as well as the shifting of troops from Bran, is the most dramatic pages of Camil Petrescu’s book. The sense the death possesses the atmosphere in these awful scenes. *The first night of war* proves to be a chaotic advance after winning the Hungarian customs station, the first dead being the colonel himself.

The *darkness*, as in *Forest of the Hanged*, increases the fear so that Gheorghidiu has the feeling that the death can come at any moment: “I know so well that I will die tonight [...]”. The narration captures many details: from images of night fighting to army mess or discussions about real battle. The text communicates the *feeling of the combatant* that kills without any sense of guilt, thinking that the distance annihilates the culpability: as if “Those from 800 meters” were “lead soldiers”.

Respecting the principle of authenticity, Camil Petrescu includes events and real characters, who act heroically in spite of *the fear of death*: the two Mănciulea sisters, suspected of espionage - false accusation - will guide the regiment to cross the river Olt.

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<sup>7</sup> N. Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe*, 100+1 Gramar, Bucharest, 2005, p. 348.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> P. Constantinescu, *Scrieri* (IV), Minerva, Bucharest, 1970, p. 252.

The writer focuses on the auditory element, using words with onomatopoeic value:

“Above you, the first explosion bursts your ears, bewilders you, the second covers you with earth. But even if you’ve heard both you are not dead. People gather like animals near each other. [...] We run because it’s the same to sit in a place. The problem to know if you stop near a tuft of grass or near a heap of earth is like at the beginning of the world”.	The lived experience is communicated through the semantic value of the verbs at present tense expressing a gradation caused by the sound shock: “bursts your ears”, “bewilders you”... We remark the human solidarity when facing the death, defending one another instinctively.
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Gheorghidiu is aware where to go, towards the village, but a new attack stops him.

“My brain seemed to liquefy; the nerves broke like rotten ropes because of so much tension. [...] I don’t realize anymore if people’s faces are dirty of earth or soot. I hardly understand the lament as a litany, as an apocalyptic curse coming from the deepest depths. - We are covered by the earth of God”.	The introspection forwards the inner feelings of cancellation. The depreciative comparison suggests the annihilation of the individuality because of the strength test which he has to pass. The word <i>earth</i> – the key of the fragment, calls up the curse of earth, harbinger of the end.
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The only chance of escape of people in this *space of death* is the “hopeless” flee which leads them towards the nearby village. The story of a soldier whose head was cut off and he was “running on, without it” is symptomatic for its absence of consciousness when only the instinct of defence matters.

In the *Forest of the Hanged*, we witness a struggle of Bologna between the two alternatives: life and death – “to one side the soldiers who escort him as an outsider, to the other the nature with “blooming trees [...] and the well sweep in the middle of the yard...”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Miron Suzana and Roșca Elisabeta, *Creatorii romanului românesc modern*, All, Bucharest, 1999, p. 65.

The network of successes, the scenes and the situations that turn out to penetrate “the life truth in the artistic expression, overwhelm the pages of death expectation too, from the blind desire to prolong the life through “a kind of cunning the fear”<sup>11</sup>: “But the time?... Why doesn’t he tell the time?” to the mechanical repetition of priest Boteanu’s words: “In the middle of all the temptations of life, you remained your parent’s son, Apostol!...”

The artistic intuition of the novelist is this time without fail too: priest Boteanu is rhetoric, Apostol lives the limit-situation. At such times, “in the strange play of meanings between the apparent man and the inside man”<sup>12</sup>, Liviu Rebreanu gives privilege to the latter one.

Everything that happens during Bologna’s hanging is a funeral ceremony, full of solemnity: “The courtyard was full of soldiers with torches lit, with shiny helmets, as during a torchlight procession on the eve of a major holiday”, as a procession.

“It is clear that this book, which Rebreanu finished after the war, is dedicated to the Romanians from Transylvania who, through a long line of martyrdom and so much suffering, will obtain liberation from foreign yoke, especially if we tie this idea to a statement cited at the beginning”<sup>13</sup>: “Apostol becomes the man among the people: he finds individually his best self [...]”.

Ștefan Gheorghidiu thinks in the same way. He believes that the war was probably the most difficult test because they were not prepared, but also because it was a continuous search for “the good Self”: “The war drama is not just the continued threat of death, carnage and hunger, but rather this constant checking of soul, this *issue of your ego*, which knows differently what it knew in a certain way”.

Thus we conclude that “the non-adapted, complex and problematic characters of Camil Petrescu often highlight, with remarkable acuity, the most difficult aspects of the apparent world they refuse. They manage to define the evil with greater lucidity, their experience having a *value of knowledge*. But they ignore the ways of removing the evil, and because of this they collapse [...]”<sup>14</sup>.

The collapse is evident in Apostol’s case because, “being classified in the typology of *the seeker of truth*, Apostol passes from general truths to *the*

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<sup>11</sup> Mioc, *Anamorfoză și poetică*, p. 146.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> Miron and Roșca, *Creatorii romanului românesc modern*, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> Matei Călinescu, *Aspecte literare*, p. 134.

*knowledge of the self*, to intuition of *the intimate truths* of his being. The fragile balance proposed and maintained a while between the outside world and the inner one is broken, the inner world overwhelming the outside one”<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Mioc, *Anamorfoză și poetică*, p. 145.