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”ALL UNFORTUNATE YOUNG WOMEN ARE LYRICAL POETS...”

(ROMANIAN WOMEN
VOICES FROM ABROAD)

During the 19th century, especially in the first half, society in Romania did not give women the same chances to develop, subordinating them to men and restricting their activities to the domestic sphere. The quintessence of the model of femininity is found in Jules Michelet’s book *La femme*, which is represented by a humble wife, submissive and utterly obedient, as opposed to that of manliness, whose main characteristics are strength and courage (Vasilescu 2004: 1). The same frank dichotomy is seen by Garabet Ibraileanu¹ who says that ”There is nothing more different than a man from a woman” (1972: 110). But things were going to change.

The beginning of the modern epoch in the history of the Romanian people was represented by the 1921 Revolution, which was followed by many programs for reform. One of these included the constitutional project, initiated by Ionita Sandu Sturdza. The capitalist development of economy and the formation of the bourgeoisie imprinted an acute character to social and political conflicts, which culminated in the 1848-1849 Revolution, an integral part of the European democratic revolution. The birth of the modern Romanian state in the second half of the 19th century (1859) brought with it a new image of the woman, as mother of the family and of the nation. With roots in Romanticism, this image of the woman has lasted up to the modern times and is well reflected in paintings – my country is represented by Maria Rosetti in a painting called ”Revolutionary Romania”, by Constantin Daniel Rosenthal.

Education was not a strong point in women’s upbringing, whether they belonged to the slum or nobility, because they were supposed to admire men’s proficiency in forbidden domains. A good example is given by Elena Vacarescu, a member of a Romanian noble and highly educated family, who complained about her father’s prejudice. He considered women inferior in all fields of activity. But there were a lot of counterarguments given by women who succeeded in their scientific careers, such as Christina Cutzarida, doctor in medicine in Paris in the 1880s and Sarmiza Bilcescu, the first woman with a PhD in law at University of Sorbonne (Vasilescu 2004: 5).

Women in Romania were mainly educated to fulfil their domestic role. In not so well-off families, this education was provided by grandmothers or governesses, who mostly applied practical skills. Girls from boyar families were instructed by governesses, family tutors or private teachers and then sent to private schools, either at home or abroad, especially to France, Romania having strong connections, both cultural and economic, with the French people. In 1864 the Law of Public Instruction decided the setting up of primary schools for girls in the rural and urban areas, primary education being free and mandatory. Another important step was Spiru Haret's reform, which organized secondary school on two levels. It was an impetus for women to acquire proper education compatible with a modern state and, as a consequence, Haret gave a new Law in 1899, that of Professional Education, that helped women train in other domains than the academic one. From 1881 young women were allowed to enrol at the Medical School, and beginning with 1895 at all the other universities. Towards the end of the century, women were invited to join the ruling of humankind, bringing a new stream of morality, anti-corruption and education.

These public and private endeavours aimed at giving women more freedom in choosing their own destiny, but it was hard to change mentality. Most women were afraid of being wrongly understood, that they were neglecting their roles of mother and wife, that they were losing their femininity; so, efforts to persuade people that education was beneficial and necessary were focused not only on men, but also on women. Some of those who struggled to emancipate and change mentality were strong women who initiated feminine societies, published articles and books, gave public speeches and played important political roles to convince Romanian women to fight for their rights. Some of these great Romanian women were doomed to oblivion, mainly by two reasons: the mentality about the other sex and by the communist laws.

One of these women was Elena Vacarescu (1864-1947), who was considered to be an ambassador of the Romanian culture. She is more recalled today especially for her unhappy engagement to Ferdinand, successor to the throne of Romania², than for her literary work. Her father was a descendent of a famous family of Wallachian boyars, many of them playing an important role both on the political and the literary scene of the country³ (Boldea 2005: 34). The family tree from her mother's side stretched to the times of Michael the Brave, who first united the three Romanian provinces at the turn of the 17th century. She was familiar both with the English literature, due to her British governess, and with the French literature, which she studied in Paris. She had the opportunity to meet there Leconte de Lisle and Victor Hugo, both mentioned in her memoirs. She also studied philosophy, aesthetics and history at the University of Sorbonne. Her poetry was polished and guided by the Parnassian poet, Sully Prudhomme.

The turning point in her life was when she met Queen Elizabeth of Romania, who encouraged her engagement to Ferdinand. But Romanian heirs to the throne were in fact supposed to marry only foreign princesses. Elena followed her queen in exile, first to Italy, and then to France. In Paris she had a literary salon where famous people used to come and helped her with her literary work, which belongs to the feminine Romanticism from the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Through her writings, including review articles, she felt no more an exile

but considered France a country of adoption, enriching her experience more than the writers who lived in the home country.

When the First World War broke out, she lobbied for Romania's joining England and France and for the last union of the country with the now Republic of Moldova. She was a fighter and loyal supporter of Romania and, as a consequence, she was appointed a member of the Romanian delegation to the Peace Conference in Paris in 1919, being one of the very few women who took part in the event. She was also appointed Secretary General of the Romanian Association that was part of the Nations Society, the precursor of the United Nations Organization. Her friend, Paul Valéry noticed that the two sides of her career, the poetical and the political, worked hand in hand, thus demolishing the misconception that women should be denied political careers. In 1925, Claudia Millian, representing the Romanian Writers Association, succeeds in organizing the well-known Société des Ecrivains Roumains in Paris, whose president was Elena Vacarescu. Among other extraordinary achievements, we can count the foundation of the International Committee for Spreading Arts and Letters through Cinema in 1930 and in 1937 the prize which would later bear her name, awarded by the Femina Committee for literary critics and history.

Her debut volume in 1886, *Chants d'Aurore* (Songs of Dawn) got a prize from the French Academy, the first one, and in 1925 she was accepted as a member of the Romanian Academy. Her literary work comprises collections of poems (I mention only one title of each), *Le Jardin passionné* (The Passionate Garden), folklore remaking, *Nuits d'Orient* (Oriental Nights), novels, *Amor vincit*, memoirs, *Le Roman de ma vie* (The Novel of My Life), and theatre, *Stana*.

Camil Petrescu⁴ claimed that she had never been separated from the country in whose language she did not write and always proved to be a true Romanian, proud of her origin, concluding that such a personality honours two literatures.

A contemporary and a relative of Elena Vacarescu was Anna-Elizabeth Bibesco-Bassaraba (pen name Anne de Noailles) (1876-1933), another member of the exiled Romanian royal family and an accomplished woman writer. She was a princess of the Brancovan family. Her father was the exiled Prince Brancovenescu of Romania and her mother, Ralouka Musurus, a great Greek pianist. She wrote many collections of poems, *Derniers vers et Poèmes d'enfance* (Last Lyrics and Poems of Childhood), three novels, and an autobiography.

She was a well-known patron of arts and in her literary salon met the intellectual, literary and artistic elite of the time, such as Paul Claudel, Colette, André Gide, Frédéric Mistral, Paul Valéry, Jean Cocteau, Alphonse Daudet and others. She was immortalized in paintings and her image was sculpted by Rodin. She was the first woman to become a Commander of the French Legion of Honour. The French Academy named a prize in her honour and The Belgium Royal Academy accepted her as a permanent member immediately after her literary debut with *Le Coeur innombrable* (The Unnamed Heart, 1901). She was a Parnassian poet writer and a representative of the literary Belle Epoque.

Calinescu⁵ is struck by her "thirst for life", so frenzy that it often becomes the intelligence of the universe. He underlines that Noailles' poetry is "not sentimental but cruelly voluptuous like that of a Diana, a kind of poetry of the principle

phenomenon in search of the fertilizing embryo, through which the world is perpetuated. The poetess embodies a Pascal with a sumptuous writing, tormented by the problem of death, singing life beyond the grave” (1982: 970). He also points at the fact that many exiled writers preferred to write in French, both for its special music as a language and because it offers the only chance to the writer to be known throughout the world. Unfortunately, this happens with almost all regional languages spoken only by their people.

Anne de Noailles was the model for the character of the countess Gaspard de Reveillon in the novel *Jean Santeuil*, written by Marcel Proust. Little by little she is being rediscovered by the contemporary French literature and this may be a starting point for her full recognition in her own country.

Marthe Lucie Lahovary (1886?-1973), also called the princess forever in love, married Prince Georges Valentin Bibesco and is known today as Princess Marthe Bibesco. She was an important character of her contemporary public life, both from the social and the cultural perspective, proving once again that women’s role is not only domestic. Her mother’s ascendancy leads to ruling princes in the 18th century Wallachia. Her father belonged to a family of ministers, prime ministers and military generals. Her only brother died at an early age and she suffered the consequences of her mother’s grievance, being deprived of a real motherly love, as she noted later in her memoirs. Her education was provided mainly by the men of her family, who were attracted by her brilliance, charm and independence. She travelled a lot, as her father was a diplomat, and that made her feel at home everywhere and helped her speak many foreign languages. Her family also influenced her character and interests, mainly in politics and literature. Marthe Bibesco’s fame is due to her literary achievements and love affairs with important men of the time (one of them being Lord Christopher Thomson, her mentor in espionage). She is considered to have had a very important role in Romania’s political attitude regarding the First World War and the historical events of the first half of the 20th century, being one of the first emancipated Romanian women.

She never forgot her literary talent and found refuge in her writings (poems, historical novels, memoirs, travel journals, essays, biographies, some under the name of Lucile Decaux), which include *Catherine-Paris*, *Les Huit Paradis* (The Eight Heavens), awarded by the French Academy, *Le Perroquet vert* (The Green Parrot), *Le Destin du lord Thomson of Cardington* (The Destiny of Lord Thomson of Cardington) *Katia-Le demon bleu* (Katia-The Blue Demon), a best-seller which was later filmed. She wrote about the magic of Romanian folk legends and social environment. As Roman says, ”Barrès and Montesquieu hailed the young writer as a great talent and the French Press followed suit. Fame was already at her feet at the age of 18 when she took Paris by storm and put Romania on the map” (2002: 3).

Her portrait was described in the book *Regards sur un passé* (Looks over a past), published by Robert Laffont in Paris in 1989, besides those of Saint-Exupéry, Jean Cocteau, and others. After the Second World War, times became harder in the country, as communism was in power and all her assets were confiscated. She remained in exile to struggle with life and to take care of her nephews for ten years,

their parents not being allowed to leave Romania. But she proved to be the same brave lady, enjoying life, and giving new meanings to common things.

She became a member of the Royal Academy from Brussels in 1955. Marthe Bibesco's brother-in-law, Antoine Bibescu, was a friend of Marcel Proust, and their frequent meetings are recalled in the volume *Au bal avec M. Proust* (At the Ball with M. Proust). R. M. Rilke admired her intuition as a poet. Fr. Mauriac, recognizing that she had written better books than *Au Bal*, confessed that he enjoyed this one best. Tudor Ionescu, a Romanian critic, admires her work, which comprises more than thirty titles, in which she expressed her will to live again, to freeze in words the passing moment, the human being. She was a master of the literary portrait, with a keen psychological sense and sensibility; that is why Marthe Bibesco was chosen to represent this literary species in French textbooks. She longed for her "country of willows" and friends she left at home until the end.

The three writers belonged to a fascinating world about which few Romanians have a clue. Communism re-wrote the history of the country and many famous and representative people were wiped out from its pages. It is painful and frustrating to find yourself alone with your own work, without your readers and public that can echo your feelings. The literature of the exile written by Mircea Eliade (*The Forbidden Forest*), Virgil Tanase, L. M. Arcade or the critical prose signed by Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca, gives you an idea about Romanian literature in general (Cistelecan 2005: 13). Many of these writers, especially in modern times, felt exiled in their own country as well. But those who endured the exile never forgot the ones living behind the Iron Curtain. One of these has been Monica Lovinescu who said: "In our country, the Stalinist terror was put in brackets of silence."

Monica Lovinescu (b. 1923) graduated from the University of Bucharest and made her literary debut with short stories, critical essays and prose in the literary journals of the time. Her father was one of the most important Romanian critics and writers. She went to France as a grantee not long after communism took power and in 1948 asked for political asylum. She had a busy life there publishing in many French journals, such as "East Europe", "L'Alternative", "La France Catholique", "Témoignages", etc. She wrote the chapter about the Romanian theatre in *Histoire du Spectacle* (Encyclopedie de la Pléiade, Gallimard) and translated Romanian books under the pen names Monique Saint-Come and Claude Pascal. She also collaborated with Romanian journals in exile, such as "Fiinta romaneasca" (The Romanian Spirit), "Ethos", "Dialog" and others.

Lovinescu represented a beacon of freedom and a gleam of hope when she began her collaboration with the French Radio Broadcasting and Radio Free Europe, where she had two programmes, "The Romanian Cultural Actuality" and "Theses and Anti-Theses in Paris". Her activity had a great influence on the cultural life of the country, as few things about cultural and political events from the West were allowed to be known. As Manolescu says, she was "the reed through which a whole people was breathing, the literary chronicler who saved us from drowning" (2001: 155). Her literary articles were collected in the series of books entitled *Short Waves*, an outstanding political and cultural fresco of communist Romania, and

Journals. She was awarded the Diploma of Honour by The Romanian-American Academy of Sciences and Arts.

Monica Lovinescu imposed her personal style: frank, straightforward, and acrimonious. Her literary comments were like a barometer for the writers and the public, establishing hierarchies and norms of morality, hoping for a recovery of what was silent, forbidden and censored for half a century. As Gheorghe Gricurcu, a Romanian critic says, "[...] she was an alternative offered not only by contrast to the official rosy and fake product of our literary output, but also to our home-grown literary criticism, based on aesthetic criteria which, although somewhat non-conforming and protesting, was nevertheless limited by censorship and self-regulatory censorship" (2003: 21).

She did her best to shake the separating wall that scarred Europe by helping people from her country, giving advice, encouraging young researchers or political refugees. She was relentless in her pursuit against making peace with the enemy. She inherited her mother's strength, an eminent professor of French, who died in the communist prison because she did not want to compromise her daughter by asking her to become an informer. Monica Lovinescu confesses in her journal that what she was doing was a duty to fulfil, because she knew too well the price of liberty (Vultur 2004: 3). She compares Nazism with communism, the former being the capital sin and the latter just an error whose principles were not well applied. She blames the western countries for the lack of a Marshall plan for Eastern Europe and the delay of the moral process of communism. She speaks about the attitude of the French intellectuals. "Indeed, (in France) if political life seemed to be dominated by the Right, by contrast, the (French) intellectuals not only positioned themselves to the Left, but they were already mentally 'sovietised'. Whoever has not tried, – as some of us have indeed –, to 'open the eyes' of those intellectuals over here in making them receptive to the tragedy of their fellow-professionals from Eastern Europe, ending up being rejected as 'fascists' as soon as they declared themselves anti-Communists (as Jean-Paul Sartre put it: 'the anti-Communist is a dog'), could not imagine the climate which faced the first (Romanian) exiles (in France)" (Lovinescu 1947-1952).

In an interview given in Romania in 1991, Monica Lovinescu expresses her optimism concerning the change for the better of the intellectuals, helped by their critical spirit and a fresh political thinking. She underlines the involvement of politics in literature and the high degree of professionalism of some cultural journals like "22". Not long before, there had been a barren political and philosophical landscape which now was flourishing unimagably. The high intellectual level of these publications was a pleasant surprise but the expectation was to fill the gap between these intellectuals and the rest of the society. Maybe a democratic forum could make up the so needed right alternative formula (Cistelean 2005: 43).

What all these writers have in common is their passion for literature and politics, together with an inextinguishable love for their native country. It is very difficult to squeeze a whole life into a single page, but the aim is to pay a humble homage to those who successfully linked Romania to the rest of Europe.

- 1 Garabet Ibraileanu (1871-1936), Romanian male writer, critic and literary historian.
2 Ferdinand I de Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen (1865-1927), king of Romania (1914-1927), nephew of Charles I of Romania.
3 Ienachita Vacarescu (1740-1797), Romanian linguist, lexicographer and poet.
4 Camil Petrescu (1894-1957), Romanian writer, member of the Romanian Academy.
5 George Calinescu (1899-1965), Romanian literary critic and historian, writer, university professor, member of the Romanian Academy.

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SUMMARY

"ALL UNFORTUNATE YOUNG WOMEN ARE LYRICAL POETS..." (ROMANIAN WOMEN VOICES FROM ABROAD)

The paper focuses historically on the contributions of women in exile to both Romanian literature and Romanian politics throughout more than a century, beginning with the second half of the 19th century and going on throughout the 20th. The main writers mentioned in the articles are Elena Vacarescu, Anne de Noailles, Marthe Bibesco and Monica Lovinescu.

KEYWORDS: literature, culture, gender studies, women's writings, multiculturalism.