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FEMINISM AND ANTIFEMINISM IN ROMANIAN THEATRE CRITICISM IN INTERWAR YEARS

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Abstract: In Romania, during the interwar years, it seems that theatre reviews – much like theatre criticism in general, narrowly as it was and sometimes continues to be defined in Romania – was only considered legitimate if signed by men. There were but two timid exceptions, two female voices whose writings were partially recovered as late as 1978-1983 and have been insufficiently explored since: the poet and memoirist Otilia Cazimir, who worked as an inspector for the Ministry of Arts’ Theatre Directorate for a decade, and the aesthetics professor Alice Voinescu. This paper is an attempt to turn the spotlight not onto the two writers’ theatre-related activity, but rather to the way they engaged, in writing or in action, with the thorny issues of feminism. Their opposing standpoints – a feminism of emancipation vs. an anti-feminist type of feminism – still proves emblematic to our day for the specific way in which socio-cultural mentalities and perceptions on women’s condition in 20th-century Romania were preserved; it appears that post-socialist theatre criticism, especially from the decade 2000-2010, coalesced around the same positions.

Keywords: Theatre, History, Criticism, Feminism, Journalism.

Feminism is prevailing. In our day, it is anachronistic to question the influence of feminism on social evolution. As feminism develops, the social condition is changing. Like a stone hitting the water causes concentric waves, the “concept” of feminism widens its roll to include all social circles. Feminism has earned its place in both public and private spheres. Everyone is discussing and debating it, but few look at it objectively. (Neli, *Adevărul* 2)

The stone that Neli (the pseudonym hiding the name of the female reviewer writing for the *Adevărul* newspaper) threw in the water in 1900 did not have a Newtonian effect on Romanian society. That is because – even though, in the decades before World War II, feminism, citizen’s rights, culture (especially literature) for, about or by women were widely debated both orally and in writing, with arguments for and against – (very) little actually changed at the level of political and social structures, or of mentalities. Similarly, in the second half of the 20th century, the rampant legislative, administrative, and political transformations proved to be, as it has often been said¹, both profound and burdensome for the *real condition of women*. Seemingly economically emancipated, women still faced the same subjugating patriarchal subordination and, worse, the criminal abuse of birth control decrees and procedures. In the arena of cultural products and discourses, progress happened slowly and superficially, and very interestingly (perhaps revealing a feature of Romanian social history), the changes caused and consolidated an aberrant rift between the current meanings and use of the notions of *femininity* and *feminism* (Constantinescu, 1941); in other words, a gap between

¹ In recent decades, a lot of literature has been produced on this topic in Romania, to close the country’s huge political culture gap generally dating back to 1945-1990 and particularly caused by the fact that it missed the chance to roll with the “three waves of feminism” that developed (separately or by correlation) in the 20th century in the West. A very quick and inevitably superficial list of specific studies includes: Elena Zamfir, C. Zamfir, *Situația femeii în România (Women’s Situation in Romania)*, Bucharest, Expert Publishing House, 1992; Maria, Bucur, Mihaela Miroiu, *Patriarhat și emancipare în istoria gândirii politice românești (Patriarchy and Emancipation in the History of Romanian Political Thought)*, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2002; Otilia Dragomir, Mihaela, Miroiu, *Lexicon feminist (Feminist Lexicon)*, Polirom, Iași, 2002; Ghizela Cosma, Enikő Magyari-Vincze, Ovidiu Pecican, *Prezențe feminine în România. Studii despre femei în România (Women in Romania. Women Studies in Romania)*, DESIRE Foundation Publishing, Cluj-Napoca, 2002; Olivia Todorean, *Itinerarii contestatate. Studii de teorie politică feministă (Challenging Itineraries: Studies on Feminist Political Theory)*, Politeia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003; Mihaela Frunză, *Ideologie și feminism (Ideology and Feminism)*, 2004; Alin Ciupală (coord.), *Despre femei și istoria lor în România (On Women and Their History in Romania)*, Bucharest University Publishing, 2004, etc.

assuming femininity in creation and its reception and ignoring, if not refusing, theoretical reflections on women's condition in society.

Historically speaking, the road of Romanian female writers to theatre criticism as a profession was paved with a series of paradoxes worth unravelling. The first paradox refers to the fact that despite a relatively rich contribution to feminism and women's creations at the start of the 20th century, prior to the advent of communism, no female theatre reviewer made a name for herself through consistent activity in the Romanian press or publications, nor was any such reviewer acknowledged (even polemically) by the cultural world.

However, there are two notable exceptions. The first is Otilia Cazimir, who worked as an inspector for Moldova and Bessarabia in the Theatre and Opera Department within the Ministry of Arts, and who never signed theatre reviews, despite her extensive publications. Her remarkable contributions to criticism are, in fact, reports to the Ministry, fragmentarily recovered by George Sanda in a modest book in 1978 [Cazimir, *Scrieri (Writings)*]. According to the editor, the writer refused to publish the texts in her lifetime to avoid hurting the feelings of any artists at Iași National Theatre with her biting humour. The second exception is Alice Voinescu, an aesthetician and professor at the Bucharest Conservatory. Her position as the sole female representative of drama theory in the academic world confirms the female writers' reluctance to engage in theatre criticism. Alice Voinescu's activity as a "theatre reviewer" started quite late and was very short-lived, consisting of essays about a very small number of performances published in *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* only during the 1945-1947 "no man's land" period (Runcan, 2013, 165-66) when hopes for a democratic Romania were still alive; these texts fit only slightly, perhaps barely, within the existing structure of a performance review.

This paradox is even more symptomatic and challenging considering that literature by women, though marginal, as Bianca Burța-Cernat pertinently shows in the 2011 *Fotografie de grup cu scriitoare uitate (Group Photo of Forgotten Female Writers)*, was being published more consistently. We find reviews of these works in the press, alongside essays and debates signed by (male) critics who coalesced canonical hierarchies, but also critical reflections by the few female literary critics (Zaharia-Filipaș, 2004). Moreover, most female writers of several generations who became

known for their interwar prose also wrote one or more plays, some of which were performed on stage. This makes it surprising that they never undertook a similar effort in the theatre criticism of the time.

In brief, even though Otilia Cazimir and Alice Voinescu professionally focused on theatre for several decades, they both were, in fact, very discreet voices who refrained from breaking a rule that was far from accidental: (literary and theatre) criticism was not a women's occupation. Beyond this, and perhaps more interestingly, they shared an engagement in either publications or educational activities, if not both, dedicated to women and young girls. At the same time, their common interests reveal a significant rift between the two, placing them on opposite political sides. Otilia Cazimir, a writer who developed around the group working for the magazine *Viața românească*, published rich journalistic materials associated with the emancipation feminism current, though she signed most of them under a pseudonym. Alice Voinescu, in turn, undertook a wide range of activities for women and girls (usually dissemination conferences) organised in association with various Christian charities, as well as authored virulent conservative articles that criticised militant feminism.

This period is additionally paradoxical because it seems to have been dominated in the world of art by “femininity without feminism” (Burța-Cernat). This phenomenon was not limited to theatre criticism but rather manifested like a protective umbrella, covering the problematic and identity references to gender relations in Romanian culture throughout the 20th century and extending into the present century. Important critics like Ibrăileanu (1906) or Lovinescu² protected, promoted, and at times admired the works of female writers and artists while repudiating activist feminism in horror. Even some of the well-known female journalists and authors of the interwar period took ambiguous, if not hostile, stands towards the activist feminist current, which had been present and increasingly organised since the end of the 19th century. Instead, they opted to identify their own works as specifically feminine from the viewpoint of themes, style,

² “A necessary discrimination leads us to distinguish between women's literature and feminine literature — not mentioning feminist literature, which is eliminated from the restricting framework of art, in its strictly aesthetic meaning, because of its prejudiced and programmatic nature. Women's literature is not exclusively feminine, i.e. a literature harnessing the essential elements of femininity, but may have other features as well, since art does not have to consider the laws of the sexes.” Eugen Lovinescu, “Notă asupra literaturii noastre feminine” (Notes on Our Feminine Literature), *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* no. 3, 1939, p. 179.

and, of course, target audience. To this end, the situations highlighted in the studies conducted by Bianca Burța-Cernat in the aforementioned book are revealing, especially in the cases of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Anișoara Odeanu, and Sorana Gurian, whose discourses were marked by multiple and bizarre internal contradictions.

Romanian antifeminism boasted deep and especially solid roots: between 1900 and 1948 dozens of press materials consistently pointed out the great, disastrous dangers of feminism in general, from the “masculinization of women”³ (which is a recurrent theme through the years) to the danger of men losing their jobs because of the cascade of women willing to immorally use their allure to secure themselves an income, while accepting meagre salaries in times of crisis⁴.

On the other hand, feminism was undoubtedly seen as a leftist movement, while joining the ranks of politics was the same as losing your femininity, including (or especially) for female artists and writers. This was the confused mentality underlying the operational opposition strategically consolidated in the first half of the 20th century between *femininity as a stylistic identity*, which can and should be embedded in cultural and media discourses, and *feminism as a leftist ideological stance*, which should be rejected or at least ignored as essentially being a vulgar heresy.

Otilia Cazimir, a feminist journalist

Today, the life and works of Otilia Cazimir seem far from appealing for literary researchers, or even for readers in general, except for those parents who, with their pre-school or school-age children in mind, dust off old poetry books, such as *Baba Iarna*

³ “This fault grows ever more apparent when we think of girls’ education and women’s guidance in general. In our days, this field is under the influence of the current that promotes a false, wretched emancipation, known as feminism, which could easily be defined as: the masculinization of women. Nowadays, women wish to be equal to men, in politics, in the economy, in mores, seeing this as a way to escape the subordination of men. When in fact this road leads to women being belittled and unhappy, thus cracking the foundation of the human society.” Priest Zosim Oancea, “Asociația religioasă Anastasia Șaguna” (Anastasia Șaguna” Religious Association), *Telegraful român* nr. 10, 1943, p. 2.

⁴ “Public offices were especially held by men only. They could easily support the family, with the help of their wives, who were always able to live a good life on the husband’s modest wage. This developed family life has always been a big contributor to the economic balance, since it is a known fact that individual economy and measure is the backbone of national wealth. Nevertheless, these days, national wealth is shaking because individual domestic life, too, is shaking. Women have invaded all the fields of human activity. They have quickly adopted all the possible human vices and shortcomings; family life has been ruined and so is our nation’s bedrock. Using the weapon of their beauty, so relative in nature, and of which so many disgracefully abuse, trafficking their bodies, this feminine world has invaded all public offices, all workshops, all plants, everything.” B. Văleanu, “Feminism și realitate” (Feminism and Reality), *Epoca* no. 582, 8 January 1931, p. 2.

intră-n sat (Eldmother Winter Comes into the Village), once printed over and over in a huge number of copies. There are many ways to explain why this poet's works, and, in part, personality have been forgotten; some go beyond the natural paradigm shift in terms of taste and literary hierarchies in the new century. One reason may have to do with Cazimir's versatility in what regards the political changes brought about by the different regimes, culminating in poetry books dedicated to the Romanian Communist Party (1961). Furthermore, the nostalgic sentimentality of her prose and poetry drove her writings towards the outskirts of the literary landscape. Cazimir died in 1967, at the age of 73. She is especially remembered through her memorial home, which is part of the active, ingenious, rich Museum of Literature in Iași. Still, this integration of her memory does not lift the veil of *passé* that has enveloped her works.

It is important to rediscover this presence from the viewpoint of the less explored dimension of Alexandrina Gavrilescu's career - the real name of the woman who started using the name Otilia Cazimir from a very young age: that of *theatre inspector* for Moldova, between 1937 and 1947. This was a very turbulent decade, with five successive changes of government forms - an apparent parliamentary democracy, King Charles' II dictatorship, the coalition government consisting of The Legion (Romanian fascists) and General Antonescu, "marshal" Antonescu's dictatorship, the beginning of the communist regime - and a devastating World War (Ornea, 1995). The fact that Otilia Cazimir was an administrative-cultural clerk during this boiling period proves to be relevant from at least two points of view: on the one hand, because her oddly linear trajectory is a contrasting testimony to how political evolutions were reflected at the grass roots, in the cultural world of the city of Iași and the country at large. On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, her decade-long parcours is an illustrative snapshot of both the dominating formula used to analyze theatre performances, and the condition of women who, through an accident of the fate, made it to a position of responsibility, albeit minor, in the (cultural) state apparatus.

Otilia Cazimir was well-known as a poet, especially writing children's poetry, and occasionally as a memoirist; between 1948 and 1964, this overshadowed her activity as a cultural inspector, though her public interventions after the installation of Communism faintly referred to it. Only from the collection of texts *Scieri despre teatru (Writings on Theatre)* (1978) – coordinated by George Sanda, a book full of gaps bearing the mark of

ensorship and published eleven years after Cazimir's death—, do we learn that the texts are not reviews *stricto sensu*, but rather professional reports sent to the Ministry of Art's Department for Theatres and Operas. In fact, we found no reviews by Cazimir published before or after her years as a public clerk. In-depth research of the impressive report files kept in the Romanian National Archives shows that Cazimir was an extremely profound analyst, a fine observer with a systematic approach, which is why the documents preserved are highly valuable for the history of Romanian theatre.⁵

Otilia Cazimir was a prolific writer; the quantity of material could even be seen as overwhelming at times. We are not only referring to her works published in books, but to her tremendous number of writings spanning 40 years, which were never gathered in books or catalogued, covering all kinds of fields, from literature to film reviews, debates, opinion pieces, and most especially articles dedicated to women, whether in long-standing columns (in *Lumea, Adevărul literar și artistic, Lupta, Țara noastră*, etc.) or occasionally published in various newspapers and magazines. In 1925-1935, estimates reached about one to three articles per week, which, to be fair, is a huge, completely untapped material.

After she left the Department for Theatres, the number of materials she published dropped significantly: those were the years when she focused on translating from Russian or other languages and rose to public fame due to her widely circulated poetry books for children. Her memoir and portrait books were also well received (*Prietenii mei, scriitori...*, 1960, *Albumul cu poze*, I-II, 1957-1967). Since she was a member of various writers' organisations, she was interviewed, reviews were published about her recent publications, and even laudatory studies on her works in general. Nevertheless, in one such article published in 1957 in *Iașul literar*, which later became the preface to her book *Poezii (Poetry)* published the same year, Constantin Ciopraga reminds that:

Feminism, meaning the campaign for the social and cultural emancipation of women, has found a perseverant supporter in Otilia Cazimir. Otilia Cazimir does not approve of certain female writers' tendency to adopt a manly language, nor does she agree with the

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the content of Otilia Cazimir's theatre reports, read the series Miruna Runcan, "Otilia Cazimir – Inspectoare și/sau critic teatral" (Otilia Cazimir - Theatre Inspector and/or Critic), *Observator cultural*, no. 1181-1191, 2023.

“feminine” style of certain men. Sensitivity looks good on women and men alike; “sensibilities” do not. Otilia Cazimir has been writing feminist articles for years. She has signed the column *Însemnări feminine (Feminine Notes)* in the magazine “*Însemnări literare*” (1919) as Alexandra Casian. On the same topic, she used the pseudonym Magda in her collaboration with the newspapers “*Lumea*” (1923) and “*Lupta*” (*Un feminist*, 18 September 1925). In “*Lumea – bazar săptămânal*” (1924–1926), the writer published different articles under the section “*Feminine*”: *O lucrătoare poetă (A Working Poet)*, *Politica nefastă pentru femei? (Is Politics Harmful for Women?)*, *Femeia în literatură (Women in Literature)*, *Femeile în gospodăria publică (Women in Public Household)*, *Șezători literare pentru femei (Literary Meetings for Women)*, *Marcel Prevost misogin (Marcel Prévost the Misogynist)*, etc. Some articles were signed Dona Sol. Similar opinions can be found in her articles published in “*Adevărul literar*”: “*Femme*” de Magdeleine Marx’ (“*Femme*” by Magdeleine Marx, 8 July 1925), *Femeia și poezia patriotică (Women and Patriotic Poems)* (12 July 1925), etc., signed Ofelia or Dona Sol. In some of her new “feminine notes” published in “*Viața românească*”, the writer discusses *Modernități (Modernities)* and other topics (1926, no. 12), while in the magazine “*Țara noastră*” – under the same section – she talks about *Evoluția liber profesionistelor (The Development of Female Freelancers)* (February 1927). (Ciopraga, 57)⁶

The professor from Iași simply listed the ones probably recommended by the author herself, and only wrote two paragraphs about this, though passing no comment on content. In any case, the starting sentence “Feminism, meaning the campaign for the social and cultural emancipation of women...” casts a shadow of suspicion and doubt over other possible meanings of the word, while the quick enumeration sounds mildly belittling, whether willingly or not. Moreover, Ciopraga attempts to appease the hypothetical vexations about “feminism” in the cultural world of Romanian Socialism by introducing this moderation, from the author’s own perspective, about the relative weight of ideology in Cazimir’s body of work.

⁶ Another in-depth study entitled “Moment retrospectiv: Otilia Cazimir” (Otilia Cazimir. A Retrospective), was published by the same author in 1967 in *Viața românească* no. 11, p. 76–89, marking the poet’s death. This time, Otilia Cazimir’s contribution to feminism was a note at the end, simply reproducing fragments of the previous study.

The first question that arises is how to explain the multiple avatars used by Cazimir to publish her feminist texts. On the one hand, the pseudonyms Alexandra Casian, Dona Sol, Magda, Ofelia, all have a playful, though evidently theatrical touch to them – three out of four are names of dramatic characters. However, her need to clearly separate her artistic work from her feminist or feminist-related writings suggests that these topics were not at all comfortable in the interwar literary world in which Otilia Cazimir had made a name for herself that she was ambitiously trying to consolidate. In fact, we should not forget that, in 1928, the Writers' Society did not include the poet's collection *Night Butterflies* in its award ceremony (Sevastos). What's worse, in the autumn of the same year, her application to become a member of the Romanian Writers' Society was also rejected, despite the rules only requiring two published books (the writer had already published three), which caused a small outrage in both leftist and rightist newspapers.⁷ She was finally allowed to join the Society a year later.

In other words, literature was serious business, not a fun game, and the writer was protecting her status as a woman who joined the men's club⁸; while "feminism" was a casual thing, a weakness, or at least an eccentricity. This seems to be her position even though long-standing publications, such as *Adevărul literar și artistic*, *Lumea*, or *Viața românească*, had columns dedicated to female audiences. This working hypothesis – of a double pressure, external and internal (internalised), causing a rift between Cazimir's personal identity and her status – gains credibility when corroborated with the fact that, after getting a job in the Ministry of Arts' Department for Theatre and Operas (1937), the poet's feminist contributions suddenly disappeared without trace. And interestingly, they never returned, not even after 1947, when her public standing was gradually and officially consolidated by the Communist Party.

Another study, published in 1964 by Al. Husar, shows more interest in the themes in Cazimir's publications and proves less biased with the obscure connotations of the notion of feminism in the collective mentality:

⁷ See the unsigned article "Nu-i scriitoare" (She's Not a Writer), *Adevărul Literar și Artistic*, no. 416, 25 November 1928, p. 8; as well as Mihail Sebastian, "Alegeri la SSR" (Romanian Writers' Society Elections), *Cuvântul*, no. 1291, 24 November 1928, p. 1.

⁸ It is worth adding that Cazimir also assumed the uncomfortable condition as romantic partner, not wife, of poet George Topârceanu, who she accompanied for 25 years and nostalgically evoked in writing until her death.

Ever since the first years when her texts were published in the media of the time, the poet showed she was fully aware of women's social status, her opportunity to contribute to the development of letters and writing. (...) These are the two standpoints, i.e. those of a woman fighting for a new dignified life for women, regardless of their race and class, based on which Otilia Cazimir discusses both the social condition of women and the problems affecting the heart, the hopes, and the rights of modern women in different ways. She reports on certain books that are especially interesting for women or discusses issues related to the social emancipation of women in *Notițe feminine (Feminine Notes)*, such as *Evoluția liber profesionistelor (The Development of Female Freelancers)* or *Electiuni sentimentale (Sentimental Choices)*. (Husar)

By simply scanning these articles, we get a picture of Otilia Cazimir's position in the rich landscape of activist writings about the condition of women. On the one hand, some articles support working on one's own, which brings economic, social, and political independence to modern women; one of the most interesting cases in point is *Evoluția liber profesionistelor (The Development of Female Freelancers)* (Cazimir, *Evoluția*): the examples selected range from proletariat per se, mostly condemned to exploitation and poverty, to intellectual occupations. In this regard, Miss Chauvin is much praised as a model, the first Frenchwoman to break the prejudice wall and become a member of the Parisian bar, hoping to "pave the way to the bar and to any other public activity for those who will follow."

Similarly, it is worth discussing an article published in the autumn of 1924 in *Lumea – Bazar săptămânal*, which had some echoes in other leftist publications⁹. Following the publication of a short poem signed by a female worker, Sorina Basarab (probably a pen name) in *Adevărul literar și artistic*, Cazimir wrote a long comment, on the borderline between a review (sprinkled with quotes) and a social standpoint text:

With the assertiveness of the self-possessed, the author infringes on the prerogatives of future female Critics. And she might have a right to do so. The truth surfaces and penetrates the heart even when cast off at the bottom of a page, in six humble stanzas. And especially when it comes to the obscure, unknown life of proletarian women, the truth can in no way be useless (...) And despite incurable aestheticians, who will raise

⁹ See, for instance, Geroge Săiculescu, the one-page columns "Cărți și reviste" (Books and Magazines), *Adevărul Literar și Artistic*, Year 5, no. 205, 9 November 1924, p. 7.

their eyebrows, Simona Basarab breathes new, original, precious, truly sincere life into our feminine literature. (Cazimir, *O lucrătoare*)

The general tone of her feminist articles is always the same: fluid, always ironic, prone to sarcasm and witty wordplay, steady. Especially interesting (since these are neither few, nor accidental, showing that Cazimir also read the media consistently) are her comments on the rights of women around the world, as well as in Romania – labour rights, the right to be represented in unions or in the management of trade organisations, and certainly the right to vote. Of these, it is worth referring to *Politica nefastă pentru femei? (Is Politics Harmful for Women?)* (Cazimir, *Politică*), which starts from women securing their right to vote in Finland (“The great majority of women earn their own bread. From the humble factory worker to a university professor, there are innumerable other situations in which women meticulously do their job.”) (Cazimir, *Politica*); or *Succese feministe (Feminist Successes)*, where she presents an overview of the latest legislative developments in several countries. The latter begins with a thorough fragment that mocks Mussolini for his hypocritical enforcement of the “administrative vote”:

Our worries were gratuitous. In May, the Italian House passed women’s suffrage with an impressive majority (218 vs. 28). But right ahead of the elections, Mussolini put up unexpected, treacherous obstacles. He crammed all restrictions into a seemingly innocent, though very malleable formula that leaves a lot of room for interpretation. Suffrage is reserved to “women who are worthy of it”. And the only worthy ones are the holders of either a war medal, or at least a medal for their civil services, such as mothers or widows of soldiers who died in the war, graduates of at least a primary school or those who can read and write, and finally women who pay taxes amounting to or over 20 liras per year. So, no votes shall be cast by women who are too young (to have a war medal or the wife or mother of a dead soldier. To have been part of the war, one needs to be a certain age), poor, undecorated, or ignorant. So, how many women will be able to enjoy their suffrage? (Cazimir, *Succese*)

Another segment expresses joy at the fact that, starting autumn, women freelancers will finally have been able to join the boards of Romanian Labour Chambers – in the legal context in which women were not allowed to sit on bank boards, except by “proxy”, even

if they owned a large or the majority share package. Evidently, Otilia Cazimir unleashes a whole series of jokes, but also of bitter comments (not at all personal, at the end of the day, for she was not an employee when she wrote the article):

Almost all female writers are employed by the State. Literature is but a hobby, a “passe-temps”. Who would give up their wage and live off literature? They would rather waste their energy teaching or working in an office and are content with writing occasionally, irregularly. In fact, there aren’t too many male writers who make a living off writing either. Out of the 35 poets mentioned in the volume one of the *Antologia (Anthology)* by Mr. Pillat and Mr. Perpessicius (32 male and 3 female poets), only three can provide for themselves by writing alone. As for the others, we either don’t know what they do, or most of them (around 20) are civil servants or practice other liberal professions. Which raises a curious question. Out of the 20 poets who earn a wage, four are higher clerks within the Ministry of Labour. A considerable percentage. What could this mean? Does the Ministry of Labour have a special weakness for poets? We recommend that bolder colleagues explore this point. (Cazimir, *Succese*)

The feminist publications of the paradoxical figure of Otilia Cazimir remain a treasure trove that is worth exploring and cultivating, at least in a selective collection volume simply reuniting Alexandra Casian, Ofelia, Magda, and Dona Sol.

Alice Voinescu – the philosophy of anti-feminist femininity

The personal and intellectual destiny of Alice Voinescu is somewhat unique in the Romanian theatre landscape, which does not make it any less exemplary. Born Alice Steriade into a family of wealthy intellectuals, she earned her bachelor's degree in philosophy under Titu Maiorescu before World War I. She went on to study in Germany and France, completing her doctoral studies in 1913 at the Sorbonne under Lévy-Bruhl with a thesis on neo-Kantianism and the Marburg philosophy school (Grigorescu in Voinescu, 1983). Despite being offered positions as a junior lecturer in Paris and the United States, she chose the unconventional path of returning to Romania to marry her fiancé, lawyer Stello Voinescu. Her loyalty came at a cost: she ended up teaching at a technical girls’ high school for nine years before finally being offered a university position. Her adored husband, who died in 1941 but to whom she continued writing in her *Jurnal (Diary)* until her own death in 1961, made her life difficult by being jealous of

her public standing, squandering the family fortune, and unscrupulously cheating on her. Voinescu's academic job was not truly in line with her training, as it was not in philosophy nor in literature, but in aesthetics, and it was within the Bucharest Conservatory of Drama, considered a lower-tier university. Between 1922 and 1948, when the new communist regime forced her retirement, she dedicated herself to teaching successive generations of students who remember her vividly. In 1949, she was arrested under the pretext of being a member of the Liberal Party, expressing monarchist views, and being part of the spiritual circle of writer Petru Manoliu. She was detained without trial, and after her release in 1950, she was placed under house arrest in a remote village near Târgu Frumos. Her diary entries (*Jurnal*) and letters from that time (*Scrisori*) are harrowing. Following the intervention of several cultural personalities in 1951, she was allowed to return to Bucharest, and after a while, she was allocated a small room in a shared flat. She could barely make ends meet, living on a tiny pension and later on odd translating and tutoring jobs. Her diary reveals how deeply grateful she was during her final ten years for any help she received from her circle of acquaintances.

Otherwise, Alice Voinescu was extremely well seen until the tragic turn her life took between 1948 and 1951.¹⁰ In 1919, she started holding conferences on various topics (literature, philosophy, sociology, moderate/Christian feminism, etc.); she was a Radio guest for the same reason; after defending her doctoral thesis, she was, on several occasions, the guest of Queen Elisabeth and later Queen Mary of Romania, and was a member of Princess Ileana's circle. For decades, she taught at the "Princess Ileana" Higher School for Female Social Workers, set up by the princess; she had a respectful friendship with poet and philanthropic activist Sabina Cantacuzino, who founded several Orthodox homes for orphans and the elderly. She was a huge music lover and, as

¹⁰ According to her, perhaps speculative, diary confession, the campaign against her started on 17 December 1947, when she participated by chance to a representation of the American play *I Remember Mama* by John Van Drutten, with Marietta Rareș and Marietta Sadova, at Odeon Theatre (currently Nottara Theatre); on that occasion, Voinescu defended the play and the staging, even though Sadova herself had engaged in self-criticism. On the other hand, the campaign took place in the first part of 1948 and targeted the management and professors of the Conservatory in general; alongside Alice Voinescu, other professors were also fired, including the provost, composer Mihail Jora. See Alice Voinescu, *Jurnal (Diary)*, ed. cit., p. 112. See also "Al treilea spectacol pentru actori" (The Third Performance for Actors), *Rampa* no. 111, 25.12.1947, p. 11, and Florin Tornea, "Necesitatea unei verificări sau poziția ideologică a doamnei Alice Voinescu" (The Need for a Verification or Mrs. Alice Voinescu's Ideological Position), *Flacăra*, no. 5, 1948, p. 18.

a relative of pianist and professor Florica Muzicescu, was often present in George Enescu and Maruca Cantacuzino's intimate circle of music fans (certain fragments of her diary remind Romanian readers of an edulcorated version of the auditions featuring in Hortensia Papadat Bengescu's novel *A Bach Concert*). Between 1925 and 1939, almost every summer, she was invited to the colloquiums organised by Paul Desjardins at Pontigny Abbey, where she met and befriended André Gide, Eugenio D'Ors, Malraux, Roger Martin du Gard (who suggested she kept a diary) and others – she exchanged friendly letters for years with some of these writers.

It is also worth mentioning that, in fact, Alice Voinescu only engaged in politics superficially and very late, joining the Liberal Party during the war and especially as a reaction to the ideology and the violences committed by the legionary-fascist movement. She was in fact a rather typical enlightened bourgeois, observing and deploring social inequalities from her high middle-class position. She shared the 1900-generation humanist democratic convictions and an innocent faith in meritocracy, while at the same time enjoying any opportunity to mingle in aristocratic circles. Perhaps even more importantly, she was a practising, at times fervent Christian, despite the great tests of her faith after the installation of communism. As most of her contemporaries remember, she was a teacher by vocation, endowed with rhetorical talent and charm.

However, from an intellectual standpoint, her 30-something years of great prestige are not fully represented by her surviving works, while the – mostly positive – reviews published after the 1983 collection that saved some of her texts can nowadays be explained as rather being tributes to an intellectual woman with a tragic fate¹¹. Her doctoral thesis was only published in 1999 (translated and with an introductory study by Nestor Ignat, a former student of hers who, in the first post-war decades, was a communist activist), which explains why certain critics thought the paper was on Kant; when the thesis was published, very few people still had the skills to analyze neo-

¹¹ An exception is Nicolae Manolescu's review entitled "Două restituiri", *România literară*, no. 45, 1983, p. 9: "The 1960-1961 novel *Întâlniri cu eroii tragici* (*Meetings with Tragic Heroes*) shows the author's truly elegant style, sombre and pathetic in tone. Still, they are based on an artificial formula. Agamemnon, Clytemnestra or Oreste talk, discuss among themselves, or are «interviewed» by the author. I have my doubts that the editor's effort will be properly rewarded. I have mixed feelings about Alice Voinescu's essays. It is likely that our taste can only «select» her in part. *Întâlnire cu eroi din literatura și teatru* (*Meetings with Literature and Drama Heroes*) sounds like a sentimental archive. The essay writer's «topicality» is rather problematic."

Kantian philosophy in Hermann Cohen's circle¹². Her book debut with the monograph on *Montaigne* was well received at the time; it was republished and discussed at large by Dan Grigorescu in the 1983 book of selected restored texts. Alongside texts that were never published in a book, reflecting her lectures at the Conservatory and, of course, focusing on universal classic theatre¹³, Voinescu also wrote essays dedicated to certain modern playwrights in *Aspecte din teatrul contemporan (Contemporary Theatre Snapshots)* (1941). Most likely for fundamentally didactic purposes, this book studies the works of Frank Wedekind, Luigi Pirandello, George Bernard Shaw, Paul Claudel (the latter study, sprinkled with philosophical and religious reflections, was removed from Dan Grigorescu's anthology by censorship). However, the essays – which Pompiliu Constantinescu cautiously accused of being excessively metaphoric and dogmatic – read 80 years after their publication, appear unsubstantial, both from the viewpoint of their academic character or of style, and especially in relation to other works dedicated to universal theatre or literature issued in Romania at the time.

Even more complicated is the situation of the theatre reviews written by Alice Voinescu between the winter of 1945 and the spring of 1947, all published in *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* and reprinted by Dan Grigorescu in a dedicated chapter. Readers, whether from 1980 or, more so, our days, might naturally wonder what made the Dramatic Art Conservatory professor opt for this particular type of journalism during those years, considering that, in her 60 years of living, she had *never* felt the need to resort to this genre; what's more, her diary (spanning over 30 years) only very rarely mentions her attending (accidentally and especially late in life) theatre performances – while noting a rich cultural life composed of classical music concerts, conferences and debates with cultural personalities at Romanian and foreign venues like the French Cultural Institute, cinema even. In any case, except for two or three texts, most of her reviews are long recounts of the play plots and character descriptions, at times *with no reference to what was happening on stage*. Read today, Mihai Eminescu's 1880 reviews

¹² Besides occasional short mentions, we were only able to find one analysis by G. G. Costandache, "Un profil feminin în filosofia românească interbelică" (Profile of a Female Interwar Romanian Philosopher), *Contemporanul-Ideea europeană*, no. 11, 2008, p. 14.

¹³ To this end, see Liliana Țopa, "Alice Voinescu. Dinamica eticului și esteticului în teatru" (Alice Voinescu. Dynamics of Theatre Ethics and Aesthetics), *Studii și cercetări de Istoria Artei*, volume 20, Editura Academiei RSR Publishing, 1973.

look “modern” compared to Alice Voinescu. The quality of her reviews is surprising given the context in which, for over two decades, Romanian theatre directing had been seen a great impetus, as had professional debates on theatre, theatricality and theatricalization¹⁴; it feels as if the aesthetics professor Voinescu completely ignored both the Romanian and the European theatrical landscape.

On the other hand, in his (1983) deferential review written when the book of recovered texts was published, the Academy member Șerban Cioculescu took the opportunity to also mention the final part, *Varia*. This review showcases the famous elderly scholar’s conservatism, while making reference not to Voinescu’s essays or theatre criticism, but to an unusual 1943 article, most likely based on a lecture, published in the ephemeral magazine *U-Preocupări universitare*:

Her subtle femininity was nevertheless resolute in the essay *Umanismul feminin (Feminine Humanism)*, which showed her discontent with the activist character of feminism as inaugurated by English suffragettes, believing that it “watered down the feminine lifestyle” by equating it to the male. She wrote: “In order to save culture, which is essentially Humanistic, women have a pressing duty to rediscover – this time, with lucidity and a sense of their cultural responsibility – their eternal purpose: human creation and the human world.” (Cioculescu)

The reference to this article, inserted at the end of a deeply eulogistic text, shows the sympathetic, triumphant enthusiasm that this lecture instilled in the literary critic. In fact, Șerban Cioculescu’s admiring reaction encapsulates the whole interwar period like a shell does a pearl: with its mentalities, practices, tastes, and idiosyncrasies. It is not, as people often insist, strictly an attitude of the – undoubtedly male dominated – bourgeois, political, and intellectual world. In professor Voinescu’s case, the Cioculescu’s gratified remark is quite a precise X-ray of the paradoxical “anti-feminist feminism” displayed by a large share of Romanian interwar female intellectuals.

“Anti-feminist feminism” refers to this conservative stance whereby the realisation that women can and should play a social and societal role in the 20th century

¹⁴ See Miruna Runcan, *Teatralizarea și reteatralizarea în România. 1920-1960 (Theatricalization and Re-Theatricalization in Romania)*, second edition revised and updated, Bucharest, Liternet Publishing, 2014. <https://editura.liternet.ro/carte/314/Miruna-Runcan/Teatralizarea-si-reteatralizarea-in-Romania-1920-1960.html>.

first and foremost results in an organised turn against feminist political activism as such. In this sense, many ladies of the educated aristocracy and middle class got involved in charitable and educational acts for girls and young women, as well as in correlated programs that promoted a virulent conservatism meant to block any attempt to (or even serious discussion on) equal political and legal rights. In truth, the battle to keep “women’s primary purpose” – i.e. being a wife and a mother – intact had countless female followers in the educated classes, both in Romania and in other European and American spaces where religious fundamentalism joined hands with the patriarchal family model; and often, they used the same methods as feminist associations to group together, combat and, ideally, annihilate the latter. Considering this complex picture and Alice Voinescu’s highly visible role as lecturer, charity activist, and professor, the article (or the lecture) *Umanismul feminin*, published during the war, grows ever more significant.

Voinescu’s posthumous diary confirms that, at least when it comes to reflections on women’s condition, the distance between her *person* and *persona* is, strictly speaking, almost insignificant. Alice Voinescu had firm beliefs and lived her private and public life desperately trying to stay true to herself to the very end. And in doing so, she exposed herself to all kinds of risks, including being cheated on and despised by her husband and sometimes her friends, exploited, even humiliated by close relatives whom she helped and forgave in a magnanimity that might seem close to recklessness, and finally to being exiled for a long while from her private and professional world, so dear to her. Surely, it was a privileged world, but one which she had joined and navigated naturally, through personal efforts and without visible compromise.

Still, not holding her political (which nowadays would be regarded as Christian-democrat) and intellectual options or her reasons and beliefs against her, it must be highlighted that it is precisely her intellectual and moral consistency that makes *Umanismul feminin* one of the most retrograde testimonies about the propagating force of Romanian anti-feminism. If we were to jokingly use a concept by Hegel, we could say this is an exemplary case of the “cunning of reason” (Hegel, *Prelegeri (Lectures)*). Especially as, this time, her main argument, *that can be found throughout her previous writings*, about the social, political, and intellectual crisis of the modern world, intertwines with her talent to effortlessly make apt use of general ideas (a hazy

combination of Carlyle, Bergson, and Claudel). Here, Voinescu claims nothing more nor less than that ‘It is not poverty or economic crises that poisoned culture, but not believing in the ultimate purpose of life. Relativism, so legitimate in the field of knowledge, is illegitimate in that of life creation’ (Voinescu, *Umanismul*). And evidently, women were the only ones responsible for the creation of life. Therefore, women were also responsible for the steep decline of the Humanist ethos, either by being careless or by being conceited:

To a large extent, the 19th century was dehumanised because women were careless. Both science and its rational-idealistic method – male works for millennia – would have stuck to its Humanistic course had the female mind stayed loyal to its life giving and organising mission. By emulating men and intensifying the powers of abstractisation that lies dormant in both sexes, then solving their human dignity problem through independence, that is, through a male method, 19th-century women inadvertently contributed to erasing differences between men and women, which together could barely make up the balance of a true culture. (Voinescu, *Umanismul*)

Socrates and Platon, alongside “Diotima, the priestess of Mantinea” are cited as sources of historical authority urging women to return to their ancient role as civilizers who accept being enslaved for the perpetuation of the species: heroines both silent and authoritarian, able to save men gone astray:

Throughout the centuries, whether openly or secretly, women continued to exercise their lifegiving influence over men’s creative power. Humanism never ceased to exist, not even in the barbaric eras, so long as women stuck to the firm instinct that drove them towards life as its creators, defenders, and shapers. Unwittingly, a slave who lovingly looked after her master’s child, taught him how to clean himself, pray, or play, was a humanising factor. (...) The responsibility of our world lies on the shoulders of women in our day and age.

Analysed more than a century after she joined the academia, as the sole female voice of theatre criticism in the interwar academic world, Alice Voinescu strikes the reader as a very complicated and in a way challenging cultural figure, enveloped in a halo of mystery because of her dramatic fate – nevertheless, her work is still worth studying and discussing, beyond the legend surrounding her character.

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It is interesting that the opposing viewpoints of the two writers/theatre critics on the complex topic of feminism are almost fully replicated (keeping proportions, of course) in the theatre criticism of the first decade of our century. In this latter case, theatre criticism was dominated by female voices (today, women make up over two thirds of the authors of theatre reviews and books on theatre history, theory, and aesthetics). If, in 1990-2000, criticism focused on the pinnacle – both national and international – of Romanian theatre aesthetics represented by the great Romanian directors who returned from exile (Liviu Ciulei, Andrei Șerban, Radu Penciulescu) or by the next generation (Silviu Purcărete, Mihai Măniuțiu, Tompa Gabor, Victor Ioan Frunză, Alexandru Darie etc.), right after the start of the new millennium, the artistic world became polarized, and so did criticism.

Reflecting the general societal conviction that history had stopped, and ideology had been erased from existence, both male and female theatre creators had until then shown no interest in social and political matters, women's condition included. However, a new generation of writers, directors, critics (and especially spectators) turned the spotlight to these subjects. After 2005, as independent companies blossomed, the theatre world was marked by contradictions and disputes. In turn, female critics seemed to coalesce on two opposing sides¹⁵: on the one hand, a conservative one that stubbornly refused open politics in theatre and supported (often idolised) the sophisticated aesthetics of great productions aspiring to universality signed by famous theatre directors of the 70s and 80s. For more than a decade, magazines such as *Teatrul azi*, *România literară* or the online platform *Yorick* undertook the role of host-museum for this position, and female reviewers of all generations reunited in this protective effort. Though not issuing direct theories, the whole group revived the attitude of “non/anti-feminist feminine”; sometimes, under the old flag of the “aesthetical autonomy”, their critical discourse discreetly combined a Christian Orthodox bias with an anti-LGTBQ

¹⁵ See the investigations “Replici de dincolo de scenă” (Lines Beyond the Stage), *Vatra*, 1994; “Este critica de teatru în «cădere calitativă»? (Is Theatre Criticism Dropping in Quality?), *Teatrul azi*, no. 7, 2007, and *Teatrul azi* no. 8-9, 2007; Iulia Popovici, “Interogând critica de teatru” (Questioning Theatre Criticism), *Observator cultural* 2016; Miruna Runcan, “Argumente pentru o cercetare istorică a criticii de teatru” (Arguments for a Historical Research on Theatre Criticism), *Observator cultural*, 2017; “Teatrul românesc azi” (Romanian Theatre Today), *Vatra*, 2020.

attitude¹⁶. An illuminating example can be the title used by Ludmila Patlanjoglu for one of the last interviews with the prominent theatre director Cătălina Buzoianu for *Yorick* in 2018: “I’m feminine, but not feminist!” A paradoxical statement (at least) from an artist who created probably the most openly feminist performances in the last decades of the communist era.

On the other hand, as announced since the last years of the 20th century through the voices of Alina Nelega, Saviana Stănescu (both critics and playwrights) or Cristina Modreanu, a series of women reviewers and theoreticians kicked off a complex process of finding and promoting an activist theatre direction that is politically and socially engaged, including by tackling themes and theatre productions dedicated to or produced by women. Their contributions (and we must name here at least Iulia Popovici, Mihaela Michailov, Oana Stoica, Cristina Rusiecki, Oltița Cîntec) have mostly been published by the magazines *Observator cultural*, *Scena.ro*, *Suplimentul de cultură*, *Dilema veche* or in authored or edited books.

Even though it looks like the Romanian theatre world has been less polarised over the last few years and the critical discourse seems more harmonised, the divide between the two groups remains the same, involuntarily recreating the opposing views of Voinescu-Cazimir.

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¹⁶ See, in this respect, Monica Andronescu, “Câtă speranță... sau împăratul e gol!” (Much Hope or The Emperor is Naked!), *Yorick*, 2011; Alina Epîngeac, “Post-modernism sau tocănița bunicii – Visul unei nopți de vară în regia lui Radu Afrim” (Post-modernism or grandma’s stew), *Yorick*, 2012; Alina Epîngeac “M.I.S.A părut. Ba nu, așa e!” (M.I.S.A. It looks like this!) *Yorick* 2017 etc.

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