

Summary

World War I (1914 – 1918) spread across the majority of Europe and was the first conflict of such proportion in history. Its ending brought significant changes in economic relations on world level, leaving a lasting demographic effect, and – by enabling the creation of new countries – it changed the geographical map of the war-ravaged area.

The trauma of war was reflected in the modern novel rather shortly after these events. Writing about war, especially while its memory is still fresh to the readers' mind, holds great responsibility, bearable only by great writers. This is why three canonical novels of Romanian literature written in the first two decades following the war have been selected for closer reflection in this book: *Forest of the Hanged* by Liviu Rebreanu (1922), *The Dragon* by Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu (1923) and *The Last Night of Love, The First Night of War* by Camil Petrescu (1930). All three share the theme of World War I, but each of the three authors approaches it with different experiences, builds different structure and chooses different narrative techniques. Thus, the reader is offered three different perspectives of Romania and the war. Camil Petrescu takes the perspective of a Romanian soldier. Liviu Rebreanu also chooses a soldier as the protagonist; however, one on the other side of the battlefield – being a Romanian from Transylvania, the protagonist is a member of Austro-Hungarian forces. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, on the other hand, shows that heroes can be found not only on the war front and not only be men, also providing insight in the life in the background and the female experience of war.

Although the validity of including in the corpus a work of literature which is not set on the battlefield (*The Dragon*) or whose author does not have the personal experience of war (*Forest of the Hanged*) may be questioned, war is an extremely distressing event both for individuals (individual experience) and for the entire community (collective experience), affecting the complete population of countries involved (leaving traces even further) rather than limiting its effects to soldiers and those directly involved in the events on the battlefield or located in its immediate proximity. Thus, for the purpose of this work, a war novel shall be considered each novel set at a time of war, specifically World War I, regardless if it is set mostly on the battlefield or in the rear, if the protagonists are soldiers or civilians, and if the novel could also be classified as, for instance, a romance or a social novel. By choosing this type of classification, it is possible to provide insight into two different perspectives: the perspective of a soldier (“the male perspective”) and the perspective of a civilian (“the female perspective”); i.e. the battle front and the rear perspective of events.

The analysis of different approaches to the theme of war in these novels is primarily based on the theory of trauma, which was brought to the literary science by Cathy Caruth, relying on Freud's *Beyond Pleasure Principles*. According to her, trauma does not include the traumatic experience alone, but also the response to a violent event which has not been fully assimilated/ understood /accepted at the time and later occurs in different repetitive forms (e.g. nightmares or hallucinations). Such experience, as pointed out in literature, is too difficult to express by means of language or the means of language one disposes of at the given moment. In Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novel, the hardest moments are marked with muteness, the lack of words, alexithymia. Apostol Bologa, the protagonist of *Forest of the Hanged*, is also overcome by muteness when he is given the most terrifying news of all – that his unit shall be sent to the Romanian front; i.e. that he is about to find himself in the position of shooting at his own people on the other side of the border. However, unlike the two who had their books published soon after the war, in 1922 (Rebreanu) and in 1923 (Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu), Camil Petrescu had remained silent for twelve years, until 1930. In that, he belongs to the literary wave of survivors in European literature, which had been started by Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929).

In terms of its relation to reality, similarly to other types of novels, war novel can vary to a large extent, ranging from testimonials to complete fiction. Out of the three authors, it was only Camil Petrescu who participated in war as a soldier – he belongs to the authors whose novels are filled with personal experiences from the front lines, the authors who had worn a uniform and held a rifle. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's town was bombarded and later occupied but she had no direct contact with the battlefield; however, her position of a wartime nurse can be taken as the "female front line" of a sort – she witnessed both blood and wounds and the struggle to survive. Out of the three, Rebreanu kept furthest from experiencing war; although he had started a military career in Gyula, Hungary in his youth, he left it long before the war, moving to Romania. Yet, he was inspired by his brother's experience of war, who had tried to flee military service only to be sentenced to death by hanging.

Writing about war – indirectly – implies answering the questions: *Why write about war?* and *How to write about war?* With all three of the authors, it is established that one of the main reasons for writing about war experiences (one's own or, in Rebreanu's case, of a close person whose loss represents a traumatic event) is fulfilling one's own deep psychological need, e.g., trauma resolution, with narrating being the path to healing.

Theorists offer two possible answers to the second question: *How to write about war?* - with *admiration* or with *horror* (Ricoeur 1990: 243), with *enchantment* or *disenchantment* (Cole 2009b: 1632-1633), by *aestheticizing* or *demystifying* war (Savage-Brosman 1992a). The way of writing, the style, appears to be more important than the choice of content. Indeed, even a work which exposes the disenchantment with war on the level of content (as all three novels do), can utilize enchanting language, as Cole points out (2009b: 1639). Although at the level of content all three authors express their horror at the war, demystifying notions of heroism, battlefield/battle, enemy, and homeland, the only one who consciously avoids using the language which might create the impression of enchantment is Camil Petrescu. It is, actually, in line with his preference to anti-callophilia and distaste for figurative language. The other two authors nourish a poetic expression with emphasized symbolism. Thus, in the novel of Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu the most important symbol is the dragon while in Rebreanu's novel, along with the gallows and the forest of the hanged, important symbols are the cross and light. Perhaps it was the figurative language, rather than the content of Rebreanu's novel that helped establish an image of his brother Emil Rebreanu – identified with Apostol Bologa – as a hero. The clear distinction between *The Last Night of Love*, *The First Night of War*, published in the early 1930s, and *The Dragon and Forest of the Hanged*, written in the early 1920s, complies with Hynes' (1992: 439) observation that the late 1920s were a time when language of war literature changed: the old grand style was replaced by "the plainest, most physical words".

"The drama of war is not just the constant threat of death, massacre and hunger, as much as the constant soul searching, the unstoppable conflict with your own self, that comprehends differently what it used to know in a certain way" is what Camil Petrescu writes in *The Last Night...* Out of the three novels, the inner drama comes to the fore mostly in two – *The Last Night...* and *Forest of the Hanged*. The plot of both novels is less affected by external events (recruitment, declaration of war, events at the battlefield, injuries) than the character's minds in turmoil. *The Last Night...* opens with Gheorghidiu's doubts about his wife's fidelity and ends with him finally giving up on his marriage and finding peace in it. *Forest of the Hanged* is also structured with respect to Apostol's mental turmoil – beginning with the first doubt of making the right decision, ending with final conciliation. Although it could not have been the author's intention, one might say that the *Forest of the Hanged* displays in miniature the change of the perception of war in literature through history: from soldiers as demigods (proud, confident Apostol in the beginning of the novel) to soldiers with all the human weaknesses (Apostol after the news of moving to the Romanian

front). Somewhat unexpectedly, only *The Dragon*, written from a female perspective, is set in a time limited with the beginning and ending of war and the protagonist Laura, though not demised of inner life, deals with practical problems more than anything else.

The physical experience of war stands out the most in *The Dragon*. The other two main characters, soldiers Apostol Bologa and Ștefan Gheorghidiu, surprisingly leave the impression of almost being disembodied. Although they are both injured, the physical pain is spoken of very briefly, incidentally. Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's prose, however, showcases tormented, mutilated, broken bodies stalked by death. The theme of illness plays an important role in her later works as well – yet, nowhere as much as in *The Dragon*. Laura, and the reader through her eyes, watches an arm turned into a slush of meat and bone, watches as the gangrene spreads and the arm is about to be amputated, watches as a man quietly dies of an unknown disease, a wounded man whose chest an explosion has opened thus revealing his heart, she treats a purulent abscess, sees a man whose mouth is infected with larvae... The visual is often accompanied with the olfactory sensation as well as an entire spectrum of feelings – ranging from compassion over pity to revulsion. Literally discarding of a body – throwing off a speeding train the corpse of a little girl who had died of an infectious disease, in front of her brothers and aunt, with silent agreement of her parents – is one of the most disturbing moments of the novel. The death of a child painfully directs to the pointlessness of bloodshed, affecting those involved in the conflict as well as the innocent, and the discarded body of a child becomes the symbol of war horror and the attitude to body (people) brought by war – body is merely a corpse, an unneeded rag, people are expendable, even when they are not cannon fodder. The symbolism of the innocent victim is further emphasized by the girl's choice of name: Mioara, or Mielușica in a term of endearment; i.e. "Lamb", "Lamblet". Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu's novel embodies the town (an organism threatened by death), homeland (mother), a train carrying wounded men (a dragon with a head, tail, nostrils, and moreover, flesh and blood). The only "missing" body belongs to Laura.

As opposed to the protagonists' inner drama, the individual experience, there are attempts to portray war as a collective experience. In his *Confession* Rebreanu speaks of Apostol Bologa's inner drama as of something shared among an entire generation, "all of us". The term "all of us" refers not only to the Romanian community in Hungary/Austro-Hungary (shown in Bologa's hometown, the small town of Parva); in the *Forest of the Hanged*, the Austro-Hungarian army is the Empire in miniature, with all the different nationalities, Romanian, Czech, Ukrainian, Jewish etc. to

Hungarian and Austrian. Still, the collective here is rather a sum of individuals (also reflecting the reality of the Monarchy) than a collective. In *The Dragon* a series of individual experiences (of wounded men) is also formed into a collective experience of war, but the collective experience is also displayed by personification of the town and homeland, portraying the town as an organism, a single being, especially while awaiting occupation and in an occupied town. Yet, in *The Last Night...* in contrast to a series of individuals – civilians embodying greed, incompetence, corruption – the collective is mostly revealed in the battlefield where, from the moment war is declared, a feeling of comradeship is born among soldiers, a special solidarity that the author himself declares to have experienced. This relationship, the feeling of being among equals, is limited to a small group of people, existing only among those in the battlefield, and the relations forming among them exceed all others. The fighting scenes of Petrescu's novel best describe what Jameson (2009) calls the collective experience of war – unlike the *Forest of the Hanged* where the artilleryman Bologna almost always acts as an individual, Petrescu's narrator Gheorghidiu identifies with his men and the lines between him and his comrades are occasionally blurred. This ideal of comradeship is part of the war experience myth (Mosse 1986: 492) created after World War I, enabling the soldiers who had taken part in battles cope with their traumatic experiences.

World War I is a turning point in the belief system closely related to literary modernism. Of all three novels, one – *Forest of the Hanged* by Rebreanu – is a better fit to the traditional realistic prose, while two – *The Dragon* and *The Last Night of Love, The First Night of War* – are closer to the poetics of modernism. Rebreanu's novel, however, has an innovative streak, mostly in terms of inner focalization (less consistently than in the other two novels), which enables the reader to "see" the world through the eyes of Apostol Bologna. Changes in the literary approach brought over by modernism are doubtlessly a reaction to the inadequacy of traditional forms not being able to express the horror of World War I. The question arises naturally: *Are novels that are more aligned with modernist paradigms better at meeting this need?* In case of these three novels, the answer is affirmative. Although a much larger corpus would be needed for any general conclusions, the example of the novels taken under consideration demonstrates that the novels relying on modernist methods conveyed the anti-war message more successfully.

Prijevod: Iris Olujić Ljubica