



The Turn. Liviu Rebreanu's Hungarian Drama and Drama Fragments

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Abstract. The paper focuses on that moment of Liviu Rebreanu's activity as a writer when his linguistic turn takes place. The author of Romanian nationality living in the Hungarian state before Trianon, who, according to the ambitions of the family wishing to rise, pursues his school studies in the Hungarian language, writes his first literary experiments (dramas, novel fragments and short stories) in Hungarian. However, while writing the drama fragment entitled *Gigi (Ghigghi)*, the writer, dismissed from the army and going through an existential crisis, continues to write in Romanian; through a few pages he translates the text started in Hungarian into Romanian, then he continues it exclusively in Romanian. But the change of the target public – due to significant social and cultural differences – does not make it possible for him to render the selected life material of autobiographical character as originally planned. The text remains in a fragmentary form.

The adequate rendering of the autobiographical motifs chosen as the materials of the first works can take place only in his great novels (first of all in *Ion* and in *The Forest of the Hanged [Pădurea spânzuraților]*), as long as it is in these that the author and his public (implicitly the narrator of the novels and the fictitious readers) can really meet. Based on the reconsideration of the problem of form-content, the study follows the changes that the autobiographical motifs undergo in the communicative space of successive works, as well as the functional mechanisms of rendering.

Keywords: material and form, form-content, content-form, life material, narrative situation, target public, cultural-social contexts

Material and form

In the study of literature the inseparability of form and content, as a matter of principle, already counts as a commonplace today, however, the view stoutly survives in the practice of literary criticism, of literary analysis and of writing literary history, according to which the most general cause of artistic failures is that the author – during the process of creating the literary work – is not capable of finding the form corresponding to the content. However, this assumption can only mean that, still, content and form differ. It is only and exclusively in this case that we can expect them to correspond to each other.

In my view, the reason for the confusion is that theory does not make a clear difference between what is usually called material and content respectively. For what we generally call content is in fact material in the case of literature and the other arts as well. Presumably everybody would agree with me in the fact that the primary *material* of the literature of all times is the authorial experience, which is also called life material usually, totally irrespective of whether the experience is real or imaginary. It is the *original form of this life material* moulded by the author during the process of creation that is traditionally called “content.”

However, in the case of the literary work, as it is observed, after Louis Hjelmslev, also by Antoine Compagnon (2008, 40), we also have to reckon with another material, namely, the *material of expression*, that is, the linguistic material in the case of literature, contours, nuances and colours in the case of fine arts and film, as well as musical sound in the case of music. The form of these *materials*, also *moulded by the artist, is the artistic form*.

The *aesthetic form* (and this is what I would add) is the consonance of the two, while the *aesthetic value* is the *degree of the equivalence* (adequacy) *between the two forms*. In this approach the material and the form are indeed inseparable, as even the most “shapeless” material (e.g., the air) also has some kind of form, in other words, it is perceptible in some way, and also the form itself can become perceptible only as the form of some material. Even the thought can appear only in a linguistic-logical or emotional form respectively, and the latter can be concretized only in thoughts.

It can also become clear that what theory understands by the terms form and content is nothing else but the artistic rendering of the original life material in accordance with the author’s artistic purposes. But we also have to see that the original form primarily shows here the particularities of the material, while in the result it is again the features of the form that seem to prevail. However, during the further treatments of the motif these form features can become themselves the materials of newer artistic renderings. Thus, it seems to be the matter of the viewpoint when and how we will (primarily) perceive that unnamable entity by which we understand form and content. Of course, this is also valid as regards the

material and the form of expression. And although in the case of literature the former *figure* – which can also be called *inner form* – can appear only in linguistic form, indeed, the mental figures of these two forms are not necessarily identical, as a consequence, so that a real work of art should come to life, they really have to correspond to each other.

The possibility of mutual correspondence (since language in itself, as sounding, cannot much resemble the life material itself) is created by the fact that the two materials moulded in distinct ways can be traced back to the same material-form complex, to the figures of imagination. The linguistic communication represented by the literary work can raise in the human mind experiences of the same nature as those raised by the original experience (the rendering of life material). This is understandable, since according to today's psychological theories, the everyday experiences (the existence of the outer world and the happenings and actions taking place within) are mind constructs similar to the world of literary works (Glaserrsfeld 1997, 132-149). What is more, as Paul Ricoeur proved it in his work *Temps et récit* (Ricoeur 1983-1984-1985), the everyday experiences called by him *pre-narrative* are also organized by artistic narrative schemes or by ones of analogous origin. That is, the process gets closed within itself: it is not only the life material that grounds literature, but the narrative structures worked out in literature (and in its antecedents, in the linguistic world view, and in the mythologies built on it) also have a determining role in turning the events of the outer world into life materials.

Thus, the question of the life material is impossible to ignore as regards art, also despite the fact that starting with the so-called immanentist literary theories (see, for instance, Jefferson-Robey 1995, 27-105), the study of literature prefers to exclude the question of authorial life experience, taken in the above dual sense, from the scope of literary research.

As it would be inconsistent if the life material could become the starting point of the analysis only if the moulded (more precisely, transformed) life material is of secondary, that is, of literary origin (see intertextuality!). The aesthetic performance depends, also in this case, on the transformations effectuated on the literary motif, subject, theme, topos (that is, artistic rendering).

The success can be grounded, also in this case, by the choice of material disposing of adequate form features – that is, literally offering itself to literary expression through its original form features. Just as in the case of the so-called life material.

The start of Rebreanu's career as a writer

The above considerations can acquire a special significance as regards Liviu Rebreanu's activity as a writer. As it is well-known, the author's most significant

works are based, without exception, on personal or community experiences. Even in the case of works such as *The Uprising* [*Răscoala*], about which the author could not have had personal experiences, but which are based on treatments, with a documentary-like fidelity, of well-known historical events.

Several motifs of the author's biography achieve mature completeness during their occurrence in various literary genres. By surveying the author's early drama, then prose experiments written in the Hungarian language, as well as certain aspects of his mature works, the present paper tries to follow, respectively, to explore, within the length provided by the present framework, the process of mutual correspondence of the inner and outer forms.

The frame conditions of this process are set by the relationship between the author and his virtual public. The author is predestined to strong ambition by the family environment, by the social ambitions of his mother and father rising from the ranks. And as every ambitious young man, he longs for quick and spectacular success. It is well-known that in the capitals of the age of dualism, both in Vienna and in Budapest, theatre is one of the most important forums of social life, accessible also for the middle layers, on which the people from the top of social hierarchy can also appear regularly. For an ambitious, freshly assimilated young man, who gradually also has to realize that the military career, chosen as the means of social rise, cannot fulfil the hopes attached to it, the possibility of a playwright's career would naturally arise. As drama does not require lasting effort, as the novel does, and the success is immediate and direct.

Thus, it can be considered natural that Rebreanu tries out this first.

The Whirl

The basic material of the first full (three-act) and completed dramatic work is literary. It is written in 1907–1908. It is characterized by an obsolete Neo-Romanticism, by a strong epigone-like character. It contains reminiscences of Schiller, Gorkij, and Knut Hamsun, demonic and angelic figures, a live conflict focused on the inner torments of the heroine, and finally, on her desperate gesture. It is full of naïvely romantic revolutionary character, blind adherence to the given word (to some extent in the spirit of Schiller's *Intrigue and Love*). It is about the melodramatic self-sacrifice of the girl saving her love, implying the ironic futility of sacrifice.

The title versions – *The Anarchist*, *Rivals*, and finally *The Whirl* – show the gradual intensification of the tendency of psychological realism. The social and aesthetic ideology aligning with the supposed state of mind and expectations of the Hungarian viewers is well discernible. The foreignness of Grazzini, the intriguer, the Hungarian spirit of Barchay, the protagonist, the monarchist fidelity of Laár, the protagonist's uncle – are all manifestations of the assimilative mentality (to be

more Hungarian than the Hungarians). And it is this that the melodramatic style characteristic of the stages from Vienna and Budapest of the turn of the century arises from. However, so that Rebreanu should have a success, he does not know his chosen public well enough yet, and besides, so that his work should become successful and enduring from an artistic point of view, he knows it too well.

The main motifs of the play are as follows: female passion also capable of the greatest sacrifice for the beloved man under the given social circumstances (even risking the man's love), the sacredness to ad absurdum of the given word (becoming ungrounded in the meantime), the wild-romantic drama of the plotter also assuming the odium of regicide for the sake of the love obtained by extortion. The romantic life material, the realistic linguistic-dramaturgical rendering striving for psychological authenticity are opposed to each other, so instead of reinforcing each other – with some kind of aesthetic resonance –, or instead of the author's making use of the dramatic tension between them, in fact they destroy each other. The incongruence of the inner and outer forms undermines the aesthetic effect. In the theatrical world the experiment will not be welcomed, not even in spite of the author's hustle. Later Rebreanu himself writes about his first dramatic attempts: "I kept persuading the theatre directors to put them on stage. I was convinced that they were very good" (Donea 1935, 3). However, their performance was out of the question.

A new source: the personal experience material

Presumably he himself is aware of the cause of failure. He tries to search for more authentic life material, also more profoundly known by him. It seems evident that in what follows he takes as a basis his own and his family's world of experiences.

The two directly experience-based conflict kernels of the early works are related to the social situation of the family. Both his father and his mother are of peasant descent. The only difference is that the mother, who is originally intended to get married to a "suitable" man, derives from a wealthier family. But in the meantime the family grows poor, the mother has to get married to a primary school teacher, which she perceives as a kind of *mésalliance* all through her life. But even the middle-class rise can be realized only partially, there is an everlasting gap between the modest primary school teacher's wages and the middle-class pretensions.

Nevertheless, they want to lift their children out of this form of existence. As concerns Liviu, the most obvious opportunity is the career of an intellectual, and within, the military career. However, the path to this leads almost exclusively through assimilation. True, the military career also implies the possibility of rising into the aristocracy. But this should also be accompanied by an aristocratic

lifestyle. And in this there lies one of the cruellest paradoxes of the peculiar liberalism of the Monarchy. The military career bearing the promise of the rise as well as the lack of material grounds of the aristocratic lifestyle compels the young officers of civilian descent into a tragic dead-end. The 1907 “embezzlement,” the forced residence, the dismissal from the army, the conviction and imprisonment known from sublieutenant Olivér Rébrán’s biography are also the consequences of this paradox.

The other family experience: the elder sister Lívia Rebreanu’s maiden passion, then forced marriage. The formation of the so-called “young lady’s” self-consciousness and – for lack of a proper dowry – the necessary failure of the marriage attempt proper for a lady can also be regarded as the female version of the failure accompanying the military career. As it is only a rich dowry that could create the possibility of a socially advantageous marriage.

The author directly converts both themes, acquiring the status of specific motifs in the following period of creation, into the basic material of narrative and dramatic texts. In both cases the basic conflict is based on the contrast between appearance and reality, and as such, it is essentially of comic character.

Second Lieutenant Valkó

The play, also planned to be a three-act one, is the dramatic rendering of the first theme. We already know the facts of the biography, and also the paradox of the Monarchy. For lack of a material background, keeping up the appearance of belonging to the upper class is possible only at the cost of norm breaking for the young non-commissioned officer. As testified by the draft of a letter addressed to a bank-clerk of Romanian nationality (Gheran 1980, 1155), Rebreanu runs into serious debt, then he is constrained to lay hands on the money of the regiment he is in charge of. However, the bank does not lend the sum of money necessary for solving the situation. Tragedy becomes inevitable.

We dispose of life facts as regards a failed love relationship (and marriage plan respectively) (Gheran 1980, 1157).

The facts of the drama fragment are as follows: second lieutenant Valkó tries to keep up with the appearances of the lifestyle of an officer. But the inevitable failure also dooms the young officer’s love passion to failure.

Thus, there is a clear connection between Olivér Rébrán’s 500 florins that disappeared “without a trace” (Gheran 1980, 1155) and second lieutenant Valkó’s lavish spending to keep up the appearances – financed from the regiment’s cashier. It suggests the relative purity of self-perception that what Rebreanu officially denies (Gheran 1980, 1155), he publicly admits it in a literary form. The main reason for the failure of the dramatic attempt is the paradoxical character of the tragic tone. What is deeply tragical from the point of view of the hero, is base from

the viewpoint of the receiver, and this is why it can count as a pitiable act at the very most. The projection upon each other of the two viewpoints would result in a comic effect. However, the view of the Chekhovian comedy seeming suitable for the treatment of the topic is unattainable for the author at the time. The melodramatic approach of the comic life material, again, results in the incongruence of the inner and outer forms. And this threatens with the destruction of the aesthetic experience ... In this way Rebreanu is constrained to give up his attempt to struggle with the theme.

Nevertheless, he does not give up the fight. He tries his wings in narrative form. He works up the topic in short stories (*The Second Lieutenant, Mr Lieutenant, The Major*), as well as in the novel fragment published in Romanian translation in no. 3 from 1975 of the journal entitled Manuscriptum under the title *Cazarma [The Barracks]* (Gheran 1980, 1156). With a modest success. Eventually he drops this too personal (and painful) motif. Similar reminiscences of *The Forest of the Hanged [Pădurea spânzuraților]* are no longer about social illusions, but about the conflicts, tragic indeed (and actual till now), of the concepts of the civil vs. cultural nation. Here the paradoxes related to the lifestyle of an officer fit into an adequate framework. History confronts the integrated officer with his renounced identity. The social problems also appear in a national perspective. The almost perfect unity of the outer and inner forms is also enhanced by the much more flexible possibilities of narrative rendering.

Gigi (Ghighi)

The story of his sister Livia's love also becomes the material of a dramatic and narrative motif, evolving in a complex manner. In the writer's legacy the manuscripts of the plans of three dramas survived (Gheran 1980, 1161-1169). In the first version there are only Hungarian names and first names. In later versions (there are several ones) there are Hungarian family and first names. In the final version only Romanian family and first names occur. The biography background is that in the meantime Rebreanu is dismissed from the army.

The fullest surviving drama fragment is also significant for us because we can catch in the act the author's linguistic-cultural turn.

The first two scenes are written in Hungarian, but there already occur Romanian text parts in it. The third scene is already bilingual, Rebreanu starts to translate the Hungarian text into Romanian, through a few replicas the Hungarian and Romanian texts run in parallel, then it continues exclusively in Romanian. And at the end of the act the play comes to an end. Rebreanu cannot write the planned second and third acts, as he realizes with a good sense that Ghighi and his mother's turnabout is impossible to carry out – on the stage – with psychological authenticity.

That is, the virtual form of the life material and the actual linguistic-dramaturgical form of the play continue to exclude each other. And Rebreanu himself also feels this. And not even stepping from one language medium into the other one proves to be suitable for solving the problem. However, the change of perspective, in a narratological sense, is illuminating by all means.

The Consequences of the Perspective Change

The comic character is explicitly present already in the first version. And as it is attested by some brilliantly executed linguistic solutions as well as some well-explored dramatic ambiguity, Rebreanu would also have a comic vein. But: the Hungarian satire of the snobbishness would basically represent a social phenomenon, whereas the Romanian satire of the snobbishness automatically gains national overtones. The one who wants to “rise” into the upper class, has to assimilate at the same time. The satirical tone (thanks to the newly formed national perspective) is reinforced, but Rebreanu, the assimilant can (then not *yet*, later *no longer*) get to the phase of facing the problem of assimilation. In absence of this, he can try to find a way out only in the moralizing retorts of the wealthy paternal uncle having a great authority in the given situation. The emancipatory pathos of the free choice of the spouse and the “common sense,” based on an archaic (but at this time already hopelessly obsolete) wisdom, of the uncle are, unfortunately, not only incompatible, but also profoundly grotesque. And Rebreanu is much too talented not to perceive this (in spite of his biases – characteristic of his entire life work, in some of its features reasonable, in others not – towards the values of the peasant world) ...

The afterlife of the motif

The dramatic possibility of solving the conflict would be provided this time as well, by the Chekhovian tragi-comedy. In Rebreanu’s case, if he had chosen assimilation, these chances would also have existed. If not, there would remain the recognition of the human and social values of the son-in-law preferred by the parents, the melodramatic “turn,” the revaluation of the national middle class. However, at this moment Rebreanu’s sense of reality makes not even this possible.

The figure of Ghighi from the sketch *The Row* [*Cearța*], then Laura and Ghighi from *Ion* (the first Rebreanu-novel which remains the most significant all through), realize a third, narrative version, in which Laura will act Ghighi’s role.

Laura is in love with a rich medical student called Aurel Ungureanu (the love of the model from the biography, Livia Rebreanu, is also a medical student called Aurel Sasu, and the connection of the names, Sasu, Ungureanu, is not accidental either). However, the husband chosen by the parents is a graduate theologian,

George Pinteá (it is also not accidental that his name reminds of the legendary hero of the Romanian folk ballads, Pinteá Viteazul!). And George, of course, is no longer bald as his alter ego from the play, he is only short.

The descendant of the father (the young man teaching in the state school) will be the younger daughter Ghighi's husband. But here there is no trace of the earlier conflict. What is more, the episode will be downright crystallized as one moment of the solution of the basic conflict. The new primary school teacher will have the possibility to pass on the old Herdelea's conscientiousness and honour into the nation-state looming, even unexpressedly, on the horizon of the novel.

The solution of the paradox

The motif gets into a new social context, acceptable also for the reader. Laura falls in love with a man devoted to a national ideal and gets married into a great family – symbolizing the demographic foundation of the Romanian national ideal. In this context the contrast between appearance and reality can be solved for the benefit of reality (the community self-realization of the citizen of Romanian nationality), with idyllic overtones. The satire gets domesticated into a slight irony – which can hardly be perceived in the beginning, but which is reinforced by the ending (Bíró 2009, 145-164).

The problem of assimilation does not appear later on either. It is understandable why. After the formation of Great Romania the assimilation becomes questionable on the Hungarian part. However, Rebreanu's exceptionally sensitive empathy in other respects (necessarily?) escapes this question. Unfortunately, since if he had not ignored it, he could have formed a more up-to-date standpoint also as regards the Hungarians from Transylvania who had become part of the Romanian monarchy and rejected assimilation, in this way he may have influenced the relationship between the two nations in a more positive way.

Rebreanu's texts written in Hungarian perplex their readers by their impeccable Hungarian language. If we did not know that the mother tongue of their writer is Romanian, we could not realize this in any way. What is more, at the time of writing these texts, the author knows the Hungarian literary language better than the Romanian one. He has the opportunity of getting to know the latter – in a deeper sense of the word – only after he settles in Bucharest. What is peculiar is that after the text in Ghighi he never writes a word in Hungarian again. He virtually breaks off all relations with the Hungarian culture. Today we can think only with nostalgia of the fact what services a writer disposing of Rebreanu's knowledge and abilities could have done to the rapprochement between the two nations. It is, of course, not Rebreanu who is primarily responsible for the fact that this (mostly) did not take place, but mainly the Hungarian political regime, which made this rapprochement impossible within the framework of the Hungarian state by having

tried to impose assimilation, by direct and indirect means, upon its citizens of Romanian mother tongue and culture.

The addressee and the message

The changed addressee (that is, the Romanian reader advanced into a majority) no longer perceives in *Ion* the basic conflict characteristic of the life material. In the perspective of the national unity the Herdelea family suddenly turns into the upper middle class. It is exactly this intellectual layer that Great Romania raises to the top of social hierarchy. At least apparently!

However, this is already another story, which others (Mateiu Caragiale, Camil Petrescu, Cezar Petrescu, Mihail Sebastian) will make the raw material of the artistic expression, for another public ...

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