

ALICE VOINESCU: CONSTRUCTING FEMININE IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT. *Alice Voinescu: Constructing Feminine Identity.* One of the most promising intellectual figures of her time, Alice Voinescu fell into obscurity and sadly never managed to impact Romanian society as much as she could have. Her diary entries reveal a complex figure often at odds with traditional gender roles. She had high confidence in Christian values and also kept under close scrutiny the rise and fall of important cultural icons shaping the age: from Queen Maria, much respected by her, to her Communist oppressors. Always concerned with the possibility of authenticity against the background of injustice, she left behind a diary that is both an enlightening and a puzzling text.

Keywords: *aristocratic, authenticity, dignity, ethics, gender, scholar.*

REZUMAT. *Alice Voinescu: construcția identității feminine.* Una dintre cele mai promițătoare figuri intelectuale ale timpului său, Alice Voinescu a căzut în uitare și nu a reușit, din păcate, să aibă impactul promis asupra societății românești. Însemnările din jurnalul ei ne indică o figură complexă, adeseori în conflict cu rolurile tradiționale de gen. Ea își punea speranțele în valorile creștinismului și urmărea, totodată, cu mare interes și luciditate personalitățile culturale ale epocii, de la Regina Maria, pe care o stima enorm, la opresorii ei comuniști. Preocupată permanent de posibilitatea autenticității în contextul nedreptății, jurnalul lui Alice este, în același timp, un text revelator și derutant.

Cuvinte cheie: *aristocratic, autenticitate, demnitate, etică, gen, intelectual.*

*Motto: Am I objective by any chance? I don't know.
I'm honest*² (Alice Voinescu: 167)

In order to achieve a certain energy and authority nowadays, female writing needed to be legitimized throughout time by the authorial experiments of women who, as early as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, faced the

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² "Oare sunt obiectivă? Nu știu. Sunt sinceră". 23rd November 1939.

isolation, alienation, and obscurity usually associated with a subculture, an experience challenging enough on its own even without mentioning the ever present, yet more intense in their case, anxiety of influence (Harold Bloom's concept as developed in his 1973 study, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*). When it comes to Romania there is a certain delay in this process so that female authorship is even more problematic at the beginning of the twentieth century. A relevant case study could be Alice Voinescu's self-portrait as it emerges in her diary entries since she was not seen as a leading intellectual of her time, but instead was consistently judged for not complying with the gender role she was expected to live up to.

Fortunate enough to have studied in the West (Philosophy in France at that!), Alice returned to a country that was clearly unprepared to accept her voice as it lacked the appropriate symbolic structures to accept her as a cultural icon. Indeed, we may notice a certain double standard at the time when it came to the reaction of the masses to her return: "The country had not seen a woman teach at university level, so much the more when the subject was Philosophy!"³ (Voinescu VII), and Paleologu adds that, looking back, "luckily for Romanian culture and society, she had to accept a job at the Music Academy in Bucharest and the Department of History of Dramatic Literature, where until 1948 she gave talks that were greatly influential at their time"⁴ (Voinescu VII). Although her training far exceeded the requirements of the job, this was the best medium Romanian culture could offer to have her voice heard as a female scholar. The very same audience outraged by the idea of a woman publicly associating herself with Philosophy, the elitist social science reigning supreme over all the others, readily accepted her as a spokesperson for dramatic literature. The hierarchy is implicit. Up to that moment, she had already refused the proposal of an American university impressed by her PhD thesis, *L'interprétation de la doctrine de Kant par l'école de Marburg* (Paris, 1913). She motivated her choice by referring to her social status: "I can't accept, my fiancé is waiting for me back home in Romania"⁵ (Voinescu: VII). One can only speculate now what her career path might have been if her fiancé, Stelu/Stello, had accepted to accompany her to the United States.

If feminism is to be seen as a new type of literarity used not only when texts are read, but also when daily life is seen and reinterpreted from a certain

³ „În țară nu se mai pomenise o femeie profesoară la universitate, și încă filozofie!” (All quotations have been translated by Cristina Diamant.)

⁴ „spre norocul culturii și societății românești, a trebuit să primească la Conservatorul din București și catedra de istoria literaturii dramatice, la care a ținut până în 1948 prelegerile care au făcut epocă”.

⁵ „Nu pot accepta, în România mă așteaptă logodnicul meu”.

perspective, we will now “read” the figure of the woman as it is reflected in her diary entries, taking into account Voinescu’s own attitude towards her gender and its importance in constructing a coherent sense of the self. What we must keep in mind at all times, however, is that there is no simple transfer of the person and the *persona* into the text in question. This is a two-way process, as it creates an opening that makes the unconscious editing of one’s own memories possible while trying to streamline events so as to have a structured narrative account of what was lived. As Jankélévitch puts it, there is a metaphysics of the *je-ne-sais-quoi* and *presque-rien*. Nothing is lost and nothing is gained: the self in a diary is much like the Argonauts’ ship: having all pieces replaced during its journey, but going by the same name, nevertheless.

Drawing strictly upon biographical data, it would seem that the claims of Joanna Russ in *How To Suppress Women’s Writing* (1984) are justified: the assumptions that women do, indeed, objectively write less and...worse are only supported by the “loss” of their works, sometimes even at the hands of their very authors who do not handle carefully what they have written and underestimate the value of their own writings. Female writing is rarely preserved and appreciated for its potential to inspire and motivate despite its great diversity. Alice Voinescu, although not present in textbooks, reveals herself in the diary to have been an active figure in Romanian cultural life, demonstrating remarkable awareness and impressive critical thinking both regarding her personal efforts and those of other contemporary cultural personalities. An issue she continuously comes against is the double standard at the socio-cultural level. Authorship is positively valued when it is the recognizable trademark of one’s uniqueness, an idiosyncratic manner of seeing the world yet, at the same time, there is a certain social pressure for women to accept the spirit of an ideology that promotes self-sacrifice and delayed rewards, always associating their selves with those of the others. Consequently, to be a woman then means not having a self-sufficient self. How to be a writer autonomous in both life and thought, even to ostentatiously mark this difference without being accused that you break the rules of your gender and fail as a woman?

The language itself is not particularly “friendly” towards women as cultural figures as it raises the issue of the *paternity* of the work, its literary *filliation* or *disseminating* ideas. Alice internalizes a complex in relation to the canonical, established texts, as well as an intimidating distance from them. What she writes on Monologue II from *Faust* becomes, in her own eyes, a sum of “empty comments”⁶ for “such a text”⁷, and even this effort in itself is justified

⁶ „sarbede comentarii”

⁷ „astfel de text”

in the diary by her need to look after others and fictionalized as “the growing crowd of youngsters which will never come into contact with *Faust* otherwise”⁸ (Voinescu: 535). Inevitably, following this logic, her position is that of a subaltern: “I play the *temptress* or, better put, that of a middleman”⁹ (Voinescu: 535). She appreciates Petre Manoliu’s qualities that she already demonstrated, namely his “remarkable precision of thought and deep feeling, great vocabulary, with intellectual embellishments”¹⁰ (Voinescu: 566), all the while adding that she hopes that he might have “the courage to start writing”¹¹. Self-reflexive enough to notice the paradox of the situation, she quickly adds, “Why don’t I write?” and her answer highlights the impossibility of independence, “Because the world is tearing me apart. I need to create my own routine so that I may work”¹² (Voinescu: 566). In her diary, her intellectual side appears to have always been “broken apart”, “interrupted”, “absent”¹³ even due to the active presence that the woman Alice Voinescu assumed according to what society expected to be her gender role. While she diligently worked on educating the masses and society proved to be very accepting of such a quasi-motherly attitude, Alice hesitated when it came to foregrounding her own original thinking and involuntarily cursed her work to the level of immanence, of the now and here. Although appreciated for her conferences, she came to see them first and foremost as a duty, not as a way to achieve self-fulfillment: “The lectures are over, good thing I got out of it, they had to be given, but, once given, I can no longer muster up the courage to write them down. Laziness or perhaps something else? Perhaps lack of faith in myself? Once again, I am absent”¹⁴ (Voinescu: 387). Her thought patterns were not egocentric, always turned towards the self, but “dissipated”, not permitting the formation of a lasting *opus*, and Alice thought of herself as being “so *somewhere else*, exceedingly impersonal”¹⁵ (Voinescu: 13). The distance that she took from her own desires and needs significantly decreased her work motivation when she tried “to work on past conferences. But they are the fruit of a dreamy idealism. They were good and beautiful because they were true. I can no longer speak like that”¹⁶ (Voinescu: 7), the woman’s

⁸ „mulțimea crescândă de tineret, care altfel nu se va apropia niciodată de Faust”. 20th October 1948.

⁹ „Fac oficiul de ‘ademenitoare’ sau mai bine zis de samsar!”. 20th October 1948.

¹⁰ „Gândește ascuțit și simte dramatic, vocabular bogat, înflorit intelectual”. 11th February 1950.

¹¹ „curajul să se pună pe scris”

¹² „Că mă destramă lumea. Trebuie să-mi fac un program așa încât să pot lucra”. 11th February 1950.

¹³ „destrămat”, „înterupt”, „absent”

¹⁴ „Conferințele au trecut, bine că am scăpat, trebuiau spuse, dar, o dată spuse, nu mai am curajul să le scriu. Lene sau altceva? Oare neîncredere în mine? Iar sunt absentă”. 21st May 1942.

¹⁵ „așa de *dincolo*, prea impersonală”. 4th November 1929.

¹⁶ „[î]ncerc să lucrez la conferințe trecute. Dar ele sunt rodul unui idealism visător. Erau bune și frumoase fiindcă erau adevărate. Acum nu mai pot vorbi așa”. 4th October 1929.

discourse started undermining that of the intellectual who felt this lack of authenticity and independence and wished "to live a few more years, so that I may grow in accordance with what I am living right now!"¹⁷ (Voinescu: 7). Always suffering from an impostor syndrome, Alice preferred to teach and–translate rather than write works of her own. At times, however, certain circumstances also limited her freedom to choose the texts. For instance, in 1961, she hesitated for quite a long about translating Feuerbach. Financial issues urged her to accept the offer, yet her principles pointed in a different direction: "What am I to do with such a sensualist and heretic?"¹⁸ (Voinescu: 803). To maintain her sense of self-coherence, she used the Christian rhetoric of necessary humility and accepted "only the challenge to have to admit that everybody makes compromises when needed"¹⁹ (Voinescu: 803). Turning her knowledge towards others, the image that she cultivated and which was also accepted by the others through a certain understanding of gender is codified as a motherly one. One of her closest friends, Maria Ana Murnu, recalled that, for her students, she was *Madam (Doamna)*. Alice "with her slightly springy gait, as if always ready to fly away, holding under her arm the books she had just explained to us, with her flaxen hair waving around the hat quite coquettishly lop-sided, she listened to her *children*, as she called them"²⁰ (Voinescu: X).

Even if she challenged certain social customs, Alice was not completely free from the constrains of her gender. Control is, just as Foucault observed, implicit and invisible, so that "docile bodies" are normalized by the gaze of the others and one's own desire to be accepted, integrated within the system. In this Panopticon, an all-seeing prison (Jeremy Bentham), coercion is replaced by cooperation, and power relations are supported by the pretense of an "expertise": knowledge is power, but not all people benefit from knowledge. Alice herself often lamented that she lacked the necessary "expertise". Never condescending or dominating the other, she left her loved ones with a lasting memory of "her kindness that overshadowed her great intelligence, [which] was, indeed, one of the heart but originated from an immense power to understand (matters one may otherwise not question)"²¹ (Voinescu: V), as well as for her "tendency [...] to *submit herself* to the needs of others, to reality, to truth. And especially to God."²² (Voinescu: VII). Socialized as a woman, she

¹⁷ „să mai trăiesc câțiva ani, să mă pot coace în sensul celor ce trăiesc acum!”. 4th October 1929.

¹⁸ „Ce legătură am eu cu acest senzualist și necreștin?”, 18th June 1958.

¹⁹ „doar încercarea de a trebui să recunosc că tot omul face compromisuri la nevoie”, 18th June 1958.

²⁰ „Cu mersul puțin săltat, parcă mereu pregătită de zbor, purtând sub braț cărțile al căror înțeles ni-l tălmăcise, cu părul auriu fluturând în jurul pălăriei cochet aplecată, își asculta *copiii* (așa îi numea)”.

²¹ „Bunătatea aceasta, care-i eclipsa marea inteligență, [care] era într-adevăr a inimii dar venea dintr-o imensă putere de înțelegere (în fond lucruri indiscutabile)”.

²² „Pornirea ei (...) de a *se supune* nevoii altuia, realității, adevărului. Și mai cu seamă lui Dumnezeu”.

would motivate her decision to eliminate what she had written by following a set of values incompatible with her academic career: "At times I am unrelenting towards my own nature. I'd much rather be seen as stupid than risk being thought mean"²³ (Voinescu: 548). Because of her dramatic hesitation between her two "natures", that of the woman and that of the intellectual, although, in reality, both are cultural aspects, she left her Paris friends, Lala and Flo, the feeling that hers was a *volatile* existence. The conflict between the emotivity that she believed she was to assume and the tendency towards sharp rationality confused her, so that "I can't make out the sense of certain leftovers, images of leftovers, in me! Had this been sometime else, I might have lost my temper, now I am too self-assured, the sign of an irredeemable indifference. It might be a victory, but it's spiritual lessening."²⁴ (Voinescu: 13).

Although in the implicit hierarchy, derived from Descartes, the spirit is superior to feeling and the corporeal, getting closer to it is felt to be a "betrayal" of the gender rather than an enriching of the self in the sense of the Hegelian synthesis. With such impossible self-imposed standards, one is sure to experience a sense of failure. Even so, the "tools" associated with her gender are at times useful when reason is not enough to make a concrete reality bearable: "The day began with difficulty. My foot hurts terribly – badly swollen, no boot fits me. The despair of a small child, crying. The heroic decision to leave even if my eyes were to pop out! Pedicure. Good bandage. Bearable."²⁵ (Voinescu: 70). At other times, being outside of what is desirable for her gender offered her a new margin of freedom and the scholar could ignore the woman: "Yesterday I was happy to be ugly – at least there is nothing time can ruin. When will I return to my writing? O! How many times to start anew?"²⁶ (Voinescu: 22). Although the text discussed is difficult to be placed in the framework developed by the American critic Elaine Showalter in *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979), Alice makes a shy attempt at a "female" type of writing as she searches for her identity outside the constraints of the established androcentric models, but without openly protesting against them, as the protest would mean maintaining their position of power as a point of

²³ „Sunt uneori severă contra firii mele. Prefer să trec drept proastă și să nu risc să fiu rea”. 9th March 1949.

²⁴ „Nu deslușesc ce rost au anumite resturi, umbre de resturi, în mine! Altădată mi-aș fi pierdut cumpătul, acum sunt prea stăpână pe mine, semn de iremediabilă indiferență. O fi victorie, dar e sărăcie sufletească”. 4th November 1929.

²⁵ „Zi începută greu. Piciorul doare îngrozitor – inflammat, nu mă încapă nici o gheată. Disperare de copil mic, plâns. Hotărâre eroică să plec și de mi-a sări ochii! Pedichiură. Pansament bun. Suportabil”. 26th September 1932.

²⁶ „Aseară am fost fericită de a fi urâtă – măcar timpul nu are nimic de stricat. Când mă voi reîntoarce la scris? O! De câte ori să reîncep?” 28th January 1930.

reference. This type of writing exposes a preoccupation with certain issues thought to be “feminine” (the pain of others, friendship, marital conflicts, etc.) not because of a projected “feminine sensibility” (an idea that is obviously an essentialist one), but because of a framework of experience quite common for many women. To bring her self into being through language, Alice must adapt the linguistic code to her own experience, always operating a selection that would permit her a minimum of unity and stability. As such, this effort may explain the hesitations and rifts noticeable within the text.

Quite common for our society, the intellectual is construed in the masculine gender. Paleologu himself, trying to express his appreciation, carefully added a disclaimer: her diary is “mostly on the emotive side (without reducing its extreme critical awareness in any manner) and comprehensive, in both senses of the word, so that it shows an extraordinary power of understanding and an immense material breadth”²⁷ (Voinescu: V). Alice was, indeed, aware of her existence on the fringes of her gender role: “He came twice and spilled his soul unto me – he needed manly understanding, as well as womanly kindness – I gave it all to him as much as I could”²⁸ (Voinescu: 8). The identity constructed in such a type of discourse about the self is, even when tacitly protesting, an “aristocratic” one, cultivating a type of sensibility that is not dramatic, but delicate and elitist. Society granted women the right to be aware of their own superiority if motivated by social standing. As such, when she attempted this “reversed gymnastics”²⁹ (Voinescu: 548), in which she only submitted to herself to avoid “moral death in this conformist stew”³⁰ (Voinescu: 548), the social class argument made a not so subtle presence “You have to lead a royal lifestyle if you descend from a king! [...] I’ll take the following decision: I’ll begin *da capo* from healthy selfishness. I will try. I will dare!”³¹ (Voinescu: 548). In a conversation about a woman’s reaction to lying in a marriage, she admits that “today’s woman – the mature one and living in the now, not dolls living outside of reality”³² (Voinescu: 3), was an *exception* back in the day. Contrary to what men may have thought, she was dissatisfied

²⁷ „precumpănitor afectiv (ceea ce nu-i scade câtuși de puțin extrema luciditate critică) și comprehensiv, în ambele sensuri, adică de o extraordinară putere de înțelegere și de o imensă cuprindere materială”.

²⁸ „De vreo două ori a venit și și-a vărsat sufletul la mine – avea nevoie de înțelegere bărbătească și blândețe și bunătate feminină – i-o dam cât puteam”. 10th October 1929.

²⁹ „această gimnastică *à rebours*”. 9th March 1949.

³⁰ „pier moralmente într-o ciulama conformistă”. 9th March 1949.

³¹ „Trebuie să trăiești regal dacă ești de neam regesc! (...) Iau o hotărâre: încep *da capo* de la egoismul sănătos. Voi încerca. Voi îndrăzni!”. 9th March 1949.

³² „că femeia de azi – cea coaptă și a vremii, iar nu păpușă și în afară de realitate”. 30th September 1929.

with illusions, with the only exception that she accepted the “illusion [that] is the strong and true reality, not the lie-like illusion, but the illusion that may create and which is born out of knowing the truth”³³ (Voinescu: 3).

As a woman, Alice is caught between parallel mirrors that highlight her feeling of being torn apart, of being inauthentic. Therefore, the narrator’s voice always negotiates meaning between the society that asks her to be useful to others and Stello, who demands exclusivity. From the very beginning, we find out that the diary exists because of the first mirror. It was written not for herself, but for an audience, namely “you and Lala and Flo and Mad, maybe you’ll also read it to others who knew me as I was and who will benefit from one’s past experience to deal with the more difficult times in life”³⁴ (Voinescu: 1). The first motivation started from one of Roger Martin du Gard’s replies at Pontigny, because of whom Alice declared that “*I will write all that I intimately live, all the spiritual surplus left from life and – because I have never done anything without love, nothing useful, I mean – I knew that even this decision I would not follow through with unless I dedicated it to someone*”³⁵ (Voinescu: 1). The assumed honesty of the diary tends to obscure its format, characterised by a fragmentary appearance, a broken pace and by its very incompleteness. Indeed, Alice’s diary also walks the fine line between self-concealment and self-disclosure. The wish to be useful will also be reflected in matters of interpersonal relationships. When Tudor Vianu admitted that he suffered from nervous asthenia, she not only empathized with him, but also, since he “promised he would come to me as he would to Diothima. On such occasions I still feel useful”³⁶ (Voinescu: 803). The tragedy of the poor conditions in which she lived her last years stemmed mostly from the fact that the first mirroring was no longer possible: “I am no longer interesting to anyone. [...] Some people still come to visit me, but they no longer need me.”³⁷ (Voinescu: 838). Not feeling herself to be a self-sufficient subject, she was incapable of motivating herself. Her professional life no longer lended her existence any meaning: “My dear, when I give it a thought, I should wish to pass away, because the existence of an ailing elder is nothing attractive neither for the self, nor for the

³³ „iluzia [care] e realitatea cea puternică și adevărată, dar nu iluzia minciună, ci iluzia creatoare care se naște numai din cunoașterea adevărului”. 30th September 1929.

³⁴ „tu și Lala și Flo și Mad, poate îl veți citi și altora care m-au cunoscut așa cum sunt și care vor avea nevoie de o experiență pentru a se descurca în momentele grele din viață”. 28th September 1929.

³⁵ „*voi scrie tot ce trăiesc intim, tot reziduul spiritual ce-mi lasă viața și – fiindcă niciodată nu am făcut nimic fără dragoste, nimic cu folos zic - știam că și această hotărâre nu o voi putea realiza consecvent decât dedicând-o cuiva*”. 28th September 1929.

³⁶ „mi-a promis că va veni la mine ca la Diothima. În asemenea momente mă simt încă de folos”. 18th June 1958.

³⁷ „Nu mai sunt interesantă pentru nimeni. (...) Mai vine lume să mă vadă, dar nu mai au nevoie de mine”. 29th January 1961.

others. [...] I am disgusted with myself. And it has also killed my drive to talk to tragic heroes. Everything seems to me completely pointless and otherwise flat.”³⁸ (Voinescu: 839).

The need to be useful, even to attend to others, “contaminated” her thoughts of Stello, once he died. Reflecting upon the importance of Communion after Easter break, she came to blame herself because her husband had not shared her religious enthusiasm, displaying, at the same time, a kind of lenience towards him, as if it had been her personal duty to convert him and she had failed³⁹. Consequently, one may say that, despite her superior intellect, she indulged in that Sartrian *mauvaise foi*, meaning that, under the pressure of societal forces, she acted against her authentic being. Believing it was her duty to make him more “spiritual”, she ignored what others noticed: there was an excess in both and, if they failed to find a common denominator, although they had the necessary skills, it was because of pre-existing tendencies. She had a Western mindset that censored the self and led one to think that it is for the instinct to submit to the rigours of the spirit and the intellect, while he (Stello) had a Balkan temperament. Drawing on the definition given by Meaghan Morris to “nagging” in *The Pirate’s Fiancée* (1988), which is simply the unsuccessful repetition of the same sentences (Gamble: 140), Alice can be truly said to continuously “nag” Stello, but not out of some sort of “feminine malice”. The reason is that her attempts to “re-educate” him failed systematically. Defying, on the one hand, the usual feminine typology of “the woman of a great man” as Stello, jealous of her students, complained about his “Prince consort”-like quality, she kept thinking of him as a pillar of her life. His envy seemed to be the sign that she could not display knowledge or desire without, implicitly, hurting him. Writing to her deceased husband in the second part of her diary, she kept cultivating a connection that she felt to be essential for the construction of her identity. A year after his death, Alice felt the disappearance of the associated status signs to be a loss because “the veil

³⁸ „Dragul meu, când mă gândesc serios, ar trebui să doresc să mă duc, căci existența unui bătrân bolnav nu e o atracție nici pentru sine, nici pentru ceilalți. (...) Îmi e silă de mine. Și mi-a secat și inspirația pentru conversațiile mele cu eroii tragici. Totul mi se pare zadarnic și, de altfel, plat”. 18th February 1961. To be noted that she uses the word „bătrân” for „elder”, not „bătrână”, so as not to mark the gender and limit the universality of experience.

³⁹ „The break passed without any spiritual gain, except for the happiness of Communion. [...] I’m hurt by the thought that you, Stello, didn’t have the courage or, better put, you were too modest and shy to do it. I have the feeling that I was terribly selfish in my discreet attitude by not insisting enough.”, „A trecut vacanța fără nici un folos sufletesc, afară de fericirea Împărtășaniei. [...] Sufăr la gândul că tu, Stello drag, n-ai avut curajul, sau, mai bine zis, ai fost prea modest și pudic pentru a îndrăzni să o faci. Am impresia că am fost groaznic de egoistă în discreția cu care te-am tratat, nu am insistat destul.” (Voinescu: 223). 25th April 1941.

and all that ritual that kept me socially tied to you gave me an integrity I no longer have, I am but a fragment. Gradually, I have to rebuild my singular unity, but I feel that this has to include a connection with you. I could stand being *your widow*, but 'a widow' has something humiliating in it."⁴⁰ (Voinescu: 341). The more the distance from this second mirror increases, the idealization factor is intensified. If, during his lifetime, "I often had a motherly feeling towards you"⁴¹ (Voinescu: 836) and felt the need to re-educate him, "Now I have the feeling that you are high above me, as you otherwise were sometimes when alive. You were living on a very high and authentic spiritual level, not only in thought, like Ionel. You, men, know of heights we, women, can only reach if supported by our instinct."⁴² (Voinescu: 836-7). A strange change of perspective, indeed, when even Maria Ana Murnu noticed that she was the more "spiritual" and rational of the two. Gender creates further contrasts between such judgements and this is why, as Deborah Cameron would have it, "gender is a problem, not a solution" (Gamble: 145). Idealizing her dead husband also affects the way she thinks of the frequency of her diary entries. If, in the early beginning, rarely and with great care "I write these pages, afraid to be caught by Stello"⁴³ (Voinescu: 75), during her last years she projected all her guilt on herself: "Stello, dearest, I'm writing on loose sheets because I no longer have a notebook. Carelessness, perpetual lack of money."⁴⁴ (Voinescu: 813). Poverty is, however, just another external limit, like his jealousy used to be. It quickly becomes apparent how a diary is a metonymy of one's life: it is this incompleteness and fascination with meagre aspects that makes the text diary-like and not similar to biographic fiction, as only the death of the speaking "I" completes the perspective, offering definite answers and meanings. The same process is mimicked when Stello is concerned, as if his death suddenly reveals the full picture by bringing to light hidden meanings, previously out of reach. During his lifetime, his portrait is less flattering. When, after an absence of two days, Stello "turns the weapon

⁴⁰ „voalul și tot ceremonialul care mă legau social de tine îmi dădeau o integritate pe care acum nu o mai am, sunt doar un fragment. Treptat trebuie să îmi refac unitatea singulară, dar simt că aceasta trebuie să includă o legătură cu tine. Suportam să fiu *văduva ta*, dar o 'văduvă' are ceva umilitor". 14th January 1942.

⁴¹ „aveam adesea un sentiment matern pentru tine". 3rd January 1961.

⁴² „Acum am impresia că ești foarte sus, cum de altfel erai uneori în viață. Tu trăiai spiritual foarte sus și autentic, nu numai cu gândul, ca și Ionel. Voi, bărbații, aveți superiorități pe care noi, femeile, dacă nu ne susține încă instinctul, nu le putem atinge decât cu greu". 3rd January 1961.

⁴³ „scriu pe aceste foi, de teamă să nu mă vadă Stello". 2nd January 1934.

⁴⁴ „Stello dragă, scriu pe foaie volantă fiindcă nu am caiet. Neglijență, lipsă de bani perpetuă". 20th February 1959.

against me: he accuses me, suspects me"⁴⁵ (Voinescu: 6), Alice noticed that this was nothing but a mechanism "to defend himself. *C'est lache*, that's what I've always told him"⁴⁶ (Voinescu: 6). Stello's jealousy towards Mișu Paleologu seems groundless in her eyes, so it may just be "not real suffering [but], as I believe, the ready-learned formula of male ego"⁴⁷ (Voinescu: 3), suggesting that she is aware of her husband's sense of entitlement. Another interesting change of perspective after his death can be found when she tries to motivate her need to focus her attention on him. If his need for exclusive attention was previously seen as "a child-like spiritual quality, a lack of maturity"⁴⁸ (Voinescu: 169), and she answered it with tacit indignation rather than any other kind of reaction, once he is no longer by her side, Alice promised him to lead the life of a nun: "It is not just that you need to know me separated from the world, but this is how I can come closer to you and your world"⁴⁹ (Voinescu: 221). Without him, she felt like a fragment, *unfinished/callow*. Comparing herself to other scholars is related to the same self-deprecating tendency, wishing to become a "mature", "whole", self-sufficient human. Although appreciated on a national and international level for her brilliant mind, her self-image was distorted. Alice thought that "My spirit has emancipated itself only as of late, only last year reaching fullness. May God help Gide! I am very much behind, a sheep in the herd"⁵⁰ (Voinescu: 23). She believed the arguments of others to be sophisticated, while her adapted-for-a-target-group discourse was severely depreciated: "I have noticed how weak I am when superior arguments are brought to my attention! I cannot help but go to school and tell the girls, even make propaganda!"⁵¹ (Voinescu: 5). When Iorga cried out to a student "Girl, don't be upset, I didn't mean to upset you!"⁵² (Voinescu: 79), Alice projected the kindness perceived in Iorga's tone upon his whole personality so that "I may have heard he's torn Titulescu apart and many more – but for me, even if a poor ugly kitten would make him show his nails, I know he's good!"⁵³ (Voinescu: 79). She would never, however, make

⁴⁵ „Întoarce arma: acuză, mă bănuiește”. 4th October 1929.

⁴⁶ „doar pentru a se apăra pe el. *C'est lache*, asta i-am reproșat întotdeauna”. 4th October 1929.

⁴⁷ „adevărată suferință [ci], cum cred, formula învățată a orgoliului bărbătesc?”. 30th September 1929.

⁴⁸ „o calitate spirituală copilărească, nematură”. 19th January 1940.

⁴⁹ „Nu doar că tu ai nevoie să mă știi ruptă de lume, dar pentru că așa mă apropii mai mult de tine și lumea ta”. 15th February 1941.

⁵⁰ „Spiritul meu s-a emancipata abia târziu, cu totul abia anul trecut. Dumnezeu să-l răsplătească pe Gide! Sunt foarte înapoiată, o oaie în turmă”. 4th February 1930.

⁵¹ „Am constatat cât sunt de slabă când mi se invocă argumente de ordin superior! Nu o să pot rezista să nu mă duc la școală să vorbesc elevelor, ba chiar să fac propagandă!”. 2nd October 1929.

⁵² „Fato, nu fi mâhnită, n-am vrut să te mâhnesc!”. 5th February 1934.

⁵³ „Pot afla că a sfâșiat în bucăți pe Titulescu sau pe oricine – pentru mine, chiar dacă un biet pisoi urât i-ar tenta ghearele, știu că e bun!”. 5th February 1934.

the opposite assumption, assuming an intellectual superiority in case of her own professional endeavours.

Compared to others, Alice strived not to display that “ambition and need of *fla fla* found in some women”⁵⁴ (Voinescu: 205). Let us keep in mind that objects in the mirror are closer than they appear, so that any premeditated self-portrait is bound to fail because it interprets rather than represent. What a reader must look for in this text, as well, is the authentic self which appears through the act of questioning. Fortunately for us, the speaking “I” of the diary does this often enough. She was not interested in gossip: although Petre Manoliu was seen as an “abnormal”, she preferred to make up her own mind about him. Once she started looking down on Elena Văcărescu for her dramatic discourse style and concluded that “*She is not a real intellectual*, she demonstrates no respectful love for truth! I’m sorry I have to write it here, I would be lying to myself if I hid this feeling!”⁵⁵ (Voinescu: 100), she turned this reflection back on herself applying the same criteria, wondering “how inauthentic I might seem to my students when I get excited about Aeschylus!”⁵⁶ (Voinescu: 80). A certain ambiguity in her relation to gender can also be noticed. “I was counting on her [Anișoara] as I would on a man, that is why I spent my time with her, as the woman in her has nothing in common with me. For me, she was a nice person.”⁵⁷ (Voinescu: 2); she forgave her, however, out of a sense of aristocratic mercy that replaces the fury of being betrayed. When Christiana P., the very image of “resigned wisdom”, opened herself up to her, Alice suffered because she saw “such a soul full of potential being eaten away”⁵⁸ (Voinescu: 5), crying out, accusingly, “Men are so stupid!”⁵⁹ (Voinescu: 5). The indignation that Radu Sihireanu married “a whore to be bought and sold”, combined with her empathy for his mother, protected the image projected upon a social class that associated itself with certain values to stand apart.

Her “aristocratic” image justifies an elitism otherwise seen as incompatible with her gender role. Instead of “womanly narcissism” or boundless opulence, her students found “the harmony of an interior where nothing seems superfluous, all objects lining up as a necessary support for

⁵⁴ „ambiiție și nevoie de *fla fla* [di]n unele femei”. 7th September 1940.

⁵⁵ „*Nu e om adevărat de cultură*, nu are dragostea respectuoasă față de adevăr! Îmi pare rău că trebuie să o scriu aci, m-aș minți dacă aș ascunde acest simțământ!”. 5th February 1934.

⁵⁶ „cât de neveridică le apar eu elevilor mei când mă pasionez pentru Eschil!”. 5th February 1934.

⁵⁷ „Contam pe ea [Anișoara] ca pe un bărbat, de aceea freiam cu ea, căci femeia din ea n-are nimic comun cu mine. Era pentru mine un om de treabă”. 30th September 1929.

⁵⁸ „se anchilozează un suflet așa plin de posibilități”. 2nd October 1929.

⁵⁹ „Proști sunt bărbații!”. 2nd October 1929.

people dedicated to the spirit⁶⁰ (Voinescu: 21). Books and music “fulfilled” her as warrants of authenticity and, oftentimes, reminded her of personal needs that separated her from the world and from Stello: “Today during music class: *Siegfrieds Tod*. An irresistible grief seized me, I’m crying unable to help myself. I need to focus on my work, I need work of the best quality”⁶¹ (Voinescu: 431). Her “aristocratic” elitism made her reject what she felt to be “thesisism” and protect the autonomy of the aesthetic while claiming that “This is not art, this is protest. What is true is that this is a direct, unfalsified vision of the ‘people’ and the upper classes. But this is observation and social protest, not art. Just like *Moromeții*”⁶² (Voinescu: 801). The same “aristocratic” sensibility rendered her woefully unprepared for a changing political climate and she eventually grew to notice that it was because of her “too solid an education, namely too strict under the disguise of grace, [that] stilted my vitality, making it a slave to moral principles. A hybrid product of a formalist era, condemned to live throughout an anarchic period! Absolute rubbish”⁶³ (Voinescu: 494). This is how she attempted to rationalise her intense disgust at the revolting news that the Communists won the election through less than honourable methods. Despite her general Christian outlook, she could not help but turn to Nietzsche and regret her previous meekness in the face of evil as she was forced to look on while the winners redefined what was right and what was wrong. Already feeling old and decrepit in 1946, she regretted not being “male and young” so that she might have her voice heard loud and clear against such abuse of power. Interestingly enough, she admitted that it was not their ideas *per se* that she fought against, but the spirit of those bringing them to life in Romanian society. Her objection is mainly against what is perceived as a betrayal of one’s own motherland, to which she adds time and time again her utter disgust when seeing people do anything for profit and forsaking the ideal of authenticity. As a social praxis, she cannot excuse the superficial assimilation of ideals that are turned into means to serve one’s selfish purpose.

This deep understanding of ethics permeated all aspects of her life. After being released from prison, during her house arrest, Alice still felt responsible

⁶⁰ „armonia unui interior unde nimic nu părea de prisos, obiectele ordonându-se ca un suport firesc și necesar unor oameni dedicați spiritului”.

⁶¹ „Azi la muzică: *Siegfrieds Tod*. M-a apucat o jale irezistibilă, plâng fără puterea de a mă stăpâni. Am nevoie de o concentrare în lucru, am nevoie de lucru de primă calitate”. 9th December 1948.

⁶² „Nu e artă, e protest. (...) Ce e drept că e o viziune directă, nefalsificată a „poporului” ca și a claselor de sus. Dar asta e observație și protest social, nu e artă. Ca și *Moromeții*”. 18th June 1958.

⁶³ „O creștere prea solidă, adică prea severă sub aparențe grațioase, mi-a frânt vitalitatea, aservind-o principiilor morale. Un hibrid produs al unei epoci formaliste și condamnat să trăiască într-o epocă anarhică! Deplasare absolută”. 24th November 1946.

for the well-being of those less fortunate than her because of her status as part of the former elite. Although oppressed on political grounds, she still thought herself to be privileged compared to others as she only had herself to look after. Her attitude is nothing short of complex, as Alice never entertained an idealised image of her own social class, but actually looked into its habits and mores for the conditions that made Communist abuse possible and she even went as far as to understand the plight of families working for the new regime. Honest and committed to the truth, she delved into scrutinizing analysis that spared no one. Her entry on 11th May 1953 highlights her deepest regret about her forced home arrest which, not surprisingly, was the feeling that she was wasting precious time instead of being of some use to others. Not allowed to practice her faith, she reminisced bitterly about one occasion when she could only receive several blessed pears from the local priest by reaching over the fence as she was not permitted access to the premises. Longing for something other than what she felt to be the broken community she was placed in, she wished for a monastic one. Denied the opportunity, she managed to gain a distance from her own oppression by using her aesthetic sense and musing that, with glasses, she might even enjoy the landscape enough to ignore her confinement. Given all this, her suffering owes much not just to her illness, but also to her wounded dignity, as when she revealed her shock at the two youngsters taunting her for her meager possessions on the way to Costești, especially considering that prior to the journey she had been imprisoned for one year and a half. Retrieving her dignity was her most ardent desire and her greatest wish was to be allowed to work for others. She made this apparent in the entry on 25th November 1946, where she admitted that her ambition was never for her own sake, but for “noble causes” she believed in at the time.

Disappointed by the way art “descends” unto the streets after the rise of Communism, “I was overwhelmed by a feeling that all’s for nothing. Now all illiterates in the Music Academy, all harp girls that can’t properly read abuse me, but that’s none of my concern!”⁶⁴ (Voinescu: 563). Although she gently approached those that needed protection, she, in turn, protected her own sensibility through a refusal of the masses⁶⁵. Her personal role model was

⁶⁴ „m-a năpădit o simțire că totul e zadarnic. Acum mă beștelesc și toți analfabeții de la Conservator, toate harponistele care nu știu bine să citească, treaba lor!”. 21st December 1948.

⁶⁵ It’s not that I have no sympathy for the simple, too, but I find the vulgar repulsive! And the lack of education of those who called me! I felt it is painfully true that those who treat us like Vallachs are right. There are Balkanic nuances, we trick ourselves when we think ourselves Western”, „Nu că n-am simpatie și față de cei simpli, dar mitocanul îmi repugnă! Și lipsa de creștere a celor ce m-au chemat! Am simțit dureros adevărul sufletesc al celor ce ne tratează ca valahi. Sunt nuanțe balcanice, ne facem iluzii când ne credem occidentali” (Voinescu: 13). 4th November 1929.

Queen Maria, whom she appreciated as a “whole person” and her passing away marked the moment when “it appears that gone is that elegant detachment, that was neither carelessness, nor a selfish indifference, but the decent grace in which all inner wounds were draped out of a politeness towards the world, perhaps even a missing sense of solidarity”⁶⁶ (Voinescu: 122). It is not so much the “womanly decency” not to suffer in the sight of others, but an aristocratic concept of dignity coming from “a joy of the quality of her being, more than a state of mind”⁶⁷ (Voinescu: 122). The last look over her own life to reach for a *telos* shows Alice to be just as dramatically divided and self-critical: “I’m dying and I’m still not fully equipped. [...] Enough with lamentations”⁶⁸ (Voinescu: 842). Although selling a ring could clear her debts, her eyes turned to the first mirror: she could leave it to Maricica, thus making herself useful even from beyond the grave and preserving her dignity in spite of the regime that humiliated her as an intellectual. Striving for a transcendental meaning, she placed great value on bodily humility as a necessary experience and, through discourse, she left behind the social stigma of poverty, constructing her own authenticity.

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⁶⁶ „se duce parcă acea detașare elegantă, care nu era nici ușurință, nici indiferență egoistă, ci era grația decentă cu care se învăluiau amarurile lăuntrice, din politeță pentru lume, poate și din nesolidaritate”. 19th July 1938.

⁶⁷ „bucurie a calității ființei ei, mai mult decât o stare de conștiință”. 19th July 1938.

⁶⁸ „Mor și tot nu sunt utilată. [...] Gata cu văicărerile.”. 30th May 1961.

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