

THE FEMININE PARADIGM OF CULTURE IN ALICE VOINESCU'S CONCEPTION

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ABSTRACT. *The Feminine Paradigm of Culture in Alice Voinescu's Conception.*

Alice Voinescu, the first Romanian woman to obtain a PhD in Philosophy, proposed a female cultural paradigm in the conferences she held between 1933-1943, in the context of the women's emancipation movement of the interwar period. In her view, the male model of knowledge, based on abstract thinking, must be permanently conjoined with the female one, based on intuition and affect, in a totalizing, modern perspective. The salvation of the "eternal human" through the "eternal feminine", characterized by respect for tradition and continuity both in culture and in society, represents an alternative for materialistic civilization, which is the outcome of the male cognitive pattern.

Keywords: *Alice Voinescu, femininity, feminism, spirituality, masculine, culture, generation, new man*

REZUMAT. *Paradigma feminină a culturii în concepția lui Alice Voinescu.*

Alice Voinescu, prima femeie doctor în Filosofie din România, propune în conferințele susținute între anii 1933-1943 o paradigmă culturală de tip feminin, în contextul mișcării de emancipare a femeilor din perioada interbelică. În viziunea sa, modelul masculin al cunoașterii, bazat pe gândirea abstractă, trebuie conjugat permanent cu cel feminin, întemeiat pe intuiție și afect, într-o perspectivă totalizatoare modernă. Salvarea "eternului uman" prin "eternul feminin", reprezentat deopotrivă în cultură și în societate de respectul pentru tradiție și continuitate, reprezintă alternativa unei civilizații materialiste, operă a tiparului cognitiv masculin.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Alice Voinescu, feminitate, feminism, spiritualitate, masculin, cultură, generație, om nou*

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In a period marked by the pre-eminence of the male spirit in culture, theorized as such by philosophers and art scholars, Alice Voinescu (1885-1961) was a special figure in the landscape of Romanian literature. Having obtained a BA degree from the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy in Bucharest, under the supervision of Titu Maiorescu (1908), she continued her studies in Paris, Leipzig and Marburg and, in 1913, became the first Romanian woman with a PhD in Philosophy. Despite the title conferred by the Sorbonne, accompanied by the invitation to occupy a position of assistant professor there, Voinescu returned to the country only to face a long series of difficulties and refusals throughout her life. The Department of History of Modern Philosophy of the University of Bucharest rejected her candidacy, on the grounds that “a woman cannot fill the position of university professor” (Grigorescu; Simion 393), so in 1922 she became professor of Aesthetics and Theatre History at the Royal Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Art. Her intellectual prowess, confirmed, among other things, by her numerous participations in the Pontigny debates, alongside renowned personalities such as André Gide, Roger Martin du Gard, André Malraux, François Mauriac, etc., was overshadowed by a tragic individual and collective destiny. When the communist regime was installed, at the end of the 1940s, she was arrested and sentenced to one year and seven months in prison, and then to forced domicile, until 1954, for having attended a conference held by Petru Manoliu (Crăciun 25). This exceptional writer and thinker “of the highest intellectual and aesthetic standing possible”, according to Petru Comarnescu (321), endowed with “subtle arguments and fine analytical discernment”, according to Nicolae Florescu (122), is relatively little known in post-war Romanian culture. During her life she published only two monographs, *Montaigne. Omul și opera* [*Montaigne. The Man and the Work*] (1936) and *Eschil* [*Aeschylus*] (1946), a volume of studies, *Aspecte din teatrul contemporan* [*Aspects of Contemporary Theatre*] (1941), and translations from Charles Dickens, Heinrich von Kleist and Thomas Mann. The collection of studies *Întâlnire cu eroii din literatură și teatru* [*Encounters with Heroes from Literature and Theatre*] was published posthumously (1983). After the fall of the Iron Curtain, two volumes of correspondence saw the light of print, as did a comprehensive journal considered by critics “a shocking document about the tragic fate of an exceptional intellectual woman” (Simion 323) and a series of radio conferences gathered under the title *Din cauzele crizei sufletești de azi* [*The Causes of Today's Spiritual Crisis*].

Writing in a sparse style, out of excessive aesthetic scrupulousness, and extremely modest, as she revealed herself in her journal, Alice Voinescu delivered outstanding courses and lectures, which represented, in Al. Paleologu's opinion, “her great art” (235). Her fragmentary, essayistic discourse, like a spoken book, reproduced a philosophy that had descended into the city. Patterned after the methods of ancient philosophy, her mind was lively, dialogical, concerned with the most diverse topical issues. Whether she talked about Paul Claudel's

theatre, Nicolae Grigorescu's painting, Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales, Torquato Tasso's poetry, Goethe's Faust or various social moral issues, the thinker expressed her ideas in a clear, well-articulated manner, from a modern, multidisciplinary perspective.

The radio conferences she held in Bucharest between 1933 and 1943, in a period of socio-political unrest, but also of unprecedented cultural effervescence in our country, under the influence of Romanian existentialism, represented by the "Criterion" group, are a cultural document of utmost importance. What are the causes of today's spiritual crisis?, asks the professor of aesthetics, from the vantage point of a philosopher specializing in Montaigne, but also from the perspective of a woman trying to offer cultural legitimation to the women's emancipation movement, which has acquired ever greater momentum since the turn of the century. According to the vision expressed in these conferences, the historical, social, cultural and political role of women has solid philosophical and psychological theoretical foundations and can become, in turn, the cornerstone of a new type of culture and spirituality.

The reasons for the supposed spiritual crisis of the time, Voinescu believes, are of a social, economic, political and scientific nature. Collective mentalities, the shared prejudices regarding the place held by women in culture and society, also play a part. The new age is one of great transformations, grafted primarily onto the general conception of the theory of relativity, which can change the old philosophical paradigms. If mechanistic materialism believed in an objective and stable universe, the new vision will most likely shatter the traditional representations of space and time as fixed, immutable forms, offering the alternative of a non-material and non-objective universe, seen as the ensemble of the "perceptive actions of an infinite number of centers that create energy, individual centers linked by mutual relationships" (*Din cauzele crizei sufletești de azi* 55). The real thus becomes the creation of individual and collective consciousness. Therefore, the sense of social responsibility and man's confidence in his own forces must be widely cultivated. Naturally, the new scientific idealism calls for an imminent spiritual revival, in the opinion of the essayist.

Researching the psychology of the younger generation, theorized by Mircea Eliade and the "Criterion" group, the lecturer notices significant differences from the previous generations. Adaptability, emotional flexibility, optimism, an appetite for adventure, the acceleration of vital rhythms, a taste for the values of immediacy and the primacy of the will are some of the new trends, corresponding to the scientific dynamism of the time. The originality of young people, Voinescu says, in agreement with the philosophy of living, "lies precisely in their power to realize the now" (*Din cauzele crizei sufletești de azi* 42). The instant demands its right to spiritual valorization, determining a new type of morality and a new culture, that is, one based on the resources of the actual, which is elevated to the rank of a principle. The feeling of nothingness, Heideggerian anguish, both of

which represent existentialist attitudes characteristic of the new mentality, are considered positive and fruitful spiritual stances, symptoms of the need for fulfilment, for meaning. The apparent anarchy detectible among the young people is but the sign of this quest. Adopting a Bergsonian stance, the author notes the metamorphosis of the instant from the “tomb of time” (44) into lived duration, full of infinite possibilities. The younger generation embodies these changes in a very real, specific way. They are achieving, in fact, a blend between the real and the rational, between intellect and affect, becoming “in-between” humans, who are natural, social and intellectual at the same time.

The role of women, in this context, is a decisive one, because it is their task to bring to spiritual life this new type of human. As proof, “humanity, especially its female component, seems to be changing today” (65). The feminine paradigm of knowledge implies intuitive, participative understanding, of the “co-naître” type, which means, “to give birth *with* the known thing” (16). It also implies the primacy of poetic thinking over the theoretical one, of personal reflection over the system, of the particular over the general. The contribution of women in culture and society must be re-analyzed from a modern standpoint, with a view to adopting this cognitive model, in agreement with the new philosophical directions and with the assumptions made by Romantic philosophy.

However, the countless patriarchal prejudices promoted by the so-called common sense are against this ideal. Traditionally, women are considered simple toys, reduced to the sole quality of being likeable creatures, or simple working tools. “The mission of one half of humanity is to please the other half – this is an aberration that explains the feminist reaction”, Alice Voinescu comments (65). The very feeling of modesty, imposed by society for centuries, was nothing but a trap meant to feed the woman’s sense of inferiority. The current “impudent offensive” translates “the need to get out of ignorance and of the *childishness* to which she was indirectly condemned because of a poorly understood modesty” (71). The real reason behind the women’s emancipation movement is not, as it might seem at first glance, a tendency towards disorder and debauchery, but a “thirst for superior order and growth” (71).

Another widespread prejudice, even among people of culture, is that intellectuality poses the danger of defeminization, “as if the truth were not a healthy target of Eve’s curiosity, as if *knowing* could weaken the powers of her heart” (36). The problem arises in the context of an increasingly visible trend of equal education for the two sexes, which of course Alice Voinescu supports, not only theoretically, but, first and foremost, by her own example. Unlike in past times, a woman now has access to study, she can pursue her intellectual vocation, can have a career, and this is undoubtedly a reparation and a right she has earned, confirmed by her numerous achievements in many fields. However, it remains to be seen who is meant to assess the results of these achievements. “Don’t you believe”, Voinescu asks, “that no matter how vast the realm of

activities to be conquered by women from now on, no matter how many original scientific, artistic or social creations the genius of women will add to the cultural heritage, men will remain the masters of this realm, in the sense that they will possess the criterion for assessing female behavior?" (125).

Analyzing these criteria, which are masculine prerogatives, both in the social and in the cultural spheres, the author observes that the patriarchal mentality tends to either reduce women to pitiful proportions, or to exaggerate their qualities. The literary pattern of the "angel or demon" type is suggestive in this regard. In the collective male perception, all the virtues of women are located between these two extremities, like those of a Procrustean bed: "While the masculine realm is restricted to the purely human, prohibiting its own extremes, the realm intended for female development expands beyond the borders of the human, as if feminine nature could only be fulfilled beyond the borders of the natural, as it were, in the realm of the supernatural" (128). The unjust dichotomy of "angel or demon" that is applied to women seems to be the expression of some painful experiences and vain aspirations of the masculine soul.

What is the alternative proposed by Alice Voinescu, a fine analyst and a lucid, intelligent and erudite judge of the cultural and social biases which have been entrenched in the collective consciousness for centuries? Her conceptions, influenced by the cultural philosophy of her time, by Christian existentialism and, to some extent, by psychoanalysis, are not part of a single current of thought. They are neither traditional nor modern, in the narrow sense of the terms, but retain the sole criterion of assumed objectivity in a flexible and fluid personal manner. They are both philosophical ideas, without proposing a philosophy proper, and practical ideas, without being confined to narrow pragmatism. Through a series of social, moral, spiritual, psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic reflections, Voinescu's conferences advocate the achievement of a fair balance between the feminine and the masculine paradigms of knowledge, that is, they endorse a point of view that assumes the identity of the opposites which characterizes, in her opinion, culture itself.

The ideology of equality is, of course, endorsed by Alice Voinescu, the professor of aesthetics. The obvious moral, social and intellectual value of women was confirmed by the recent establishment of schools for girls in Romania, even prior to such implementation in other countries with a much older cultural tradition. Far from being a danger, intellectual education is the prerequisite for higher objectivity, the supreme intellectual quality, and this, in turn, is tantamount to a diminution of individualism, seen as egoism nourished by whim alone. "Serious instruction (the enlightenment of thought)", says Voinescu, "cannot be a threat to femininity, except perhaps in the eyes of those who consider femininity as nothing but unconscious and graceful childishness!" (36). The right of women to work, to get out of the passivity imposed by society and thus embrace a career, is fundamental and legitimate. In a conference entitled "Woman in state

positions” the author argues in favor of the legitimate possibility for women to occupy positions in the state by virtue of their ability to come into direct contact with the actual and to humanize ideas through intuition. If a man views the state as an ideal reality, a pure idea, a woman largely focuses on the human and living nature of social entities. Her capacity “to intuit and animate the concrete “(82), exercised for thousands of years in a narrow circle of experience, in her immediate world, could thus extend to the larger ensemble, to the broader reality.

Furthermore, women can play as active a role as men do – albeit not a military one – in defending the country. Apparently deprived of a heroic aura, professions such as nursing, social work, civil service, education have, in fact, an extremely rich potential. They are distinguished by the heroism of truth and patience and by the virtue of spiritual maturity. Although she firmly believes in full equality between women and men, Voinescu thinks women should, by and large, choose professions that are in tune with their natural calling, professions in the social or cultural fields that have to do with the human body and soul.

In her view, the two paradigms – the masculine and the feminine – represent two specific structural modes based on an archetypal pattern. According to this pattern, man tends to turn the concrete into abstractions, reducing it to pure laws, while woman captures the uniqueness of that which exists through a type of understanding that engages her entire being. Man “thinks the world”, while woman “animates it” (81). Female sensitivity, grafted onto an intimate contact with matter, differs from male sensitivity, which tends to convert the empirical into a category of consciousness. Knowing the living reality is the prerogative of women: owing to their mission of motherhood, they are forced to adjust to the most diverse conditions through a direct understanding of the “concrete” givens. Always in a haste to cope with the immediate turmoil, they cannot afford to linger on phenomena that are constantly on the move and strive to discover their fixed order. Instead of man’s scientific, disinterested approach to nature and life, as he is inspired by curiosity and by the desire to master reality, woman harbors feelings of solidarity and love towards the real. However, truth must be a synthesis of the real and the ideal, and therefore the typical masculine concern for the ideal must be combined with a feminine grasp of reality. Moreover, in order to keep a balance in society and culture, what is needed is not only knowledge of the subject, but also an interest in the individual; not only theoretical constructions, but also the feminine, intuitive way of knowing. In Alice Voinescu’s opinion, the inability to rise above the concrete, which women are often reproached for, may be “the last chance to save human individuality from the mechanized uniformity imposed by the materialistic ideal” (111). Thus, a possible better world cannot be envisaged as an abstract, masculine edifice. It is not a mathematical problem put into equations and solved solely by rational formulas, but a living reality, sifted through the filter of intuition and anchored in the

tradition defended, again, by women. Her duty remains largely that of saving the "feminine spirit of culture" by virtue of her maternal mission, transposed onto a spiritual level, in keeping with the law of the continuity and the preservation of values. And if woman sometimes lags behind man, this is not a sign of inferiority, but of "practical wisdom" (121). The contribution of women to European culture and civilization, Voinescu believes, has always encompassed gentleness, indulgence, kindness and the love of people, that is, "all those spiritual qualities that humanized the human animal and steered it towards the realm of the spirit" (122). Mere intelligence does not guarantee the spiritual evolution of culture and society if there is no respect for the individual and for emotional values. Culture, the essayist concludes, "is not saved by man, who doesn't give his life for it, but by woman, who keeps it alive through faith and patience" (122). For this reason, a better world means saving the eternal human through the eternal feminine.

In its outline, the philosophy of culture proposed by Alice Voinescu gives center stage to the feminine prototype, understood as a condition for the realization of the Universal. Unlike the Romanian interwar philosophers who discussed the ideal of the new man in the context of the "new spirituality", theorized especially by Mircea Eliade, Voinescu, the author of radio conferences, leans on the feminine type of the new human, encapsulated in the model of the superior woman, not as a simple exception, but as a whole generation of superior femininity. The generationist debate of the 1920s and 1930s is thus steered onto the ground of feminist ideology, which will gain more and more traction in the following years.

It is obvious that the theorist, who nearly embraces a "masculine" type of discourse in her celebration of the feminine, remains, at times, indebted to the mentality of her time. Moreover, she does not consider herself a defender of feminism, but of femininity. She does not embrace what she calls the "back path of feminist morality" (71), but looks much further, towards the "superior human with a feminine profile" (66). She does not want to level out the differences between the sexes, which would lead to a so-called "equality in mediocrity" (39), but embraces the ideal of a new human synthesis based on respect for diversity. In her opinion, the courage, freedom, voluntarism and lack of affection of the emancipated women of her time amount to a distortion of feminine consciousness. Moreover, the desire to equalize the natures and behaviors of the two sexes is not an authentic but a borrowed aspiration, signaling the prospect of a type of servitude which could be more dangerous than women's submission to men once was. It is not the "masculinization" of thought that she dislikes, but rather that of the will of her contemporary women, their conquering stance, the exaltation of heroism manifested as lack of shyness, bodily brazenness and brashness. The emphasis on sport in the education of women, their access to specifically masculine careers, such as those of aviator and explorer are commendable, but these are

bound to remain peripheral phenomena. As the example of Joan of Arc shows, if one is to stay true to one's feminine nature, heroism should be seen as the "courage of patience, the courage of expectation and hope" (37). Antigone and the Virgin Mary are the feminine models of European culture. They symbolize the respect for life and the prevalence of reflection over instinct, in contrast to the "type of today's intrepid Amazon", whose attitude betrays, for Voinescu, a false sense of freedom paid for with "sterile strains" and a fatigue manifesting as "sadness, surfeit and a taste of nothingness" (38).

In a conference entitled "On the psychology of women today. Woman and work", Voinescu discusses the impulse of modern women to conquer the territory reserved for men in the field of labor and identifies two features in the attitude of the new Eves. First, the legitimate desire to liberate themselves from the passivity of acceptance, peculiar to the older epochs, is often accompanied by a sense of conquest, which is not devoid of a touch of aggressiveness. Their sometimes-ostentatious pride, the confidence they exude in words and gestures, the radiant, youthful expression on their faces and their slight exhilaration at fulfilling their duty are the visible signs of this triumph, envied by most women who do not work. However, this much coveted independence does not correspond to a genuine spiritual need within the feminine soul. As proof, the working woman often willingly assumes new duties. Her longing for independence seems to be more of a longing for companionship, for a perfect communion with man. For most women, this is the true meaning of that famous "equality" between the genders. A second characteristic of the working woman would be her aspiration to move away from the subjectivity to which society has condemned her for centuries and strive for objectivity. However, the signs of this evolution are sometimes limited either to intransigent ideas, or to pedantry and cynicism. This shows that liberation from the vagaries of subjectivity is an arduous, long-lasting process. What woman lacks, in the opinion of Alice Voinescu, is not the power of abstraction or judgment, but the ability to use these qualities without the interference of sentiment. This is due to a lack of genuine confidence in her own forces, which is the prerogative of the specific objectivity of the masculine spirit.

Beyond these reproaches to mainstream feminism, which are still quite relevant today, but also working through them, Voinescu constantly pleads for objective, liberating knowledge, which is the condition for the full realization of the feminine model. She believes in emancipation enlightened by reason and moderated not by toning down the reliance upon common sense, but by what she considers to be respect for undisputable laws. According to these laws, individualism, pride and boldness (which pertain to masculine ways of thinking) do not fit into feminine patterns of thought, just like patience, gentleness and altruism (corresponding to intuitive, participatory thinking, of the "co-naître" type) do not characterize the masculine spirit. Only the conjugation of the two paradigms can provide a superior model of humanity.

The ethical and pragmatic stakes of Alice Voinescu's discourse are only of secondary import. In fact, her stance on interwar feminism is still under debate. Her articles and conferences, whose social vision is comparable to those of Alexandrina Cantacuzino, Martha Bibescu and Elena Văcărescu, primarily advocate the cultural and spiritual evolution of women rather than a change in customs related to a so-called natural plan. If Alice Voinescu, the professor of aesthetics, appears to have joined the feminist trends of ideas by virtue of some of her assertions, she does so only for cultural reasons, so as to support a humanistic philosophical conception to which all other practical aspects are subordinated. The same holds true for her literary and aesthetic comments, clearly inscribed in a more comprehensive cultural perspective. The essays devoted to Frank Wedekind, Faustus or "female humanism" in the volume *Aspecte din teatrul contemporan* (1941) eloquently outline her general vision of feminism as a modern cultural paradigm. Discussing Wedekind, for example, who is considered a champion of women's emancipation, Voinescu notes that the playwright focuses, in reality, on a psychological problem, not a biological one, namely "the right of legitimate expansion for all spiritual powers" (*Întâlnire cu eroi din literatură și teatru* 71). Likewise, the study on Faustus analyses not the female characters under their visible aspects, but the "feminine element" they embody: "without the harmony of feminine nature, Faustus's anxiety would be dissipated in aimless motion, in directionless change. In the Faustian symbol, the feminine element is the form towards which eternal hope aspires, it is the form in which absolute harmony is mirrored. The eternal feminine is the path that steers life to the mystery of its finality" (756). Before embodying destinies, the heroines therefore represent symbols, philosophical paradigms with archetypal meaning.

Combined with the statements from the essay "Umanismul feminin" ["Feminine Humanism"] and some remarks she makes in her *Jurnal [Journal]* (1997; 2002; 2013) and in *Scrisori către fiul și fiica mea [Letters to My Son and Daughter]* (1994), the ideas acquire the clarity of a system. According to Alice Voinescu, the purpose and foundation of life is freedom, meaning "deliverance from the clutches of necessity" (*Scrisori către fiul și fiica mea* 72), and from the multitude of contingencies and causalities. Freedom is synonymous with the spirit and is given especially by the values of culture that make possible "the perfection of human qualities" (*Întâlnire cu eroi din literatură și teatru* 756). Like Constantin Noica, Voinescu makes a distinction between culture and history in order to demonstrate the ontological superiority of the former, since culture is the essence of a higher type of humanity. Culture evolves by reconciling opposites, unlike history, which progresses by ceaselessly counterposing antithetical values. It is predominantly associated with spiritual knowledge, which rests on intuition, subjective epiphanic experiences, the ultimate finalities, and the "supernatural." It is not limited to theoretical knowledge, as in that of the masculine type, specific

to the intellectual self, which is also different from the cultural self. The role of woman, apparently traditionalist and insignificant, is to reveal to man the “area of mystery” and to help him create his “intimate humanity, not as an individual, as a superhuman or an abstract number, but as a personality” (*Întâlnire cu eroi din literatură și teatru* 764). Women enable the very transition from necessity to freedom, from matter and abstraction to spirit, through the exercise of a “formative geniality” (764), not so much from a pragmatic point of view, as in an ontological sense. As a form of higher existence, culture itself is such a transition from matter to spirit and from abstraction to embodied ideas, and femininity is the symbolic site of this evolution. As an integral part and, at the same time, as a measure of this all-encompassing unity, femininity represents the cultural expression of the spirit and the mark of humanism itself, specific to the feminine gender.

The author’s intellectualist traditionalism, which is evident at times, is filtered through a romantic strand of idealism adapted to the mentalities of her time. Voinescu supports gender equality against equalization, urges the pursuit of the feminine vocation instead of a mediocre uniformity predicated on the idea of women’s excessive similarity with men, and proposes a spiritual humanity of the feminine type against the materialism of its masculine counterpart. While she rejects the notion that women could practically abandon their maternal – natural or spiritual – vocation, Voinescu nonetheless compensates for this intransigency on the theoretical level. Instead of a feminist discourse about the emancipation of women, she prefers a “masculine” discourse about the spiritual paradigm of femininity.

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