TIME, MEMORY, ILLNESS AND DEATH IN THE DIARY WRITING OF TWO ROMANIAN DIARISTS

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Abstract: *Keeping what the French call a journal intime, writers of all cultures and ages write against the ticking of the clock, the passage of time, and disappearance. It is in the intimate space of the diary that they record their experiences while those are fresh and immediate. This paper purports to look into the diaries of two Romanian diarists whose main purpose was to explore the subtlest transformations and nuances of their own perceptions of time. Matei Călinescu's Un altfel de jurnal. Ieșirea din timp (Another Kind of Diary. Escaping Time) (Humanitas Press, 2016) and Radu Vancu's Boala & războiul. Jurnal, 2020-2024 (Illness & War. A Diary, 2020-2024) (Polirom Press, 2024) are troubling testimonies of what it means to literally write against the clock, while a terminal illness eats at your body (Matei Călinescu's situation) or the suffering, isolation and death brought about by the COVID epidemic is a constant reminder of one's mortality and impending death (Radu Vancu's situation shared by a whole planet).*

Keywords: *diary, time, memory, apophrades, illness, death*

Introduction to the Genre of "Ego-documents"

The diary, alternatively called journal, is a confessional type of writing in the first person. Cuddon's statement that "on the face of it, [it] is a self-revelation" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 151) is extremely relevant for my approach to the two diaries I tackle in this study, namely Matei Călinescu's *Un altfel de jurnal. Ieșirea din timp* (*Another Kind of Diary. Escaping Time*) (Humanitas Press, 2016) and Radu Vancu's *Boala & războiul. Jurnal, 2020-2024* (*Illness & War. A Diary, 2020-2024*) (Polirom Press, 2024).

Starting with a taxonomy that distinguishes between "intimate" and "anecdotal" modes of diary writing (Cuddon, 2013, p. 151), Cuddon provides a diachronic survey of the genre since the 17th century, when it became a literary habit, and covering the most important female and male diarists in the 18th and

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19th centuries, with a few examples of 20th century diaries (Katherine Mansfield's *Journal*, 1927; C. E. Montague's *A Writer's Notes on His Trade*, 1930; Arnold Bennett's *Journals*, 1933-34; Somerset Maugham's *A Writer's Notebook*, 1949; Graham Greene's *In Search of a Character*, 1962). To these, especially in the context of my approach to the diaries written by two writers who are also professors of literature and literary critics, I would add the significant contributions to the genre of two well-known 20th century writers: Virginia Woolf, who kept her diary almost daily and whose twelve volumes of diaries and letters are now acknowledged to be part of her *oeuvre*, and *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000). An important aspect that the writers' diaries have in common is the particular blending of mundane topics, reflections on ideas and matters of the day, and reading impressions and ideas or even theories generated by those reflections. They are, in Cuddon's words, "part diary, part journal and part notebook" (Cuddon, 2013, pp. 200-201), which makes them invaluable sources that shed light on their authors' personalities and times, on their struggles with writing, on their choices of topics, style, etc.

Bruce Merry argues that, contrary to the belief that "the diary is an intimate journal, a personal dialogue between the writer and his private *persona*, in which anything can be discussed outside the push and pull of editorial fashion" (Merry, 1979, p. 3), diary writing is as much molded by literary fashion and subject to rigorous editing as any other literary genre. Merry also points out an aspect that is crucial to my analysis of the two diaries in this study, namely that "Nearly all diarists list their reading, their own reaction to classics, their slow mastery of world literature and immediate response to art" (Merry, 1979, p. 4). These two aspects of the diary as a literary genre practised by creative writers have the potential to make both academics and the larger reading public reconsider the significance and position of the diary and its dynamic evolution in what Even-Zohar calls the literary polysystem.[2] Polly North argues that while before the 1970s very few academics considered life-writing worth-studying, "Post 1970, academic recognition for diaries and their significance has been on an upward curve. Criticism, terms, and approaches evolve, but the desire to pick over the nature and content of human experience remains a constant" (North, 2023). My writing of an article on two Romanian authors' diary writing for an academic journal issue on this topic is an evidence of this late 20th century and early 21st century re-consideration of the previously unacknowledged significance of the genre in academia.

As Lejeune aptly notes, "discontinuity is part and parcel of the diary's rhythm" (Lejeune, 2009, p. 193). Nonetheless, this stylistic discontinuity and apparent fragmentariness of the diary as a genre are thematically inscribed into the unifying structure of the volume(s) and counterpointed by recurrent images and details, as I will argue in what follows.

2 Even-Zohar formulated his Polysystem theory in the 1970s and he has continued to develop it to the present day.

Since the two diaries under scrutiny in this study are written in times of intense suffering, it is particularly relevant to add that keeping a diary may have a therapeutic role. In some cases, diaries may be written "at the invitation of a clinician to provide relevant data for a specific study, or a therapist to facilitate self-exploration and understanding" (Pennebaker, JW & LA King, 1999, p. 1296). On the same note, Susan Sontag reveals a truth nobody could deny: that "Two diseases have been spectacularly, and similarly, encumbered by the trappings of metaphor: tuberculosis and cancer" (Sontag, 1978, p.5). Writing, and more specifically keeping a diary, with its tone of immediacy and intimacy, is a way of leaving the traces of one's existence-on-the-edge in words to endure beyond one's physical disappearance. Sontag also argues that cancer, recorded so punctiliously by Matei Călinescu in his diary, draws our attention to the stark material aspect of our condition, by mercilessly showing us "that the body is, all too woefully, just the body" (Sontag, 1978, p. 18). Did Călinescu "aestheticise" (a possibility Sontag challenges us to (re)consider) cancer when he wrote his diary? Maybe not as such, but his alternation of very accurate descriptions of the stages of the biological degradation he undergoes, the treatments and tests he is subject to, with entries recounting the spiritual and intellectual experiences he has in the same interval, can be read in the key of a transcendence of physical pain into the ethereal realm of the aesthetic. And, as Sontag remarks, "Diseases - and patients - become subjects for decipherment" (Sontag, 1978, p. 45) in the writers' letters, journals, prose, poetry and drama.

North notes that "The memoir, compilations of private letters, and autobiography (even biography) are also closely linked to the diary. This family of forms, including diary, have been dubbed life writing or ego-documents" (North, 2023). As much as these forms have in common "a perspective on events the authors were part of or observed," North argues that the diary differs from them in its spontaneity. While the diary is characterised by this immediacy, the other ego-documents "are usually carefully considered and retrospective; they are often written with hindsight, tackle longer periods of time, and/or have a predesignated focus" (North, 2023).

The diaries written by Matei Călinescu and Radu Vancu respectively combine characteristics of both categories of ego-documents: the spontaneity and immediacy of the diary, on the one hand, with the longer chunks of time they cover and the thematic focus their authors choose (an impending death counterpointed by a turning back of time through memory in the case of Călinescu's diary; illness and war, in the case of Vancu's), which are typical of the memoir, on the other.The retrospective approach is very poignant in Călinescu's diary, which is the writer's *recherche du temps perdu*, with recurrent meditations on the rich imagery and symbolism of Proust's novel. This blending of forms makes them read as a hybrid genre between diary and memoir, to which the characteristics of notebook mentioned by Cuddon are added.

In the following sections I will argue that the diary is a literary genre that enjoys a great success with the reading public, which has simultaneously gained importance and prestige as an academic field of study. In order to do so, I will highlight the stylistic devices and narrative techniques used by Călinescu and Vancu to bestow literariness onto their diaries, which both diarists planned to publish from the moment when they set out to write them. Time, a theme explored in both diaries, is also the mortar that binds the bricks of their masonry together, and in close connection with it there is memory, the frailty of the body in times of epidemic or in one's personal experience of a terminal illness; there are also mortality and death, and the compensatory role of art, with its transcendence and long duration.

Romanian Diarists and Diary Writing

In the Romanian literary landscape, there is a rich line of creative writers whose diaries established the genre in the 20th century. A notable diarist of that period is Mihail Sebastian, an outstanding chronicler of the growing power of the Nazi regime in Europe and of the persecution of the Jews before and during World War II (1935-1944), whose diary was published in 1991, fifty years after being written. Sebastian's diary remains a sample of Holocaust diary no less touching than Anne Frank's. Nicolae Steinhardt's book *Jurnalul fericirii* / *The Diary of Happiness* (1991) also waited for more congenial times to be published. Translated and published in France, the United States, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Germany and England, Sebastian's diary was a revelation. No less of a revelation was Steinhardt's book, considered by the famous Romanian critic Nicolae Manolescu "a splendid book, an inextricable blend of quotidian notation, memory, confession, hermeneutics (in the literal sense, because the Bible is often an object of interpretation /.../), humour, tragedy, history, universality, metaphysics, physiology, reading quotes a.s.f." (Steinhardt, 2008, p. 706).[3]

Matei Călinescu (15 June 1934, Bucharest – 24 June 2009, Bloomington, Indiana) was a poet, prose writer, essayist, literary critic and theorist, and professor of comparative literature. In 1973 Călinescu left Romania for America. He started his academic career at Indiana University Bloomington, initially as a Visiting Professor and Fulbright scholar, and later as a tenured professor at the Department of Comparative Literature, whose head he was for two years (1996-1998). He authored numerous academic books, a novel, two diaries, the biography of his son Matthew who died before he turned 26, and a volume of poems. The Humanitas Press issued a series of Matei Călinescu's books, in keeping with the author's testamentary will. As Raluca Dună, the editor of *Another Kind of Diary. Escaping Time* states in her preface to the volume, Călinescu envisaged his work as "a global autobiographical project" (Călinescu, 2016, p. 7) completed by the last piece, which was a diary written by its dying author. Even if its first entries date from 2004, the diary seen as an escape from time, i.e. earthly existence, begins in 2007, when he found out that he suffered from cancer in the terminal phase. Dună

3 Unless otherwise mentioned, all the quotes in Romanian are my translation into English.

aptly considers Călinescu's journal "'his little Aleph', in which he sees his own reflection and which reflects his visage, a world in miniature, containing, besides the visible, the invisible, besides the said, what's left to be unsaid..." (Călinescu, 2016, p. 7).

Radu Vancu (13 July 1978, Sibiu) is one of the most outstanding Romanian writers of the present, also a professor at the Faculty of Letters in Sibiu and a translator, whose civic activism makes him a conscience of our times. He wrote three academic books, one on Mihai Eminescu and another on Mircea Ivănescu, and a volume tackling the relationship between poetic modernity and our essentially human nature. Since 2002 he has published nine volumes of poetry, which won several prestigious national and international prizes, while his poems have been translated into approximately twenty languages. He has also published two novels (his latest, *Paradis / Paradise*, has just come out), a diary in three volumes, two children's books and a collection of civic writings. His recently published *Illness and War. A Diary, 2020-2024* documents the suffering, isolation and death brought about by the COVID epidemic as a constant reminder of one's mortality and impending death. This suffering is of the diarist's own body and mind as much as it is of the whole planet, but Vancu's way of transforming and transcending it is through the beauty of art and human relations. The confessionally incandescent tone of the diary allows Vancu to connect with the whole humanity of all times in the deepest way. One notices the leitmotif of the diarist's kinship of spirit with the Romanian writer and translator Mircea Ivănescu, his mentor and father figure, who opened him up to most of the philosophical and aesthetic perceptions of time and the surrounding world. Through Ivănescu, Vancu is connected with Matei Călinescu, whom he briefly met for an interview facilitated by his mentor, and to whom Călinescu dedicated his last book, *Another Kind of Journal.* One feels here, very poignantly, E. M. Forster's epigraph "Only connect" translated by Vancu from an urge (in *Howards End*) into a *raison d'être* in writing and in life.

For Matei Călinescu, the autobiographical nature of the diary is not altogether different from fiction. Accounting for his title and the kind of writing his diary is, Călinescu reflects:

> *Another Kind of Diary*, a diary that is, in which experiences felt in the past, those "print-outs" of an old memory prevail, and that memory still has the force to fight futility. The more recent memories melt into nothingness and vanish into the murky waters of the passing days. I'd much rather pass my time writing fiction - this page you're reading should have been the opening of a short story written in the first person -, but isn't everything I might be writing fiction? (Călinescu, 2016, p. 119).

Vancu has a very keen perception of the incorporeal blueprint of his diary writing:

> Somehow I wanted to put to a test the hypothesis that literature might do its job even after the body has ceased to be; and I wrote them [my first diary and my novel *Transparency*] as if I no longer had a body (Vancu, 2024, p. 134).

Like Călinescu, Vancu reflects on the relation between diary and fiction writing. Starting from the readers' ingrained assumptions that fiction is about *personae*, i.e. constructs or invented fabrications, while the diary is its opposite, i.e. the real-life person writing it, Vancu deems the diary to be "the most uncomfortable of all the exposures to which writing commits you" (Vancu, 2024, pp.134-135). Diary writing further challenges him with the Stendhal versus Flaubert dilemma:

> I have this Stendhalian bogey, according to which the diary makes sense only if it is your unmitigated, unrevised & unadulterated emission. But then I also have the Flaubertian bogey - of prose as a tissue of sentences, as a syntactic trawl where beauty gets caught. I'm well aware that the two bogeys clash - but I do find comfort in saying to myself: well, that's literature for you, a collection of clashing bogeys (Vancu, 2024, p. 135).

In the last entry of 25 June 2024, Vancu returns to ponder on the point of writing the diary, reminding himself of the diaries written by other Romanian writers (Sebastian's, which is "one of the greatest European documents of the inter-war period"; Radu Petrescu's post-war diary, which is "of the most keen obsession with beauty I've ever come across"; Cărtărescu's, who "documents the way in which true literature is more than literature – i.e. a way of having a full experience of the real & of going beyond it") (Vancu, 2024, p. 438). Vancu started keeping a diary in 2012, when his inspiration had dried up and he hoped that this kind of writing would help him escape from the impasse. The strategy worked: the diary showed him the way towards three other poetry books and two novels. "In a way," Vancu candidly confesses, "the diary is my literature teacher. A kind of ChatGPT that I invented for myself, an interlocutor I can converse with about the literature in my brain & in my heart. And which, from a certain point onwards, started to invent me" (Vancu, 2024, p. 438).

Time, Memory, *Apophrades* and Art

My own experience of reading Radu Vancu's Journal was of the nature of successive epiphanies and discoveries. The book is, to quote Cuddon again, "a self-revelation" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 151) in the first place, but it is a self-revelation as much as it is the reader's own. At the same time, being a writer's diary, Vancu's journal is very largely a reading notebook. Thus, reading it I found Matei Călinescu's referenced there, among hundreds of other writers and their writings. Călinescu's thoughts and ideas are referenced in different places in Vancu's Journal, but the most galvanising reference to *Another Kind of Diary* is occasioned by Vancu's epiphanic experience of listening to Matei Ioachimescu's flute solo, which triggers a cavalcade of ecstatic connections in his mind:

> *Electric*, in which the music was visually translated by lasers that sliced the air into coloured beams, hypnotic prisms, incandescent semi-plants. When Matei's flute was melancholic, the air would flicker, almost dying out; when life shot through the flute again, silver threads would glare up in the air – like luminescent bones - and the entire resurrected body of music, returned from the dead, stood there erect on their skeleton. This reminded me of Matei Călinescu's way of visualising music in his

> diary that records the last years before he died: Matei C. (another Matei!) knew he had cancer, that his days were numbered, he kept the diary as a record of his escape from time (its very title is that), and he would also listen to music as an escape from time; quite often, he would have this same image of it as a descent from above of some silver threads, which I (while reading his diary) understood obviously as a staircase. A staircase one can ascend & descend at will, as one does the staircase of literature, which is actually the same staircase (Vancu, 2024, p. 161).

The whole truth of the Latin aphorism *ars longa, vita brevis* lies in this passage, completed by a parenthetical reflection in a later entry: "Art is what's left alive beyond life" (Vancu, 2024, p. 251). Vancu, the unfictionalised protagonist of the book, embeds this moment in his experience of physical pain. In the wake of an accident, one of his legs is lame, and walking back home from Ioachimescu's concert at the Gong theatre, he lets art do its magic trick of allowing him to transcend the aching body into another dimension of time and reality. There, in art, the staircase is invisible, though "one can trip and fall badly off it too – with horrible and life-crippling fractures – like falling off any staircase" (Vancu, 2024, p. 161).

In the face of rampaging epidemic, followed by the outburst of the war in Ukraine, Vancu's diary entries are replete with meditations on mortality, suffering, disease and death. One may find it striking that Vancu takes the times of epidemic and war as the backdrop of his daily sorrows, joys, epiphanies, disappointments and elations, especially considering Sontag's remark that in the Middle Ages "Epidemic diseases were a common figure for social disorder" and "From pestilence (bubonic plague) came 'pestilent', whose figurative meaning, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is 'injurious to religion, morals, or public peace – 1513'; and 'pestilential', meaning 'morally baneful or pernicious – 1531" (Sontag, 1978, p. 58). In the face of his own imminent death, Matei Călinescu's diary is a Proustian *recherche du temps perdu,* obsessively referencing Proust's *roman-fleuve* in which the past intersects with and illuminates the present. Vancu's and Călinescu's endeavours of making the beauty of art triumph over the ravaging passage of time chart a confessional space of maximum intensity and urgency in the two diaries, and both seem to converge into Vancu's, which succeeds Călinescu's in time. Thus, Vancu's diary opens itself up, aware of repeated moments of *apophrades*, to the dead authors that return to visit and inhabit it. Two of those dead authors are Mircea Ivănescu and his friend Matei Călinescu.

When they are not occasioned by mundane miracles like a dog and a frog playing together, a cat plucking up the courage to let itself caressed for the first time, a hedgehog paying its routine visits, Vancu's reflections are triggered by stimulating conversations and interviews or by extremely intense experiences of art. One of those interviews is Horia Roman Patapievici's about the genesis of the 20th century literary modernity, whose idea is that "modernity means the invocation of some dead forms of beauty and their coming back to life, the

borrowing of some dead voices and revivifying them in new molds of language" (Vancu, 2024, p. 64). Patapievici's reflection reminds Vancu of Harold Bloom's *apophrades* in *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*. Vancu argues that what Bloom does is to translate the old belief in the darkening days of the *apophrades,* when the dead would return to dwell in the houses they used to inhabit. In Vancu's reading of Bloom's reinterpretation of the old Greek term, the *apophrades* is "that form of the anxiety of influence in which the writer deliberately opens up their poem to the great dead [authors] before them" (Vancu, 2024, p. 65). Where Bloom states that "the covert subject of most poetry for the last three centuries has been the anxiety of influence, each poet's fear that no proper work remains for him to perform" (Bloom, 1997, p. 148), Vancu contends that the *apophrades* is "truly seminal and iconic for modernity" (Vancu, 2024, p. 65). Reinforcing the idea, Vancu concludes the entry of 28 October 2020:

> ...making sense of literature as the resurrection of the dead. Making sense of words as bricks of the houses where we're desperately & hopefully trying to lure our beloved dead. Both those of the past and those of the future - in equal measure. There is no other way this can be (Vancu, 2024, p. 65).

Throughout the journal, Vancu reflects upon time in its myriads of manifestations, dimensions and perceptions. He accounts for the second volume of his journal as a way of recording and perceiving time that typifies an interval before the pandemic. The third volume captures "another quality of time, a Dantesque 'time imposed by force' which our brains found difficult to metabolise - hence the planetary depression in those first months of the pandemic" (Vancu, 2024, p. 134). Dante's *Divina commedia* read in Italian is a recurrent underlayer of the diary, and while reading Dante's *Paradise* with its descriptions of dazzling light, his mind engages in a simultaneous (re)reading through involuntary association of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Rilke's poetry (Vancu, 2024, p. 20), which is a reshaping of time into a sphere. In 2021, lying in a hammock chair on the beach in Neptun, he tries "to kill time," (Vancu, 2024, p. 142), and he discovers that consuming the beauty around and the beauty in art is the most efficient way of doing so. Travelling from place to place (from Croatia through Tuscany and ending the journey in Milan, for instance) adds a new perception of time: one finds that the writing gains momentum, "perhaps also because it has to navigate through times of varying densities" (Vancu, 2024, p. 143).

Being written by a dying writer, Călinescu's diary is totally absorbed into memory time. Its first pages, as well as its later pages, are a painful reconstruction of the portrait of M, his late son, whose death two years before 25 May 2004 (the first entry date) made time feel different. Călinescu's model is Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* which, like Dante's *Divina commedia* that gives meaning and substance to Vancu's diary, is the recurrent underlayer of Călinescu's palimpsest. Proust gives Călinescu a narrative strategy, and so the diarist opens up his text to the dead French author, who returns to inhabit the dwelling house (i.e. the text) of his *ephebe*. Starting from the thought of his

dead mother who lost her memory because of Alzheimer, and confessing that his memory of her is a form of her continuing to live (i.e. also dwell!) in him, "in images that cleave and overlap in an ever-changing way," (Călinescu, 2016, p. 42) Călinescu ends the entry with the final image of the narrator's own body on high stilts in Proust's novel. Those stilts metaphorically keep the subject connected with their past, but it becomes more and more difficult and problematic for one to keep walking on those stilts and maintain the connection. Călinescu reads the image as "connected memories" (Călinescu, 2016, p. 43). The image returns two pages later, when the diarist broods about the significance of 100 years and the distance between the epochs lived in his lifetime. Memory preserves those stretches of lived time, and its loss through Alzheimer, which revisits the thinking mind, erases it. That erasure of time is at the same time the erasure of the self before the physical death strikes.

Commemorating M on 24 August 2006, Călinescu sees time as "a space without dimensions, though no less real in its own unreality," where his dead son's presence "is an unnoticeable thread, which becomes luminous now and then, thus giving the meaning of an enigmatic smile to the whole day" (Călinescu, 2016, p. 22). Along with those recurrent memories of M, the diarist is revisited by memories of Borges, whose "imagination imitated memory" (Călinescu, 2016, p. 48); the houses of his childhood, also part of "a particular unreality, an inexistence" (Călinescu, 2016, p. 60) because they belong to a different time and space; his grandmothers, whom the diarist's "retrospective imagination" places in a space-time that is now lost, Proust's paradise (Călinescu, 2016, pp. 105-107).

Călinescu is troubled (almost like Lockwood, who is troubled by his "solitary neighbour" in *Wuthering Heights*) by the same distinction between diary and fiction writing that Vancu considers in his own diary:

> No matter how 'sincere' he might be – no matter how skillful a writer might be in 'the rhetoric of sincerity' –, a reader cannot help fictionalising what he [the writer] writes - be it autobiographical or invented - before they adjust their inner lenses for the reading of the self brought about by the literary text. For whatever we might be doing, the only kind of writing we can read is fiction... (Călinescu, 2016, p. 60).

Călinescu's reflection here sheds light on the fictitious nature of any text. The personal experiences recorded in writing, the spontaneous and sincere tone (that can after all be contrived) confer literariness upon the diary. Considering this, the diary is no less literary than the novel, especially when its author's intention is to give shape to their impromptu thoughts and impressions and to publish them. Wondering why the diary enjoys huge popularity, Peter Zimmermann puts this success of the genre in the publishing world down to its literary and aesthetic value when he argues that "**Max Frisch**'s diaries are on a level par with his novels and plays. The diaries are even **Paul Nizon**'s main work. The same now applies for **Karl-Markus Gauß**. **Siegfried Unseld**'s diaries are regarded as key texts of post-war literature" (the author's emphasis) (Zimmermann, 2015).

For Călinescu, diary writing and in particular the writing of "another kind of diary", which he knows is the last volume of his *oeuvre*, his "escape from time," with its promise of beyondness, is an "apparent temporal zigzag of rummaging through memory" (Călinescu, 2016, p. 271), a task of reconstituting snappy moments of the layered past and putting them into "a narrative syntax, a succession resembling the succession of words in a sentence with subordinate clauses and brackets, in a paragraph, etc.", while "in the memory, time is abolished" (Călinescu, 2016, p. 272): those moments are fresh and colourful and complete. For a book-learned person like Călinescu, the languages in which he did his readings (English, French, Romanian), in translation or in the original, preserve their "semantic identity" (Călinescu, 2016, p. 272) intact. Călinescu scrutinises these tricks of memory, admitting the inaccuracy of the process, and therefore the transformative nature of the whole endeavour. He concludes the entry of 8 August 2008:

> A satisfaction hard to describe ensues. The visual name and image *in tandem* may start telling stories, inserting chronology into memory, organising the episodes in keeping with this chronology (starting, for instance, *in medias res*, and then committing a prior event to the foreground, and then foreshadowing, etc.) - all the strategies alien to the oceanic world of memory (Călinescu, 2016, pp. 272-273).

Thus, diary writing becomes "what the writer self-construes" (Zimmermann, 2015). Nonetheless, when he advances this approach to it Zimmermann admits that

> this sounds brutal if one considers **Wolfgang Herrndorf**'s work and structure – his co-writing with death, the attempt to find a language for a life with an illness leaving no chance for the individual. Yet this is the case: in the quest for language one stumbles across form. And form is not reality; it is merely a surrogate for the unmentionable (the author's emphasis) (Zimmermann, 2015).

The point Zimmermann makes of the construed nature of the text has a bearing on Călinescu's diary, which is, like Wolfgang Herrndorf's, a text written by a dying person for whom writing is literally a way of giving shape to an amorphous reality of pain. Writing is, in this extreme case, the diarist's way of re-organising the nebulae of memory, the bookish experiences of the past and of the present in order to give some meaning to one's life and approaching death through a coherent and contained narrative.

Body, Illness, Death, Beauty, Transcendence

The two diarists keep their diaries in an acute awareness of an inevitable, and in Călinescu's case, impending death. Invoking Socrates, who stated that we do not know anything about death, we do not know whether it is a good or a bad thing, or whether it is a complete cessation of being or just a transformation and a journey of the soul from here to another realm, Călinescu concludes his entry of 15 March 2008 in admiration of Socrates's "sublime" closing line, which he quotes: "Which of us walks towards something better nobody knows except for the [supreme] God!". The entry is a dramatic record of the clock's merciless

ticking, in spite of the diarist's titanic endeavour of reversing its advancing hands in his Proustian narrative:

> I am also sentenced to death - not unjustly; as a matter of fact, beyond good and evil, beyond my own destiny – but the only thing I know vaguely is that the moment is not very far (Călinescu, 2016, p. 157).

Four days later in the chronological measurement of time and in the next entry of the diary, which skips those days, Călinescu proclaims a truth he shares with Vancu and so many other writers and artists across ages and cultures, a truth so definitively contained in the *ars longa, vita brevis* dictum. Both Călinescu and Vancu, and the whole league of other believers in this truth add an eschatological dimension to it: the beauty of art is not only enduring beyond an individual's existence; beauty can also save the world, a might it shares with love (and its corollaries) and with theological faith. In our modern times, most poignantly since the 18th century, more and more of us (writers, artists and art consumers) have turned art into our religion, putting our faith in its eschatological might. Realizing that, in the shock of the news that he suffers from terminal cancer, he has forgotten to resort to the soothing effect of music, Călinescu resonates with Dostoevsky in the thought that beauty will save the world. He admits that actually it *is* saving the world now:

> ...whenever you come across it or approach it, in rapture. It reveals a mysterious dimension of the present, and yet another one, even more mysterious, of expectation. Listening to Mozart, I often stop writing, in the rediscovered joy of listening in awe, for minutes on end, to the exquisite purity of the sounds and rhythms that materialise his music, to the stairs made from thin silver threads, fluttering their wings in a flight to my ears (only in Bach's music are these of gold) (Călinescu, 2016, pp. 158-159).

Vancu chooses to read Călinescu's gesture of keeping on reading and writing literature and listening to music not in an eschatological key, but as:

> a support that might help him to build sense in the midst of nonsense. He asks the beauty in literature and in music, for he would listen to a lot of music in those terminal years, to work as some kind of angels – who do not save anything, but herald one meaning or another, sometimes a terrifying one, in Rilke's words, and sometimes soothing (Vancu, 2024, p. 86).

Nonetheless, it is the stairs in Călinescu's description that Vancu echoes in his own diary, referencing Călinescu. Vancu's and Călinescu's diaries are replete with passages of such rapture, and with reiterations of the eschatological, transcendental and soothing role of beauty.

More anchored in the postmodern mindset, Vancu seems to live a lot more in the body than Călinescu, who more often than not records his cancer treatments and his worsening health condition and physical degradation in a tone of sad detachment. Although he tries to transcend his bodily condition confessing that he has "always been touched by the art that transcends the

body" (Vancu, 2024, p. 150), Vancu realizes that the body can be and ultimately *is* an aching attachment. He reads the Romanian poet George Bacovia (as a person) and Bacovia's poetry in terms of alienation. With Rimbaud's lines in mind (*La vraie vie est absente. Nous ne sommes pas au monde*) and at the same time thinking of Bacovia, Vancu argues:

> In the most obvious way, Bacovia was not of this world; not only in the habitual sense that no poet is *of* this world - but in the hard-factual, physical, concrete sense in which nothing of what his body did occurred *in* this world. His life was not present here - there is no one poem written by him that would fail to make you feel that he regards everything with the astonishment of an alien body, brutally thrust in an environment which is not his (Vancu, 2024, p. 151).

Heartbroken by Bacovia's desperate gesture of clinging to his poems because for him they were "the only real objects in his life" (Vancu, 2024, p. 152), Vancu undergoes a series of epiphanies that reveal to him the unreality of the world and of ourselves. This is an eerie sense shared by Vancu and Călinescu, and it is in close connection with the aching of the body in the case of somebody who suffers from cancer (Călinescu's case) and somebody who records his living in times of the pandemic and of war, which infallibly take their death toll after causing terrible pain to the body (Vancu's case, who adds his own pain to the collective pain in the wake of an accident which incapacitates him for a long interval). After the accident, Vancu confesses:

> I have been neglectful of my body, more neglectful than of poetry anyway. 'It's just a body', I said to myself so oftentimes, in silly arrogance. (I hadn't come across that passage in Plotin that states, assertively & plainly & in the accurate terms of an essential equation: "The body is within.") And the body punished me, it taught me it was an impudence on my part to want it to be transparent. /.../ In a way, modernity can be read as an entrance of the body into literature (Vancu, 2024, p. 145).

Poets and artists know that since the physical body is subject to decay, art is an embodiment *and* a way of transcending the body at the same time. Bringing to memory a moment when he saw Sappho's saying "Mere air, these words, but delicious to hear" in a museum in Athens, poet Edward Hirsch reflects that "Writing fixes the evanescence of the sound. It holds it against death" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 9). The body of the text (the shape of its words with their rhythm, and structured into the syntax of the poem) are then felt "coming off the page into my own mouth – in transit, in action. I generate – I re-create – the words incantatory, the words liberated and self-reflexive. Words rising from the body, out of the body" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 10). What Vancu adds to this sense of simultaneous embodiment and transcendence is the intensity of poetry, which "has to be intensified soul; as a form of goodness, it has to be intensified soul – so intense that it changes you forever in the wake of the experience of it" (Vancu, 2024, p. 171).

An anecdote written in the entry of 2 May 2022 is of the nature of an epiphany. It was selected (by the press? by the diarist?) to essentialise Vancu's message about our need of beauty and our restlessly eager search for it:

> 2 May. A little story of the other day, Ioana Marghita was keen on calling me up to share it with me: one day last week, an elderly man from the Titan district walked all the way to the radio station to find out what the musical piece with which I had concluded my dialogue in a music programme was called - he'd been ravished by it. As the elderly person did not know how to google it up, the radio was his only source. The piece was *Insan Insan,* composed by Fazil Say on a 16th century poem by Muhyiddin Abdal. I can understand what might have been in the soul of the man from Bucharest: the first time I heard it was in Istanbul, in Gökçenur's car, some ten years ago - and it tears my soul to shreds every time I listen to it. That's all I wanted to report here: that somebody can still walk across the whole city just to gain knowledge of a musical piece that was wonderful & haunting & healing. There is hope left (Vancu, 2024, p. 226).

Likewise, literature, and poetry in particular (which is more intense than any other genre) has the role of building communities and nations, and "preserving these scraps of humaneness [even in communities destroyed by war]" (Vancu, 2024, p. 113). Written in moments of "inspiration in the presence of death" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 38) as Hirsch accounts for it drawing on Lorca's "duende", poetry is a message against death and forgetfulness.

On Reading and A Few Conclusions

Vancu's reflection is that the role of literature is "to hallucinate your life. And, only in doing so, to pour large amounts of light that were lying somewhere within you down upon your life, amounts of light you wouldn't have been able to release if literature hadn't unlocked them" (Vancu, 2024, pp. 183-184).

Hirsch's reflections find a good context here again, since what he argues in *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* can read as a prelude to the book Călinescu finished writing sixteen days before he died. Hirsch states in one of the book's sub-chapters that "It Is Something of an Accident That You Are the Reader and I the Writer" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 28). Hirsch quotes Emerson, who wrote about "creative reading" in "The American Scholar" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 29), and of course Harold Bloom's "misreading" is one more voice in this chorus. With its connective and liberating impact, "a poem enacts what it is about, it creates a way for itself to live dramatically inside the reader" (Hirsch, 1999, p. 45), which is another kind of embodiment.

Echoing Mallarmé's opening line in *Brise marine,* Călinescu ponders on it: "Hélas, j'ai lu tous les livres" (Călinescu, 2016, pp.436-437). In that particular moment and circumstance, this lament translates not so much a sense of *ennui* as a sense of disappointment that reading (any book) can no longer give the reader the surprise of a new discovery that is so characteristic of youth. For the writer who is writing this, the meaning is also that he has read all the books he could read, since this is literally the end of his life. To Lejeune's question "How Do Diaries End?" that gives the title of a chapter in a book that tackles diary writing, Călinescu's answer is no contrivance: his kind of diary ends on the note of the writer's last days on Earth, in a tone of dissolution, which is also

the dissolution of the style itself. It is strikingly significant that Lejeune quotes Michel Leiris's diary entry of September 26, 1966, in which Leiris contemplates a kind of writing that will not be halted by one's cessation to exist:

> A book that would be neither an intimate diary nor a fully formed work, neither an autobiography nor a work of imagination, neither poetry nor prose, but all of that at once. A book conceived so as to be able to constitute an autonomous whole at whatever moment it is interrupted (by death, of course) (Leiris quoted by Lejeune, 2009, p. 192).

Like Philip Quarles – Huxley's novelist in *Point Counter Point* – and like Huxley himself who designed the book, the solution to this creative conundrum lies in getting the writing as close as possible to the sense of proliferation in music: Leiris found it in variation; Huxley found it in counterpoint; Călinescu found it in the evocative descriptions of the music he was listening to, which counterpointed in the text's body the proliferation of anaplastic cells in his own dying body.

Zimmermann's last blog passage on the diary as a literary genre encapsulates Călinescu's plight in a metalanguage that resonates with the Romanian writer's Proustian text:

> 'Co-writing' or Mit-Schreiben (**Peter Handke**) with the day, with daily impressions, accomplishments and encounters only exists as a process of transformation and redrafting. The sentence is never identical to the subject that it describes. Thought in itself already corrupts reality. The sentence corrupts the thought in a second step, and thus to a certain extent it expresses a double untruth. Basically, nothing is wrong with this. Yet one should know that when I say 'I', another subject is always intended and that this 'now' refers to a different time than the present. The fact that diaries are nonetheless favoured as examples of experienced reality may be explained with the following sentence from **Marcel Proust**, "Time passes, and little by little everything that we have spoken in falsehood becomes true" (the author's emphasis) (Zimmermann, 2015).

Vancu's reflections on poetry are abundant in the diary, but his statement that "from my point of view, the one who reads poetry is also a poet - because they also take part, with the same zest the poet does, in this admirable & dreadful beauty. [A beauty] that we build & inhabit together" (Vancu, 2024, p. 146) is of particular relevance in this context of reading. The image of the masonry built and inhabited by authors and readers hypertextually connects (in Genette's terms) Vancu's diary with the Epic of Gilgamesh and with all the houses, palaces, mansions, cottages, huts, rooms, parlours, halls, etc. in world literature since the dawn of writing to the present day.

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