

## MASCULINE CENTRE AND FEMININE PERIPHERY IN ANTON HOLBAN'S NOVELS

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Love is one of the main themes of Anton Holban's literature. Therefore, in the novels *O moarte care nu dovedește nimic* (*A death that proves nothing*), *Ioana* and *Jocurile Daniei* (*Dania's games*) the masculine element, represented by the protagonist-narrator, intertwines with the feminine one, materialized in his three partners. However, Sandu's relationships with women are determined, first of all, by the image that he creates of himself. Other characters usually live in his shadow.

In most cases, a woman is treated by Holban's protagonist with superiority. Especially in relation to Irina Sandu manifests a kind of intellectual pride, demonstrating constantly that she is ignorant. Sandu is disappointed about his partner's indifference towards aesthetic experiences. According to him, Irina's behaviour and opinions prove her lack of taste. Especially her admiration for his musical talent, that he considers to be mediocre, arouses his anger:

... Irina spunea despre mine, ca și despre toți cei care îi erau simpatici: „Sandu cântă drăguț la piano!” După atâtea cărți citite și comentate împreună, se mulțumea cu astfel de formulări rudimentare, care nu însemnau nimic și care demonstrau nepriceperea ei completă.

(...Irina was saying about me, as well as about everyone that she liked: „Sandu plays nicely the piano!” After so many books read and commented together, she contented herself with such simple opinions that meant nothing and demonstrated her total ignorance.) [1: 21]

The protagonist displays even sadistic tendencies towards Irina: „suferea toate toanele mele. O pedepseam amarnic de orice mi se întâmpla, o umileam, o disprețuiam. Găseam cuvinte savant combinate care s-o doară.” („she bore all my caprices. I punished her for everything that had happened to me, I humiliated her, I treated her with disregard. I found elaborately combined words to hurt her.”) [1: 20]

Irina's company is seen by Sandu as a kind of

necessary evil. Spending time with her, Sandu complains about losing the best years of his life:

... dânsa mereu îndrăgostită, iar eu din când în când dorind-o, iar restul timpului petrecându-l cu ea, uneori din afecție, alteori din milă sau din plictiseală și mereu cu impresia că-mi sacrific tinerețea în mod neinteresant.

(...she was in love with me, while I wanted her from time to time, and spent time with her, sometimes out of affection, sometimes out of pity or boredom, and often having the impression that I sacrificed my youth in an uninteresting way.) [1:46]

Especially the idea of marrying Irina frightens him; as a result, he is extremely malicious towards his partner when she tackles this subject: „Într-o zi vorbeam, bătându-mi joc de fetele bătrâne și, ca s-o chinui, am adăugat, fără vreo schimbare a vocii (...): «Tu ai să rămâi fată bătrână!»” („One day I was mocking at spinsters and to hurt her, I added without changing my tone: «You are going to be a spinster!»”) [1: 23]

Sandu does not understand why he chose Irina, a person so different from himself. Here is an example of these divergences:

Mă mir că am putut crede în oarecare asemănări dintre noi. Irina era vorbăreț, spunea la întâmplare tot ce auzea, tot ce credea momentan, dar timp de ani, cât am fost împreună, nu-mi amintesc s-o fi auzit vreodată făcând vreo reflexie asupra muzicii. Doar uneori o vorbă banală și proastă, pe care o zicea identic și cu aceleași intenții: „E un băiat foarte drăguț!” și apoi „cântă drăguț la piano!” înlocuit câteodată prin „vorbește drăguț franțuzește!”

(I am surprised that I could have believed in any similarities between us. Irina was talkative, she was saying at random everything she had heard, everything she believed for the moment, but during all the years we spent together I don't remember her making a reflection on music. At times she expressed a banal and stupid opinion, said in the same way and with the same intention: „He is a very nice boy!” and then „he plays nicely the piano!” replaced sometimes with „he speaks nicely French!”) [1: 42]

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In our opinion, the protagonist does not realize that he chose Irina just because of those differences of intellect and character. As we are going to demonstrate, Holban's narrator uses a woman as a mirror to reflect in her his own personality.

We can observe Sandu's obsessional desire to transform his partner's personality according to his own will. As a result, the woman appears to be a person subordinate to the man, as far as her spiritual development is concerned. Holban's narrator often underlines the importance of his influence on Irina: „Că în preajma mea și-a îmbogățit mintea, asta e adevărat.” („It is true that she has enriched her mind in my presence.”) [1: 59] Similarly, in the novel *Ioana* Sandu introduces a friend of his to the heroine, finding him intelligent and capable of exerting a salutary influence on her: „să o învețe o mulțime de lucruri și să aibă o înrâurire asupra ei, punând puțină ordine într-o minte așa de chinuită.” („to teach her a lot of things and to influence her, to put her tormented mind in order.”) [2: 138] Thus, according to the protagonist, the woman's personality is „amorphous” and depends only on the beneficial effect of the man's strong personality.

In Holban's work love cannot acquire true intensity, because the narrator concentrates on the search of the truth of both his and the woman's feelings. Sandu, obsessed with the excessive analysis of every gesture and every word, does not indulge himself a passion that could lead him to lose self-control. Therefore, the strength of love is annihilated by the protagonist's desire to observe and control the woman. However, she turns out to be elusive. In fact, Anton Holban's work is permeated with the idea of the impossibility of unravelling the feminine mystery.

The problem of acquiring the knowledge of the beloved woman becomes vital, because when the erotic relation starts, the lovers do not know each other. It is possible, for the protagonist's desire is impersonal and it is often „applied” to accidental women.

In love, the narrator's aim is to „penetrate” the woman's attention, to dominate her and „possess” her psychically. Sandu finds pleasure not in approaching the woman, but in observing the pleasure that he offers her. Thus, love can be perceived as a struggle between two indifferent personalities, between the masculine element and the feminine one. The man's aim is achieved when the woman approaches him. Then he can retreat and observe her interest with calm indifference. We find an example of this game between the man and the

woman in the novel *O moarte care nu dovedește nimic*. At first Irina, seen from a distance, arouses Sandu's interest, but when he realizes that he is the object of her feelings, he becomes indifferent. Loving, Irina is a victim, because she situates herself inside the relationship. Sandu, remaining outside it, is invulnerable as long as he dominates her in entire safety.

Sandu's feelings have, therefore, an impersonal character. Holban's protagonist turns out to be lucid, not sentimental. His aim is to discover the truth, to have absolute certainty about every aspect of life, including love. He devotes much energy to solve his partner's mystery:

Aud respirația Irinei, nu știu numai dacă aceasta va fi Irina adevărată, și asta aș vrea s-o știu. Și mereu încep cercetările mele de la capăt, cercetări zadarnice, care nu vor duce la nici un rezultat, dar la care nu am tăria să renunț.

(I can hear Irina breathing, but I don't know if this is the true Irina, and I would like to know that. I start my research again, my useless research which will not produce any results, but which I am not strong enough to give up.) [1: 28]

What Holban's narrator wants is one clear image of the woman. He can hardly accept the fact that Irina is changing, that her behaviour is sometimes contradictory. However, continuous research as an antidote to the elusiveness of life turns out to be inefficient: instead of one clear image of the world, the protagonist gets a multitude of perspectives, which brings uncertainty. Sandu moves in this vicious circle, getting the impression of absurdity. He states: „Cu cât mă gândesc mai mult, cu atât se multiplică detaliile și văd mai puțin clar.” („The more I think, the greater number of details I get and I see less clearly.”) [1: 9] To explain other people's behaviour, the protagonist creates a system of multiple motivations, consisting in asking interminable questions and formulating sentences of the type „fie... fie...” („or... or...”). Here is an example of Sandu's doubts:

A fost în stare (...) să intre în cinematograful acela? Din spirit de bravură sau de inconștiență. Sau pentru că o impresiune prea mult gestul de a se duce la un cinematograf de cartier și nu putuse renunța la el. Sau poate că s-a dus la alt cinematograf.

(Was she able to go into that cinema? Out of bravery or because she was unaware. Or because the act of going to a local cinema had impressed her too much and she couldn't give up the idea. Or perhaps she went to another cinema.) [3: 144]

The narrator's wish to explain the whole complexity of his partner's behaviour leads to the

multiplication of hypotheses that make external reality even more elusive. Sandu is aware both of the impossibility of defining the woman's nature and of the cause of this impossibility, that is the multiplication of perspectives:

Sunt în romane anumite ființe insesizabile din pricina unui mister voit, aruncat asupra lor de autor, a unor detalii neexplicate, a unor evenimente neașteptate, a unor vorbe stranii. (...) Eroina mea e insesizabilă dintr-un motiv contrar: truda mea de a o explica în întregime și de a arunca asupra ei toată lumina de care sunt în stare.

(There are in novels some beings elusive because of an intentional mystery, given to them by the author, because of some unexplained details, unexpected events, strange words. My heroine is elusive due to a contrary motive: my struggle to explain her completely and to cast on her all the light I can.) [1: 62]

What is interesting, we do not find in Anton Holban's novels a genuine image of erotic attraction. Physical love is seldom a source of pleasure in *O moarte care nu dovedește nimic*. What Sandu desires is not Irina, but rather control of Irina's desires. He would like to possess her consciousness, because by „penetrating” her attention, he finds a visible proof of his own existence. Therefore, the protagonist wants much more than physical possession, but physical possession is a way of getting what he really desires. It is through sexuality that Sandu possesses or loses Irina. He is jealous of her without really desiring her. The protagonist initiates the sexual act in revenge for a wedding party where Irina went without him. He is often bored, even at the most intimate moments. As he says, „nimic nu mă mai tenta, cu tot trupul fraged și gol de lângă mine.” („nothing attracted me, although her delicate and naked body was lying beside me.”) [1: 22]

It is worth emphasizing that in Holban's work the verb „to know” is much more frequent than the verb „to love”. The narrator's pleasures and joys result from discovering the truth, and not from lyrical exultation.

In Holban's protagonist love is born of the sensation of vague anxiety. It is a desire aroused by an indefinite woman, by a stranger, we could say – by a mystery. In this way, Sandu is attracted by the group of girls among whom there is Irina. The young women seem „intangible” to him. They are „mereu împreună, fără amestec printre ceilalți, vioaie, grăbite, surzătoare, (...) distanțe.” („always together, not mixing with others, lively, quick, smiling, distant.”) [1: 10] As the girls' life seems full of secrets to the protagonist, his most urgent

desire is to meet those mysterious beings. In Sandu's opinion, such an event would confirm his best qualities: „Cunoștința lor ar fi o dovadă a importanței mele.” („Meeting them would be a proof of my importance.”) [1: 10] It is significant that Sandu desires all the girls, not knowing anything about them. His desire is an available feeling with no object. Now, the protagonist has to choose an actrice who will play the role of the beloved woman. However, as his desire is blind, this choice cannot be based on the woman's qualities, but is made accidentally, mainly because a person is around at the right moment and – what is important – because she is indifferent. In this way Irina is „chosen”. Sandu's conviction that a woman has a mysterious life, in which he could also be admitted thanks to her love, is sufficient to arouse affection for her. The greater the woman's mystery is, the stronger Sandu's feelings are. As he confesses, „neputința de a o avea în voia mea îmi îmboldea dorințele.” („the impossibility of having her at will whetted my desire.”) [1: 21] Thus, the woman seems attractive, because she is inaccessible, because she has mysterious desires. When the man feels that he is the object of those desires, his sensation of mystery, as well as his interest, tend to disappear. Once the mystery seems unravelled during everyday life, Sandu feels disappointed. Soon, Irina becomes colourless in his eyes. One could suppose, then, that the intensity of the protagonist's feelings cannot resist to possession. However, affection reappears suddenly when there is a shadow of a doubt about her faithfulness. Love becomes, in this way, an interminable sequence of certainty – connected with boredom – , and uncertainty – connected with suffering. This is the case of Sandu's love for Irina. Going to Paris, the narrator is happy with the perspective of spending so much time without his partner. However, when he stops receiving letters from Irina, he is tormented by unbearable suffering: „De atâtea ori m-am gândit s-o termin cu ea, și acum i-am scris să vie neapărat, că fac tot ce va spune.” („So many times I thought that I should finish this relationship, and now I've asked her to be sure to come and promised to do whatever she would like.”) [1: 85]

Is such an attitude a manifestation of profound love or rather of fierce jealousy? Here is the protagonist's answer to this question: „De fapt, mă doare mai puțin supoziția dragostei ei netrainice decât gelozia că va aparține altuia. Că va fi îmbrățișată pe gură, pe tot corpul gol, că va fi a lui.” („Actually, the supposition that her love could be unstable hurts me less than the jealousy I feel when

I think that she will belong to someone else. That he will kiss her lips, her whole body, that she will be his.”) [1: 73]

When we analyse the problem of the presence and absence of Sandu’s partners, we can easily observe that the woman plays a *peripheral* role for Holban’s protagonist. On the one hand, the narrator feels often tired of her partner’s continuous presence. As a result, Sandu encourages Irina to leave him: „o povățuiam să aibă voința să mă uite și să se distreze cu alții.” („I advised her to have the will to forget me and to have a good time with others.”) [1: 22] On the other hand, when he loses control of Irina’s activities, he becomes immediately jealous of the time she spends in other places: „m-a durut mai ales petrecerea la care se amuzase fără mine.” („I suffered especially because of the party where she went without me.”) [1: 16] Similarly, when her family intends that she should marry someone else, Sandu does not disapprove of the idea, but he feels satisfied when Irina comes back to him:

Când mi-a spus Irina, râzând, istoria, am times-o să-l vadă și, dacă se poate, să-l accepte. La întoarcere mi-a povestit toată prostia candidatului și eu m-am amuzat cel dintâi. (Am trimis-o ca să încerc să găsesc o modalitate de a scăpa de ea, în același timp, să-i văd repulsia față de alții și întoarcerea ei și mai nebună spre mine.)

(When Irina, laughing, told me the story, I sent her to see him and, if possible, to accept him. After she came back, she told me about the candidate’s stupidity and I was the first one to laugh at it. [I sent her to try to find a way of getting rid of her and, at the same time, to see her repulsion towards others and her even more desperate return to me.]) [1: 22]

The novel *Ioana* is, almost exclusively, a record of the narrator’s jealousy of the time spent by his partner with „the other”, when Sandu could not control her. In *Jocurile Daniei*, similarly, we find innumerable questions left, in most cases, without answer, concerning Dania’s travels in which he cannot take part. Sandu repeats:

Ce făcea ea în momentul acela (...)? La un teatru? La un ceai? Invitată? (...) Să poți asista, cum numai la cinematograful se poate face, la două scene aproape în același timp.

(What was she doing then? At the theatre? At a tea? Invited? If you could witness, as you can do only in the cinema, two scenes almost at the same time.) [3: 21]

As we mentioned above, being jealous of the time spent by the woman in other places, unknown to the protagonist, does not mean that he longs for her permanent presence. Sandu appreciates solitude

as a source of unique experiences. In the novel *Ioana*, during an excursion, without his partner, to Brașov, the protagonist enjoys his liberty and discovers that „în singurătate și în tăcere se pot trăi clipele într-adevăr profunde.” („in solitude and in silence you can savour really profound moments.”) [2: 195] Such moments are also offered to the narrator when he listens to music, in which he finds „singurele consolări” („the only consolation”). [2: 157] Sandu confesses: „Eu profitam de muzică pentru că mă puteam retrage în mine, pentru a nu mi se mai părea că ceea ce-mi este mai intim a fost invadat de un străin.” („I benefited from music, because I could retreat into myself, in order not to have the impression that a stranger invaded what was most intimate to me.”) [2: 157] He adds that music should be listened to in solitude.

Therefore, Sandu wants the woman to be always available, but not to fatigue him by her presence. He prefers a temporary absence of the loved one, but accompanied by the certainty of her return. Only in such moments, when the protagonist is alone, but sure of his partner’s activities, can he be quiet. Thus, Sandu is convinced that the woman’s episodic presence is beneficial for his spiritual development. This state of partial presence is called by Mihai Zamfir *half-absence* (*semi-absență*). [4: 30] It is realized by such means of communication as letters, messages sent by third parties and telephone calls, which sustain and prolong real appointments.

We find a good illustration of the half-absence psychology in the novels *O moarte care nu dovedește nimic* and *Jocurile Daniei*. The former begins with a significant scene of Sandu’s departure for Paris. As this journey is the achievement of his dreams, Sandu is excited and happy. The lovers’ leave taking is awkward. The narrator observes: „acum nu știam ce să-i vorbesc.” („now I didn’t know what to tell her.”) [1: 7] Once in Paris, he contents himself with frequent letters from Irina. It is the capital of France that offers him real pleasure:

Trăiesc din surprize, și seara adorm istovit de atâta goană prin muzee și pe străzi. De la Irina îmi vin scrisorile la dată fixă, așa cum hotărâsem acasă. Îi răspund conștiincios, dar grăbit, cu gândul în altă parte, vorbindu-i de lucruri care probabil n-o interesează. (...) Despre mine și despre dânsa nimic, doar un „dragă” la început și „sărutări” la urmă.

(I live on surprises, and in the evening I fall asleep, exhausted after visiting the museums and walking down the streets. Letters from Irina come on fixed days, as we settled at home. I answer her scrupulously, but in a hurry, thinking about

something else and writing about things that probably don't interest her. About me and her – nothing, only a „dear” at the beginning and „kisses” at the end.) [1: 7-8]

Sandu, being aware of his coldness towards Irina, makes a lucid observation: „Așa își scriu îndrăgostiții și acestea sunt mijloacele de a întreține focul nestins?” („Is this the way lovers write to each other? Are these the means of feeding the eternal fire?”) [1: 8] He is wrong, however, thinking that his indifference is complete, that he wants to get rid of Irina. When he does not receive news from her on time, he feels sudden anxiety, and discovering the motive of Irina's silence becomes his single occupation. What Sandu really desires is Irina's absence controlled by him, that is half-absence.

Similarly, in the novel *Jocurile Daniei* we find numerous scenes characteristic of the half-absence psychology. After Dania's first long absence, the protagonist is waiting for her letters:

După câteva zile, când făcusem socoteala că trebuie să-mi scrie, m-am dus fără de nici o bănuială, surzător de succesul meu sigur, la cutia de scrisori. Apoi la factorul următor și la al treilea. Am început să-mi dau singur explicații: poate că numărasem eu greșit. (...) Din prima zi nu-mi scrie, sunt prea pretențios. Poate că nu mi-a reținut bine adresa. Sau s-a pierdut scrisoarea... Sau... Nu înțelegem. (...) Mady a spus: „Așa e ea!” Cum așa? Adică este inutil să aștept un semn? În fiecare zi, inutil?

(After several days, when I stated that she should write to me, I went without any doubt, smiling at the idea of my certain success, to the letterbox. Then again and again. I began to explain it to myself: perhaps my calculations were wrong. She will not write to me the first day, I'm too pretentious. Perhaps she failed to remember my address. Or the letter has got lost... Or... I didn't understand. Mady told me: „She's like that!” What does it mean? Is it useless, then, to wait for a sign? Every day, useless?) [3: 21]

The above quotation shows that Dania's absence is not in itself a source of the narrator's disappointment. The first sentence – let us remember that Sandu is „smiling” and sure of his success – reflects the hope of establishing a perfect relationship, based on half-absence. If a letter arrived, it would give the narrator an illusion of a permanent relationship. His disappointment begins when half-absence becomes impossible because of Dania's silence.

Half-absence is a temporary state. It ends inevitably when the signs that constitute it are missing. The erotic adventure with Dania is interrupted when the correspondence between her

and Sandu comes to an end. The narrator decides to take a rest in his grandparents' house, in a small provincial town. The capricious partner's half-absence is indispensable for him to realize his intellectual goals. However, he cannot work, because Dania's letters, which he is expecting impatiently, do not arrive:

Factorul marca existența mea de fiecare zi. La șapte dimineața mă trezeam. Până la opt n-aveam griji multe, dar mai pe urmă eram tot mai îngrijorat (factorul vine *pe la nouă*). Ieșeam din casă la fiecare minut, să mă uit înspre stradă. (...) Desigur, dacă n-aș fi fost de față, factorul ar fi putut să-mi lase scrisoarea la altcineva. Dar dacă scrisoarea s-ar fi rătăcit? (...) În sfârșit, zăresc factorul. (...) Caut să ghicesc pe chipul factorului dacă are ceva pentru mine pe când traversează curtea noastră. Constat că nici nu mă bagă în seamă, că ar găsi oricând pe altcineva căruia să-i lase corespondența. Mă mișc eu, mă ofer să fac eu serviciul acesta. De fapt, mai sper că totuși se va găsi ceva pentru mine și că factorul imbecil nu s-a priceput să fie mai explicit, sau că meseria i-a netezit orice expresie. Inutil, nimic pentru mine. Uneori factorul se uită în grămada de scrisori, să vadă bine dacă nu cumva mai este ceva pentru noi. Atunci aștept, chinul meu este deplin. „Nu e nimic!” Sau: „Ba da!” O scrisoare pentru altcineva. Voi trebui să aștept iarăși o zi întreagă.

(The postman marked my everyday existence. I was waking up at seven. Until eight I did not have many worries, but then I was more and more uneasy [the postman arrives *around nine*]. I was going out every minute to watch the street. Certainly, if I had not been at home, the postman could have left the letter at someone else. But if the letter had got lost? Finally, I see the postman. I try to read from his face whether he has something for me, while he crosses our courtyard. I state that he doesn't even notice me, that he would always find someone else to whom he could give the mail. I go toward him, I offer to do the service. Actually, I still hope that there will be something for me, that the stupid postman was not precise enough, or that his job erased every expression from his face. In vain, nothing for me. Sometimes the postman looks at the whole lot of letters to see well whether there is anything more for us. At such moments I wait, my suffering is most intense. „There is nothing!” Or: „Oh, yes!” A letter for someone else. I will have to wait another whole day.) [3: 153-154]

This long quotation is only a fragment of the vast and detailed description of everyday waiting. Sandu takes into consideration all the possible causes of Dania's silence trying, uselessly, to console himself. Finally, he decides not to see his partner again. Their relationship ends spontaneously.

The protagonist of Holban's novels appears to be a hypersensitive intellectual. Obsessed with the significance of every event and every feeling, he formulates a lot of hypotheses to unravel the feminine mystery that remains impenetrable. The object of the protagonist's desire is not the woman, but rather knowledge and control of her intimate life. The tension of Holban's novels does not result from affection, but from lucidity. The centre of Sandu's interests is occupied by himself. In

a state indispensable for the narrator's literary creation. Sandu adopts „o teorie asupra temperamentelor artistice” („a theory of artistic temperaments”), believing that „un astfel de temperament trebuia lăsat în voie.” („such a temperament has to be free.”) [1: 22] As a result, a woman cannot become a real partner for Holban's protagonist, she can only play a peripheral role in his life.

Holban's prose we often find the idea of solitude as

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