

Angelic and Crepuscular in Alexandru Sever's Drama

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Abstract

*The illustration of a world, apparently drifting, the (de)mystification of the transcendent and of the act of creation, as idea and textual strategy, seem to Alexandru Sever (1921-2010) a means for another beginning. The impossibility of action in *Înger bătrîn/ The Old Angel* (1977) and the pact-making in *Îngerul slut/ The Miscreated Angel* (1982), imply metamorphosis in essence, supported by the dialogue with the great texts of the world, by intertextuality (the biblical text, Shakespeare's texts -Hamlet -Yorick, texts written by Goethe, Beckett, Marlowe, Dostoevsky, J. P. Sartre, Mikhail Bulgakov and others).*

The projection of Auschwitz, as a Siberia of the spirit, and that of Faustianism, result in a detailed analysis of the human, both as individuality and as community, in an attempt to illustrate the (in)intelligible inaction, death involving catharsis in the mundane and the theatre alike.

Keywords: drifting world, metamorphosis, intertextuality, drama

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Alexandru Sever's debut in the journal *Student român* (1948) opens his path towards a journalistic activity (editor at PMR Publishing House (1949-1950) and E.S.P.L.A. from 1950 to 1958), carried out, up to a certain point, at the same time with his becoming a writer, playwright, essayist and translator. Of Jewish origin – his real name is Solomon Silberman (b. Bacău, 1921 – d. Beer Sheva, 2010) - Alexandru Sever immigrates to Israel in 1985, without speaking either Hebrew or Yiddish. In an interview given to Constantin Severin in 1997, the author concludes that his works are “presented for good” to Romanian literature. The displacement to another space is not only geographical: it is also one of meditation and settlement, as suggested by the titles published afterwards [1].

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However, until this period of creation, Sever had already produced dramatic texts revealing an obvious dialogue with the major texts of world's literature (through vision, "situation", conflict, quotation, allusion, etc.), a central theme being represented by Evil, with Man and History as its "roots". Some of the plays worth mentioning are: *Praznic cu monștri/ Noaptea speranțelor* [A Wake with the Monsters/The Night of Expectations] (1968), *Îngerul slut* [The Miscreated Angel] (12 tableaux, firstly included in the volume *Impostorul* [The Impostor], 1977, vol. 1984), *Descăpățănarea* [The Beheading] (1979), the *Leordenii* trilogy (*Bocitoarele, Haita, Ieșirea*, 1981 [The Wailers, The Pack, and The Exit]), which, inspired by Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, develop a psychoanalytically-decipherable conflict (Freud's *Totem and Taboo*), *Îngerul bătrân* [The Old Angel], a tragedy in three acts (vol. 1982), *Don Juan apocaliptic* [Don Juan the Apocalyptic], Vol. 1984, *Noaptea este parohia mea* [Night Is My Parish], a tragedy in two parts, *Un os pentru un câine mort* [A Bone for a Dead Dog], the three-act drama of an unbearable solitude, etc.

Following the trend of the "return and rebirth" of tragedy, Alexandru Sever's dramatic works state the question of a "poetics of the tragic" (see Ghițulescu 1981: 20-23), reminding of Mihail Sebastian's delimitation of the "tragic" as a "possibility" to live with it. Thus, cultivating tragedies, black comedies or dramas, the author creates images of a sick, drifting world, which justifies the future references to a transcendental court. The outlining of Time as over-character is accompanied of a plethora of character-masks concealing Evil, aiming to limn the "transvestite demonism" and the hangman. Besides the devil Mephiticus from *Îngerul slut*, the Führer is another character included in the gallery of demons. Such "motifs constantly intersect" in Sever's works (Ianoși 1984: 5-22), representing "obsessive" themes, the "memory of the age" and the biographic elements considered.

The angelic, followed by fall and existential abyss, in plays such as *Îngerul slut/II principe maledetto* and *Îngerul bătrân/Comedia nebunilor*, at the crossroads of false historicity ("an Italian citadel around 1600") and the attested past (Auschwitz, 1944), respectively, has as its stake the recollection of "some times" when the expected tragic resolution acquires a cathartic role under the sign of hope.

After a series of crimes committed to fill the hourglass of life, undue every day, Prince Cesare eventually accepts his demise: his being buried alive, standing, like a sunken statue of a perverted Sisyphus, like a decayed god, thus marking the twilight of a world. Old Godieu dies in

want of hope (*"Când nimeni nu-i destul de liber să trăiască cât vrea, liber e să aleagă când să moară"* (Sever, 1982: 302) [When one is not free enough to live as long as one wants, one is free to choose when to die]), hearing the gun fire of Elsa's and Zager's execution, the first Kapo of Crematorium Sonderkommando, who had accompanied her and held her hand. The dénouement of *Îngerul bătrîn*, a play which is a *"meditație gravă asupra condiției tragice nu a omului, ci a omenirii"* (Ghițulescu, 1981: 21) [a grave meditation on the tragic condition of mankind, not that of man], is relatively open in what the fate of the commander is concerned. After having chased away the shadows of the women come out of the death chamber to prepare his gallows, he is surprised to see Thomas Monk. As is the case of the still unfulfilled plans for burning the crematoriums and the camp, his destiny is left to the decision of other, "worthier angels", destined to successfully accomplish the actions of the former ones.

The created "black" universes point to human captivity, either by one's own choice (R. Descartes, A. Schopenhauer, J. P. Sartre), through the pact with Mephiticus, through the impossibility of getting out of the covenant, the citadel becoming an eternal prison, a *"țarc de victime viitoare"* (Sever, 1984: 82) [an enclosure of future victims], or through the action in the fascist concentration camp (the limitation of freedom is external to the individual - J. St. Mill), as a *"țarc de morți"* (241) [an enclosure of dead men]. Thus, the dramatic texts are imbued with symbols of clausturation: temporal - before dawn /at cockcrow; spatial - the prison, the underground, the cell, the camp, the autopsy hall, the gas chamber; imagined:

PRINȚUL (către Mephiticus): Ce lucru ciudat... Ai inventat o poveste al cărei erou sînt eu însumi, și oamenii aceștia mai degrabă cred povestea ta decît adevărul... Și iată-mă pe mine însumi prizonierul unei povești." (74)

[THE PRINCE (to Mephiticus): How strange... You have invented a story whose hero is me and these people would rather believe your story than the truth... And here I am - prisoner to a story.]

Nonetheless, the attempt to obtain physical salvation, to escape from the camp, is not accompanied by a spiritual one for those compromised (*"Cine să te ierte, Mussfeld; eu, fata, cei vii, cei morți, Dumnezeuul evreilor, Dumnezeuul papei, Dumnezeuul lui Luther? ...Cine?"* (Godieiu) (295) [Godieiu: Who should forgive you, Mussfeld? Me, the girl, the living, the dead, the God of Jews, the God of the Pope, the God of Luther? ...Who?]), as the redemption, similar to the vision in *Iona*, is under the sign of History:

GODIEU: *Sînteți atît de siguri că n-o să nimeriți din lagărul ăsta în altul? (...) Sîntem îmbarcați pe o corabie nebună (...) care plutește pe apa lumii (...), pe un dric fără adresă, singura corabie din univers pe care viitorul nu are preț, pentru că omul e mai ieftin decît iarba cîmpului, și sîngele e un suc mai netrebnic decît apa oceanelor...* (303).

[GODIEU: Are you so sure that you won't fall from this camp to another? (...) We are aboard a ship of fools (...) floating on the waters of the world (...), on a directionless hearse, the only ship in the entire universe where future has no price, for man is cheaper than the grass on the plain and blood is a juice less worthy than the waters of the oceans...]

The crepuscular character of the spaces and the constant existential agony are illustrated by a "belated sunrise", as if the sun were "*sătul să lumineze o nouă zi menită să lungească o durere.*" (Nyzsli) (224) [sated with lighting a new day meant to prolong the pain].

Under the sign of constant waiting, of a release which never comes, life no longer belongs to the individual, but to the force that governs it. Although the temptation to escape from the dungeon makes the Prince exclaim, at first, in Descartes's vein, that "*Prefer să gîndesc. Atît timp cît îmi gîndesc moartea, încă sînt*" (26) [I'd rather think. As long as I think of my death, I still exist.], the acceptance to sign the pact "with the dagger" enslaves him. The beginning of *Îngerul bătrîn* illustrating the analysis of the mind of a prisoner, in which the attempt to "find traces of God" leads to the comparison with "*hrana porcilor de la cantină, deși, pînă aseară (...) mișuna de gînduri, de imagini, de amintiri, vibra de suferințe, își avea depozitul lui de știință, nu-i lipsea poate nici chiar o adîncă conștiință a existenței*" (225) [with the meal of the pigs in the canteen, although, until last night, he was swarming with thoughts, images, memories, he was vibrating with suffering, he had his knowledge deposit, and didn't even lack a deep conscience of the existence].

Charged with watching the dead body, he names it a perpetual agony: "*Numai nu știu care cadavru: ăla din mine, sau ăl de alături?*" (idem) [I only don't know which corpse: the one within myself or the one nearby?]. Godieu's meditation reminds of Hamlet's at the sight of Yorick's skull. The Shakespearean pattern is also distinguishable in *Înger slut*, in Cesare's oscillating thoughts, in favour and/ or to the detriment of his own existence (as is in the case of Dostoyevsky's Stavrogin), in Isabella's death by poisoning, but also in the plots against the prince concocted at the Vitelli Palace.

The dialogue with Goethe's *Faust* – at least – with regard to the circulation of the model at world level (Marlowe, Dostoyevsky, J. P. Sartre, Mikhail Bulgakov, etc.), is also obvious in the dramatic poem placed in incipit: “UMBRA: “*Un poet savant, sau poate-un duh poznaș, / Și-a dorit un drac cărui să-i fie naș (...)* A ieșit în zori și a strigat la porți / Un nume latinesc, sapiențial...” (36) [THE SHADOW: A learned poet, a prankster spirit, rather/ Wished for a little devil, to become his godfather (...) He went out at dawn and cried towards the gates/ a sapiențial, Latin name...] Among the three levels of depth established in the case of *Îngerul slut*, apart from the central figure of the prince and the intertextual dialogue of the dramatic text with the great world masterpieces, Ion Vartic also notes “*o implicită intenționalitate polemică, incluzând, sub travestiul renașcentist, o demistificare a viziunii romantice despre eroul demonic*” (1984: 155) [an inherent polemic intentionality, beneath the Renaissance travesty, including a demystification of the Romantic vision of the demonic hero].

Whilst Godieu's death coming from conviction is fast, Cesare's, rounding the play through expressing the thoughts of a man facing death, in (semi)obscurity (at night and in the twilight) – reminds of the Kafkian vision of suicide as execution, punishment, defeat. The debut brings him forth saying: “*Dar eu, deși m-am împotrivit mult timp înfrângerii, m-am împăcat până și cu ea. (...) nimic nu mă împiedică să interpretez execuția asta drept o sinucidere cu garanția statului (...) cu avantajul de a nu risca ridicolul unei sinucideri neizbutite*” (Sever, 1984: 26) [But although I had resisted defeat for a long time, I eventually came to terms with it, (...) Nothing prevents me from interpreting this execution as a suicide warranted by the state (...) with the advantage of not risking the ridicule of a failed suicide.], whereas, in the final part, the same character refuses a possible salvation, perhaps as a last glimpse of morality: “*Sînt obosit... Înveliți-mă! Vreau să dorm!*” (153) [I'm tired... Tuck me in! I want to sleep!] As is the case with Ana in *Meșterul Manole*, life is measured in metres, for:

PRINȚUL: *Mă cam strînge groapa pe la subțiori / Sigur mă îmbracă groapa pînă-n zori. (...); (38)*

SOLDAT I: *Nu te doare pe la rădăcina picioarelor? (...)*

SOLDAT II: *Dar mijlocul, Cesar, mijlocul nu te doare? (153).*

[THE PRINCE: I feel the grave cluster around my arm. / It surely reaches to my head till dawn

THE FIRST SOLDIER: Don't you feel pain at the bottom of your feet? (...)

THE SECOND SOLDIER: What about the loin, Cesar, doesn't it hurt?]

Both texts repeatedly refer to the biblical text, to the divine justice, but also to the apprentices of the Church, the latter being the favourites of Mephiticus, the “authorised devil of the Holy Writs”: both the monk and the cardinal ask for Annibale’s punishment, as scapegoat. There are at least two natures of the transcendental force: a God who coexists with Mephiticus, to whose action the devil also takes place, sharing “the same philosophy”, as in the case of the construction of the Dostoyevskian demonic character:

UMBRA: „Căci nu-i nicăieri Biserică solidă / Ca să nu-i fi pus măcar o cărămidă. (...) Admirând Zidirea și slujindu-i Templul / N-am făcut decât să-i urmez exemplul. Întâietatea lui o cîntă tot veleatul. / A creat El moartea, Eu: asasinatul (...) Cum s-ar spune, fac ce face Dumnezeu, / Atâta doar: oleacă mai devreme!” (31-32)

[THE SHADOW: For never has a single Church been built/ without me putting at least a brick in it. (...) Admiring his Creation and serving in his Temple/ I’ve always simply followed his example/ Praised for being the first by every nation/ He created death, and me, assassination (...) One might say, I do what God has done, only that he’s been doing it already for some time.];

and another one who keeps up the hope, the “collective hallucination”, and who seems to protect humanity, through the angels and martyrs of *Înger bătrîn*. Also entitled *Comedia nebunilor* [The Comedy of Fools], the play centres around old Godieu, who reports himself, as those who will follow him after death, assuming his angel condition, to put an end to the crimes committed during the inquiry made with a view to finding the divine spectre, and underlining the fact that there is an angel sleeping in every man. Nevertheless,

COMANDANTUL: Atunci, în mine nu s-a trezit niciodată!

GODIEU: Asta nu se știe... Poate a murit de mult. (...)

COMANDANTUL: În viața mea n-am văzut un nebun mai mare ca tine.” (Sever, 1982: 259)

[THE COMMANDER: Then, it has never awoken in me!

GODIEU: You can’t know that for sure. Maybe it’s been long dead (...)

THE COMMANDER: I’ve never seen a greater fool than you in my entire life]

Even through onomastic similitude, Jean-Clément Godieu reminds of Beckett’s Godot, as he also embodies a waiting for the sign of a *Dieu*,

until the exhaustion of his own being: “un bărbat în vîrstă, scund, altădată voinic, acum însă fragil, numai piele și os, cu capul sur” (223) [an elderly man, short, once plump in his days, now fragile, a bag of bones with grey hair]. The wager to demonstrate the divine existence (“KAPO: Dacă fata va fi salvată, Dumnezeu există.” (294) [If the girl is saved, then God exists]) is lost, because “prin parcul nostru de momîi, Dumnezeu e absent” (MOLL), and, while he is not “în evidența lagărului, Dumnezeu nu există” (The Commander) (230) [God is missing from our park of scarecrows (MOLL); if he’s not in the camp records, God doesn’t exist (THE COMMANDER)], which reminds of Nietzsche’s apostasy. The tracking, the shooting, the request for the self-surrender of the “prankster” ghost with “political instincts” are marked by a tragic absurd: *Dacă fantoma care s-a plimbat în noaptea de 28 spre 29 septembrie nu se predă, sau nu ne este predată în dimineața asta pînă la ora 7, atunci, diseară, pe Lagerplatz, «va fi spînzurat cîte un om de fiecare baracă»*” (230) [If the ghost that walked in the night of 28 to 29 of September doesn’t surrender or is not given up to us this morning until 7 o’clock, then, tonight, on Lagerplatz, a man from every barrack will be hanged.]. The reason for the action is in the following dialogue:

KAPO: *Dar nu-i decît o poveste!*

HOLZ: *Și eu îți repet: o poveste în care cred mii de oameni e un fapt – adică o putere -, și uite că nemții țin cont de ea. Și țin seama de poveste pentru că poveștile nu se tem de nimic, și povestea asta nu ascultă decît de durerile lumii. (...) Ceea ce vor nemții să îngroape e însăși povestea (...) îngropînd oamenii odată cu ea. (241)*

[KAPO: But it’s only a story!

HOLZ: And I keep telling you again: a story which thousands of people believe in is a fact, – which means power. And they take the story into account because stories fear nothing, and this particular story listens to nothing else but the pains of the world. (...) What the Germans would like to bury is the story itself, burying people at the same.]

In *Îngerul slut*, in an attempt to justify his dishonourable deeds, “the Prince” asserts, in Machiavellian spirit:

Eva n-a avut să-i ofere lui Adam decît un măr, și acela viermănos. Era singura ei zestre, și pe aceea i-a dat-o șarpele. Și totuși Adam a luat-o!... Acum e adevărat: a luat-o nu pentru că i-a dat un măr, ci pentru că era unica. Din carnea cea sănătoasă a mărului s-a născut Abel, din viermele mărului s-a născut Cain (115)

[Eve had only an apple to offer to Adam – and it was a wormy one. It

was her only dowry, and the snake gave it to her. And yet Adam took her! Now, tis true that he didn't take her because she had given him an apple, but because she was the only one. From the good flesh of the apple, Abel was born, and from the wormy one – Cain.],

after having blamed on the dark forces for his own fate: "*Cum s-ar zice dar, mi-ai hotărît tain / De-aici pînă-n vecie: rolul lui Cain*" (41) [So, as one would say, you granted me the meed/to take, for here to eternity, the role of Cain as lead].

The humiliation of the divinity with "its own lie" proves effective, as the "forever dying" prince ends up sacrificing even unknowingly everything for an ephemeral existence; he sacrifices himself, Isabella, Annibale (the executioner of his life), the people of his own kingdom. Mephiticus's manipulation of the prince, gambling on the difficulty to give up the breath of life, is discursively constructed on elements which remind of Eminescu's works: "*UMBRA: Și ce consolare-i pentru tine dacă / Lumea e eternă, când tu ești muritor? (...) Lacom să înghit tot ce-i Viu și Este, / Umbra mea de veci se împuternicește / Din tot ce e Azi ca să devină Ieri (...) Ce vrei tu e-un nume pentru un chip de lut!*" (33, 35) [THE SHADOW: And what consolation is to you/ that the world is eternal while you are just a mortal? (...) Greedy to swallow what's alive and living/ My eternal shade is vested / From what's Today, to become Yesterday (...) You only want a name for a face of clay!].

The devil's metamorphoses and his diversions (the embodiment under Cesar's mask, the hangman dies instead of Annibale, etc.) represent histrionic games ending tragically, as "*ceea ce scena poate să rabde și de o sută de ori, viața nu îngăduie decît o dată*" (The Prince) (120) [what the stage may be enduring for a hundred times, life allows only once]. The redemption through love, as the foundation of a new world in the underworld, "*ca un alt Adam și o altă Evă*" (The Prince) (140) [like another Adam and another Eve] is not possible, as the union has resembled, since its very beginning, with "*slujba morților*", the matrimonial bed reminding of "a hearse" (the Second Captain); (133) [with the rite of the dead; a bier].

A few situations rendered in a tragi-comical language stand out from the "obscure" horizons of the play [3]: Annibale does not commit suicide for want of imagination ("*întotdeauna am mai multă putere să-mi închipui moartea altora decît moartea mea... mai ales întrucât, pentru un asasin, "cușitul nu știe carte" și "moartea nu are duminică"*"; idem, p. 65) [I

am always more able to imagine other people's death than my own; the knife is illiterate; death has no Sundays];

PRINȚUL: Că așa i-i dat omului, săracu: / De nu-l culcă Domnul, sigur îl ia Dracu.(...) (34)

PRINȚUL: În sfârșit: o zi! Numai o zi! Atît!

MEPHITICUS: Nu-i cine știe ce: doar un singur gît! (39)

[THE PRINCE: For that's the fate of the poor man: should God fail to lay him down, then, the dickens takes him for sure!

THE PRINCE: At last: a day! A single day! That's all!

MEPHITICUS: It's not such a big deal – a single neck for it!]

The angel's metaphor constantly occurs in the two dramatic works, emphasising the implied symbolism, and explicitly providing reading and interpretation grids. As such, with his conscience at peace with Mephiticus's help, the Prince's transformation is brought forth by his uncle, Vitelli: "*Nu, acesta nu e Cesar... Aceasta e tirania ticăloasă a crimei și a destrăbălării. Copilul pe care l-am crescut ca pe fiul meu era un arhanghel. Cel care a ucis în fața noastră, nu-i decît un înger slut.*" (Sever, 1984: 104) [No, this is not Cesar... This is the abject tyranny of murder and debauchery. The child I raised as if he were mine was an archangel. The one who committed murder before our eyes is but a miscreated angel]. After having assumed the angelic condition during the examination, Godieu remembers that he used to be "an angel of a child" for his grandmother, a "benefactor" for his patients, an "enduring" husband, his present mission being that of "an angel of memory", "a reckoner" of lost time and accomplished deeds, although the Commander regards him as "an angel of the garbage". With regard to the explorations into Nazism and in the mass-murder during the Second World War, one may consider the following lines as an artistic credo of the playwright:

GODIEU: Întotdeauna m-am gîndit (...) că rostul meu divin este să fiu martor. Să văd, să ascult, să înregistrez. Să adun toate durerile, tot chinul, toată spaima, toată mizeria... Să adun și să țin minte (...) toată durerea lumii, toată lumea durerii" (Sever, 1982: 261-263)

[GODIEU: I've always considered (...) that my divine role is that of a witness. To watch, to listen, to record. To gather pain, torment, dismay, and abjectness. To collect and recollect all the pain of the world, the world of all pain.]

The projected duality, intended to explain his presence at more places at one time, depicts an old man with a cane, "immured in his dumbness",

“sad to death”, after having witnessed the mutilation of the innocent victims.

The painfully realistic conditions in the camp are introduced with violent imagery, although Sever’s drama is not one of cruelty, but one constructed on violence, as Artur Silvestri and Constantin Măciucă point out (Sever, 1984: 366). From the human pyramid in the gas chamber, trying to take a breath of air, a girl manages to survive and to be rescued, for a period of time. Unlike Isabella, who does not have qualms of conscience, even after Cesare’s assassination of her father, Elsa proves sacrificial spirit and a touching humanity at her early age. Paul Tutungiu draws a parallel between her character and the little girl in *Greul pământului*, by Valeriu Anania (idem, pp. 366-367). As silence is not an option (“*Elsa: Ca să n-o spun ar trebui să fiu moartă, să mă pălească muștenia, uitarea sau nebunia...*” Sever, 1982: 299 [Elsa: Not to mention that I should be dead, struck by dumbness, oblivion, or insanity]), the acceptance of the execution is grounded in the wish to not compromise other lives.

Asserting that Alexandru Sever, the novelist, has never been better put forward than by “*dramaturgul de excepție care a scris Înger bătrîn*” [the exceptional playwright who wrote *Înger bătrîn*], Mircea Ghițulescu also makes reference to *Îngerul slut* (National Theatre of Cluj Napoca, 2004), pointing out that it is “*o dramă de antologie, pierdută, cum se întâmplă printre mondenități mediocre și idiosincrazii critice*” (2007: 397-404) [an anthological drama, lost, as it happens, among mediocre conventions and critical idiosyncrasies].

Illustrating Man in “bitter” worlds, his perversion or resistance to Evil, Alexandru Sever presents, simultaneously, angel falls, lost battles, but also ascensions, fulfilled victories and hopes of the spirit, which results in a drama of opposites. Intertextuality, either implicit or explicit, apart from the inner or external conflicts developed through vivid dialogues, contributes to the complexity of his dramatic works.

Notes

*This paper has been translated from Romanian by Oana Gheorghiu.

[1] *Memoria durerii* [The Memory of Pain] (Bucharest, 1985); *Iraclide*, essay on theatre and dramaturgy (Bucharest, 1988); the novel *Cartea morților* [The Book of the Dead] (Tel Aviv, 1995); *Inventarul obsesiilor circulare* [The Inventory of Circular Obsessions] (Cluj, 1999); *Insomniacii* [The Insomniacs] (Bucharest, 2000).

[2] V. Sebastian, Mihail “Note”, II, *Cuvântul*, 28 November 1928; reprinted in *Eseuri, cronici, memorial* [Essays, Reviews, Memorial], Bucharest, Minerva Publishing, 1972, p. 117; a pattern also observed in the play *Menajera* [The Housemaid].

[3] In addition, from the earliest plays, in which the style supervision is exerted on words and lines, up to complex lexical systems, with euphemistically oriented twists, allusively or archaized (...), Alexandru Sever's style has gained brilliance and classical balance. The force of his latest works is not only a result of the tension of dramatic situations, of his epic connexions, but also of the cult of style, of the pleasure of writing, so as many of his remarkable pages may be the object of a discussion on the measure to which language is a primary element of theatricality (Ghițulescu, 1981: 23).

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