

“Retro-modernism” in *Viața cea de toate zilele* by Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu

Elena PANAIT*♦

Abstract

“Retro-modernism” is a concept coined by critic Paul Cernat (Modernismul retro în romanul românesc interbelic [Retro-Modernism in the Romanian Inter-War Novel], Art Publishing, 2009) in view of defining a type of novel developed during the inter-war period as an alternative to prospective modernism, excessively used at that time. The “retro-novels” identified and analysed by Paul Cernat possess a distinct aesthetic physiognomy, marked by nostalgia for the atmosphere at the end of the nineteenth century, despite the modernist techniques employed at the level of the narrative discourse.

*Little known in the present day cultural space, Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu (Lily Teodoreanu) tackles the question of the peripheral and provincial environments, suffocated by the lack of perspective in the characters’ destinies, especially in the case of feminine characters. *Viața cea de toate zilele* [Daily Life] (1940) may be described as retro-modernist, as the writer moderately approaches the theme of the woman’s condition, avoiding the excesses of militant and declarative feminism. The novel’s protagonist overcomes an identity crisis by assuming a superior understanding of the idea of commitment to her family. The reference points of the patriarchal organisation of the world are imperceptibly shaken by the heroine’s drama.*

Key words: *retro-modernism, femininity, psychologism, identity, discourse*

Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu (1897–1995) is little known nowadays by the general readership [1], to whom she is resonant only according to her status as the wife of the author of *La Medeleni*, Ionel Teodoreanu. Born in France, this woman writer (also known as Lily Teodoreanu) attended primary school in Paris, and then completed her education in Iasi and Bucharest during the troubled years of the First World War. Marked by the atmosphere of the *Viața românească* journal, somehow indirectly, through her husband, an assiduous participant in the meetings of the Iasi literary circle, Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu made her debut in 1929 in Tudor Arghezi’s cultural magazine, *Bilete de papagal*, with short pieces of prose, later collected in the volume *Cloșca cu pui* [*The Brooding Hen with Chickens*] (1941). She also collaborated with the magazine *Revista Fundațiilor Regale*. Her readings from Rabindranath Tagore, Ivan Turgenev or Lev Tolstoy are obvious in the general atmosphere of her novels, at the character construction level and in the artistic message they transmit.

* PhD student, “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați, Romania
elena.panait.05@gmail.com

♦ Translated by Oana Gheorghiu and Steluța Stan

Viața cea de toate zilele [Daily Life] was published in 1940 by Casa Românească Publishing House, as the author's second novel after *Calendar vechi* [Old Calendar] (1939; a Romanian Intellectuals Association Award winner). Among other writings signed by Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu one should mention the novels *Acasă* [At Home] (1947) and *Căminul* [The Home] (1971), and also the memoir *Ursitul* [The Fated One] (1970) and the poetry volume *Șoapte într-un asfințit* [Whispers in the Dusk] (1981), which ends her writing career. Resigned with noble discretion in the shadow of her husband's figure, Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu opted after the Second World War for an impressive career as a translator. She translated especially Russian literature, both classic and modern writers (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gorki, and Goncharov).

There are few and contradictory critical assessments of the works by Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu, because of their being insufficiently known. Only a few works of history of the Romanian literature mention her name. Dumitru Murărașu (1943: 413) only associates her name with a few titles: "*Dela 'nceput biruitoare în epica noastră se arată Ștefana Velisar-Teodoreanu prin Calendar Vechiu (1939), Viața cea de toate zilele (1940) și Cloșca cu pui (1941)*" [Ștefana Velisar-Teodoreanu proves triumphant from the beginning in our epic creation with 'Old Calendar', 'Daily Life' and 'The Brooding Hen with Chickens'], novels which Al. Piru (1981: 42) thematically assesses as "*romane sentimentale privind copilăria, adolescența și relațiile dintre soți în mediul provincial*" [sentimental novels of childhood, adolescence and marital relationships in the provincial environment]. Bianca Burța-Cernat (2011: 61) labels Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu as a minor prose writer, considering that her novels "*sunt deficitare epic și, chiar dacă «realiste» în intenție, au ceva (involuntar) atemporal*" [are epically deficient and, although intentionally 'realist', possess an (involuntary) timelessness]. According to Cornelia Pillat, poet Ștefan Nenițescu considered Lily Teodoreanu "*cea mai talentată dintre Teodoreni*" [the most talented Teodoreanu] [2]. In a preface to the novel *Acasă* [At Home], George Gibescu (1972: V) evaluates Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu as "*excelentă prozatoare a vârstelor și a mediilor*" [an excellent prose writer of ages and environments], an exception from the specificities of feminine writing, unable to render "*dimensiunea metafizicului*" [the metaphysics dimension], constantly tributary "*erotismului, percepției epidermice a vieții*" [to eroticism and the epidermal perception of life]. Liana Cozea (1994: 21) succinctly comments two of her novels in the following terms:

O anumită cruzime se manifestă în relațiile autoarelor cu personajele lor, dublată de înțelegere și compasiune plină de tristețe, ca în romanul Acasă (1947) și Căminul (1970) de Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu, dacă aparțin sexului feminin și de neîndurare față de sexul opus, ca într-un ritual necesar și dureros de exorcizare.

[A certain cruelty manifests in the relationships between women writers and their characters, doubled by understanding and sad compassion, as in the novels *At Home* (1947) and *The Home* (1970) by Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu, if they belong to

the feminine gender, and by mercilessness for the opposite sex, as in a painful and necessary exorcism ritual.]

The present study proposes a reading of the novel *Viața cea de toate zilele* [*Daily Life*] through an original grid, acknowledged by Paul Cernat as a distinct typology of the Romanian interwar novel: retro-modernism [3], a category in which the critic includes works such as *La Medeleni*, by Ionel Teodoreanu, a few 1930s novels by Mihail Sadoveanu (e.g. *Locul unde nu s-a întâmplat nimic/ The Place Where Nothing Happened*) and Cezar Petrescu (*Oraș patriarhal/ Patriarchal City*), *Craii de Curtea-Veche/ The Old Court Libertines* by Mateiu Caragiale, *Adela* by Garabet Ibrăileanu, *Enigma Otiliei/ Otilia's Enigma* by George Călinescu and two novels by Mircea Eliade (*Domnișoara Christina/ Miss Christina* and *Nuntă în cer/ Marriage in Heaven*). These are the works which the critic considers to be retro-novels, “relevante pentru înțelegerea modului în care mentalitatea «secolului al XIX-lea» a fost modernizată à rebours de prozatorii epocii interbelice” [relevant for the understanding of the way in which the 19th century mentality was modernised à rebours by the writers of the interwar period] (2009: 11). Aside from central patterns, represented by the realist-objective formula exercised by Liviu Rebreanu and the analytical-psychological one in the novels of Camil Petrescu or Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, the critic identifies on the map of the modern Romanian interwar novel a specific typology which illustrates “un alt modernism decât cel prospectiv, orientat către inovație și actualitate, un modernism retrospectiv” (emphasis in the original) [a modernism different from the prospective one, oriented towards innovation and actuality: a *retrospective* modernism] (Cernat, 2009: 11). It is about those novels which, although written in a period of complete assimilation of modernist patterns, possess a different aesthetic physiognomy, attempting to recover the air of a past era, the end of the nineteenth century:

(...) prin recondiționarea unor convenții literare vetuste (balzacianismul, simbolismul decadent, idilismul postromantic ș.a.) sau a unor coduri de comportament devenite între timp desuete (pudoarea, idealismul romantic, manierele «boierești», patriarhalismul mic-burghez). (...) Nu avem de-a face totuși cu un paseism epigonic, întrucât autorii inovează à rebours privind înapoi. (...) Evident, prozatorii în cauză nu mai pot fi niște realiști autentici, în sensul social-istoric, voluntarist și pozitivist al secolului al XIX-lea. Nu mai au suficientă credință pentru asta. Sunt, în schimb, niște autoiluzionați lucizi și niște bovarici paradoxali, conștienți de propriul bovarism. Modernismul lor retro are, prin excelență, un caracter nostalgic, evazionist și fantasmatic, fără a pierde însă total contactul cu mimesis-ul traditional.

[...] by reconditioning some outdated literary conventions (Balzacianism, decadent Symbolism, Postromantic idyllism, etc.) or some behavioural codes become obsolete (decency, Romantic idealism, the manners of the boyars or the petite bourgeoisie patriarchy). (...) However, it is not about an epigonic cult of the past, as the authors make à rebours innovations while looking back. (...) Obviously, these writers cannot be authentic Realists in the social-historical, volunteering and positivist sense of the nineteenth century anymore. They no longer have enough faith for that. They are, on the other hand, lucid self-illusioned and paradoxically

Bovarists, aware of their own Bovarisms. Their retro-modernism has, par excellence, a nostalgic, evasive and phantasmatic character, without completely losing contact with traditional mimesis.] (Cernat, 2009: 17).

It follows that “retro-novels” are meant to ensure the balance of the evolution of the Romanian modernist novel by counterbalancing the modernism *à outrance* practised by some authors in the interwar decades.

The novel *Viața cea de toate zilele [Daily Life]* by Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu may be framed within this hybrid area of the Romanian inter-war novel, as, despite its processing of modernist narrative techniques, which keep it in the dominant literary paradigm of the time, it also displays an approach *à rebours* of a theme specific to the latter half of the nineteenth century: the social and cultural condition of women, tackled in a pronounced feminist register by the women writers of the time. Paraphrasing Paul Cernat, we can consider the novel under the lens representative for a form of *retro-feminism*. Whilst her congeners (Henriette Yvonne Stahl, Cella Serghi, Ioana Postelnicu, Anișoara Odeanu, Lucia Demetrius, Sorana Gurian or the canonical Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu) were writing in the 1930s novels which, in their deep structure, asserted the emancipation of the modern woman from the arbitrariness of some phallogocratic laws and conventions, Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu goes against the grain of the interwar women’s literature, being sooner ascribable to the previous generation of women writers, who were still concerned with redefining gender social roles and with women’s cultural visibility.

Through their configuration of an incipient phase of Romanian women’s literature, some nineteenth century women writers, such as Emilia Lungu, Sofia Nădejde, Constanța Hodoș, Bucura Dumbravă, Elena Hartulari, Cornelia Emilian or Iulia Hasdeu, contributed to the dissolution of the local cultural gynaeceum and to the affirmation of women in the public space. In their novels, the feminine characters are projected against the background of an idyllic-patriarchal world vitiated by their Bovaric aspirations and by the permanent negotiation of their freedom (including their inner freedom).

Odată cu apariția romanului și dramaturgiei realiste, personajul feminin își redobândește individualitatea treptat, în cadrul conflictului ce destramă cuplul ori familia. Noțiunii de femeie și de feminitate i se adaugă ideea de feminism. Apar opere literare în care personajul feminin devine un personaj-pledoarie pentru emanciparea femeii într-o societate în care se află într-o poziție de inferioritate. Crește preocuparea pentru psihologie în cadrul romanului și dramei familiale care se alătură romanului de dragoste.

[With the emergence of the realist novel and drama, the feminine character gradually regains its individuality inside the conflict which disintegrates couples or families. The idea of feminism comes to add to the notions of woman and womanhood/ femininity. There are published literary works in which the feminine character becomes a character-plea for women’s emancipation in a society in which they are viewed as inferior. The preoccupation with psychology increases in the family novel and drama, adding to the romance novels] (Radian 1986: 9).

Similarly, in *Viața cea de toate zilele* [*Daily Life*], the protagonist of the novel claims a new identity for her, renouncing the comfortable but unexciting life of a marriage in a provincial town for a much harsher life, amidst the peasants in a village still lacking the benefits of civilisation.

Viața cea de toate zilele [*Daily Life*] (a Romanian Academy Award winner) is set in the years 1936-1937, in an anonymous Moldavian borough where boredom prevails, perfectly fit for reducing failed lives to nothingness: “*Mediu care, în viziunea multor prozatori români (de la Sadoveanu și Brătescu-Voinești încoace) poartă ca un stigmat al fatalității, amprenta elegiacului. E locul unde, prin tradiție, nu se întâmplă parcă nimic*” [An environment which, in the eyes of many Romanian writers, starting with Sadoveanu and Brătescu-Voinești, bears the elegy imprint as a stigma of fatality. It is the place where, by tradition, nothing happens] (Martin 1969: viii). Other researchers maintain that this scarcity of events at the level of the plot is a feminine writing specificity:

Les écrits féminins procèdent à un traitement particulier du temps et de l'action. On parle d'une relative carence de l'événement dans le roman féminin. La présence de l'événement dans le récit n'est pas conçue de la même façon par l'homme et par la femme; les romancières aiment à suggérer la vie dans ce qu'elle a d'infime, de quotidien

[Feminine writings deal with time and action in a particular manner. Many mention a relative scarcity of the events in the feminine novel. The presence of the event in a novel is not constructed identically by men and women: women writers prefer to suggest life in its minor, daily aspects] (Milea 2009: 263).

A few scenes are transposed to Bucharest but the evocation of the life in the metropolis is craftily avoided, as it would not have matched the slow rhythm of the novel. In the latter half, the narrative topos is Butuci village, where there is a vineyard (a family estate) in whose rehabilitation the protagonist, Elisabeta Scutaru, known as Baba (a nickname she took in childhood) chooses to get involved.

The novel sets out with a family scene: four characters have dinner on Sunday in an atmosphere of complete indifference and apathy. Mother of a 17-year old (Nucă), Baba is a 36-year old woman who has reached a critical point of her inner existence: married to Mircea when she was very young, Baba has led a life completely dedicated to her family, gradually giving up her own ideals and also her own identity: “*Dacă n-ar fi Dadaia, pe care o am de la bunica mea, aș uita și cum mă cheamă*” [If I didn't have Dadaia from my grandmother, I'd forget my own name] (Velisar Teodoreanu 1969: 7). This tragic life experience has been long concealed behind the appearances of an idyllic-patriarchal life of resignation of the woman and retreat to the routine of a life fully subjected to serving the others. The belief that “there might be an error somewhere”, that, despite the comfort of her family life, her settled existence risks missing the essence of life, starts assaulting her more and more aggressively. Having reached a critical age, Baba sees herself forced to renounce self-censorship and look for solutions for an existential

problem which, in the eyes of her husband, is simply “neurasthenia”. In the novel’s inner structure, the writer subversively weaves feminist accents of revolt against the historical and cultural condition of women of all times, condemned to silence, anonymity and passivity. Baba’s desire to get away from the suffocating space of her home’s intimacy and to affirm her identity in a proper environment is subjected to the irony of her husband, who is unable to comprehend her inner turmoil:

(...) *Atâtea gânduri și vorbe roiesc în mine și se revoltă, că le țin închise. Mă tem să nu-mi scape odată, să nu le mai pot struni. Mă servesc de prea puține acum, cât i-ar trebui unui copil de 7 ani, binecrescut. Când mai scot din celelalte, Mircea zice că sunt absurdă, romantică și provincială, că-i pregătesc o scenă. A fost un timp când vorbeam amândoi*
 [So many thoughts and words swarm inside of me and revolt for keeping them shut. I’m afraid I might let them loose and not be able to control them at some point. I use too few now, not more than a well-behaved seven-year old child would need. When I pull out some of the others, Mircea says that I’m absurd, romantic and provincial, that I’m making scenes. There was a time when we conversed] (11).

With his thinking, dominated by patriarchal-conventional principles, Mircea provides an exemplary definition of uncomprehended femininity:

Imposibil de vorbit cu tine. Reduci totul la ființa ta. O susceptibilitate bolnăvicioasă, de care mă împiedic la orice pas. O viziune romantică a vieții, cu care nu pot lupta. Ai vrea să ne plimbăm mână în mână, în grădină, pe câmp, să mergem la sindrofii, spectacole, să ne spunem vorbe dulci, o perpetuă logodnă!
 [You’re impossible to speak with. You reduce everything to yourself. A sickly susceptibility on which I stumble over at any moment. A romantic vision of life which I cannot fight. You’d like us to walk hand in hand, in the garden, in the field, to go to gatherings, shows, to tell each other sweet nothings, a perpetual betrothal] (101).

Although she passes for an exemplary wife and mother, Baba acutely feels the bitter taste of self-unfulfilment, suspecting her own life of artificiality and mediocrity:

S-au lipit încet pe mine multe etichete. Singură nu mai știu care-mi corespund, care s-au întipărit în mine, care m-au îmbrăcat în altcineva care mi-i atât de strâmt, că nu mai pot face o mișcare naturală.
 [Many labels have been slowly put on me. I myself don’t know which ones really fit me, which ones have imprinted on my mind, which ones have dressed me in someone else who is so tight that I can no longer move naturally] (11).

Baba’s condition is emblematic for the woman’s status in a society built on patriarchal patterns, in which her aspirations towards emancipation and personal affirmation is ignored, minimalized, disdained and silenced. When confronted by a family friend with his wife’s drama, Mircea suggestively admits: “*Aș vrea-o mai simplă...*” [I wish she were simpler] (246). The action of the character to set herself free from the tutelage of a preordained order is one of discrete modernity, in

opposition with the dominant character of the novel, faithful to some ancestral rigorous social conventions in what concerns what today is known as segregation of gender roles: “*Cu ce drept pretindea la ceea ce n-avea nimeni: un rai utopic, în miniatură, comod și casnic. (...) Ce nerozie! Femeia e făcută să fie pasivă în toate. De ce se revoltase Baba?* (my emphasis.)” [What right did she have to claim something that no one had: a miniature utopic paradise, comfortable and domestic? (...) How stupid! **Woman is made for passivity. Why had Baba revolted?**] (159).

The novel *Viața cea de toate zilele* [Daily Life] may also be read as a treatise of feminine psychology, many pages vouching for the complications of the feminine soul, stylised through their connections with some ideas in Tolstoy’s novels. The way in which Baba’s identity crisis is resolved reminds of Tolstoy’s plea for the simple life in nature, amidst the peasants and in their service: Baba finds refuge in Butuci, saves the overgrown vineyard destroyed by the negligence of a drunkard administrator. She wins the trust of the peasants with her fairness and with her talent in caring for the sick (one may infer from here, though not clearly specified, that she had previous medical training). The field work, the daily privation, the hard life and the initial reluctance of the peasants do not scare away the woman accustomed to a much more comfortable environment; on the contrary, they provide her the necessary framework for regaining herself. By bringing the vineyard back to life, Baba also rebuilds herself, through work and solidarity with the peasants of Butuci. Symbolically, her experience lasts for nine months, the period of gestation for a new understanding of life, but also for a new feminine identity. Baba expresses her inner drama as an illness of the soul: “*Mi-a fost sufletul bolnav...*” [My soul was sick...] (238), to Luca Trofim, the father of Haralambie (Harap), a neighbour fallen in love with her and willing to save her from the twists and turns of an existence without any horizons. But Harap, just as Mircea, is incapable of perceiving the woman’s soul in its essence, assimilating it to “*psihologii specific feminine, de sacrificii mărunte, nesfârșite, fără folos pentru nimeni*” [a feminine-specific psychology of trifling, endless sacrifices, useless for everybody] (129). The conversations between Baba and Luca are declarative, with serious themes such as the benefits of suffering, the need for progress through culture, or the co-existence of the good and the evil inside the human being.

The woman’s “healing” comes from a superior understanding of the idea of devoutness and commitment, conscientiously assumed and not imposed by virtue of some preordained rules. Completely freed from these constraints, Baba revisits her past life and suddenly has the revelation of the true reasons for her and her family’s drama. In this point of the discourse, the writer introduces a purely modernist artifice; the general scheme of the novel is revisited in its most significant points, giving the reader access to the novel’s creation laboratory. Together with the reader, the author experiences a regression to an incipient stage of the book writing, when she was trying to find possible courses for the organisation of the narrative material:

Mircea și Baba. Căsătorie între oameni prea tineri. Iubire-pasiune. Lumea descoperită mână în mână. Epoca raiului. Se naște copilul. (...) Baba e prinsă de instinctul maternității (...). Mircea cade pe planul al doilea. (...) Surovine o boală grea, care o scoate pe Baba din joc pentru un timp. Vine sora mai mare în casă. O acalmie. Sora se devotează surorii mai mici și copilului. Prinde slăbiciune pentru copil. (...) Începe o luptă ascunsă între surori pentru copil. (...) Bărbatul nu vede nimic. E mulțumit. Atmosfera se schimbă treptat. Altă lumină. Femeia pălește din ce în ce, alunecă pe un plan secundar. (...) Fiecare este alterat, egoist în felul lui, sclav al ideii greșite și necontrolate despre el însuși. (...) Bărbatul se simte frustrat de partea lui de bucurie. Nu pricepe de ce. Devine pesimist. Se refugiază în muncă. Sora mai mare e descurajată (...)

[Mircea and Baba. Marriage between two too young people. Love-passion. The world discovered hand in hand. The age of paradise. The child is born. (...) Baba is caught by the maternal instinct. (...) Mircea comes second now. (...) A serious illness puts Baba out of action for a while. An elder sister comes to their house. Calm. The sister is dedicated to her younger sister and the child. She has a soft spot for the child. (...) A hidden struggle for the child begins between sisters. (...) The man sees nothing. He is content. The atmosphere gradually alters. Another light. The woman pales more and more, she slips to the second position. (...) Each one is altered, selfish in his own way, a slave of an erroneous and uncontrolled idea about himself. (...) The man feels frustrated of his part of joy. He can't understand why. He turns pessimistic. He finds a refuge in his work. The elder sister is discouraged...] (211-212).

Some of these narrative courses are further developed in the novel, whereas some others remain unused (e.g. the rivalry between the two sisters for the love of the child). These notes, written in the present tense, concentrated on a few pages as Baba's objective assessment of her own life, indirectly reveal the structure of the novel, the mechanisms for generating the main axes of the plot. Intentional or not, this discursive practice is suggestively compared to a medical radiology and draws Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu's novel closer to the modern formula of the meta-novel.

Baba se înfioară. Niciodată n-a gândit astfel, despuiat, uscat, științific oarecum. E o impresie macabră, pe care a mai cunoscut-o asistând la radioscopii, uitându-se la scheletul omului viu mișcându-se sub placa de sticlă."

[Baba flinches. She has never thought like this, bare, dry, somehow scientific. It is a macabre sensation which she experienced before, when she witnessed radioscopies and saw the skeleton of the man moving under the glass plate] (214).

After these lucid reflections that Baba makes of her own existence (which, as stated above, have also a discursive aim, entailing a modern, interactive relationship between author, narrator, character and reader), the woman diagnoses it as a "phony game of mirrors" in which she has indulged together with her dear ones (husband, son, and step sister), and decides to fix everything through the power of her personal example, with the belief that a man's acts reverberate in the becoming of the others. The end of the novel is

programmatically optimistic, communicating the writer's faith in general human values such as solidarity, tolerance, power of maternal and marital love. The novel ends symmetrically with another scene of a family dinner, but this time it is transposed in a different register – one of freedom, hope and communion. "*Baba, în picioare, la un capăt al mesei pătrate, le făcu semn să se așeze: Mircea, în fața ei, ca stăpân al casei. Ceilalți, în părți. (...) Mâna Babei, fără să știe, făcuse astfel semnul crucii, blagoslovind masa*" [Baba, standing at one end of the square table, gestured towards them to sit down: Mircea, in front of her, as the master of the house. The others, on the sides. (...) Unknowingly, Baba's hand had made the sign of the cross, thus blessing the dinner] (278). The apathetic woman at the beginning of the novel is contrasted with the image of an Amazon landlady in the end. Baba is completely transformed, to the amazement of her family and friends. However, the true owner of the Butuci domain and the true family leader remains Mircea, the husband whose authority Baba continues to respect unreservedly.

In contrast with Baba's evading aspirations, another feminine character, Maia, represents the resigned femininity who interiorises her suffering as a means of compensating for a tragic guilt: "*Ispășesc păcatele mele, și asta o fac din toată inima, atâta merit am*" [I atone for my sins with all my heart, it's my only merit] (73). When she was young, Maia married the wrong man, although in love with his brother, and destroyed his life. In the conversations between Baba and her friend, Maia, are timidly inserted allusions to a series of Humanist-Christian ideas about purification through suffering and the serene acceptance of an eventual divine punishment. The mystic Maia represents to Baba an existential alternative which inspires her in her process of identity reconstruction.

Another hypostasis of femininity in the novel is Eleonora (Nora), Baba's elder step sister, present in her life since the latter's childhood, following the death of their father. Eleonora represents failed femininity, despite her perfect beauty. She also has a love secret, as she was the protagonist of a love affair in her youth. This is the reason why she isolates herself in an existence dominated by routine and banality, fully dedicating to her sister's family life. Maia and Eleonora are mirror reflections of Baba, concentrating in their essence some possible courses for the evolution of the protagonist: the dedication to family, motivated either by spiritual-Christian imperatives (as in Maia's case), or by conventionalism (as in Nora's). Nevertheless, Baba makes a symbolic choice, freed from external motivations and fed by inner resorts which pertain to her own world vision.

Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu's novel discourse in *Viața cea de toate zilele* [Daily Life] distinguishes itself through a few timid technical innovations. The narrative levels are metaleptically substituted, the third person being often replaced with the first person, in a subtle game of objectivity and subjectivity, specific to psychological prose. Baba's interior discourse, alternating with the main course of the narrator, gives the reader access to her inner movements and intentions, as well as to the information necessary to understand her drama:

Cu Mircea nu mă pot lămuri. Mi-e frică de vocea lui stăpânită. Mă întrebă ca un străin: «Ce vrei de la mine? Cu ce ți-am greșit? Nu pot fi un erou de romane, sunt un biet magistrat de provincie și un istoric ratat». Ca și cum ar avea vreo importanță slujba, treapta, locul! Doar ne-am luat din dragoste.»

[I can't reason with Mircea. I'm afraid of his restrained voice. He asks me like a stranger: 'What do you want from me? What have I done wrong? I can't be a novel hero; I'm just a poor provincial magistrate and a failed historian'. As if his job, his position or his place mattered in any way. But we married for love] (21).

Another element of modernity of the narrative discourse practised by Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu in *Viața cea de toate zilele [Daily Life]* is the introduction of some subtle reflections on feminine writing and on the condition of the woman-writer forced to use expression techniques which are not in tune with her vision and artistic sensitivity. Thus, the effort of women writers to draw the attention of a male receptor (reader, critic, fellow writer) is subversively bemoaned in an oblique commentary of a letter Baba sends to Haralambie:

Îi scrise, cum știi numai femeile, învățate să-și ascundă rănilile sub zâmbet, să câștige victorii dureroase, măgulind orgoliul masculin, supunându-se judecății lui, lăsându-l să creadă că tot eroismul și puterea erau de partea lui. Din afecțiune, mândrie, milă, ori milenară diplomație feminină? Din fiecare câte ceva, probabil.

[She wrote to him as only women know how to write, in their habit of hiding their wounds with a smile, of winning painful victories by flattering the male ego, subjecting to his judgement, making him believe that all heroism and power are his. Was it endearment, pride, mercy or millennial feminine diplomacy? Probably all of them] (134).

Elsewhere, the inability of words to truly communicate people's vision of the world is blamed:

Prin vorbe e greu să-ți dai seama de diferența dintre viziunea ta și a altuia. Fiindcă vorbele au fost educate să se îmbine în scopul nivelării expresiilor umane. Chiar îmbinările cele mai neașteptate, subtile, originale nu sunt astfel decât relativ la expresie, nu la simțire. N-avem altă monedă de schimb între noi, trebuie să aibă înfățișare obișnuită ca s-o putem recunoaște și folosi. Vorbele sunt opace de felul lor, greoaie, decolorate, uzate, exacte numai într-un sens necioplit față de simțire.

[It's hard to understand the difference between your vision and the other's just through words. Because the words have been educated to conjoin in view of levelling human expressions. Even the most unexpected, subtle and original joints are this way only in relation to expression, not to senses. We don't have other currency to exchange, it has to possess a familiar aspect to be able to recognise and use it. The words are opaque by nature, dull, weathered, worn out, exact only in a way rough to the senses] (171).

Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu seems to indirectly affirm the necessity for a language of difference as a tool capable to render the distinct nuances of every individual's sensitivity, as well as the need for genuine communication among the people, fed from within. Such commentaries prove the writer's complete literary conscience

and her understanding of the mechanisms of artistic writing and psychological prose [4].

Although, in the preface to the 1969 edition of the novel, Aurel Martin identifies a “deliberate delimitation” of the writer from the aesthetic formula of her husband, Ionel Teodoreanu, one cannot disregard, at least at the level of some metaphors’ constructions, obvious similitudes in vision and artistic sensibility. An image such as “Cozile și sâmburii de cireșe: vraf încâlcit de note fără sens, alfabet dezarticulat. Pierduse cheia desigur.” [Cherry stalks and kernels; a straggly pile of meaningless notes; an inarticulate alphabet. She had lost the key, of course] (8) seems to be taken directly from *Alunele veveriței* [*The Squirrel’s Peanuts*], the metaphor notebook of Dănuț Deleanu in *La Medeleni*.

With *Viața cea de toate zilele* [*Daily Life*], Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu remains captive “într-o zonă crepusculară, bântuită de imaginile și ecourile unui timp «pierdut»” [in a twilight zone haunted by images and echoes of a ‘lost time’] (Cernat, 2009: 17). In what the condition of the modern woman is concerned, the writer completely disregards matters such as corporeality, erotic lack of inhibition, intimacy, exercising some rights that used to be considered inconceivable back in the days (pursuing an education, own choosing of a profession, adopting a personal career plan, deciding the share of personal investment in work and family). Elisabeta Scutaru overcomes her identity crisis in a rather artificial manner, as the change she triggers in her life is only superficial: she resumes her domestic activities, but this time they are conscientiously assumed, against the background of the interiorisation of certain existential Humanist-Christian beliefs. The novel voluptuously breathes in the nostalgia for the directions of a patriarchal making-up of the world, imperceptibly shattered by Elisabeta’s drama. This mentality and its fondness of the past are what inscribe the novel in the “retro-modernism” formula. The reading of Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu’s novel through this grid allows for the revalorisation of the works of this writer, unjustly minimized at “the stock exchange of literary values” (in Paul Cernat’s words), just as many other retro-novels.

Notes

[1] In 2010, Humanitas publishes in the collection *Convorbiri. Corespondențe. Portrete* [*Conversations. Letters. Portraits*] the volume *Minunea timpului trăit* [*The miracle of the time spent*], with pages from the letters exchanged by Monica Pillat and Lily Teodoreanu with Pia Pillat, which also features an evocation of Lily Teodoreanu (Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu, named Lady Lily by Mihail Sadoveanu and Garabet Ibrăileanu) written by Cornelia Pillat. The portrait (pp. 323-330) is reproduced after the article *Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu – Corespondență inedită: Scrisori din roase plicuri* [*Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu – Unpublished Mail: Letters from Time-Worn Envelopes*], published in *România literară* no 20/23-29 May 2001, pp. 12-13, available from <http://www.romlit.ro>

[2] According to Cornelia Pillat, *art. cit.*

[3] Paul Cernat, *Modernismul retro în romanul românesc interbelic*, Art Publishing House, București, 2009

[4] Aurel Martin considers that *Viața cea de toate zilele* sets out as a regional novel, to further evolve into a psychological novel and into a novel of communication breakdown and alienation, followed by disalienation – in Preface to Velisar Teodoreanu, Ștefana, *Viața cea de toate zilele*, p. IX

References

- *** (2010) *Minunea timpului trăit. Din corespondența Monicăi Pillat și a lui Lily Teodoreanu cu Pia Pillat* [*The Miracle of the Time Spent. Letters of Monica Pillat and Lily Teodoreanu to Pia Pillat*], preface by H. R. Patapievici, București: Humanitas
- Burța-Cernat, B. (2011) *Fotografie de grup cu scriitoare uitate. Proza feminină interbelică* [*Group Photo with Forgotten Women Writers. The Feminine Prose of the Inter-war*]. București: Cartea Românească
- Cernat, P. (2009) *Modernismul retro în romanul românesc interbelic* [*Retro-Modernism in the Romanian Inter-War Novel*]. București: Art
- Cozea, L. (1994) *Prozatoare ale literaturii române moderne* [*Women Writers in Modern Romanian Literature*]. Oradea: Biblioteca revistei Familia
- Gibescu, G. (1972) 'Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu și condiția literaturii feminine' [Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu and the Condition of Feminine Literature]. In Velisar Teodoreanu, Ș. (1972) *Acasă* [*At Home*]. București: Minerva
- Milea, D. (2009) 'Discours féministe/écrits féminins' [Feminist Discourse/ Feminine Writings]. *Communication interculturelle et littérature*, Nr. 4 (8), Octomber-Noiembrie-December, 2009, Galați: Europlus, 261-264
- Murărașu, D. (1943) *Istoria literaturii române* [*The History of Romanian Literature*], third edition. București: Cartea Românească
- Pillat, C. (2001) 'Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu – Corespondență inedită: Scrisori din roase plicuri' [Ștefana Velisar Teodoreanu – Unpublished Mail: Letters from Time-Worn Envelopes]. *România literară*, no. 20, available from <http://www.romlit.ro>
- Piru, A. (1981) *Istoria literaturii române de la început până azi* [*The History of Romanian Literature from the Beginning until the Present Day*]. București: Univers
- Radian, S. (1986) *Portrete feminine în romanul românesc interbelic* [*Feminine Portraits in the Romanian Inter-war Novel*]. București: Minerva
- Velisar Teodoreanu, Ș. (1969) *Viața cea de toate zilele* [*Daily Life*], Preface by Aurel Martin. București: Editura pentru Literatură