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THE NARCISSIST REGRESSION AND THE FASCINATING MONSTER IN V.VOIVULESCU'S SHORT STORIES

Raluca Nicoleta ȘERBAN¹

Abstract

As analyzed in a previous paper, V. Voiculescu's short stories recreate a strange universe, very close to Herman Melville's fictional world. The most important similarity of the two is the heroes' Narcissist regression towards a sub-human environment, namely towards the animal register, triggered by a similar fascination with water, water monsters and fishing. The conditions for such a change and for the subsequent identification, intermingling man-animal (big fish most of the times) are met and the Romanian author dwells extensively on this theme. In this paper, we shall look more closely at a few of Voiculescu's heroes, involved in similar love/hatred relationships with fascinating monsters.

Keywords: narcissist regression, the fascinating monster/Leviathan, love/hatred dynamics

Voiculescu's heroes as marginal, ex-centric individuals

Voiculescu's heroes are marginal individuals, *marked* and destined to follow a certain route. Aliman is the most daring and brave, handsome and passionate, in a word different from the other boys,

“Aliman era frumos și voinic. Nu știa de frica nimănuî. Cu atât mai puțin de a calor văzute și neștiute. Bistrița pentru el nu mai avea taine și ținea la adânc ca o vidră. S-a jurat să prinză loștrița vie și nu și-a mai îngăduit o zi de hodină” (Capul de zimbru: 47)

His ex-centricity, marginality isolates him from the others,

“Uneori flăcăii și fetele izbuteau să-l ia cu sila pe la șezători și furcării. Ședea însă posomorât...cu mințile aiurea.” (48)

Other heroes that are constructed following the same pattern are even more overtly marked. They are literally marginal in their communities, live outside the village and know the language of different animals. Bujor (cf. “Misiune de încredere”) is one of them,

“Astfel, prin piroteala ce mă cuprinsese, înțelesei că pe tărâmurile acelea văcuia unul căruia îi plăcea să trăiască slobod, fără să-i pese de rânduielile și legile obștii.” (84) “Toată lumea cinstită îl îndrăgește și i se supune de bunăvoie, vitele, ca și albinele, fiarele...” (86) “un erou solar, un fecior

¹ Raluca Nicoleta Șerban, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, raluca.serban@rei.ase.ro

chipeș, înalt și mlădios” (88) “el nu ucidea fiare” (89) “Tăcea ca muntele, ca arborii, ca fiarele, care nu-și dau glas tainelor decât la răstimpuri sorocite” (93),

Bujor is also said (and shown) to control the weather in the mountains, and to get news from the beasts.

Luparul (“În mijlocul lupilor”) is another good example. Literally marginal as well, he is isolated from the others by his very look and smell. He seems to be from the beginning half man, half beast, able to control and talk to the wolves. Many people think he turns into a wolf himself; but here are the narrator’s words,

”Am aflat...că omul meu era un mare vrăjitor de lupi, pe care îi supunea și îi folosea cu farmecele și magia lui, ca un stăpân. I se spunea Luparul și era privit ca o urâciune a lumii...Trăia ca un paria, afară din sat, pe coclauri, într-un fel de jumătate bojdeucă, jumătate peșteră scobită într-un mal argilos și sterp...Lumea spunea că în jurul lui nu suferă să viețuiască nici un dobitoc domestic...și nimeni nu-i poate suferi nici mirosul, nici privirile” (106)

However, some of these suppositions are deconstructed by the narrator, at least in the beginning. Most of them are rationally explained or dismissed, including the fact that, “uneori se prefăce el însuși în lup și iese înaintea oamenilor să-i sfâșie” (107). However, he does talk to the wolves, and this is, for the present analysis, an easily recognisable sign.

Amin is another solitary, marginal hero, but special nevertheless. His description strikingly reminds us of captain Ahab, especially since it comes out immediately after the reader finds out that he is marked by the same fascination with the water and The big fish,

“Rămas dintr-o dată singur, ia în stăpânire singurătățile...De sus, de pe grinda întâiului gard, ca un comandant la prova unei corăbii pe jumătate scufundată și înțepenită între țarmuri, Amin veghează neconținut peste această împărăție închinată mușeniei...De zeci de ori se scufundă să dibuie pulsul gârlei,năzuielele curentilor, să pândească punerile la cale ale peștilor” (27)

Amin is also described as if the regression towards an animal monster has already taken place, as if he were half fish already.

“Amin are în toată făptura lui ceva de mare amfibie...Pielea de pe el, lunecoasă, nu are fir de păr, moștenire din moși-strămoși a neamului Aminilor, care se zice că s-ar fi trăgând din pești” (28)

However, with Amin, we enter a different universe, one which is more open to mythical intrusions in the real. In Moby-Dick the only mythical descent is that of the white whale, i.e. the Leviathan, and this comes only as parenthetic information. In Voiculescu’s world, myth is at home in the midst of the space of the real, the latter being ready to receive such mythical intrusions without an unpleasant clash. Let us mention that the fantastic springs from other spots, not from the peaceful cohabitation of realistic and mythical data.

The hermit, Sofonie (“Schimnicul”), is another example of hero described from the very beginning as marginal and exceptional. He is the only monk that can fight hunger and spend his days in neverending prayers. Nobody else can be like him,

“Numai părintele Sofonie sta mereu întreg și nebiruit. Nici ajunări sălbatice, nici îndelungi vegheri în genunchi nu-l înfrângeau. Treay, puternic, neabătut tot timpul...” (149).

The head of the monastery literally marginalizes him by granting him the right to stay isolated and pray as much as he wanted,

“În chipul acesta, scoțându-l din obște, starețul nou nădăjduia să curme neliniștea râvnelor nefirești încuibată în pașnicul locaș” (149)

Moreover, just like the other heroes, Sofonie can have the wolves obey his will. He is the only monk who can scare the wolves away when they hunt for the monastery’s sheep, “numai de frica lui ascultă dihăniile, spuneau ciobanii, făcându-și cruce” (151). Still, this is not the only miracle Sofonie performs. When still a boy, he brings water out of the well without touching the bucket. Sofonie’s miracles are, as well as his unnatural power of endurance, his sign, what makes him marginal: “se răzleți de obște” (160).

Finally, the last hero of interest to this analysis, Berevoi, the last one of his people, is marginal, too,

“Într-un corn de cătun uitat s-a scornit un unchiaș fără ani, fără nume, în mințile căruia stăruiau bătrânele solomonii [i.e. spells]...Hărțuit de popi, prigonit de învățători...ajuns de hula tineretului, ca să scape se îngropase de viu în hobaia asta unde, lepădându-și numele, trăia sihăstrit...” (Ultimul Berevoi, 317)

Just like Herman Melville's characters, with whom V. Voiculescu's heroes can at any time be compared, namely, just like Ahab, or rather like Fedallah, he is seen as the Devil able to take the souls of the villagers. However, he is only a wizard.

What is common to all the above mentioned heroes is their obsession, fascination with an ex-centric, abnormal, marginal, even monstrous animal: fish most of the times, but also bear and wolf. Their common fate is the same circular route, the same quest, obsessive hunt, the same mad search for a monstrous animal that haunts them itself from within, because all these beastly creatures dwell upon their souls. Let us see how these marked animals look like, as seen by the heroes.

The fascinating monster/the Leviathan

The monstrous fish is, perhaps, the most intriguing of these examples. Interestingly enough, like Moby Dick, it is not impressive due to its size mainly, but thanks to its anthropomorphic features. It is evil and has a purpose in his actions. More than this, just like the sperm whale, it is a man-eater, the human flesh seems to be its favourite. Why should we start by analysing the fish, when Voiculescu's universe is full of unnatural creatures, wolves and bears, too? His texts offer us the best argument: because nowhere else is the devil more “at home”, as the reader can see in the beginning of one of his best known short stories, “Lostrita”,

“Nicăieri diavolul cu toată puița și nagodele lui nu se ascunde mai bine ca în ape. Dracul din baltă, se știe, este nelipsit dintre oameni și cel mai amăgitor. Ia felurite chipuri: de la luminița care pâlpâie în beznele nopții și trage pe călătorul rătăcit la adânc, până la fata șuie care se scaldă în vultori și nu-i decât o știmă vicleană” (Capul de zimbriu, 45)

One comes across another devilish, malefic fish, “peștele naibei”, which appears as a protean creature, able to change its looks in order to pursue its evil goals: eating or drawing people, since it is shown to be hungry for human flesh, “hulpavă la pește, ...dar mai ales nesătulă de carne de om” (46).

The Narcissist regression of the hero

When the hero meets the devilish animal, a sort of intermingling takes place: the memory of the malefic touch persists like a loss; hence the hero's, Aliman's madness and passionate search,

“a izbutit să o prinză odată în undiță. Numai o clipă! Pe la mijlocul verii a ochit-o din nou și a încolțit-o... a înhățat-o în brațe. Dar sălbăticiunea...i-a scăpat din mâini ca o săgeată licăritoare, cum îi scăpa duminica câte o zvârlugă de fată la horă... Și de atunci nu i-a mai ieșit din carnea brațelor o dezmierdare, ca un gust de departe al lostritei. Îi simțea mereu povara și forma în mâinile nedibaceși în sufletul tulburat.” (47) – my underlinings.

As we have seen when analysing Melville's hero, Aliman's search for the fish turns, after this encounter, in a mad and painful search; the boy is perceived by the others as being charmed, bewitched, or sick, “se topea”, melting,

“a tânjit, a bolit aproape tot timpul. Parcă intrase și în el somnul iernii” (48), “îi simțea mereu dulcea ei greutate în brațele-i pline de amintirea ei” (49),

and, just like Ahab, seeks for the help if not of God, then of Satan, “se lepăda de lumea lui Dumnezeu” (50), only to achieve his goal, to touch the fish once more. The same love/hatred relationship is established between man and fish, only that this time the love and fascination of the boy are much more overtly stated than his hatred, the latter being obvious in the relation Ahab – Moby Dick.

The same relationship is to be emphasized in the short story “Pescarul Amin”. The isolated, ex-centric Amin, who is said to descend from fish, chases but most of all loves and sympathizes with the monster he caught. Why monster? Because not only once the text calls this fish so: “somnii hulpavi, leviatanii apelor noastre” (12). The caught fish is granted this mythical descent,

“Un somn uriaș, își spuse Amin... o fi poate cel care de câțiva ani bântuie balta, năvălit la prădăciuni și spaima copiilor la scaldă...Are să se lupte cu namila, să o prinză” (29)

Not only once the fish is called “the devil”, or “the ghost”, “năluca” (30), “the beast of the lake”, “his secret, mysterious beast”, “tainica lui jivină” (33), that should be hated,

“Cu somnul, da, avea pricini și răfuieli...” because of its anthropomorphic malice, “...cum avea cu vecinii din sat... Somnul îi înhăța regulat rațele și găștele de pe baltă. I-a apucat într-un rând mielul...Retezase piciorul unui copilăș prins la scaldă” (35),

but which is the object not of such deserved hatred, but of Amin’s constant fascination and love, since the fish is Amin’s own ancestor,

“Este răs-strămoșul său, legendarul, de care i se povestise” (42), one of the ancestral monsters, “peștii uriași din care i se trage neamul, leviatanii strămoși ai legendelor...chiții nemăsurați, morunii...îi simțea acum mai aproape și mai adevărați decât pe bieții pescari” (41)

Amin’s above mentioned circular route is even more overtly emphasized: he is pursuing a fish/an ancestor that is following him itself, of which he cannot break free, because he holds it deep inside his soul as well as in his blood. Madness seems to be, once more, the only solution for this quest to reach to an end. The short story’s imagery sends the reader to Moby Dick and Ahab; here follows one more example’

“Îl păli un fel de nebunie.Și-a vârât chiar el un picior în apă și l-a ținut mult timp așa, bălăbănindu-l, momeală; deducită la carne de om, dihania poate s-ar hotărî să se repeadă...”, and more, Amin “nu mai mănâncă, nu mai doarme” (31),

and cannot seek God’s help because he does not know how to do that,

“căci el nu știa, nu se pricepea să-și întoarcă chipul în sus, spre Cerul de deasupra... Pescarii au cerul lor în fundul apelor... amețitor de misterios. Dumnezeu lor nu umblă pe nori: se poartă pe...chiții și morunii biblici.” (39),

but the water is assimilated, let us remember, with the shelter of Satan.

With Amin, the identification man – aquatic monster is more obvious than anywhere else: he is the great-grandson of the fish, and this is probably the source of his love/hatred generative of madness.

Other animal-monsters. The wolf

In Voiculescu’s fictions, such an identification takes place not only between man and fish. The matrix of the un-natural, strange, evil animal is a bit larger. Two more impressive examples will emphasize the same pattern, only this time the fascinating monster is a wolf. “În mijlocul lupilor” (“Surrounded by Wolves”) brings into the open a strange character that seems to be able to talk to the wolves and make them obey his will, to the narrator’s wonder. As a magistrate, as a judge, he considers the hero, “Luparul”, not guilty when tried for killing deer,

“lupii au ajuns pe la noi câini de vânătoare?” ‘Așa e, cum spuneți dumneavoastră... Fiarele stau în slujba lui... Aleargă și ucid vânatul la poruncă” (106)

The wolves seem to be the guilty ones, to any reasonable person, however, the villagers think they obey the hero’s orders.

The fact that Luparul lives a very secluded life, outside the village, adds to everybody’s wonder and seems to sustain their belief that sometimes he turns into a wolf himself. His appearance is is incriminating, too. No matter how hard the narrator tries to account for his strange smell and weird looks, an attentive reading can identify the germs of the hero’s regression towards the beastly realm and of his identification with the great Wolf.

“Era un bătrân verde, uscat, înalt și ciolănos, posomorât, dar cu o privire arzătoare, părul des căzut pe frunte și mâinile lățite, cu degete rășchirate ca niște labe. Chipul măsliniu și prelung, spânatic...avea ceva tainic” (107), “avea ca un iz arsenical, un miros usturat” (107), and more than this, “se pricepea să vorbească și să se înțeleagă cu lupii chiar în limba lor” (108) – my underlinings.

The hero’s promise to take the narrator with him and show him this miracle exactly in the night celebrating Saint Andrew, “când lupii își primesc pentru tot anul merticul lor de prăzi”, when the wolves can eat human flesh and when, as the folklore tells us, men can become wolves, is another clue that helps our analysis in the above mentioned direction. The hero himself changes and his terrible looks become even more terrifying and un-natural,

“Din ochii căscați îi zbucea un fel de văpaie, ca și din mâinile întinse, mai ales din degete...iar izul puternic... usturat, duhnea din el cu o tărie de neînvins” (114)

The explanation the narrator offers seems to go in the same direction,

“Omul meu crescuse, se lărgise dincolo de el, de sălbăticiunea strâmtă a lui, ca să poată cuprinde și înțelege pe lup, să și-l asimileze... Magul primitiv devenea prin asta arhetipul lupului” (116) – my underlinings.

Still, such explanations tend to be too unpleasantly theoretical. What is interesting nevertheless, is the stress laid on the aporetic route such characters, marginal within their community, are destined to follow, “nu alerga după fiare, ci vâna primejdii, săgeta taine potrivnice” (117), i.e. the hunting of haunting temptations and dangers.

Another example of illustration of the lycanthrop myth is the short story “Schimnicul” (“The Hermit”). This time the reader discovers an outstanding embodiment of the myth. The regression of the hero, Sofonie, as well as his identification with the evil beast are only suggested throughout the text, creating that fantastic atmosphere as understood by Roger Caillois. Only a few details make the reader guess what he is going to witness. As we have already seen, the hero is one more marginal, exceptional character, rejected by the others and secluded by his own will. He is the only one who can cast out the wolves.

Here are the details that make us suspect something else hides beneath the surface of the text: Sofonie eats almost nothing and never gets weak or ill. More than that, when fast-time, the wolves steal more sheep than ever, which is an intriguing detail,

“aci se potrivea parcă înadins o grozavă întâmplare, ca un făcut. În post, și mai cu seamă în zilele de ajunare, lupii dădeau iama în turmele mănăstirii.” (150)

Interestingly enough, the wolf that causes the greatest damage is identified with Sata, and since the reader already suspects that the monk intermingles somehow with the beast, we come once more across the symbolic mixture of the sacred and demonic, of god and evil,

“E cu osebire o spurcăciune de lup mare și sur, meșter și mlădios ca Satana. Țsta nu știe nici de gard, nici de coșar” (151)

Another interesting detail: as soon as Sofonie is called and interrupts his prayers, his trance, the wolf disappears. Still, something in the monk’s appearance reminds us of the devilish beast,

“Sofonie se sculă, și cu el odată umbra-i uriașă, care se zugrăvi neagră pe perete și-l însoți... Părul și barba sure îi stau zbârlite ca de mânie și ochii arzători îi sticleau de un foc sălbatic... își netezi cu mna chica răzvrătită... căscă fioros de câteva ori... își linse cu limba clăbucii de spumă roșie ce-I țiveau colțurile gurii scrâșnind între dinți...” (153) – my underlinings.

One more captivating detail: as a child, Sofonie had been hit by a fierce ram; this encounter with the evil beast leaves behind only half of the healthy boy, now marked by this trauma, as if by a loss: “băiatul rămăsese zdruncinat: bolnăvicios, lincav la mâncare, năzuos, Fără gust de joacă, aproape sălbatic” (157).

The need to get revenged can only be satisfied later, and by a new embodiment of this tormented spirit: the lycanthrope. The germs of this late development are to be found in the child, after this traumatic encounter.

Only a magician can identify him. Șotropa, the magician, is another interesting character: he is able to talk to the dogs, because this is the only way to find out what or who is the malefic creature that haunts the monastery.

The circular route of the hero. The “unheimlich”

Never again has the circular route of the marginal hero been so clearly and terrifyingly embodied as by this story. ‘The Hermit’ is probably the best example: Sofonie chases the evil beast, the wolf that hunts their sheep and cannot reach it, precisely because the wolf dwells upon his soul, because the wolf is himself. Trying to catch the devil he must turn towards himself, the saint. It is the perfect embodiment of mythical Uroboros, the snake that feeds by eating his own tail. However, this solution for the tension of the story is offered to the reader only in the last two pages of the text.

Hence another observation: “The Hermit” is, thus, the best example of Voiculescu’s ability to create that strange atmosphere Sigmund Freud called “Unheimlich”. The strangeness, “das Unheimliche” comes out of the juxtaposition of something familiar and something scaring, or rather out of something familiar turned into something terrifying, generative of Angst. Let us remember that Freud considered that the unheimlich had the intriguing ability to suggest something of the home, and something strange, alien, usually kept secret, but that was revealed nevertheless. (Freud: 303)

Voiculescu’s monstrous animals, like the White Whale, can be read in terms of what J. Kristeva calls “abjection”, i.e. “what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, position, rules... The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (cf. J. Kristeva, “Approaching abjection”, *Powers of Horror*).

Probably this fantastic, “unheimlich” atmosphere is the thing that differentiates V.Voiculescu’s short stories from Melville’s narrative. Otherwise, the same elements of the circular quest are to be identified: the monstrous animal, the marginal human individual, on the verge of regression and intermingling with the monster, as we have already seen, the tragic end of the story, i.e. the death of the hero. Such a monstrous metamorphosis cannot be experienced but at the cost of losing one’s identity, and, finally, die.

All the heroes we have examined so far share this last characteristic; here are the paragraphs accounting for their unusual death,

“Lostrița... se-ntoarse deodată nălucitoare, cu capul țintă în Aliman. Apoi porni, fulgerând apele, spre el. Omul încremeni. Dar numaidecât, cu chipul luminat de o bucuie nefirească, chiui... ‘iată, vin!’...și, smucindu-se din mâinile a trei oameni, sări în mijlocul Bistriței, cu brațele întinse spre lostriță...Ținea lostrița și, amețit de izbitura apelor, se căznea s-o apere...apoi s-a cufundat în valuri” (55)

Amin shares the same tragic fate,

“o dată cu povara apelor care năvăli pe spărtură și-i smulse mâinile, îl covârși șuvoiul de pești zbcunți peste el. Amin nu putu, sau nu mai vru să aibă timp? Morunul se ivise amenințător. Când se înfipse în gaura neîncăpătoare și se opinti, luă cu el în piept pe Amin...ducând la piept pe strănepotul său...” (43)

Gheorghieș, the dead hero of “Lacul rău” (“The Evil Lake”), is also swallowed by a lake that was not shown respect. Once more does the coexistence of strange details give birth to that feeling of “unheimlich”: what was supposed to be inanimate is shown as an evil, not only animate, but anthropomorphic being: “Lacul rău își avea tainele lui venite din vechi veleaturi... Nu era îngăduit să calci anume locuri, mai ales

mijlocul, care sta ca un iezer aparte, miez negru, viu, unde vine de ape groase ca pe picior zbucnite din alte tărâmurii bulbuceau în afunzișuri” (Ultimul Berevoi: 294).

Probably such unheimlich details are the best argument in favour of Voiculescu’s uniqueness: the fantastic that springs out of these isolated spots sets this world apart from the fabulous hunt of Melville’s whale. It is difficult if not impossible to ignore such fragments like the one in which a girl, Aliman’s lover, is described as the evil fish, is suggested to be the evil monster itself. However, like one of Voiculescu’s characters states, one can never be sure; here is the fragment,

“are părul despletit pe umeri ca niște șuvoaie de plăvițe răsfirate pe o stană albă. Ochii, de chihlimbar verde-aurii cu strilici albaștri, erau mari, rotunzi, dar reci ca de sticlă. Și dinții, când i-a înfipt într-o coajă de pâine întinsă de Aliman, s-au descoperit albi, dar ascuțiți ca la fiare...” (51); “Parcă fuseseră făcuți și adunați unul pe potriva celuilalt. Era frumoasă, cu chipul cam bucălat, suie, cu trupul lung, mlădios...” (52).

Their love and union only announces Aliman’s final identification with the demonic fish.

Conclusions. The unifying role of the “unheimlich”

Finally, we should mention the fact that Voiculescu’s fictional universe appears as a one dominated by the fantastic, either in Todorov’s acception or Caillois’, or understood as “unheimlich”, at least in the stories that represent the tough core of this milieu. The fantastic, just like the above mentioned authors defined it, irrupts in the midst of the most commonplace and realistic space that could have been brought to the reader’s attention, the Romanian fields or mountains, with their inhabitants, with their traditions and beliefs. The reader can never be sure if this world realistically describes the wilderness or not. Explanations are continuously offered and systematically rejected by the narrators. It is definitely a strange, and sometimes terrifying world, rooted in archaic myths and archetypes. The world of the last Berevoi, the last magician, however oscilating between the old mythical heritage and a new era only dawning in these texts. It is a world able to go back in time,

“Luma muntelui se-ntorcea la vârsta lemnului și la vârsta pietrei” (Ultimul Berevoi, 320), where spells are at home, as well as archetypes,

“duhul marelui taur al muntelui, bătrânul arhitaur, străbunul celor de azi” (323), where the sheperds regress to the status of cattle, at least while performing old rituals,

“La intrare se adăpară ca niște vite, sorbind pe rând din găleata magică, trei pe o parte, trei pe alta, cu buhaiul în fruntea lor” (324).

Still this is a world where the magic is at its dusk, “Magia se istovise în om. Puterile ei se strămutaseră în fier și în oțel” (332).

Looking back at this strange universe, the reader cannot even be sure of the label it could match: fantastic? or just fabulous, like Melville’s? or neither of the two? The feeling that the reader is left with is that this world is a slippery ground, always slipping through the fingers of an analyst. Which is, after all, precisely Todorov’s definition of the fantastic.

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The author

Raluca Șerban is currently associate professor with the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest and teaches Business English and Professional Communication to undergraduate and graduate students, as well as Romanian as a foreign language. Specialized in American Studies, she has a PhD in this field, with the thesis *Representations of Authorship in the Postmodern American Novel. Self-fictionalization in John Barth's Writing*. She has published a number of articles in academic journals and has co-authored several textbooks, among which *Talking Business, First Steps into Marketing, English for Marketing Students*, or *Comunicare de afaceri și limbaj economic în limba română*. Her main research interests include American cultural studies, postmodern literature and action / practitioner research.