
A Dystopian Universe: "Omul din care a fost extras răul" ("The Evil-Free Man") by Matei Vișniec

Adriana Sala¹

Abstract: *Matei Vișniec's play, Omul din care a fost extras răul (The Evil-Free Man)² is a dystopia, casting the partnership between human brain and rat brain as the only possible model for an alleged progress in a society where positive thinking has taken the lead. Rats are called to ease man from the burden of having anything to do with his/her conscience. Man has given up the fight for humanity. This makes man vulnerable to a request expressed by rats to form a man-animal partnership but in which the rats must act like the inner self, like the innermost voice of the conscience. Should man accept such partnership, apart from its nauseating and anxiety-inducing effects, it would mean that man has given up any hope for mankind. Poetry could bring salvation, people need the imprecision, the lack of determination, the space for ambiguity but also for the visionarism which they find in poetical language.*

Key-words: *dystopia, utopian thought, evil, consumerist society, Vișniec*

According to Liviu Petrescu in his book *Poetica postmodernismului (The Poetics of Postmodernism)*, the patterns of scientific thought had something in common with the patterns of utopian thinking. This fact does not refer to any epoch, but is circumscribed to early modernism, in Liviu Petrescu's terms: "(...) în cadrul modernismului timpuriu, tiparele gândirii științifice se vor învecina cel mai adesea, în chipul cel mai strâns, cu anumite tipare ale gândirii utopice" (Petrescu 21). The

¹ M.A. Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

intersection point between early modernism and utopian thinking was the good side of utopian thinking, stirred by the capacity to transform the society based on the evolution of progress in science. However, utopian thinking taken as a model, not as a partial necessity, has generated dystopian universes and also it has modelled with irreversible consequences some states and societies in the East of Europe, in Asia, in Central America, crushing first of all the freedom of speech and the freedom to fight for democracy.

A dystopian model. The rats of the burden-eased man.

Matei Vişniec's play, *Omul din care a fost extras răul* (*The Evil-Free Man*) is a dystopia, casting the partnership between human brain and rat brain as the only possible model for an alleged progress in a society where positive thinking has taken the lead. The setting is post-communism, the country could be anywhere in Europe. The play has caught some surprising phenomena. There are references to twitter and youtube. Vişniec's play was published in 2014. The mass-circulation of information it speaks about had a totally different level in 2014 as compared to now. 2014 was only the beginning of bloggers and youtubers who turned their posting into a vocation. Now, in 2020, this phenomenon has taken different proportions. The number of visualisations matters more than the actual content and it matters more than the message it conveys. A good part of the so-called journalism without hypocrisy taught by Eric, one of the characters, has permeated all media-channels and it is even more difficult to re-establish the initial truth.

In Matei Vişniec's play, the consequence is that the rats are called to ease man from the burden of having anything to do with his/her conscience. Utopian thinking comes with its negative effect. Man has become unable to integrate whatever contradicts this utopian thinking. Therefore, a denial of crisis is regarded as always better than expressing the truth about crisis. This leads to the perpetuation of the same stereotypes and to the fact that man cannot find in himself/herself the power to be amazed by the dimension of humanity, by kindness and genuine selflessness. According to Reinhart Koselleck, the use of the word "crisis" is a diffuse one, unlike in ancient Greek "krisis", which does not allow us to find a correct diagnosis of the situation (Koselleck 176). But such imprecision could be an example of how man uses language in a connotative way even if he or she had the chance to use it in a denotative way. The tendency to cast off from language all irregularities, all the dirty words and the improper usage has unexpected consequences, it changes man into a being reduced to

vital functions but impaired in the capacity to connect and fulfil his emotions in a balanced way. The TV has as target the tendency to reprogram man's emotions so as to render him a consumerist of their own show. By losing his identity, man becomes a person ready to falsify everything around him and to surround himself by other objects, not by other people (Indrieş 59).

Omul din care a fost extras răul (The Evil-Free Man) shows the moral decay of the contemporary man. The problem nowadays is that man prefers to call himself/herself a victim of the circumstances, just because the environment is corrupt. Man has given up the fight for humanity. This makes man vulnerable to a request expressed by rats to form a man-animal partnership but in which the rats must act like the inner self, like the innermost voice of the conscience. The rat becomes a 'natural' extension of man. Not natural in the sense of acceptance, but in the sense of cause and effect. Man's new attitude has generated this response. Should man accept such partnership, apart from its nauseating and anxiety-inducing effects, it would mean that man has given up any hope for mankind. Only poetry, literature, culture, books, visual arts and any forms of art could give man hope for the future. Also all the innocence of game-playing, the game without stakes, without aiming power or destruction.

Agnes Heller and Riccardo Mazzeo in the book *Wind and Whirlwind: Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Literature and Philosophy* speak about the targets of dystopian fiction: totalitarianism, both Nazi and Bolshevik, technological manipulation, bio-politics, demise of our culture, destruction of the world, the flexibility of human nature, the importance of remembering and of forgetting (Heller, Mazzeo 42). The authors point out to inherent contradictions: if dystopia is undesirable for a society, it is frightening, what exactly should be the desired outcome, what would be the alternative, the better world? The author's list is: happiness? justice? harmony? spirituality? individuality? (Heller, Mazzeo 42).

These questions reflect that there is no black and white solution and some aspects cannot be settled. Utopia and dystopia are interrelated. Utopia was projected as such but it contained its opposite, its contradictions from the very beginning. Mircea Crăciun includes in the discussion utopian versus dystopian the terms identity and alterity as having more to do with this impossibility to divide them in two distinct classes.

”The concern with the failure of finding a proper solution between identity and alterity, paramount in the deconstructive

activity, renders Utopia a space of forbidding institutions, of imposed behavioural patterns, which arrest initiative and the free play of imagination. The prevalence of the dystopian underside of the discourse (with no generic or modal implications) is the mark of the anti-utopias of the twentieth century.

A self-destructing universe, utopia warns that trust in the possibility of imaginatively cancelling the immanent may itself turn out illusory. The dichotomous patterning of the utopian text, its perpetual interrogation of expectations provides for another possibility of transgression. "The subversion comes from within, in a 'world turned upside-down', the evil is ridiculed when faced with the image of the ideal." (Crăciun 222)

Loss of sensitivity, loss of expression. The utopian transparency.

Sensitivity is what allows poetry to survive. The contemporary man is modelled so as to lose sensitivity through everyday exposure to TV. Man has perverted the concept of evil, that is why all these operations can take place. If s/he has become 'an evil-free' man, he has also lost identity and the ability to empathize with his/her fellow beings. He accepts the information that gives adrenaline rush and turns all the people it talks about into objects. The whole world becomes a simple space ruled by consumerism. The lack of feelings becomes the new norm.

In Vişniec's play, after this 'strategic' partnership is voted for in a summit (mimicking real Brussels' summits) and implemented, every man, woman or child walks around surrounded by the rats cleaning the garbage he or she has left behind. Some people cause more waste around them than others, the author expressing here his bitter satire of a consumerist society. The more enveloped in the need to consume goods people are, the more rats they need to clean after them. Some people are surrounded by 92 rats, other by 200 and the most hypocritical and vocal of all characters, the shadow leader, by 800 rats.

"SOPRANELE SIAMEZE: Şobolanul este prietenul omului.

Şobolanul îl ajută pe om să devină perfect.

Numai şobolanul ştie să extragă răul din om.

Omul din care a fost extras răul este fericit.

Şobolanul veghează la fericirea omului.

Omul care are un şobolan interior este perfect.

Nimeni nu trebuie să refuze extragerea răului din sine.

Nimeni nu trebuie să refuze conviețuirea cu un șobolan interior. Șobolanul interior este busola noastră morală.” (Vișniec 116)

Somehow, the number of rats becomes a shameful fact. It stirs new political mechanisms; it requires a full transparency which is impossible to keep as such. The people surrounded by more rats try to play down this fact and to make no big deal about it, thus stirring the premises for a generalized hypocrisy. The journalists from different countries are quick to throw the blame on them and to dig in their past about other more atrocious facts that they 'must' have committed, otherwise they would not be so 'unclean' now. The rats are taking the offensive, their voice is continuously heard in a 'common human animal' brain plugged into a station. The rats even require to be given a compensation for those times in history of mankind when they were considered the carriers of diseases, the agents of the plagues and so on. The universe is Kafka-esque. The presence of another is fear-inducing, as the critic Nicolae Balotă said about Kafka. (Balotă 85)

No one will know the future of man as a species, after this so-called partnership. However, Mr. President recognizes the fact that he does not know what poetry is:

”PREȘEDINTELE: Nu știu ce înseamnă poezia și nici nu cred că v-ar folosi să știți ce înseamnă poezia. (...) Pentru mine, personal, poezia nu înseamnă nimic, nu m-a ajutat cu nimic, dar nici nu m-a împiedicat să avansez în viață. (...)

Cred că în acest lucru constă poezia, îți tulbură mintea fără să-ți explice nimic. De altfel, cam acesta cred că e rolul poezilor, să perturbe ordinea gândurilor. Deși nimeni nu le cere acest lucru. (...)

Ce spun eu însă nu e concludent, improvizez acum pe loc pentru că m-ați incitat să o fac. Este prima dată când îmi trece prin minte că poezia ar putea să supraviețuiască în univers după dispariția omului.” (Vișniec 132)

Poetry could bring salvation, people need the imprecision, the lack of determination, the space for ambiguity but also for visionarism which they find in poetical language. Plurisemantism translates the freedom of thinking, the emotion, and gives life to empathy. Thus, art brings us together, makes us more empathetic and sublimates the human side. If poetry dies, words are also useless, so thinking succumbs, the spokesperson herself suffers this verbal amputation: ”Cuvintele ne-au paralizat, cuvintele ne-au murdarit, cuvintele ne-au indepartat de

natura! (...) Cuvintele ne-au. (...). Ne. (...) Unu. Doi. (...) Ușori până (...)” (Vișniec 138)

The language in clichés has banned all these notions from the vocabulary of man. In a scene towards the end, the rats devour all the dirty words from books, leaving the books discarded, with holes in them, as if they were Swiss cheese slices with holes in them.

The 'parallel universe' accompanying man in all undertaken deeds seems to be a necessary counterbalance for the immense quantities of litter, debris threatening the planet, since man has become a being that generates too much garbage. While this is true at the first sight only, like in a dystopia, following the model of George Orwell, the model imposed for 'correction' is even more frightening for human race than the status-quo. Accepting and befriending the partnerships with rats that become a kind of inner voice, man has renounced to moral principles and moral faith altogether. Even the faith, man as a religious being, has no room in this universe, in this modelling of the future. The man, due to the collaboration with rats, has become an 'evil-free' being. The philosophy of cleansing negative emotions is taken here to its extremes.

The new consumerist trend as the "future" of the man purged of all evil and contradictions.

The author asks himself what could really happen to man if all evil is extracted from him. Will man become a better being? Will man be ready to do only good deeds and will he or she be the most endearing person on earth towards his fellow beings? The evil-extraction from man is an artificial endeavour showing the great lengths at which utopian thinking can interfere with everyday political thinking.

Man needs to balance his/her easiness to produce waste and consume without giving a second thought, that is very true. But at the same time, the authors draws our attention on facts that could harm humanity as a whole because the solution-oriented models are not always the one that fate human nature the most. Cutting man from the source of his/her contradiction results in creating a new type of man. Communism has labelled this type 'the new man' and, in the countries belonging to the Eastern Bloc, this model has lived its ultimate consequences exposing the failure of such a utopian model. Communism has imposed this also as a form of controlling and standardizing the freedom of man (Cistelean 29).

Vișniec has a clear vision about the intersection of the older utopia of 'the new man' with the newer utopia of man as a being able to remove his/her contradictions at command. The new post-communist utopian

type appears in the first part of the play, under the slogan 'jurnalism fără ipocrizii', namely 'hypocrisy-free journalism':

"După o știre-bombă puneți o știre-mitralieră. Și după știrea-mitralieră puneți o știre-grenadă. Și după știrea-grenadă puneți o știre-palmă. Și după știrea-palmă puneți o știre-trăznet. Și după o știre-trăznet puneți o știre-horror...Un jurnal ideal trebuie să fie un câmp de luptă, o expediție sângeroasă, o operațiune de commando. Iar cuvântul de ordine este MOARTE." (Vișniec 16)

Man has agreed to become a pseudo-man, so that there is a common ground between him and the rats. The garbage refers both to corruption, manipulation and cowardice and to actual debris and waste. The journalists are the ones who keep offering these dejectures every day: "o felie din mizeria lumii, o listă de murdării umane, de scabroșenii morale, de lașitate, de cinism, de diaree existențială, de putreziciune și de abandon". (Vișniec 11)

The idea of a partnership between man and animal with the intention of modelling the man after the animal has been implanted in the minds of the audience during a TV show presented by the character Eric Nowicki, assisted by Vanessa. Eric teaches young journalists how to pack news in the format of emotional dependence, so as to make the audience dependent on the emotions got from TV and how to manipulate the contents so that the adrenaline rush takes the first place. In a strip-tease moment accompanied by drums, he reveals what has been tattooed on his chest: "Born To Watch TV". By using the triggers of the strip-tease techniques, he makes his audience delirious, only to undress his back afterwards, where the tattooed message is: "Born To Have Fun".

The staging of the moment, although placed at the beginning of the play, in the first scene, seems to be far more important than anything else, than the casting of the actual contents. Using this trick, the actual contents can be anything, even an idea causing moral revulsion. An accompanying act of the characters, throughout the play, is the act of vomiting, showing the rebellion of human conscience against the overgrowing acceptance of the violation of personal boundaries as the new norm. The instinctual act of throwing up in public contrasts with the carefully staged script of the TV show, but it is a form of communication with the inner repressed world of contradictions, dictated by the reminiscent of conscience. Although Eric's presence seems to be very playful, it discloses the highest form of

hypocrisy.

This form of hypocrisy is accepting to tell the truth, to reveal it to its last consequences, only to show that in fact the foundation of the so called disclosure had been a premeditated lie. The journalism without hypocrisy is the biggest hypocrisy as it leaves no choice and no escape to man. The gilded microphone and the message emphasizing all that glitters actually are meant to create a bigger discrepancy between the TV presenter and the spectators. The journalist belongs to the world of the future, the rich world of good choices while the spectators are mocked openly for their so-called ignorance, they do not belong to the world of perfect choices, they are to be destined to a mediocre existence, without the chance to ever become V.I.P-s, they are merely anonymous objects whose feelings must be hijacked for the benefit of humanity.

The quantitative principle is part of this universe which transforms people into objects. According to Dana Sala, the replacement of personality with quantity is metaphysical: man has no other outlet because of the quantitative principle (a man equals a certain number of rats), therefore man cannot find an alter-ego in himself/herself, that is why the rat can take place of this alter-ego. (Sala 137)

Marius Miheţ speaks of ontological paralysis for Vişniec's characters: "Basically, Matei Vişniec's dystopia refers to the post-postmodern individual living in the new Platonic cave demanding the ultimate truth." (Miheţ 67).

The Ş space is seen as a temple through which what is left of man is morally filtered so as not to produce disgust, but in an artificial way. Matei Vişniec's apocalyptic vision of the condition of humanity shows mankind subjugated by the unbearable cloacae of the subconscious. Here the Evil is established as a form of education and therapy through annihilating it in distortion, but this perpetuates evil at other levels of deeds and of societies. The rat is a loaded symbol with double meaning: on the one hand, it illustrates the vitiated, sickly debris to which the human being has been reduced, all that can be more frightening, more nauseating in an individual; on the other hand, the rat is the reverse of the medal, the one that comes to clean in our dream channels, in our existential slaughterhouses, as well as in the cognitive cemeteries, because it is the only mirror in which we can see our image. Conclusion? The rat's tail is the extension of the rat. The rats are not necessarily responsible for the perpetuation of evil, but man is.

References:

- BALOTĂ, Nicolae, *Lupta cu absurdul*, ediția a 2-a, București, Editura Teora, 2000.
- CISTELECAN, Ioana, *On Modern Man & On Socialist realism Crisis in Literature during Romanian Communism*, in *Annals of the University of Oradea, Romanian Language and Literature (ALLRO)*, volume 25, 2018, pp. 25-33.
- CRĂCIUN, Mircea, *A Poetics of Utopia*, Cluj-Napoca, Limes, 2011.
- HELLER, Agnes; Mazzeo, Riccardo, *Wind and Whirlwind: Utopian and Dystopian Themes in Literature and Philosophy*, Brill i Rodopi, 2019.
- INDRIEȘ, Magdalena, *L'homme- une identité perdue, dans le théâtre de Matei Vișniec* (Identity Lost: Man in the Plays of Matei Vișniec) in "Annals of the University of Oradea, Romanian Language and Literature (ALLRO)", volume 25, 2018, pp. 51-61.
- KOSELLECK, Reinhart, *Conceptele și istoriile lor*, transl. By Gabriel H. Decuble and Mari Oruz, București, Editura Art, 2009 (translated into Romanian).
- MIHEȚ, Marius, *The Prose of Matei Vișniec*, in *Annals of the University of Oradea, Romanian Language and Literature (ALLRO)*, volume 25, 2018, pp. 62-78.
- PETRESCU, Liviu, *Poetica postmodernismului*, ediția a II-a, Pitești, Editura Paralela 45, 1998.
- SALA, Dana, *Matei Vișniec - masca și resorturile ascunse ale tragicului*, in "Discobolul", oct- nov-dec 2014 , pp. 134-140.
- VIȘNIEC, Matei, *Omul din care a fost extras răul*, București, Cartea Românească, 2014.