

THE RECEPTION OF A CONTROVERSIAL PLAY – *EVANGHELISTII* – IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

In this paper we intend to present the reception of the play *Evangheliștii* [*The Evangelists*] (published in volume in 1993 and represented on stage in 2005) written by Alina Mungiu Pippidi in post-communist Romanian society. In the interpretation of this topic we have considered the author's artistic goals in relation to the "horizon of expectation" of the Romanian theatre public, as well as to the reaction that critics and institutions outside the world of theatre, such as the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, and local public institutions, had as regards its publication and stage representation.

Thus, we have pointed out the clash and the gap that exist between the author's postmodernist approach to religious faith (i.e. the deconstruction of the Christian ideology) and the often wrong reception of the play's topic coming basically from the Church and in part from the theatre audience. The reception of this play in post-communist Romania is analysed in relation to the rigid, formalist perspective on art shared by an important part of the theatre audience.

One of the main conclusions we have drawn is that the openness degree of our society members to the freedom of artistic creation illustrates, in fact, the degree of civilization and, implicitly, of tolerance which we have acquired up to a certain point in time as a society, especially that today our country is no longer totalitarian and, in consequence, no artistic manifestation can be censored by any ideologies coming from the public space.

Key words: deconstruction of religious ideology, agnostic dramatic discourse, post-communist Romanian theatre audience, "horizons of expectation", aesthetic freedom vs. religious ideologies.

Introduction

Alina Mungiu-Pippidi¹ has an international reputation as a Romanian academic, and is one of the most prominent voices of Romanian civic society. Her literary activity dates back in the 1980s. As a prose writer and playwright she has enjoyed favourable critical receptions coming basically from renowned critics, a fact that is true including for her most controversial literary work, i.e. the play *The Evangelists*, which, however, confronted with harsh criticism coming basically from church representatives, local public institutions, and rarely from writers and critics².

So far Alina Mungiu-Pippidi has published two volumes of theatre (*The Death of Ariel*³ and *The Evangelists*⁴). In 1992 the play *Evangheliștii* [*The Evangelists*] was awarded the distinction of "the best Romanian play of the year". Four years later, in 1996, the play was published by Modern International Drama in New York and later on it was represented on stage at Tătărași Athenaeum in Iași on 3rd December 2005⁵.

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¹ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi founded SAR (Romanian Academic Society), is an expert of the European Commission and frequently participated in conferences organized by renowned universities (Oxford, Stanford, Harvard, and Princeton).

² Most literary critics that wrote about *The Evangelists* appreciated that this work of art deserves the prize of the best play of the year (1992). Few Romanian intellectuals, however, such as Teodor Baconski, Adrian Papahagi, Academician Constantin Bălăceanu- Stolnici, regarded the play as heretical.

³ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Moartea lui Ariel*, (București: Editura Unitext, 1997).

⁴ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Evangheliștii*, (București: Editura Unitext, 1993; see also the latest edition: Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Evangheliștii*, (București: Editura Cartea Românească, 2006).

⁵ An interesting detail in this respect is the fact that *The Evangelists* was first represented by the actors from Iași Tătărași Athenaeum under the coordination of Benoit Vitse in Hungary and only afterwards in Romania (see Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, „Interviuri”, in *Evangheliștii*, (București: Editura Cartea Românească, 2006).

The courage of re-interpreting and deconstructing the history of a millenary, internationally widespread religious ideology – Christian ideology – by projecting it into the time of Jesus and the Apostles and viewing it through the voice of the central character (Cherintos, a Greek sophist), who relates it to the universal world of ideas, to doubtful, ironical criticism and rational deduction, all have been interpreted as reflecting a boldly heretical attitude on the part of the author. Nevertheless, the writer's intention was to approach a millenary ideology in the form of theatre, the theatre of ideas.

The writer describes *The Evangelists* as “an exercise meant to deconstruct a social construction of a religion /.../ it is a play about propaganda”⁶. The text asks questions such as: How can we be certain that old sacred texts were written through the inspiration of God? How reliable is history since those who wrote it were either subject to the time rulers or were paid to write in a certain manner and with a certain political goal? Does the miracle recorded at the end of the play (Jesus stands and walks, though stabbed by Paul, and promises Maria Magdalena to go with Him to Heaven) represent the author's acceptance of the Christian truth? Is there any topic that should not be approached by playwrights for fear that it might sound heretical or agnostic to the Church? Is it appropriate for theatre productions to be construed by the Church? How influential have religious ideologies been in society? Have religious ideologies been subjected to modifications that were meant to inculcate their supporters certain mentalities and behaviours so that they could be more easily manipulated?

Paper Content

The reception of *The Evangelists* considerably depended on the audience's “horizon of expectation”⁷, in our case – the Romanian post-communist theatre audience that prior to December 1989 had been accustomed to a rather *rigid* dramatic discourse⁸, as Miruna Runcan pointed out in her study *Teatralizarea și reteatralizarea în România (1920-1960) [Teatralization and Re-teatralization in Romania (1920-1960)]*. According to Miruna Runcan and C.C. Buricea Mlinarcic, the revitalization of Romanian theatre starting with the 1960s generation led to the creation of a *rigid canon*, from which the Romanian theatre audience found it difficult to “escape”: “What the 1960s founders intended to be a normal and healthy process of authentic theatrical freedom of expression, including the challenge of the spectator's imagination and direct reflexivity, became after 1990 an *undeclared canon of aesthetic self-sufficiency*.”⁹ In consequence, the Romanian theatre audience was – when the play was published and represented on the stage – unprepared to perceive the author's message properly for it was stuck in the former canon created by the famous golden generation of stage directors and actors that had gained an outstanding reputation before 1989. Thus, the audience was aesthetically instructed but only up to a certain extent for it had been kept away from multiple experimental forms of theatre.

In our hermeneutical approach we have considered - in accordance with Hans Robert Jauss' theory on reception - the *three parties* involved in it: the author and her artistic goal, the play (the text), and the post-communist Romanian theatre audience. In order to point out the clash between the author's artistic goals and the audience's *horizon of expectation*, we have first of all considered the writer's declarations regarding her intention to approach such a topic in her playwriting, and also the temporal, social and cultural context in which this religious issue was developed. In the interview

⁶ In original: „*Evangheliștii* este un exercițiu de deconstruire a construcției sociale a unei religii /.../ este o piesă despre propagandă.” - Apud Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, cap. *Interviuri, Arta nu poate merge în vârful picioarelor de teamă că va deranja pe cineva*, în vol. *Evangheliștii*, (București: Editura Cartea Românească, 2006), 123.

⁷ See Hans Robert Jauss, *Experiență estetică și hermeneutică literară*, (București: Editura Univers, 1983) and Anne Übersfeld, *Termenii cheie ai analizei teatrului*, (Iași: Editura Institutul European, 1999).

⁸ Miruna Runcan, *Teatralizarea și reteatralizarea în România (1920-1960)*, (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Eikon, Colectia „Biblioteca Teatrul Imposibil”, 2003).

⁹ http://ekphrasis.accentpublisher.ro/files/articles_content/46/6.pdf - accessed on 1st March 2013.

with Emilia Chiscop¹⁰, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi gives information about the time when she considered writing this play, i.e. around 1988 (a year before The Romanian Revolution in December 1989). In this interview, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi mentions her interest in the phenomenon of history falsification, and in the role played by intellectuals in society. At the time she was a psychiatrist (who faced human suffering daily) and a journalist (who was aware of the moral degradation of the intellectuals). Alina Mungiu-Pippidi draws our attention to the novel *Ultima cruciadă*¹¹ [*The Last Crusade*], which she wrote between 1987 and 1989 and which she regards as illustrative for her vision in *The Evangelists*. In this novel, one of the characters embodies Teilhard de Chardin, who as a scholar and missionary dedicated all his life to the poor and dispossessed, and whose sacrifice for the other must be regarded, in the author's vision, as an example to be followed in everyday life. As an agnostic, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi admitted that if God's existence was real, he could not offer people good and justice for granted; in other words, without people's participation and self-sacrifice God's good intentions will not fulfil. The writer also admits the influence of Sartre's, Camus's and Montherlant's intellectual and anticlerical theatre upon her writing. Moreover, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi draws our attention towards a character in *Ultima cruciadă*, a representative of the clerical world, who wrote a heretical book that reinterpreted the life of Jesus from a perspective that departs from the official version promoted by the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. In this heretical book when Jesus is asked whether He had resurrected or not, the answer He gives is a rhetorical one: "What did you do for Me to resurrect?"¹²

The author's message is quite clear: as a society which regained its freedom and dignity we, the Romanians, have the duty to rebuild the Christian and political values that we praise in words through the very actions we perform. The intellectual "game" that the author proposes Romanian readers and theatre audiences in *The Evangelists* is to start thinking freely and to make Christian values real through our own sacrifice. That is to say religion must be lived; religion does not imply verbally inheriting Christian clichés about the meaning of life and its values; on the contrary it implies living these values, acquiring them on inner level. The play also does more than that: it hints at the influence of religious propaganda upon society members. Is this surprising for a representative of our society which was for decades subjected to brain cleansing through political propaganda?

On the other hand, besides the fact that the Romanian theatre public was not ready (accustomed and instructed) to accept freedom of expression in art, religion has always been a delicate topic to approach in our country; thus, the author's theatre of ideas came as an unexpected struck on the Romanian theatre repertoire. From this perspective, Liviu Malița was right when he pointed out that the writer's anti-clerical attitude in post-communist Romanian society was not meant to be an offensive attitude but a manifestation of his/her freedom of speech: "The writer, the artist in general, started to assume the liberty of adopting a rebellious attitude against the religious sphere. If he/she disavowed it during the communist period, when the religious topic itself was oppressed, and consequently it arose a feeling of solidarity from the artist; now, in the climate of liberty, the rebellious attitude becomes legitimate in the artist's eyes. More often than not, this is not a stronger reaction against the autochthonous realities, but the linkage to the Western ethos, to <<postmodernism>> and deconstruction, to de-structuring, parody and a certain demystifying disposition. But, since the new attitude is no longer imposed in a propagandistic manner, but freely chosen by the playwright, it has a good chance to become artistic."¹³

¹⁰ Apud Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, cap. *Interviuri*, *Arta nu poate merge în vârful picioarelor de teamă că va deranja pe cineva*, in vol. *Evangheliștii*, (București: Editura Cartea Românească, 2006) 119-140.

¹¹ Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *Ultima cruciadă*, (București: Editura Humanitas, 2001).

¹² In original: „Ce ați făcut să mă înviați?” - Apud Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, cap. „Interviuri. Arta nu poate merge în vârful picioarelor de teamă că va deranja pe cineva”, in *Evangheliștii*, (București: Editura Cartea Românească, 2006) 127.

¹³ Liviu Malița, *The Religious Imaginary in the Romanian Post-War Dramaturgy*, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, <http://www.phantasma.ro/caiete/caiete/caiete12/31.html> - accessed 7th February 2013.

The reception of a play which is meant to deconstruct religious ideology and is published and represented on stage in post-communist Romania has to be linked to the social and cultural context in which it was created. Absolute aesthetic freedom that creators enjoyed after December 1989 in Romania represented a challenge that many authors and artists dared to assume no matter the reactions they might generate. Naturally, the effervescence of literary activity comprised a wide range of tones on the part of authors who either embraced a violent language and a gloomy perspective over communist / post-communist Romanian society in prose, poetry, drama, and script writing or used their freedom to develop topics that approached previously unacceptable subjects (criticism of political ideology) or sensitive themes (religion and its power and influence over masses, which is one of the topics of *The Evangelists*).

The horizon of expectation characteristic of the post-totalitarian theatre public was on the one hand marked by the eagerness to experience new artistic creations and on the other hand it proved rather inhibited (a natural reaction to the once forbidden act of free reasoning). Despite the newly gained freedom of speech and expression, the post-December 1989 Romanian art consumers (theatre / film audience, readers, music fans) and public institutions reacted to the new creative context set up after the Revolution either with enthusiasm or by embracing a harshly critical attitude.

Writing a play that questioned Christian ideology and coldly analysed it as any other ideology through the voice of the central character, Cherintos, and through the perspective of human sins (such as thirst for power) embodied by Paul and, in fact, by all characters (including by Jesus) must have represented an unacceptable blasphemy for many.

Church representatives reacted promptly after the play's first representation. Thus, the former Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, Teoctist, stated that: ".../ if somebody writes about the Church or about *The Holy Book* or even a literary work such as *The Evangelists*, that person unconsciously brings defamation to Christian learning".¹⁴ In his turn, Ioan Robu, Bishop of Roman-Catholic Church of Bucharest, stated that: "It is blasphemy to our life and faith. [...] When such a play is interpreted in a theatre, I, as a man of Church, and each of us cannot feel happy to see that what we hold as holy is ridiculed". And, finally, we quote the words uttered by one of the most famous members of the Romanian Academy, Constantin Balaceanu-Stolnici, who considers that: "Any person who has a Christian culture will regard this play as a shame".

In an article published in *Cotidianul*¹⁵, Cristian Teodorescu informs readers that *The Evangelists* was not initially represented on the stage in Romania because actors did not want to provoke a scandal and, consequently, the play was interpreted in Hungary. Afterwards, the play was interpreted in Romania. Besides the reaction of the Church, on the 6th of December 2005, the cultural commission from the Local Council of Iași joined in order to decide whether the play could be represented or not on the Tătărași Athenaeum stage any more. The mayor of Iași at the time, Gheorghe Nichita, planned to inspect the Tătărași Athenaeum's activity, an attitude that reminded people of the former totalitarian repressive methods and censorship. However, the play was finally not interdicted.

Apart from the above mentioned wave of criticism, we consider that reference must be made to a part of Romanian society which reacted in a critical way to *The Evangelists* because religious faith has always been perceived as a constant unifying factor for Romanians no matter the provinces they came from or the historical period. From this point of view, the Church has symbolized a form

¹⁴ You can read here the translated fragments in original: I.P.S. Teoctist: „și cineva, dacă scrie despre Biserică sau despre Evanghelie sau chiar o piesă literară precum Evangheliștii, aduce fără să-și dea seama o jignire Bisericii, învățaturii creștine“; Ioan Robu: „Este o blasfemie la viața și credința noastră. [...] Când se joacă așa ceva într-un teatru, eu, ca om al Bisericii, și fiecare nu putem fi bucuroși că ceea ce este mai sfânt pentru noi este ridiculizat“. Constantin Bălăceanu-Stolnici: „Orice om care are o cultura creștină consideră această piesă o rușine“. See: http://www.observatorcultural.ro/Despre-Ratiune-si-Credinta.-Evanghelistii*articleID_14488-articles_details.html – accessed 16th February 2013.

¹⁵ Cristian Teodorescu, *Cotidianul*, 5 decembrie, 2005.

of resistance against foreign suppressors and the communist atheist propaganda, besides the fact that it is an essential part of our moral and spiritual heritage. However, the tragic events that the Romanian Christian Churches (The Catholic Church United with Rome¹⁶, The Orthodox Church¹⁷, The Catholic Church, and The Protestant Church) underwent during the totalitarian regime are in general known to little extent by Romanians even if many books have been published on this topic. Naturally, this unawareness and lack of interest manifested by most of the Romanians is on the one hand an offence to the martyrs of the Church and on the other a negative factor that currently hinders our moral evolution as a nation.

The play contains a set of shocking details as to the Christian myth, such as the ones referring to Jesus (the Narrator of the play and the character who finally reveals to be Christ), Paul and Peter (the Apostles), and the four Evangelists (the four disciples of the Greek sophist Cherintos: Luke, Matthew, John, and Mark). All of them are depicted in a manner that does not correspond to the well-known history related by the New Testament. Briefly speaking the most representative figures of Christianity are depicted as ordinary men, apart from the last scene in the play in which Christ, even if stabbed by Paul, does not die. In Alina Mungiu-Pippidi's play Jesus appears as a feeble, inoffensive character, who is fond of Helen (the Greek, pagan correspondent of Maria Magdalena) and whose dream of spreading the Christian ideology made him follow Paul. In *The Evangelists* Paul represents the fanatical, combative "Christian", who is aware of the power that ideas may have over the others and who decides to re-compose the whole story of Christ in order to seduce (conquer) through it as many supporters as possible. To him religion must be imposed on the others no matter the sacrifice this must require in order to transform the world into a better place. Murders did not prevent Paul from making his dream come true. Thus, the four holy books are written in the presence of Christ, whose words are, however, modified as Paul indicates in order to correspond to the version that the latter wants to have. After the four books are written, Paul murders the Evangelists and tries to convince Cherinthos about joining him in his attempt to make the prospective Christian Church a powerful institution through the new Christian doctrine. However, Cherinthos commits suicide by drinking the poisonous wine prepared by Paul for the Evangelists. Cherinthos cannot accept that his disciples died because of his negligence and that the books written in his Academy will be used as ideology for conquest. Finally, Paul sees his dream fulfilled for his thirst for power is now satisfied. Apparently, he is the only character who is victorious. Yet, the play concludes with Christ's words, who - despite of being stabbed by Paul - keeps walking and promises Helen, his lover, to join Him in Heaven.

The other Apostle in the play, Peter stands, at least apparently, for the real Christian: he is meek, humble, fair, kind-hearted, and incapable of imposing his faith upon the others through force. However, the play does not leave room for great ideals to come true. Thus, Peter, after being deceived into believing that he sees the figure of Resurrected Christ, leaves Antiochia to let the other Jews know about this miracle and about Paul's "assiduous" work for disseminating the Christian learning.

Another element that must have shocked Church representatives in the play is the reinterpretation of Jesus' resurrection. The Christian traditional version of resurrection is replaced with a story in which Jesus is not killed on the cross, but Barabbas through an intrigue woven by Paul and meant to keep Jesus alive so that the Jews would believe in His resurrection subsequent to Barabbas' (apparently Jesus') sacrifice at the order of Pilates.

¹⁶ The Catholic Church United with Rome or the Greek-Catholic Church was abolished in 1948 by the communists, an act that brought with it a large number of sacrifices on the part of priests or church goers who were either killed or suffered in prisons'.

¹⁷ The Orthodox Church also underwent a tragic period during the communist regime; in this respect, one can consult the following selective bibliography: Mircea Păcurariu, *Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române*, (Chișinău, 1994); Mihai Rădulescu, *Rugul aprins. Duhovnicia Ortodoxiei în ghearele comuniste*, (București: Editura Ramida, 1993); Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, „Prigonirea Bisericii Ortodoxe strămoșești sub comunism”, in *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei Românești*, 1990, no. 3, p. 3; Vasile Manea, *Preoți ortodocși în închisorile comuniste*, (Cluj: Editura Patmos, 2000).

The dialogues between the four Evangelists (who are paid together with their master, Cherinthos, to write the life of Christ according to the story told by Paul and the Narrator) illustrate in part freedom of thinking and in part irony and cynicism. The four Evangelists and Cherinthos are a group of Greek philosophers who had not known or heard about Jesus Christ and who accept to write the story of the Jewish prophet in exchange of money. The dialogue between Cherinthos and one of the disciples regarding the writer's freedom of creation is bitterly sad. According to Cherinthos no writer can exceed the limits imposed on him by the client who paid for that work to be written; the only thing a writer can do is to try to write a very good and trustful story.

The ambiguous ending leaves more room for interpretation. The writer did not intend to contradict or deny the Christian myth. On the contrary it accepted its possibility and miracle. The conclusion which the reader draws refers both to the uncertain process of writing the allegedly sacred texts and to the use thereof in a fanatical way and with the intention to control masses.

From an aesthetical point of view the play is written in a vivid and intellectual style, and it is full of witty dialogues. Dramatic action aims at formal perfection: scenes follow each other in a natural manner, without delays or unnecessary sequences. Characters seem, however, to be somehow outlined, except for Paul, the fervently fanatic supporter of the Christian ideology – depicted according to his corrections and indications. Finally, the characters and dramatic action serve the purpose that the author assigned them, i.e. that of being the vehicles of the author's deconstructive approach to Christianity.

Conclusions

An interesting aspect remains to be analysed in the future, namely: how the perception of this play will evolve in time for - according to Hans Robert Jauss - the hermeneutics of any text is in fact an attempt: "to examine the text in its original historical context – by examining the dynamic of its original production and reception (*the text within history*)", ".../ to trace a history of the text – by examining the text's reception by communities of readers in different historical periods (*the text throughout history*)" and ".../ to examine the text in relation to general history – by examining the way a text, in its social function, not only arises out of, and is received from within a historical context, but can also have determining impact on that wider, general history (*the text and history*)."¹⁸

The Evangelists is the author's protest against the power of any ideology that attempts to lead people blindly and transform them into mechanical performers of rituals, as well as a lesson which teaches us that in any society and at any time it is natural for the former and present hierarchy of values to be gradually reinterpreted and challenged in order to make room to a multitude of forms of expression, topics and discourses. And isn't such a perspective necessary especially in a society which undergoes a period of transition from totalitarianism to democracy?

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¹⁸ Ormond Rush, *The Reception of Doctrine: An Appropriation of Hans Robert Jauss' Reception*, (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1997) 39.

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