Tragedy in Romanian Literature: Some Conceptual Delimitations

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Abstract: This article examines the presence and manifestation of tragedy as a literary genre in Romanian literature until the establishment of the communist regime. My analysis begins with an overview of the arguments that various critics, playwrights, and essayists have invoked in trying to explain the alleged absence of tragedy in Romanian culture and continues with a discussion about the errors and confusions inherent to such a position. Starting from these misconceptions, I propose a new definition of tragedy as a dramatic/theatrical genre and then employ that definition in identifying the most important tragedies in Romanian literature from the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. The conclusion of my article, strongly contradicting the dominant idea in the history of Romanian drama studies, is that tragedy not only existed in Romanian literature, but that the genre represented a fundamental coordinate of the Romanian cultural tradition.

Keywords: tragedy, Romanian literature, the tragic, drama, violent death

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The strongest prejudices are those whose source is difficult to trace back. Moreover, this fuzziness makes them even more difficult to dismantle; precisely because "everyone knows" a certain fact, it is difficult to correlate it with a certain set of definite statements, as well as with a set of evidence and grounds on which to challenge it. The argument that I intend to challenge within the present article belongs to this very category of well-known "facts," namely that Romanian literature has never had any tragedies. The idea currently circulates as an axiom, including within didactic contexts where, even when not explicitly stated, it is institutionalized to the highest degree (for instance, through the Baccalaureate curriculum in Romanian Language and Literature, where the dramatic genre includes comedy and drama alone, but not tragedy, despite the indisputable prestige of the latter).[1] However, if I had to provide a concrete formulation of this interpretation, I would prefer the following one, expressed by a textbook author with the occasion of a polemic regarding school textbooks:

> "there are no tragedies in Romanian literature in the classical and rigorous sense of the word … there are, instead, attempts from the second half of the 19th century, obscure, hybrid, classicizing and romantic in a minor style … everything dubbed as tragedy in the 20th century (such as a play by Mircea Eliade titled *Iphigenia* or *Iona* by Marin Sorescu) has as much to do with Sophocles as Joyce's novel *Ulysse* has to do with Homer."[2]

1. See *Examenul național de bacalaureat 2014. Programa de examen pentru disciplina limba și literatura română. Filiera teoretică – profil umanist. Filiera vocațională – profil pedagogic.* https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/Programa_Bac_2014_Lb_si_literatura_romana_profil_uman.pdf, accessed on 01.06.2024. The 2014 curriculum remained valid for 2024.
2. Dumitrița Stoica, "Manualele de limba română între profesionalism și impostură," *Observator cultural*, no. 346, November 9, 2006. https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/manualele-de-literatura-romana-intre-profesionalism-si-impostura-2/, accessed on 03.06.2024.

There are several things worth discussing in this statement. First and foremost, the ambiguous precaution implied in the phrase: "in the classical and rigorous sense of the term." "Classical"—does this refer to Antiquity, to French classicism, or to the idea of a European tragic canon (which would perhaps include Shakespeare, but also Goethe)? Things differ from case to case. Second, what does it mean that there were "attempts" at tragedy in the 19th century? The term seems to evoke unfinished texts, the publication of which was hampered by various obstacles, rather than artistically unredeemable texts, as the author of the quote actually implies; because, if the texts are complete and mostly respect the genre's norms, it is inappropriate to call them "attempts," regardless of how unsatisfactory they may seem. Finally, the comparison is not exactly suitable. Notwithstanding that Iphigenia's destiny was immortalized by Euripides and not Sophocles, most of the Romanian authors who wrote tragedies based on ancient patterns throughout the 20th century—from Victor Eftimiu and Nicolae Iorga to Mircea Eliade and Radu Stanca—have intended to revive ancient myths *sub specie temporis nostri* in a completely different manner than James Joyce did (i.e., by changing the characters' destinies while maintaining their names, and not disguising them as contemporary surrogates).

"Why don't we have tragedy of our own?"

Beyond these detailed observations, the fundamental question remains as to whether or not tragedy exists in Romanian literature. A preliminary observation is that, despite the consistently negative response provided by successive scholars to this question, a thorough analysis of this phenomenon has not yet been undertaken. More precisely: not only is a scholarly overview of the Romanian tragic form missing, but also a more or less substantial essay examining the possibility of the genre's existence in Romanian literature (through a careful examination of the works that would fall under this category) or, at least, the reasons behind its absence. I should add that I mainly refer to the period during which modern Romanian drama was first established and flourished (namely from its origins until after the Second World War), and less so to the communist period, when, on the one hand, the instauration of a totalitarian regime and, on the other, the experimental hybridization of forms specific to the entire international post-war drama make the Romanian rendition of this literary genre problematic. Choosing, therefore, to end my investigation with 1948, it is worth remembering that even Romanian literary histories focused on drama do not address this issue; or, if they do, they do so in an imprecise and superficial manner. For instance, the third volume of *Istoria teatrului în România* [History of Romanian Theater], coordinated by Simion Alterescu, albeit admitting that Victor Eftimiu wrote "Greek-inspired tragedies," and that these plays mark a distinct "category" in his oeuvre,[3] unreservedly delegates the author's dramatic activity to the chapter on "Historical Drama." But what can be "historic" in depicting characters such as Prometheus, Oedipus, or Agamemnon? Furthermore, in the first—and only—volume of the *Istoria literaturii dramatice românești* [History of Romanian Dramatic Literature], which analyses the genre's renditions up to 1890, Vicu Mîndra is perhaps the only historian of Romanian theater that makes use of the concept of tragedy—in employing the phrase "tragic plays."[4] But he does so in an utterly unprofessional manner, understanding "tragic" as simply "solemn" and thus transforming it into an umbrella term covering the most diverse dramatic forms possible (the historical drama, the "passional melodrama," the "historical melodrama," the "rural drama," etc.).

And yet, to deliver a plausible answer to the question that gives the title of this section, we can only navigate among the fragments, articles, and essays at hand. In this sense, it should be noted, first, that the issue was approached from two complementary directions. First of all, the lack/non-existence of tragedy in Romanian literature was viewed as a response to a *specific* problem (Romanian society and/or literature, on account of their particularities, refused tragedy) or to a *generic* one (the modern era, regardless of country, was incompatible with tragic form). The former idea was intensively explored in the first half of the 20th century and was linked more or less explicitly to the illusion of Romanian exceptionalism. For instance, in a 1933 article, suggestively titled "Sensibilitatea tragică în România" [Tragic sensibility in Romania], Emil Cioran argued that the tragic is lacking not only in Romanian art, but in the entire Romanian society: "I cannot speak of a generalized tragic sensibility within our nation, widespread in a broader sphere and creating an atmosphere, but only of a certain tragic sensibility

3. Simion Alterescu, coord., *Istoria teatrului în România* 3. *1919-1944* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1973), 151.

4. V. Mîndra, *Istoria literaturii dramatice românești*, vol. 1. *De la începuturi până la 1890* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1986), *passim*.

shared by a few individuals."[5] The list over these individuals is hilarious due to its heterogeneity—in fact, it only comprises four names: Lucian Blaga, Mircea Eliade, Petru Manoliu, and Anton Holban—, and Cioran does not feel obliged to explain his selection, being content to state in passing that "the essential reason" for this absence of the tragic is to be found "in a constitutive deficiency, in a defect pertaining to [the country's] essence and psychic conformation."[6] Inspired by foreign (from Friedrich Nietzsche to José Ortega y Gasset) or national models (Vasile Pârvan, Nae Ionescu, etc.), such arguments are frequent among young Romanian intellectuals of the 1930s, from whom D. D. Roșca, Vasile Băncilă, Dan Botta, Mircea Eliade, Petru Comarnescu, Mircea Vulcănescu, Haig Acterian, and Ion Frunzetti stand out, notwithstanding their pronounced ideological differences.[7] Collectively praising tragic form, they mourn its absence or celebrate its presence in Romanian society and culture, without undertaking an applied study of its Romanian rendition.

Even the young critic I. Negoițescu, who, in his postwar correspondence with Radu Stanca, will try to transform the tragic into a key component of his "Euphorionic" program, designed as a synthesis between Classicism and Romanticism, does not undertake such an investigation—although he would have had both the interest and the means to do it. Negoițescu draws on the statement that, unlike Molière's heroes, "none of [Ioan Luca] Caragiale's characters has a moral structure and therefore none of his heroes are tragic."[8] Mutatis mutandis, the situation is somewhat similar to that of Camil Petrescu, in whose novels the characters "do not enact a moral drama, but an existential and therefore casuistic one: their soul does not choose between Good and Evil, but between pleasant and unpleasant, comfortable and embarrassing, useful and useless, etc."[9] A forced generalization is only a step away: "And so on with the whole of Romanian literature."[10] As for the cause of the tragic's absence, the explanation is one that often circulates within Romanian culture—the natives' passivity, their transactional nature, their habit to "adapt to the circumstances" instead of fighting against them: "there lies dormant in us a *historical lethargy* that always subjects us to circumstances."[11] Therefore, although he draws on two of the fundamental Romanian writers (I. L. Caragiale and Camil Petrescu), Negoițescu reaches a similar conclusion as Cioran, invoking a socio-historical-existential explanation for an artistic deficit. Indeed, even if he had remained in the field of literature, the critic's approach would have been improper: he raises the problem of the tragic while first referring to a genre that opposes it (comedy) and then to a non-dramatic genre (the novel).

But is tragedy still tenable in the modern age? A negative answer to this question was delivered long before George Steiner's famous contribution (*The Death of Tragedy*, 1961)[12], and was wholeheartedly embraced in Romania. For example, in his *Estetica* [Aesthetics] (2 vols., 1934-1936), the most important Romanian book of its kind, Tudor Vianu remarked that starting from the 19th century

> "it was possible to note the disappearance of tragedy as a literary genre and even of tragic feeling within the whole literary production: a process that gave no sign of diminishing in intensity during the last century. Emerging at the same time with the heroic conception on life, that is to say, at the same time with the attitude of Man who is so empowered and self-conscious to the point where he dares enter a destructive struggle against the forces of nature and destiny, the tragedy could not be maintained within the levelling democracies of the last century. And because the tragic hero can no longer be identified amongst the bourgeois and conformist masses … the old tragedies continued to be read and admired, but they no longer speak to anyone with the same warmth felt by the younger and more individualistic hero of past societies, in which life was a continuous struggle against nature, against an unknown destiny, and against merciless gods."[13]

5. Emil Cioran, *Opere* 2, edited by Marin Diaconu, foreword by Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Academia Română-Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2012), 422.
6. Ibid., 423.
7. For an overview, albeit incomplete, see Gabriel Petric, *Viziune și spirit tragic în literatura română a secolului XX* (Florești: Limes, 2014), 101-138.
8. I. Negoițescu and Radu Stanca, *Un roman epistolar*, edited by Ioan Cristescu and Ion Vartic, Afterword by Ion Vartic (Iași: Polirom, 2022), 134.
9. Ibid., 135.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1996).
13. Tudor Vianu, *Estetica*, edited by Vlad Alexandrescu, Foreword by George Gană (Bucharest: Orizonturi, 1996), 371.

Vianu's considerations were inspired by the ideas of Adriano Tilgher,[14] whom he also quotes. It might be possible that the Italian philosopher was also G. Călinescu's source, who stated in 1964: "In the modern era, tragedy has practically disappeared, what Racine offers us is a theater of poetry. In life, hilarious seriousness and grim seriousness go hand in hand. The new formula for character analysis is drama. Shakespeare wrote only dramas and comedies."[15] It is true that George Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* had also been published by then, but Călinescu's attitude towards Shakespeare and Racine makes it unlikely that this was his inspiration. Instead, Steiner is directly invoked in the 1970 *Farsa tragică* [Tragic Farce] by Romul Munteanu, who admits that the death of tragedy is "a real phenomenon," even if he criticizes the English comparatist for "a certain timidity," as well as for offering "only a partial explanation for a much more complex phenomenon."[16] In any case, instead of "death," Munteanu prefers to talk about the "degradation" of tragedy, which would thus justify its "mixture between comedy and tragedy" and, implicitly, his concept of "tragic farce."[17]

A problematic definition

Therefore, regardless of whether they identify it as a more general issue or a specific one, local theorists seem to agree that there was no tragedy in Romanian literature. But what do they mean by tragedy? The aforementioned examples illustrate that the majority of scholars who have discussed the manifestations of tragic form in Romanian literature have worked with improper definitions of the genre, drifting towards at least one of two common misconceptions. The first confusion was denounced by Radu Stanca in a posthumous text published in 1967:

> "in Romanian culture and maybe not only in it, tragedy was considered (at least among theater scholars and practitioners) as a kind of drama that is 'somewhat more horrendous' than actual drama, and in any case 'unrulier'. In tragedy, the misfortunes of drama acquire frightening proportions, and the more dreadfully the actor depicts these misfortunes, the more 'tragic' the tragedy is."[18]

This tendency to assimilate tragedy into the category of drama is illustrated from the very first applied Romanian text on the dramatic phenomenon, namely *Teoria dramei* [The Theory of Drama] (1899) by Iosif Blaga, where, despite the title, the author admits that he "first of all and more broadly discussed tragedy," which he considered a "genre of drama" alone, even if the genre presented "the most artistic value."[19]

The second misconception refers to the two coordinates identified by Péter Szondi in the first lines of *An Essay on the Tragic* (1961): "Since Aristotle, there has been a poetics of tragedy. Only since Schelling there has been a philosophy of the tragic."[20] In other words, most of the Romanian critics cited above confuse *tragedy*, a literary (dramatic) genre formalized almost 2,400 years ago, with *the tragic*, an aesthetic-existential category produced by German idealist philosophy around 1800. Admittedly, the idea of *the tragic* was developed out of *tragedy*, hence it always retains an inextricable link to its prototype. But it is no less true that the tragic as a philosophical construct often reached such a degree of autonomy in relation to its literary model that it paradoxically became its point of reference.[21] The problem with such an approach is not necessarily that it can show us, by use of retrospective reading, that "the Greek tragedies were not tragic,"[22] according to William Marx. A more disturbing conclusion is that, as Hans-Thies Lehmann points out, "a considerable portion of extant theories of tragedy could

14. Adriano Tilgher, *Studi sul Teatro Contemporaneo*, third edition (Rome: Libreria de Scienze e Lettere, 1929).
15. G. Călinescu, *Opere* 11: *Publicistică 1963-1965. Conferințe,* edited by Nicolae Mecu, Foreword by Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Academia Română-Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă), 2012.
16. Romul Munteanu, *Farsa tragică*, second edition (Bucharest: Univers, 1989), 10–11.
17. Ibid, 9.
18. Radu Stanca, *Aquarium. Eseuri programatice*, edited by Marta Petreu, Foreword by Ion Vartic (Cluj-Napoca: Apostrof, 2000), 178.
19. Iosif Blaga, *Teoria dramei. Cu un tractat introductiv despre frumos și artă* (Brașov: Editura Autorului, 1899), 4.
20. Péter Szondi, *An Essay on the Tragic*, translated by Paul Fleming (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 1.
21. "[T]he analysis of a specific literary form that was the object of the *Poetics* was replaced by a philosophy of 'the tragic' as a self-standing entity." Franco Moretti, "Two Theories," *Daedalus* 150, no. 1 (2021): 16.
22. See William Marx, *The Tomb of Oedipus: Why Greek Tragedies Were Not Tragic* (London & New York: Verso, 2022), especially 41-87.

have been written as they stand if a *theatre* of tragedy had never existed at all"[23]—when, in fact, "no tragic experience exists without theatrical experience."[24] In other words, the greatest inconvenience of existing theories on the tragic is not that they extend the tragic beyond tragedy—which is only natural, otherwise one of the two concepts would have become redundant—, nor that they claim that some (most?) ancient tragedies were not "tragic," but that they fundamentally exclude tragedy (i.e., theater) from the definition of the tragic, turning it into an optional accessory to it.

But what definitions and theories are we hereby referring to? I will not take up the Romanian scholars again, given that they do not excel in originality by any means, but I will also not linger on the German philosophers, where the disconnect of the tragic from the tragedy is more than obvious. As a starting point, I will address a volume whose very title aims to offer *A Definition of Tragedy* (1961) and who is also authored by a playwright with intimate knowledge of the tragic phenomenon, namely Oscar Mandel. His definition sound like this:

> "A work of art is tragic if it substantiates the following situation: A protagonist *who commands our earnest good will* is impelled in a given world by a purpose, or undertakes an action, *of a certain seriousness and magnitude*; and by that very purpose or action, subject to the same given world, necessarily and inevitably meets with *grave* spiritual or physical *suffering*. [author's emphases]"[25]

It is not difficult to see that Mandel's definition illustrates not only one, but both of the aforementioned misconceptions. On the other hand, he does not approach tragedy as a dramatic/theatrical genre, but as an aesthetic category that can be found in any "work of art": not only theater, Mandel seems to imply, but also other forms of artistic expression—the novel, for example—could be categorized as "tragic" if they meet the conditions stipulated in his definition; yet, moving the emphasis from the form to the "situation" opens the possibility of ultimately projecting the "tragic" outside the sphere of art. On the other hand, according to Mandel's definition, tragedy is dissociated from drama not in a structural way, but in a gradual manner: "suffering" is also found in full in drama (and most of all, in melodrama), and the simple qualifier of "grave" is insufficient in distinguishing between the two dramatic forms. Equally controversial are the other two parts of the definition that Mandel himself emphasized, on the grounds that they would require additional clarification: "our earnest good will" betrays an attitude that is excessively generous towards the tragic characters, since respecting this principle would remove numerous works with ambitious and averse characters at their center from this definition of tragedy, such as Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1592); while the property "*of a certain…magnitude*" places Mandel's definition in the realm of Greek or, at most, Elizabethan tragedy, thus drastically limiting the possibility of considering works with bourgeois protagonists that were written after and/or along the lines of Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836).

But the main problem of Mandel's definition remains the "suffering," which cannot help in distinguishing tragedy not only from drama, but also from comedy; a "drastic … suffering" can ultimately be found in Argan, the hypochondriac from Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673), even if the play cannot possibly be considered a tragedy. Of course, there is an intimate connection between tragedy and suffering, but we are only referring to *a certain type of suffering*. To better understand this connection, perhaps it would be better to start from the way tragedy—and the suffering that generates it—was conceived by the most important tragic author in world literature: William Shakespeare. Admittedly, Shakespeare was not a theoretician per se, but from the occurrences of this term in his work, J. V. Cunningham extracted as early as 1950 a "Shakespearean conception of *tragedy*," which he summarized as follows:

> "The tragic atmosphere and the anticipation of the tragic catastrophe is fearful; the catastrophe woeful. The process by which the catastrophe comes about involves intrigue, hypocrisy, political conspiracy and treason, acts of sin, and is conducted by responsible agents. These are the connotations of *tragedy*. The denotation is violent, unexpected death—murder, death in battle, suicide. To these is added rape."[26]

23. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre*, translated by Eric Butler (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.
24. Ibid., 3.
25. Oscar Mandel, *A Definition of Tragedy* (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 88.
26. J. V. Cunningham, "Tragedy in Shakespeare," *English Literary History* 17, no. 1 (1950): 43.

Even if this "conception" does not qualify as a definition of tragedy, but rather as its description—more precisely, a description of how tragedy is reflected in the works of a single author—, Cunningham's strong point is that he links the causes of the "suffering" felt by tragic heroes (what he, rather improperly, dubs "connotations") to an extremely concrete effect (coined "denotation"). And what unites all of these "denotations"—murder, suicide, rape, etc.—is not so much the "gravity" of suffering (when death occurs "unexpectedly," the suffering does not last too long either), but the fact that they leave some *indelible traces* on the tragic protagonist. What has been done can never be undone—this is the element that indicates the specificity of tragedy, which can therefore constitute a solid starting point for a new definition of the genre.

Towards a new definition of tragedy

Therefore, the definition I hereby propose is the following: *Tragedy is a dramatic form that represents in a serious manner how the play's protagonists end up suffering a severe, violent, and irreversible deterioration, oftentimes concluding with their own demise, as an inevitable but regrettable result of their actions.* Let us analyze the components of this definition one by one:

1. "Tragedy is a dramatic form...": I state from the outset that the subject of my article is *tragedy as dramatic form* ("genre" or "species"), and not the "tragic" as an aesthetic and/or existential category, which seems to be neither a necessary nor—most of the time—an appropriate concept to understand tragedy. In other words, I don't think *tragedy* can exist outside the theater (except, at most, through a metaphorical extension of the concept). Whether and to what extent the *tragic* exists outside of tragedy or art—that is a problem that does not concern me in the present article.

2. "...that represents in a serious manner...": the so-called "tragic" events can be approached in various ways, including within the techniques of comedy. But their treatment as comedy automatically extracts the resulting text from the conventions of tragedy. This is the reason why the very first Romanian play, *Occisio Gregorii in Moldaviae Vodae tragice expressa* (written c. 1778–1779 by an unidentified author) is not a tragedy; although it claims to have been "expressed in tragic form," the farcical tone that underpins it often invalidates its tragic dimension. This does not mean, however, that tragedies cannot also contain comic moments, intended to humanize the characters and increase the authenticity of the discourse. Two conclusive examples in this regard are *Manasse* (1900) by Roman Ronetti and *Patima roșie* [Red Passion] (1916), by Mihail Sorbul, whereby characters such as Zelig Șor or Sbilț constantly dissolve the dramatic tension. But making use of humorous inserts does not diminish the tragic character of the works in question.

3. "...how the play's protagonists...": tragedy is a form centering on its main characters; they are the most important agents and the most important objects of the plot. That is precisely why many tragedies have a name as their title, possibly accompanied by a brief description (*Agamemnon*, *Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Phèdre, Despot Vodă, The Master Builder, Danton, Caligula*, etc.), or a collective noun (*The Persians*, *Bacchae*, *Atrizii,* etc.), both indicating the tragic destiny of a certain individual or group going through a calamity. The relevance of the protagonist is crucial, because only focusing on a character that has been carefully developed throughout the play can lead to a tragic effect. In this sense, the death of episodic or secondary characters, however pathetic and regrettable, cannot constitute the defining material of the tragedy. Thus, the death of Mercutio in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597), although very important in the play's unfolding, is insufficient, by itself, to support its tragic character. A borderline case in this regard is represented, however, by characters who die *instead of* the protagonists, yet not by accident (such as Mercutio, who does not pursue suicide), but as a result of their own or the protagonists' conscious decisions. Two illustrative examples in this regard are the suicide committed by Ion from Caragiale's *Năpasta* [The Plague] (1890), as the character cannot come to terms with the thought that he served 9 years in prison for a crime he did not commit, whereas Dragomir continued to live unpunished, and the lynching of the Old Man from Lucian Blaga's *Tulburarea apelor* [Whirling Waters] (1923), because of the Priest's lies. Both plays thus constitute borderline tragic forms—or, which can be discussed in relation to this genre.

4. "*...end up suffering a severe, violent, and irreversible deterioration, oftentimes concluding with their own demise...*": in tragedies, the protagonists—or their substitutes—meet a violent death or a comparable mutilation. Generally, the main characters die, regardless of whether their death is by murder or suicide, and regardless of the instrument used to bring about this denouement (poison, rope, firearms, or melee weapons ranging from knife and sword to guillotine). In particular cases, maiming

and mutilation are also acceptable as tragic instead of death, as is the case in *Oedipus Tyrannus* (429 B.C.) by Sophocles, which would have remained a tragedy even if Oedipus' self-inflicted blindness had not been accompanied by the hanging of Jocasta. At the same time, even if the idea of mutilation suggests damage inflicted *on the body*, it is not mandatory that the tragic outcome leaves visible physical injuries. The death of Manasse from the eponymous play by Ronetti Roman is also tragic; the protagonist, a traditionalist Jew, has an ischemic stroke because he is unable to accept that his niece will marry a Christian. Therefore, what defines tragedy is not necessarily the intensity of the suffering experienced by the protagonist, but its irreversible character leading to death or mutilation. There are numerous other plays where the characters have revelations that cause them a lot of distress, but they ultimately manage to compensate for or even reverse these negative emotions—or, at the very least, come to terms with them in the end. The same category also includes plays where the characters suffer serious but curable injuries. This is the case of *Suflete tari* [Strong Characters] (1922) by Camil Petrescu, at the end of which Culai informs us that the protagonist Andrei Pietraru survived his suicide attempt. Moreover, the success or failure of a suicide attempt can be a defining trait for the classification of a play as a tragedy or as a drama. This is the case with Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896), where we do not know for sure whether or not Konstantin Treplev's second suicide attempt led to his death (although most indications suggest that it did). In any case, the defining characteristic of tragedy is that the death/mutilation of the protagonist is violent (primarily because it is deliberate, caused by a human agent), regardless of whether it is caused by physical or mental factors. Predictable death caused by "natural" causes, such as the prolonged illness of Stephen the Great from *Apus de soare* [Sunset] (1909) by Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea, does not fall within the definition of tragedy, nor does sudden death caused by transcendent factors, such as Radu's demise in *Cruciada copiilor* [The Children's Crusade] (1930) by Lucian Blaga. None of these situations correspond to the tenet of *violent* death. On the other hand, it is not mandatory that the characters die on stage, in view of the audience. In many tragedies conceived in the late 19th and early 20th century, there is an unwritten rule that, especially with regard to suicide, the characters die offstage, as in *Daria* (1925) by Lucian Blaga. Moreover, sometimes this death is only suggested as imminent, without being confirmed post factum, as it happens in most of the plays inspired by Danton's life: *Danton's Death* (1835) by Georg Büchner, *Danton* (1901) by Romain Rolland, *Danton* (1931) by Camil Petrescu, etc. Certainly, we must also hereby take into account that the limited technical means of the era made it extremely difficult to set up and manipulate a guillotine on stage in such a way as to "realistically" suggest the protagonist's death. After all, the technical limitations have pushed the central episode of the tragedy—violent death—away from the stage, starting with the very first work historically attested as belonging to this genre, Aeschylus' *The Persians* (472 B.C.), where the playwright had no way of bringing the entire invading army on stage, which had perished on the battlefield anyway and had not killed itself in a palace.[27]

5. "*...as an inevitable but regrettable result of their actions*": ultimately, the death of the tragic hero occurs towards the end of the play, as its conclusion; otherwise, the effect is diluted, and the play tends to turn into the drama of those having to emotionally deal with the protagonist's death. The violent events that befall the heroes result from their actions; however, it is important that the reader does not seek a sense of satisfaction, but, on the contrary, is sympathetic toward the tragic character. In other words, the hero of a tragedy cannot be a sadistic and self-centered criminal, but a person endowed with reason and a minimum amount of moral sense. For example, Delavrancea's 1912 *Viforul* [The Hurricane] is not a tragedy, since, although Ștefăniță dies in the end, poisoned by Mrs. Tana, the audience finds satisfaction and feels a sense of justice upon learning this news. Instead, Albert Camus's *Caligula* (1944) remains a tragic play, despite the protagonist's cruel character, as his cruelty is explained by the immense suffering that Drusilla's death caused him. Last but not least, Eugene Ionesco's *The Lesson* (1951) cannot be classified as a tragedy, given that it is difficult for the viewer to accept that an alleged grammar mistake could ever constitute a motive for murder. Moreover, the moral (or, at least, psychological) justification of the heroes' actions and the inevitable (or, at least, plausible) character of the consequences that they face remain key aspects of the tragedy, which also explains why it becomes problematic to discuss this genre after the emergence of the theater of the absurd. But that is another topic entirely.

27. This technique also has quantitative effects. For example, in *The Persians*, "Messenger and Chorus utter almost 60% of the play's words"—Franco Moretti, "Network Semantics. A Beginning," *Transilvania* no. 5 (2024): 5-11.

Tragedy in Romanian literature

Let us now return to my initial question: was there tragedy in Romanian literature? And, if the answer is affirmative, how significant was it? Testimonies regarding the activity of Romanian playwrights from the first half of the 19th century speak of numerous tragedies written and subsequently lost, either before or after their performances. For instance, Cezar Bolliac was remembered by his contemporaries as the author of several tragedies, including *Matilda* (1835), claimed to be "the first tragedy dictated by the Romanian muse."[28] We have no reason to doubt this information, but we cannot comment on texts that are no longer available to us either. Therefore, in the question of periodizing Romanian dramatic works, it is much more relevant to take into account the year of a play's publication rather than the year of its public representation or writing. From this perspective, probably the first Romanian tragedy that has survived to this day is Alexandru Pelimon's *Curtea lui Vasilie-Vodă* [Vasilie-Vodă's Court] (1852). Built on the model of Greek and Shakespearean tragedies—parricide: a son kills his father, an Avenor at the court of Vasile Lupu; the dead father's ghost appears before the other son, Stroe; Stroe is not, in fact, the son of the Avenor, but of Vasilie-Vodă, as revealed in a final anagnorisis, etc.—, the text does not excel through its artistic qualities, but at least it strictly adheres to established patterns of tragedy.

Furthermore, *Curtea lui Vasilie-Vodă* paves the way for a direction that will eventually become dominant throughout Romanian drama up until World War I, namely that of historical tragedy—regardless of whether or not it is presented as such. The most valuable "serious" Romanian plays of the 19th century belong to this category, among them *Răzvan și Vidra* [Răzvan and Vidra] (1867) by Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu, and *Despot Vodă* [Prince Despot] (1880) by Vasile Alecsandri.[29] Both deal with the figure of the ambitious foreigner who infiltrates Romanian society but is ultimately excluded from the nation. Another representative corpus of Romanian tragedies published until the end of the Great War consists of adaptations of ancient plays, however without yet making use of the pantheon of Greek mythology. This series debuts with *Rhea Silvia* (1873) by N. Scurtescu—"the first Romanian tragedy of a classical type,"[30] as considered by G. Călinescu—and also includes plays such as George Bengescu-Dabija's *Pygmalion, regele Feniciei* [Pygmalion, King of Phoenicia] (1886) or *Amilcar Barca* (1894). Notwithstanding, this is still an insignificant category until the publication of *Cocoșul negru* [Black Rooster] (1913) by Victor Eftimiu, which, adapting the Faustian plot to a local folklore material, represents the first attempt in contouring a specific mythology of Romanian tragedy. Lastly, the third type of plays brings tragic subjects into contemporary life, focusing on aspects such as the characters' class, ethnicity, and gender; it is essentially a project analogous to Ibsen's, i.e., "capturing the dark side of modern private life, and giving it a 'public' significance."[31] This direction is spearheaded by Ion Luca Caragiale's *Năpasta*—which, in the absence of a well-established Romanian bourgeoisie, focuses on the peasant class[32]—and continued by Ronetti Roman's *Manasse*, which addresses the condition of the Jews, and by Mihail Sorbul's *Patima roșie*, which addresses gender relations.

In any case, the previous examples are sufficient in helping us draw an initial conclusion. Even if tragedy manifested itself in Romanian literature up to World War I mainly through mediocre plays and imitating western models—which can be said, in the end, about any literary genre from any culture and era—, it also includes six indisputably valuable plays (*Răzvan și Vidra, Despot Vodă, Năpasta, Manasse, Cocoșul negru, Patima roșie*), including a masterpiece (*Manasse*). This is not spectacular, but it is also not negligeable by any means, especially if we compare tragedy with the other "lengthy" literary forms of pre-WWI Romanian literature. Leaving poetry and short prose aside, given that their comparison with the novel or drama would lead to false conclusions, we should note that the Romanian novel up until the Great War hosts a comparable number of successful works: Nicolae Filimon's *Ciocoii vechi și noi* [Upstarts Old and New] (1863), Ioan Slavici's *Mara* (1894), Duiliu Zamfirescu's *Viața la țară*

28. Simion Alterescu, ed., *Istoria teatrului în România* 1: *De la începuturi până la 1848* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1965), 230.

29. For a more detailed discussion on this subgenre, see Snejana Ung, "Importing and Writing Tragedy in Nineteenth-Century Romanian Principalities," *Transilvania* no. 5 (2024): 23-31

30. G. Călinescu, *History of Romanian Literature*, translated by Leon Levițchi (Milan: UNESCO-Nagard, 1988), 330.

31. Franco Moretti, "Simulating Dramatic Networks: Morphology, History, Literary Study," *Journal of World Literature* 6, no. 1 (2020): 39.

32. For a comparison between Caragiale and Ibsen, with a focus on the social classes represented in their works, see Ovio Olaru, "Satire Meets Critical Realism in the European Semiperiphery: A Study on Ibsen and Caragiale." *Transilvania* no. 5 (2024): 32-41

[Life in the Countryside] (1894) and *Tănase Scatiu* (1898), Alexandru Vlahuță's *Dan* (1894), and Ion Agârbiceanu's *Arhanghelii* [Archangels] (1913); the only difference is that novelistic production was considerably larger, with a total of over 500 novels *vs.* less than 50 tragedies. Among the comedies, only Caragiale's four plays are worth mentioning—*O noapte furtunoasă* [A Stormy Night] (1879), *Conu' Leonida față cu reacțiunea* [Mr. Leonida and the Reactionaries] (1880), *O scrisoare pierdută* (The Lost Letter, 1884), and *D'ale carnavalului* [Carnival Scenes] (1885)—, in comparison to which Alecsandri's comedies seem childish today. As for the dramas, only Alecsandri's *Fântâna Blanduziei* [The Blandusian Fountain] (1883) and *Ovidiu* (1885), Alexandru Davila's *Vlaicu Vodă* [Prince Vlaicu] (1902), and Delavrancea's *Apus de soare* stand the test of time. Therefore, I must conclude that not only was tragedy present in Romanian literature, but it was *perhaps the most developed Romanian literary genre until World War I*.

Unfortunately, things will change radically for tragedy and for the entirety of Romanian theater following the war. I will not expand on the reasons why interwar drama underwent a significant regression in relation to poetry and prose—not only in Romania, but on the entire continent. Suffice it to say that "serious" plays (regardless of whether tragedies or dramas) suffered a major setback in relation to the "tradition of Caragiale-inspired satirical comedy of manners,"[33] which became the dominant genre during that era. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, registering varying degrees of artistic success. Among them is Victor Eftimiu, the only interwar Romanian author who programmatically focused on the tragic genre, addressing ancient subjects and labelling his plays as "tragedies," such as *Prometeu* [Prometheus] (1919), *Thebaida* [Thebaid] (1924), and *Atrizii* [The Atreides] (1939). But, unlike *Cocoșul negru*, Eftimiu's "classical" tragedies are unconvincing, especially due to certain stylistic and compositional shortcomings. For example, *Thebaida* combines the plots of three Greek tragedies: *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles, *Seven against Thebes* by Aeschylus, and *Antigone* by Sophocles. The play's plot is chronologically accurate, but its artistry leaves much to be desired due to the conflict's lack of coherence and the excessive oscillation between catastrophe and anticlimax.

For the interwar period, much more representative are two authors who, without claiming to practice this genre, wrote the most important tragedies of Romanian literature: Lucian Blaga and Camil Petrescu. Blaga made renewed attempts to align tragedy to a Romanian mythology, drawing on Eftimiu's *Cocoșul negru*, but reaching a higher degree of symbolic depth and artistic complexity. His approach begins with the sacrificial tragedy *Zamolxe* [Zalmoxis] (1921), in which the Dacian prophet Zalmoxis incites an angry mob to lynch him so as not to be transformed into the idol of an institutionalized religion, and culminates with *Meșterul Manole* [Master Builder Manole] (1929), a dramatization of a pan-European legend that the Romanians reframed as a medieval anecdote: a prince asks a mason to build a church, but this absolutely requires a human sacrifice; the victim is the master builder's wife herself, while the husband ends up questioning the ethical foundations of the religion he serves and ultimately commits suicide. Conversely, eschewing any mythical-religious projection entirely, Camil Petrescu's tragedies are fully anchored in the historical reality of the modern era, whereby the political and social positions of the characters confront their biographical contingencies. For example, in *Jocul ielelor* [The Fairies' Dance] (1919), the journalist Gelu Ruscanu's intention to provoke the resignation of a corrupt minister is ultimately thwarted both by the possible repercussions of such a gesture on his circle of friends and by the discovery of a troubled family past; unable to renounce his ideal of justice, Ruscanu takes his own life. Somewhat similar, yet approached from the opposite perspective, the plot of *Danton* opposes the "human" pragmatism of the protagonist to the ideological inflexibility of Robespierre and his henchmen, even if it is precisely this superior understanding of human imperfections that will ultimately lead him to the guillotine.

Probably the last notable attempt to revamp tragedy in pre-communist Romanian literature owes to Radu Stanca. Although extremely prolific in the early postwar period, when he wrote around a dozen plays, Stanca was unable to publish any of his works due to ideological restrictions, until his untimely demise, aged just 42. For this reason, he is an exception to the chronological threshold I was announcing in the beginning of this section. In any case, the young playwright is still extremely relevant for the history of Romanian drama, in that he not only penned tragedies, but carefully explored all dimensions and limitations of the tragic phenomenon. On the one hand, Stanca wrote several (quasi) tragedies, starting with the biblical triptych *Drumul Magilor* [The Magi's Road] (1944)—*Turnul Babel*

33. Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale*, vol. 3: *Dramaturgia și critica literară* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1975), 7.

[Tower of Babel] (1945)—*Rege, preot și profet* [King, Priest, and Prophet] (1946), and ending with *Ostatecul* [The Hostage] (1958), a queer tragedy. On the other hand, the author explored and often exceeded the limits of the tragic, imagining plays in which Oedipus finds his redemption on the way to Colonus—*Oedip salvat* [Oedipus Saved] (1947)—, Don Juan has a female double—*Dona Juana* (1947)—, and the Olympian gods are featured as characters of comedy—*Critis sau Gâlceava zeilor* [Critis or the Quarrel of the Gods] (1946).

In conclusion, I consider that, contrary to the dominant narrative in the history of Romanian dramatic literature, not only Romanian literature did, indeed, possess the form of tragedy, but also this genre represented a fundamental coordinate of the Romanian cultural tradition.

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