



## Types of Justice in Camil Petrescu's *Jocul ielelor*

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**Abstract:** Writer with a solid philosophical preparation, Camil Petrescu proves his ability to make refined conceptual distinctions through artistic literature. Thus, in the play *Jocul ielelor*, he determines his characters to support the validity of several types of justice. The main character is the journalist Gelu Ruscanu, who lives a true drama of conscience because his notion of “absolute justice” (Platonic and Kantian) cannot be applied to/ in his contemporary reality. Beyond its undoubted literary value, the play *Jocul ielelor* is also a genuine debate about the concept of justice.

**Keywords:** Camil Petrescu; law; justice; ethics; Romanian literature

### 1. Preliminaries

Our article continues a series of researches, some of which have already been published (see Pușcă & Munteanu, 2016, pp. 122-133, and Pușcă & Munteanu, 2018, pp. 5-15), which we have undertaken on a territory of “justice in literature“. We intend to examine here some more or less explicit distinctions made by Camil Petrescu within the notion of «justice», distinctions in the drama *Jocul ielelor*. Considering that the subject of this literary work is well known to readers, we will only analyze the elements and the relevant sequences.

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## 2. Types of «Justice» in *Jocul ielelor*

In the lines of the drama *Jocul ielelor* appear, in different argumentations, at least four types or forms of «justice»: *absolute justice*, *social justice*, *legal justice* and *individual justice*. These four forms / concepts are particularly highlighted during the verbal confrontation between Șerban Saru-Sinești and Gelu Ruscanu, in the presence of Franzisek Praidă, whose final, although brief, intervention is significant.

### 2.1. Absolute Justice

Gelu Ruscanu, director of the publication „Dreptatea socială” [Social Justice], has the ability to see “ideas” (in the Platonic sense of this term). For him, both *justice* and *love* have value only if they are absolute and eternal. Plato’s influence is strong and obvious here. Penciulescu “guesses” Gelu very well (resembling him to Saint-Just) and he also makes the analogy between the “game of ideas” and the “play of the wicked fairies”, appreciating that “*ideas*” attracts them, fascinates them, but at the same time scare them, destroying those who saw them and follow them: “Tell me why you suffer and I will tell you who you are. This is our friend Saint-Just’s case, who is just obsessed with ideas... What do you want? if he discovered in a night with the moon «*Jocul ielelor*»...! [...] Who saw the ideas becomes an inane person, what do you want?... The lad passes through the woods, he hears an unearthly music and sees in the clearing, in the moonlight, the naked and wild wicked fairies dancing the round dance. He is astonished, nailed to the earth, staring at them. They disappear and he remains an inane person. Either with a crooked face, or with a paralyzed foot, or with a strange mind. Or, more rarely, with the nostalgia of the absolute. He can no longer descend on the earth. That’s how the wicked fairies are... they punish... They do not like being seen naked by mortals. There was once a Greek, one Plato, who claimed to have seen the pure ideas, and from this Greek came all the misfortunes in the world.” (Petrescu, 1971, pp. 73-74).

The idea of justice for which Ruscanu fights is a perfect one and precisely, therefore, inhuman in the eyes of others. Often he doubles the reflections on justice with references to mathematics to show the immutable character of the idea of justice: “All our power to say what we say comes from the consciousness of this absolute justice... One single exceptional case would annul it, like if only once two plus one makes four, all mathematics would be null ... “ (Petrescu, 1971, p. 70);

“Would you [= Sinești] be able to support the idea of a square circle?... Or the thought that two plus three makes six?” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 104) and so on.

Undoubtedly, there is much Platonism in what Gelu Ruscanu claims (and not just by references to mathematics). In some ways, however, it seems to be some Aristotelian influences. For example, the fact that he locates absolute justice in conscience suggests the “active intellect” described by Aristotle. Then, when aunt Irena rejects his arguments on the grounds that they are only “baloney... phrases from the books you filled your head with”, Gelu indignantly bursts out, “What do you mean by baloney...? What do you mean by phrases? So where does a nice and clean thought written to be despised? Phrases? But the books were written for fools and crazy people? Why is the wisdom of others, practical and cynical, the only one omniscient?” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 59). This is the opposition established by the ancient Greeks (in particular the Stagirite) between *theoria* (theoretical wisdom) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). If Gelu Ruscanu (like his father, Grigore Ruscanu) is predominantly characterized by a contemplative spirit, by *theoria*, instead, both Prada and Saru-Sinești are led in their actions by *phronesis*.

At the same time, some more modern influences cannot be excluded. We can identify some correlations of Gelu Ruscanu’s ideas with I. Kant’s ethical conception (which recommends us to guide ourselves in life according to certain categorical laws or imperatives localized in the conscience). Similarly, Praid’s ethical behavior, for example, seems influenced by J.S. Mill’s utilitarianism.

Of course, Gelu does not entirely reject Plato’s closeness. At one point, forcing him to give up the straight line that he had imposed on the editorial office of the newspaper he was leading, the hero had the following dialogue with the staff: “SACHE: Mr. Director, there is no shout, holler and cigar if you don’t publish the poor Râpoi in the newspaper... / GELU: If Plato’s ideas are really in heaven, then his hole is done, Sache. (*Concessive.*) Come on, where the rat passed, maybe the mouse can now pass... You become a benefactor with us as well ... (*With an ironic allusion.*) We get adhesions. / VASILIU (*stunned*): I stop the coverage, Comrade Director? (*Indignantly.*) Then what do we do with the poet Ion Zaprea? / GELU: Very well, he can take also advantage of the breach made in the pure sphere of our conscience and to get together with all of us... in the heap!” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 113).

In the reality in which characters live, absolute justice cannot be applied. Real justice (“social”) is compromised. This is why cases such as that of Ion Zaprea (the embezzler poet) and Râpoi (the poor man who steals the flowers in the cemetery),

for which editors require leniency, are blows (“holes in Plato’s sky”) that paralyzes Ruscanu. Moreover, when Șerban Saru-Sinești (“the rat”, which is alluded to above) makes it clear that Petre Boruga will be released from prison if the newspaper “Dreptatea socială” [Social Justice] will end the press campaign against him, Gelu is, practically, forced by his brothers to destroy proof (a letter from Maria Sinești) that incriminates the minister of justice.

The disappointment in love – the unhappy relationship with Mary – did not kill the hero (despite the damage caused to the soul); instead, the impossibility of the application of absolute justice completely disarms him, leaving him without purpose in life. The media campaign he leads against Saru-Sinești was only triggered when he became minister of justice. (For the alleged crime of Sinești – the murder of old lady Manitti – Gelu knew for a few years, but until that time he had not done anything of a judicial nature.) From that moment on, leaving justice in the hands of a murderer was a too serious contradiction for him to be overlooked.

## **2.2. Social Justice**

Together with Gelu Ruscanu, another emblematic character is Franzisek Praidă, for whom absolute justice and, as such, inhumane is an unacceptable concept. Justice must serve a cause. For instance, justice is subordinated, in its case, to the socialist party (i.e. its aims), and not vice versa, as Gelu Ruscanu claims it should be. Absolute justice can only have value as a guiding principle, like the Polar Star: “I would not want to be misunderstood... We also cherish ideas... But we know their meaning... Ideas are like the Polar Star... to go the people towards it when they have a good steerer... But no one ever thought to anchor in the Polar Star...” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 118).

Just like Penciulescu, Praidă implies what kind of justice Gelu<sup>1</sup> follows; he is trying to make him understand (sharing from his own experience) that the notion is ungrounded: “You seem obsessed with the idea of law, the idea of justice, so pure... An absolutely pure justice, like a geometry...? [...] Before studying engineering, I wanted to study pure mathematics in Germany. But I fell over the new mathematical theories of antinomies and I was terrified. This pure logic ends

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<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, Praidă is the one who concludes the play, offering a final characterization of Gelu Ruscanu: “He had the pride to judge everything... He departed from his own, who were his only support... He was too smart to accept the world as it is, but not quite intelligent for what he wanted. For what he hoped to understand, no human mind was enough to this day... He was lost to his eloquent ego...” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 132).

irremediably in the mismatch of uncertainties. This formal, abstract justice is to leave you hanging once... just when you look for it more desperately” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 73).

After witnessing the long discussion between Ruscanu and Saru-Sinești, Praidă proves (through his final intervention) that he does not share either the idea of «absolute justice» promoted by Ruscanu, nor the notion of «legal justice» advocated by Saru-Sinești. He addressed the latter as follows: “But you spoke of justice, of the power of law, and quoted a Roman dictum. I can tell you, however, that above the law and justice even the Romans named the politics... For they were saying: *Salus rei publicae, suprema lex*: or, translated, as you please... The salvation of the public cause is the supreme law.” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 105).

### 2.3. Legal Justice

The “Roman dictum” invoked by Saru-Sinești – to whom Praidă, as we have seen, contraptions (also in Latin expression) the principle he is guided by – is *Pereat mundus, fiat justitia* (“To perish the world, but justice to be done”). Sometimes, due to hurried readings (and to emphasize the difference / opposition between the two worlds, Utopia and Realia), it is appreciated that these Latin words very well characterize Gelu Ruscanu’s view of justice. Camil Petrescu’s text tells us something else, namely that the formula *Pereat mundus, fiat justitia* makes sense in the legal system (Roman law), made up of more or less improvable laws, and not in the philosophy of Platonic essences. Justice it is, admits Saru-Sinești, but based on evidence! On this line, Sinești develops before Gelu Ruscanu the following reasoning: “I see that you have not understood anything of all the character of Western civilization. The basic, the essence of this civilization is not science, for science can be assimilated by other continents... It is the Roman legacy of law... It is the absolute supremacy of the legal law. *Pereat mundus, fiat justitia*... (As if he was the voice of millennial justice himself, he stood up.) Let the world be perverted, but *legal justice* be made [our emphasis] to the one who has it, even if it is lonely and insignificant. This is the power and glory of European civilization. [...] Of course, the laws are largely unfair. But there are laws... There can be others better, no doubt... Justice itself may be mistaken in its application... But what can not admit Western conscience is legal injustice... executed lucidly, deliberately, no matter what purpose. And because you are talking about the absolute, this is the only absolute, legal one, because it comes from will, that solid principle: *Pereat mundus, fiat justice*.” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 99).

Such a kind of justice (“human”) is despised by Gelu, who, in a previous scene, had replied to the first prosecutor: “It is not about your law, for which we do not have much respect, as it is not about your justice that we know... It’s all about something else, above. The situation seems paradoxical because you do not know us and you do not understand us... The laws that you know and that justice are in your image and likeness... are human... We pursue the pure law and the idea of justice itself... This law is in us... This justice has no privilege...” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 70).

#### **2.4. Individual Justice**

Individual justice, as depicted by Saru-Sinești, does not oppose legal justice. The justice minister asks the question: “There is no justice for the many, where there is no justice for oneself. For such a case, the Dreyfus case, France has been cramped for almost a decade and has reached the brink of civil war.” (Petrescu, 1971, p. 99). This kind of justice does not contradict either the social justice pursued by Praidă. An individual can suffer and suffer an injustice if the community he / she is part of is saved or something important is gained. Similarly, members of the respective community can make some compromises, if by this an exceptional individual (such as Petre Boruga) gets the chance to be saved. For Gelu Ruscanu, however, the individual can be sacrificed without remorse, if in this way the permanence of absolute, abstract justice is assured.

### **3. By Way of Conclusion**

There is a distinct form of individual justice: *personal justice*, on its own. This occurs when the individual seeks to do his own thing. In Camil Petrescu’s play, such a case (real) is presented, thanks to a correspondent in Paris who reports “Dreptatea socială” [Social Justice] newspaper news about the murder of a journalist (Calmette) by the wife of the Justice Minister (Mrs. Caillaux) who could not bear the blackmail campaign of the media against her husband. In *Jocul ielelor*, Maria Sinești (who still loves Gelu Ruscanu) cannot commit such a crime. (Besides, the ties between the characters are woven here in a different way.) She, however, brings a revolver to Gelu Ruscanu, with which he will commit suicide in a way similar to his father (Grigore Ruscanu). This is perhaps also a way in which the superior man tries to make himself right in a world that overwhelms him with its injustices...

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