

ALICE VOINESCU

1885-1961

BIOGRAPHY



Alice VOINESCU was born in Turnu Severin on 10 February 1885. She was the daughter of lawyer Sterie Steriadi and of Masinica Poenaru. At five, she can already read in Romanian and German, and learns French at six. She is educated at home, with private tutors (lay tutors and Catholic nuns who will encourage her to read *Imitatio Christi* at 14), and develops her musical sensitiveness by listening to her mother playing the piano. Her father dies in 1902 and her mother, in 1910. ● In 1903, she signs up for the Faculty of Medicine in Bucharest (after having graduated from high school in Turnu Severin), but she drops out for some time as she cannot cope with the specific environment of this profession. She then signs up for the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, where she attends the courses of T. Maiorescu, C. Rădulescu-Motru (whose niece she is), Pompiliu Eliade, M. Dragomirescu and N. Iorga. In 1908, she takes her degree in philosophy with T. Maiorescu and, at his insistence, her family sends her to Germany and France for a Ph.D. in philosophy. ● In 1909, at Leipzig, she attends the lectures of the aestheticians Th. Lipps and J. Volkelt and reads H. Cohen, whose philosophy fills her with enthusiasm. She goes to Paris in 1910, where she attends the courses of L. Brunschvicg, A. Lalande, G. Dumas and V. Delbos. She returns for her Ph.D. thesis to the University of Marburg in Germany, where she attends H. Cohen's lectures and makes friends with N. Hartmann. In May 1913, she defends her doctoral thesis, *L'interprétation de la doctrine de Kant par l'école de Marburg – Étude sur l'idéalisme critique*, with L. Levy-Bruhl in Paris. As a result of her successful defence, she is offered a lecturer position at the University of Paris and a series of lectures in the US. She turns down both, and returns to Romania, where she marries lawyer Stelian Voinescu in 1915. Although deeply in love, living with him will prove rather difficult. ● She enters the competition for a teaching position in the field of the history of modern philosophy at the University of Bucharest, but she is rejected on account of being a woman, which would create a precedent, and she has to confine herself

to teaching in an industrial school. After the war, she delivers several public lectures on philosophical, literary and social subjects, under the aegis of the *Ideea europeană* [*the European Idea*] Society presided by C. Rădulescu-Motru. ● In 1922, she is appointed professor of aesthetics and theater history at the Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Art, where she will teach many generations of artists that will preserve her vivid memory not only because of her lectures, but also due to her warmth. Her courses are structured into three-year cycles, and cover the French classical dramaturgy, Shakespeare and the Greek tragedy. She also teaches sociology at the Higher School for Social Assistance, militating for women's emancipation and education. In 1935, she participates in the Congress on Social Morals in Budapest. ● In 1926, she is one of the founding members of the Romanian Intellectual Union that publishes, that same year, an appeal for the setting up of an international community of the intellectuals. At the recommendation of Ch. du Bos and Groethuysen, she is invited in 1925 at "the Pontigny decades", organized yearly by P. Desjardins as a forum of discussion of the most outstanding European intellectuals. She participates in the meetings held in 1929, 1930, 1932 and 1938 (which she recalls in a 1943 lecture delivered at the French Institute in Bucharest [7]). She makes friends with the host as well as with A. Gide and R. Martin Du Gard. At the latter's insistence, in 1929 she starts writing a diary that will continue for 34 notebooks [8] until her death. In 1930 and 1932, on returning from France, she visits Venice and Florence, where she has the revelation of plastic arts. ● In 1936, she travels to Britain with a view to setting up in Romania a religious organization similar to the Oxford group. The organization is established the same year, but in May 1937 she quits the group's board, in order to put an end to certain existing conflicts and thus preserve the unity of the organization. ● Between 1932-1942, she delivers a number of radio lectures on cultural and feministic topics, that draw T. Arghezi's attention (some of them being published posthumously). In 1936, she publishes a monograph on Montaigne [1,6], then she contributes with articles to *The History of Modern Philosophy* published by the Romanian Philosophy Society [2-3]. From now on, she will focus only on dramaturgy and theater performances, boldly covering classics as well as moderns, mysticism as well as skepticism (but not libertinism). ● Between 1939-1940, she works on a volume on four contemporary playwrights (Wedekind, Shaw, Pirandello, Claudel), representing, perhaps not accidentally, the four great Western powers that have just begun to confront each other [4, 6]. During the war, she starts working on a book on Aeschylus [5, 6] (sometime conseneled by the great Romanian Hellenist D. Pippidi). From October 1945 until September 1947, she publishes exceptional dramatic chronicles in every issue of *Revista Fundațiilor Regale/The Royal Foundations Review*, headed by Camil Petrescu (remarkable are those on O'Neill's *Electra* and on I. Sava directing the

masque performance of *Macbeth* [6]). From July 1960 until her last days, she writes a series of essays in the form of monologues or dialogues between various characters from the ancient theater or Shakespeare's plays, that end with a profound analysis of *Hamlet* [6]. ● Her husband's death in 1940 is a great blow to her, from which she recovers only by attending, from 1941 to 1945, the concerts performed by G. Enescu in his home, and by making friends with him and his wife, Maruca Rosetti-Cantacuzino. ● In 1940, she takes up a public attitude against N. Iorga's assassination by the legionaries, in 1947 she resigns from *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* as a protest against the communist censorship, and at the beginning of 1948, she denounces at her courses King Michael's forced abdication. As a result, she is compelled to retire from the Conservatory and from the Social Assistance School. However, she still delivers a series of private literary lectures for women. At the beginning of 1951, the remaining copies of *Aeschylus* are destroyed, and in April 1951 she is arrested and imprisoned without a trial in the prisons of Jilava and Ghencea, until November 1952. She then has forced residence in the village of Costești, near Târgu Frumos, under terrible living conditions. ● Following the December 1953 written protests of T. Vianu, M. Jora, Perpessicius, F. Muzicescu, Camil Petrescu, V. Eftimiu and M. Voiculescu, as well as P. Groza's intervention, she is set free in January 1954, but is forced to live on a scant pension and on literary translations, despite T. Vianu and Geo Bogza's support. She continues to help her close relatives and some young disciples, either financially or by writing, between August 1950 – January 1957, a series of epistolary ethical advice. She dies on the night of 3-4 June 1961. ● Her works are recovered only beginning with 1983, when Dan Grigorescu republishes her books and also some of her previously unpublished works [6]. After the 1989 revolution, Ana-Maria Murnu publishes her "ethical letters" [7] and her diary [8].

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(L. B.)