

BUZURA'S WORKS

A METACRITICAL RE-READING

(Abstract)

It is undeniable that after 1989, literary criticism has tried to catch up with what it missed after the Second World War, mainly a negative critical perspective. For instance, the study of the realist-socialist literature became a very systematic process (mostly because it was part of the communist ideology): denomination, sources and influences, programmes and ideology, as well as various stages. Unfortunately, the opposition to demagogy on the part of the independent/autonomous aesthetic literature between the 1960s and the 1980s was completely ignored. As far as the revaluation of the antipropagandistic resistance was concerned, the literary criticism after 1989 proved to be even more competent than the old totalitarian censorship when it came to the imposition of ideological taboos. One of the most significant examples in this sense refers to the way Augustin Buzura's novels were received, and, generally, there was an a priori rejection of his novels after the 1989 Romanian Revolution.

This deadlock explains why I have written the present monograph. The first chapter (*At present...*) is concerned with the revaluation of those acts of refusing to read Buzura's works, which blocked, held back, and delegitimized for two decades, after the Revolution, the reassessment of one of the representative works for the literature of subversion, which manifestly faced censorship. We shall presently observe how difficult it is to convey such a debatable, yet current historical and literary issue regarding the research of texts and documents on this matter. However, it is my hope that this

endeavour will not prove an unattainable one as long as the refusal to read Buzura can not be considered the main exegetic method of investigation of contemporary criticism.

What we should take into consideration are the two methods available in order to overcome the dogmatic refusal to read Buzura's works: a theory of reading and a less biased re-reading of his novels. Nevertheless, theories of reading are hardly put into practice, while they never apply to monographs, as they develop a sort of a narcissistic way of investing the work with a certain subjective meaning, which inevitably ends by postulating the lack of relevance of the auctorial intention. When I began this project, I engaged in a more theoretical dispute with the refusal to read, but, eventually, I had to switch to the phenomenological aspect of the process of re-reading. This meant coming and going between, on the one hand, the already acknowledged patterns of interpretation and valorisation concerning Buzura's critical bibliography or some related theoretical bibliographies, and, on the other hand, the relevant and updated quotations from his novels and programmatic texts.

The process of re-reading will always be biased about the first reading. A new attempt to gather the works in an anthology will also consist of those referential criteria which are taken into consideration and are sometimes compulsory when paving the way to the aesthetic canon. By metacritically reconstructing the hermeneutical reading that Buzura's works enjoyed until 1989, I will aim at finding that ideal starting point of the monographic research that I think would have been the best option for the literary history after 1989, not necessarily respecting the same "critical direction," but at least focusing on the main points. Without being too daring under the rules of censorship, the post-war literary critics managed to say something more (apart from what remained unsaid) about

the literature of the antipropagandistic resistance. The simple fact that they knew how to promote a subversive book as a literary event became once again a significant moment (take, for instance, the reception of the novel *Absenții* (*The Absentees*) in *Romania literară* as early as 1971).

There is no doubt that the early criticism is not without fault. Firstly, we should look at the double meaning of the terms "aesthetic" and "esth-etic," at the literary direction (and the novelty, the stylistic innovation, and the synchronisation with Western literature), which was influenced by the Romanian literary journals, and at the militant anti-communist direction typical for the *Europa liberă* (*Radio Free Europe*). This double meaning came from different angles and had divergent aims until 1989, and therefore, it was very complex and beneficial while it also induced a state of confusion which resulted in the refusal to read after 1989. However, apart from all its shortcomings, the post-War critique proved to be a professional one, and so it is worth being continued from where it was interrupted.

Although it could have been predicted that the splitting of critique would provoke a splitting of the auctorial consciousness itself, until 1989, Augustin Buzura's relationship with the literary criticism of the time was one based on feedback. It was unusually productive, especially for a writer who did not specialise in Philology. As a graduate of the medical school, one who partly specialised in psychiatry, Buzura considered the critical observations - and especially, the negative ones - as "scientific" evaluation of his literary experiments. For instance, *Refugii*, (*Places of Refuge*, also translated as *Refuges*) seems to have been written with a view to meeting the critics' expectations, who persistently suggested that the author should focus more on feminine characters and love

stories in every novel. Fortunately, the writer's creative intuition was quite helpful in his next novel, when he avoided the *dead-end* towards which he could have been led by the authoritarian instructions imposed by the Bucharest critics, who had a taste for a certain melodramatic psychology.

But Augustin Buzura's aesthetic autonomy should be more closely looked into. Having a deep understanding of the criteria enforced by the critical reception, Buzura does not comply with their rules and he refuses to give up his originality and personal touch. Hence, a certain repetitive reproachful statements coming from the critics who started to set up a "system," which was obviously a closed system, too restrictive for a vivid literature. Buzura never rebelled against these critics, at least not before the 1989 Revolution. On the contrary, he appreciated the critics' professionalism according to the solidarity principle "resistant culture," even if sometimes these critics proved less comprehensive as far as their writings were concerned.

As a matter of fact, if we take it for granted that bad choices can *sometimes* lead to good ones, the refusal to read which manifested after 1989 convinced the novelist into confessing his artistic creed in an abstruse and inconvenient autobiography, *Tentația risipirii* (*The Temptation to Give Away*) (unfortunately, this book was badly received by the literary criticism after 1989). Having this volume in view, I will insist on the special type of unorthodox views of the author of *Orgolii* (*Vanities*) and particularly on the organic consubstantiality between his attachment to the "pure" work and the professional reasons that made him resist the toughest totalitarian censorship in Romania after the Second World War.

It is difficult to say whether Buzura's works are still of present interest. This would depend of the type of interest we have in mind. In my opinion, his themes have not been affected by the time, and neither has the value of the narrative poetics. To put it bluntly, his themes and poetics did not have enough time to become outdated, and the post 1989 young writers imperfectly took over some of Buzura's innovations from the 1970s and 1980s, from the everyday squalor to the eloquence of the jargon he used. What has been affected by time is the present belief in literature. This is where the "change of paradigm" has occurred, and the critics' lack of interest in *Tentația risipirii* richly proved this. During the last decades of the totalitarian regime, Buzura's prestige meant, above all, auctorial reliability. He was one of the very few writers whose works were taken for granted by their readers. At present, literary criticism does not take for granted the ability of literature to go beyond its contextual limits and transmit to readers a significant and reliable message about the human condition.

Some say that we have finally caught up with Western philosophy. In the footsteps of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche (the great denouncers of the "false conscience") Postmodernism recommends the "disenchantment" of the interpretation and the maintenance of the reading at the surface of the text (any profundity being illusory). It remains to be seen whether this is the only philosophical premise accepted by the exegesis. The aesthetical exegesis, deprived of wonder and enchantment, can not exist, as we all know it. As far as I am concerned, I would rather opt for a paradigm of reserve, which was latent in the Western world when the Postmodernist anti-foundationalism was triumphant, and which has lately been more and more often called "Neomodernism."

There is a necessary "conflict of interpretations" (as Paul Ricoeur would call it) between the demythifying reading and the wish to reestablish, by means of a second degree criticism, some fundamentals that were too quickly abandoned by the philosophical thinking of the latest century, such as the strong (self-creating) individual, the rationality of knowledge, the inherent value of the work, etc. Assuming the risk of being accused of Protochronism, I shall advance the hypothesis that post-war Romanian Neomodernism can be described in retrospect as another type of "conflict of interpretations," which writers and critics have gotten into out of artistic instinct more than of deliberate doctrinal premeditation: a reinstatement of the canon of intrinsic aesthetics, in dispute with Communist propaganda (to most local men of letters, an implicit dispute, but also explicit in some rare cases, such as Buzura's, for example).

Being a case study, a monograph obviously can not promise to immediately find universal solutions to a crisis of contemporary philosophical thought. For this reason, the emerging definitions of Neomodernism (Western and Romanian, with their possible correspondence) will make room for the "more focused" observations belonging to the field of the critique of criticism. In Chapters II and III (*A Positivist in the World of Men of Letters* and *Introspection and Moral Ontology*), I shall try to separate *in actu* the two major functions that criticism has while it is entwined with fiction: the steering (and inevitably ideologising) function of "orientation" and the technical function of the applied commentary. At this level, we no longer speak of a splitting of (unconscious and confusion-generating) reception, but of a specialization, which can be analysed in its syllogism constituents.

I could have paralleled, mathematically, the prospective and/or evaluating criteria of criticism and the solutions found by the author. But it would have been an artificial symmetry, since, like any other great writer, Buzura reinvents the critics' standard expectations to match the DNA of his own creative originality. For this reason, in the process of writing this monograph, I have found it more productive to associate to the divergent imperatives of the steering criticism the integrative advocacy for the investigation of "the man's" psychology (with specialized biographies, less used by literary critics: Huxley, Moreno, Adler), as a possible answer of the author; to the rigorousness of procedure of the technical criticism (structuralist narratology was in fashion in the 1970-1980s) I associated the author's explorations - some of them very risky both aesthetically and ideologically – of the *terra incognita* of the construction of the creative ego on axiological ethics. The result takes the form of several spectacular artistic findings, which criticism still does not know how to interpret: *the signature*, *the psychic death*, and the parables of the reestablishment of self-conscience thorough the anamnesis of "*what you really know.*"

Self-referential, highly connotative and at the same time catachreses, repetitive symbols, each time referring to other structural configurations, these figures signal the double determination and the double relevance of Augustin Buzura's art of poetry. I have left for the last chapter (*The Art of Meaning*) the analysis of the most difficult question: how is it possible for an author specialized in the analysis of the ego to create an exhaustive social fresco? Buzura succeeds in writing "a front diary:" on the one hand it is introductory observation, and on the other an existential allegory of the ego involved in the world, a kind of proto-history (fictional and self-referential, but so clear as objective

representation) of the communist society, which anticipates almost all the current themes of the denotative history of post-war Romania. It is surprising to see how he managed to escape censorship with so much subversive content of "the duty to remember" and it is even more astounding and completely unbelievable to see how he managed to give it an autonomous aesthetic shape. To any theoretical approach, there is no match between introspection and the description of social environment and mechanisms, and a creative formula that would aim at combine the two is doomed to sink into an oxymoron.

Since, leaving aside concrete readings, theory postulates the logical impossibility of such aesthetics, I shall look for an answer in the practical study of the genesis of the novels, investigating, in the author's confessions, the tensions and the reciprocal determinations of self-analysis and documentation, as they were consciously perceived by the author in the process of creation. In the novels written in his youth, self-analysis used to begin as psychological self-analysis, later on gradually turning into the self-analysis of the thematic and compositional options, hence the analysis of options of creation. *Drumul cenușii (Road of Ashes)* is significant for the way it rewrites the adventure of self-knowledge as a metadiscursive adventure. Stylistically speaking, it is the novel that best matches Postmodernist aesthetics, but, through the implications of the *structure* and *meaning* of this transfiguration, it may be a good starting point for a Neomodernist reading (as Postmodernism admits neither the transcendence nor the immanence of any *meaning*).

By experimenting, Buzura manages to overcome the theoreticians' prejudice about what can and what can not be included in one's work; after all, the great literature has always done this. It has been proven for a long time that the exegesis has never

succeeded in covering the wide range of meanings of the literary work. It would not be wise to succeed, after all (otherwise, historical and literary research would be redundant in the future). Especially when the literary work is so syncretically articulated on the heteronomous expectations of the audience's message (just like the novels of his immediate predecessor Marin Preda, Buzura's novels were said to "embody" the denotative discourse of the civil society).

The issue of "writing between the lines" is an intrinsic issue of aesthetic hermeneutics; associated with anti-propaganda literature, it should also attempt to make room for interdisciplinary multiperspectivism. The *Addenda* includes a list of the subversive truths that Buzura saved from censorship, for mere information of the specialists in general history. The circulation of these truths, on the verge of interdiction (there may have been even more than I have been able to find while striving, against my own disposition for literary comprehension, to read "ambiguously") is related to a certain auctorial heroism, which goes far beyond the criteria of a historical and literary recognition and should be acknowledged by the "great" history.

Certainly, the heroic vocation of the author is not a counterargument to a purely aesthetic reception. In another interpretive vision, the truths that I have not managed to reveal in a reflection about form may become very interesting from an expressive point of view. I enumerated them, setting them as a boundary of my range of values and, at a deeper level, as a warning (for myself, as I am inclined - even in this monograph - to first take into account what critics have said and only then to let the author speak) that, in an attempt to "say it all" about "everything," analytical interpretations of literary criticism always lag behind the fictional work, which is integrative, synthetic, holistic by nature.

I believe it was here that post-1990 verdicts of the refusal to read were mainly wrong: they claimed just for themselves (naively and abusively) an absolute truth about the totalitarian world, for the ownership of which literary criticism should no longer need be "disturbed" by the works which, historically, determined it. The result could be nothing else but the heuristic and methodological falsification of literary criticism itself.

Translated by Andreea Bratu and Elena Butoescu