Political aspects in post-revolutionary morality novel *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii* (case study)

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Résumé: L'article se propose de surprendre la direction dans laquelle se dirige la littérature roumaine après la période communiste. Si sous le totalitarisme les écrivains avaient peur de la censure et du régime politique, en général, on essaierait de découvrir quelles sont les tendances actuelles. Est-ce que le politique peut encore se mettre l'empreinte sur la littérature? Est-ce qu'un auteur qui a lutté des années avec le pouvoir politique reste-t-il marqué? On s'efforcera à apprendre en réfléchissant sur le roman d'Augustin Buzura, *Requiem pour les fous et les bêtes*.

Mots-clés: pouvoir politique, communisme, littérature postrévolutionnaire, littérature subversive, psychologisme, totalitarisme

1. Post-communist European literature

The changes undergone by East-European literary cultures were alternatively described as a form of political "liberation" ("decolonization" in the case of Baltic States), cultural "emancipation" and rediscovery/ retrieval of national traditions.

At the same time, East-European literatures rediscovered their connections and relevance for European and global circuits.

Certain features of the literary cultures after 1989 were anticipated in the work of certain experienced and dissident writers as early as the 1970^{s}. These writers made possible the emergence of a range of literary styles, from insurgent poetry that interrogated not only the clichés of tota-

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litarian society but also the apparent normalization after 1989 (Ewa Lipska, Jana Bodnárová, Milán Buzássy, Michal Habaj, Endre Kukorelly, Mircea Dinescu, Ruxandra Cesereanu, Bisera Alikadić, Ani Ilkov, Kiril Merdzhanski, Georgi Gospodinov, Plamen Doinov) to fiction that deconstructed the grand narrations of the communist age and of the transition period (Bohumil Hrabal, Vládimir Paral, Jáchym Topol, Peter Pišťanek, Ján Litvák, Peter Esterházy, Imre Kertész, Lajos Grendel, Norman Manea, Mircea Cărtărescu, Ádám Bodor, Saulius Tomas Kondrotas, Alek Popov, Ismail Kadare), and to innovative women's literature concerned to find new alternative methods to depict communist and post-communist experiences (Andra Nieburga, Gabriela Adameşteanu, Dubravka Ugrešić, Jana Juráňová, Miglena Nikolchina, Emilia Dvoryanova etc.). The last two decades also included a return to forms of popular literature and pulp fiction (both Occidental and East-European) neglected or censured under Communism. These significant changes occurred in cultures that for the most part lacked a functional public sphere and a successful civil society.

As a consequence of these shifts, East-European literary scene appeared to be muddled, a hodgepodge of contradictory trends. The underground forms of "alternative" art were recovered and integrated into the mainstream but – as Alexandr Zinoviev remarked in an interview at the beginning of the tenth decade – this integration came in many cases too late: „The time when these works would have exploded their intended readers' orthodox values was two or three decades earlier"[1]. The literature of "meta-utopian" resistance that Zinoviev and others of his colleagues had been promoting could appear out of place in the contradictory ideological environment of post-Communism which had called into question the political and intellectual significance of aesthetic resistance – that of the former dissidents included. A part of the critics spoke with certain justification about a post-revolutionary syndrome which included new ethnic and national tensions, socio-cultural resentment and a "regression of civic consciousness"[2] of the former cultural class which, after 1989 had to be more preoccupied with its own survival in a global world dominated by economic forces little understood. The obstacle the intellectual mass has been confronting (and still does) after 1989 is not "end of the history", as a series of occidental historians have declared, but rather "end of the

[1] Quoted in Clowes, Edith W., *Russian Experimental Fiction: Resisting Ideology after Utopia*, Princeton UP, 1993, p.17.

[2] Marius Popescu, *Oglinda spartă: Teatrul românesc după 1989*, Unitext, Bucureşti, 1997, p.11.

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culture", real or only imagined erosion of the capacity and "right to express itself by sound, movement and words"[3].

In consequence, the debate with regard to the viability of East-European contemporary literature, especially that part of literature interrogating traditional demarcations, gathering local and global interests, continues to remain useful. Since the corpus of translations and East-European contributions to the theory and practice of post-communist literature extends, this debate can turn back to normal, elucidating the new features of post-communist societies and the role innovative literature and cultural theory can have in relation to them.

2. Romanian literature after '89

If it seemed more and more clear that the axiological situation of Romanian literature in Communism could be solved, elucidated by means of a demanding assessment in the new syntheses, the situation of the new literature, issued after the 1990s proved to be more and more confused. Where was it headed to?

Two phenomena of new, post-December literature partly summarize the significant transformations: on one hand, in the fiction field, the variable proportion between fiction and non-fiction and on the other hand, poetry's spectacular decline after a deceiving inflation which seemed as a flourishing expansion of lyrics. Both phenomena occur in two steps: a first stage (1990-2000) favourable to non-fiction and relatively neutral compared to poetry, creating the impression of a stability that is maintaining poetry at the previous level; a second stage (after 2000) in which fiction is regenerated and the decline of poetry becomes obvious.

The increase of interest for confessional literature was followed, approximately since 2000, by a predictable decrease of interest for memoirs and journals because of the relative fatigue and especially of the audience's satiety or fag. Non-fiction had done its part though the surprise of interesting confessions is still kept, but without creating the event. Confessional literature did not and shall not disappear, but the importance given was slowly but surely diminished.

The novel entered a crisis of creation and readers immediately after 1990, but breaks in again at the beginning of the 3rd millennium allowing us to hope of not at notorious European success, at least to modest, but certain affirmances.

[3] *Idem*, p.78.

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3. *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii,* the novel of the escape from totalitarianism

A work such as Augustin Buzura's is in its entirety the confession of a time and the confession of a representative consciousness such as the one of Marin Preda, Nichita Stănescu, Marin Sorescu, Octavian Paler, Nicolae Breban, Dumitru Radu Popescu and not many others – a work relevant with its overview of Communist and post-communist Romanian society, with its social, political and moral universe.

Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii, issued in 1999, is Augustin Buzura's first post-December novel. Ten years of waiting may seem a period of expectation or reconsideration of one's own epic perspective. But the comeback occurs with the force of the same themes and the same style, as it happened with Nicolae Breban or Dumitru Radu Popescu. New accents mean the intensification or attenuation of certain previous readiness: narration is more dynamic, also undertaking elements of the sensation; psychologism is diminished and completed by a sarcastic sight of the morals; insinuate, subversive political attitude from previous novels is replaced by a journalistic virulence o opinion over a present-day outrageous with moral deviations. The profound motivation of writing as a confession on an age, laid out in all the ampleness and cruel reality of the social phenomenon, remains the same: "I write because what I see and what I feel hurts terribly" – says the writer in the introduction to the journalistic collection from the volume Periphery's Canon.

The year 1999 was not a favourable moment for the novel *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii*, but the moment was overreached with the symbolic force of the narration. Then, inquisitorial critics had decided, on one's own authority, that the novel should be different if not experimentalist and postmodern, then more adjusted to market demands in the meaning of eroticism and exoticism. The acceptance of a multitude of options came later, but it was the only option to diversify the epic, a refuse to commercially homogenize literature. Ambassadors of the `60s generation in the novel bring this new form of literature resistance in a changed context, in which the compelling role of Communist ideology is taken over by the market's questionable taste. Despite all these inconveniences, Augustin Buzura's novel was one of the best-sellers over the period 1990-2000, if not even the best book sold. He still had a great part of the reading audience on his side.

Had something substantial been changed in the condition of man released from the constraints of Communist dictatorship? Yes, most certainly. But was that change for the better? That is the novel's essential question. The answer is perplexing, whether as complicated and detailed

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as the entire novel or simple and aphoristic as the symptomatic disappointment of a severe verdict. The mixture of insurgence and disgust is the typical formula of the epic speech from all of Augustin Buzura's novels, from *Absenţii* to *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii*. Matei Popa, the protagonist of the post-December novel, expresses this pessimistic verdict right from the first pages of his confession: "It was impossible for me to understand how, in such a short time, from a prison we moved or transformed into a sanatorium". Refugee in misanthropy is equal to a defeat: "Of course there were explanations but none of them spared me of horror, of the brutal aggression from the surrounding world. In other words, I wonder, is it of any use – when nobody is there to help you, encourage you – to torment myself for such beings that do not stand mirrors, justice, truth, reality?…"[4] The revolted consciousness of Matei Popa, the journalist from the novel, is allied to an interrogative consciousness, careful to essential truths about a man in an age of crucial changes: "The questions of a defeated individual came back, like in the pre-day of death, something of the kind: what is the use in all these risks, this pain and hope, so many sacrifices if today, after the Revolution, I feel more insecure, more threatened even than before?"[5]. Tonality is kept along the entire novel. Post-communism is an uncertain, disquieting, confusing, baffling season.

Revisions after 1989, with political, moral and aesthetic arguments altogether, claimed the historicization both of dissidence and of subversion. Since the two types of literature (dissident and subversive) depended on the Communist regime, according to which the strategies of submission were built, protest or opposition, once the repressive authority and its controlling institutions disappeared, they – dissident and subversive literature – would have become caducous. Leaving aside the fact that opportunistic and escapist literature also depended just as much on the Communist regime, on the permissiveness of censure and of decisive ideological dirigisme. An inevitable obsolescence occurred, of course, as the Lovinescian mutation of values works incessantly, with results more spectacular or slowly obtained in time. A more appropriate question would be to what extent political changes after 1989 influenced the aesthetic perspective over literature written during Communism.

The reticence of some part of current critics towards Augustin Buzura (from Nicolae Manolescu in his History… from 2008 to critics from recent generations) comes from the suspicion that his fiction was affected by the change from this turn of events. But it is a mere suspicion, an assumption, often not checked with anew reading, not matter how deman-

[4] Augustin Buzura, *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii*, Rao, Bucureşti, 2013, p.17.
[5] *Idem*, p. 28.

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ding it is. Unfortunately, too few people check such radical statements by means of a new reading, as doubt and suspicion suffice them. Paradoxically as it might be, the more and more translated Augustin Buzura is abroad, the more and more disputed he is by critics from the former support group. Even Nicolae Manolescu, in his selection of literary chronicles having the role of canonical list from the three volumes, Post-War Romanian Literature, remembers from Augustin Buzura's fiction only two novels, Vanities and The Voices in the Night, whereas from Eugen Barbu's work he remembers four titles (among which Incognito, which is truly outrageous), from Fănuş Neagu, four titles as well, from Alexandru Ivasiuc, three, from Dumitru Radu Popescu, also three, and from Nicolae Breban, five, at most, the same as with Marin Preda – and I only called upon the cases discussable by comparison with Augustin Buzura, clearly downgraded and disadvantaged in Nicolae Manolescu's post-December selection. But this process is justified by the perspective an extremely personal point of view which should be understood as such. The search for truth is not simple rhetoric in Augustin Buzura's fiction: it is a type of social and ethic investigation materializing itself in a particular epic formula. The writer explores in depth, by psychological analysis, the vices of Communist regime and continues this exploration in *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii* as well. Moral interrogations maintain their keenness and pithiness.

Political meliorism and moral radicalism are important features of epic and ideological vision and they are reflected just as significantly in the entire work.

Augustin Buzura's novels elaborate in more variants one and the same universal issue: riot of the humiliated individual (whether by a concrete social existence or by "the shortcoming of existing") against a situation guilty of lacking in freedom and of the individual's moral alienation. Sometimes, in the beginnings, with existentialist finalities (as in *Absenții*), other times, upon the writer's complete maturity, with existentialist premise (especially as in *Refugii*), Augustin Buzura writes a novel on the human condition, deeply anchored in the social and politic, staking on a philosophical enlargement of analysis and narrative. Augustin Buzura reiterates in his own way Marin Preda's favourite theme, fatality of the relationship, conflict between the individual and history, elaborating on this general background psychology of fear, psychology of failure or psychology of fearsome riot within an oppressive political regime. This is the reason for which Augustin Buzura appears, in a retrospective insight, an aesthetic consciousness responsibly anchored from the social, moral and political point of view in the most sensitive actuality of the human

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condition, with the greatest ampleness and impact in Marin Preda's continuance, in the aspiration to "confess about a time, a space and an experience".

Augustin Buzura's novels (for the transparency of argumentation) „confess about a time, a space and an experience" (as the writer likes to say). In other words, they reflect man's tragic destiny during Communism, as one lives fear, failure, riot, limitation of freedom, confrontation with supervision and repression, control of personal life, alienation, the drama of unaccomplished love – themes treated in a specific way according to certain circumstances, inevitably caught in the construction of the novel.

With the same themes, the same narrative technique as always engaged in his fiction, Augustin Buzura replies to the scepticism and challenges of the dreadful times around the year by means of a new novel, in *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii* (1999). The narrator charged with the mission to confess about the transition age is the journalist Matei Popa, with a busy, spectacular, in patches sensational bibliography, involving a succession of exciting events. No other novel of Augustin Buzura has this epic density and such a narrative rhythm, quite fast-moving, capable to mobilize the reader just as in a genuine adventure novel. The panoramic coverage of the Romanian society is impressive as well. A few years before 1989, Matei Popa is an artificer in a mine, a talented and successful footballer, but persecuted, marginalized and returned to the initial working place as a part of the rescue team. His brother, Visarion, disgusted by the life's misery during Ceauşescu's age, only aims for one thing: to leave the country as soon as possible, perspective for which he sensitizes and prepares Matei, too, as the only salvation possible. Suspected and followed by the Security, they have to work as secretly as possible. Matei is required (a much too gentle word!) to become an informer of the Security, sometimes bribed, other times threatened, but not only does he shirk, but he also definitely refuses as a serious and unforgivable humiliation. His riot continues to rise and, seconded by his good friend and work colleague, Radu, he steals dynamite on the chance of being able one day to explode the headquarters of the Communist Party from his province town, as a sign of protest towards the oppressive regime. Regardless of the many precautions they take, the two will finally be discovered.

Another narrative thread aims Matei Popa's love life. While he is making preparations for the illegal offset and he takes foreign language classes, he falls in love with the English teacher's daughter, Elena Filipescu. One night as they were strolling at the boundaries of a forest, they are attacked by a group of tractor drivers. Matei is wildly beat and tied to

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a tree and Elena is abused and raped. Together with his friend Radu, Matei Popa will try to track the aggressors as the police did not want to solve the case and the main responsible will be found by the two on their own, punished, seriously bruised, which will trigger Matei Popa's sentence to prison. Elena will emigrate together with her father in Germany and will only come back after the Revolution in a mysterious way, by means of help, when she episodically finds Matei. In the sports world, on the training field, Matei meets the Jewish Estera, a professional runner and swimmer, who first becomes a devoted friend and then a passionate lover; after she legally leaves for Israel, she will come back to the country, preparing a very risky escape for Matei. Estera, Visarion and Matei, well trained physically, strategically and inwards, cross the Danube one day swimming to Yugoslavia and are noticed by the border guards: Estera is shot and taken by the waves, Visarion manages to cross, without Matei knowing for sure if he saved himself, and Matei, deeply depressed and feeling guilty for the tragic turn of events, returns on the Romanian shore, unseen by the followers. He is arrested after a period of suspicions and investigations for the theft and possession of dynamite, precisely around the events from December 1989, he is releasev and becomes one of the local leaders of the improvised National Salvation Front. He receives ab important amount in dollars from his brother in America, involved in illicit business, amount sent by means of a former cell mate of Matei's who had run abroad. With the money received out of nowhere, Matei Popa becomes the owner of the most important local newspaper in the mine town by means of which he denunciates illegal business and suspicious coalitions. This is the time when the narration unreels retrospectively: Matei Popa is threatened to cease exposure and anathemas, he is forced to sell the newspaper in order to be put to silence. His new lover, whom he will marry soon, is Anca Negru, a translator with a company, divorced to an imbalanced and violent doctor, whom he had known from saloon reunions organized by doctor Cernescu, involved in the local network of revolution profiteers. The entire novel the epic of which I strived to narrate unreels like Matei Popa's process of consciousness, morally stimulated and psychologically supported by Anca Negru. She demands him to face his own past in order to free himself from it, because – she says – „one cannot postpone forever a decisive encounter with the self".

Matei Popa feels the need to explain to Anca, the woman he will soon marry, what had happened between him and Estera, the young Jewish devoted to him, before 1989, willing to save him from the Communist regime, preparing an escape over the border and precisely her dying in the waters of the Danube. Matei Popa is, thus, before two im-

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portant decisions: the first, to sell or not to sell the newspaper (both cases would mean to face certain "dangers" and require the mobilization of "energy and arguments"); the second, to marry Anca, the woman who represents his true psychological and moral support.

The epic consistency of the ample narration upholds two major dimensions of the solid construction: novel of manners and political novel. *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii* is the most significant novel about the transition from one regime to another, including essential, defining aspects for Communism and post-communism. The capacity of absorption of the social and ideological makes it be representative for an entire age, gathering elements from all fields, from everyday life to the Security's strategies and top politics, from business to the atmosphere in prisons, from the sensational of illicitly crossing the border to Serbia at Băile Herculane, to the back stage and scene of the Revolution. The author carefully and skilfully ties the narrative threads: Matei is a rival in his love for Elena Filipescu to a security officer who watches her father. The epic intertexture is very tight though it is episodically and fragmentarily reconstructed, according to Matei Popa's process of consciousness. The epic, psychological and essayistic are the three dimensions converging in the novel's structure and it is hard to dissociate them.

Matei Popa, the main character from *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii*, is the third important journalist from Augustin Buzura's fiction after Dan Toma from *Feţele tăcerii* and Adrian Coman from *Drumul cenuşii*. This explains the accentuation of the publicist style. On the other hand, being a journalist enhances the writer's access to several media and justifies direct opinions about registered recent moral phenomena and political anomalies. The society's radiography has programmatic, realistic, incisive amplitude, being placed under the sign of an uncomfortable investigation.

Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii achieves with much dare and realistic ambition a panoramic coverage of Romanian society morals from the years immediately prior to Ceauşescu's fall and from the post-revolutionary period. We have little such attempts. It is, for now, the only novel of such scope dedicated to the period of transition from one age to another. The narrator directly, concretely reflects social, political and moral life, being accompanied by the pages that document on the meditation age with a clear publicist accent, often polemic, attributed to the journalist Matei Popa, the owner of a daily newspaper issued in a mine town. Redeeming, ruthless and incorruptible spirit, Matei Popa becomes inconvenient for the political aristocracy and for the businessmen in the area. With the purpose of intimidating or demoralizing him, he is sent threat

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signals and, as they prove to be inefficient, suggestions are made to buy the newspaper from him as a solution of his opponents and enemies of putting him to silence. With a Camilpetrescian will of absolute justice, Matei Popa acts as an invincible moral instance with a reputation of Attila of the media. His social investigations are ruthless, though Anca draws his attention regarding the tones: „God an forgive then any sin, I explained to her my way of thinking, but I have the obligation to always remind them that they have sinned, that they are guilty. I don't think we can live in a world of great sins hidden, ignored or even unpunished. We have to settle things, no matter how painful it turns out to be!"[6] Anca helps Matei defeat his disgust, fear, state of deception so as to keep the fight with social evil. His friend Radu translates and explains to him a mission Matei mightily and heroically undertakes: "The evil is huge, profound, so it has to be cut very deeply, but I can still feel as the change of winning existed, even if not right now. Anyway, chances have to be taken; one has to be at peace for having done the impossible. For me, knowing evil and not striving to eliminate it, simply contemplating it is a serious sin, an obsession, dissatisfaction and a frightening humiliation. Whether you want to or not, you are an accomplice, so you willingly accept degradation, abasement and nothing could be more humiliating…"[7]. The truth bothers after the revolution, as well, and the resignation that fight and change were in vain sets in like a marasmus of deception: "Questions of a defeated individual came back, like in the pre-day of death, something of the kind: what's the good in so many risks, so much pain and hope, so many sacrifices if today, after the Revolution, I feel even more insecure, more threatened than before? (…) Is this really the world I risked my life for? Where are all those good and clean people I had thought to be everywhere? Could I have fought only so that crooks can feel even more free, to be able to threat at their own will?"[8] Emergence from totalitarianism did not mean overcoming the moral disaster, as well – this is the great disappointment of a protagonist of political change.

4. Conclusions

Matei Popa remains along the entire novel in this irresolute state, neither a loser nor a winner, which he begins his process of consciousness and the indictment of contemporary society with. In *Recviem pentru nebuni şi bestii*, Augustin Buzura reiterates the themes of his novels before 1989 (guilt, eradication of evil, obsession of failure etc.) as a form of

[6] *Op. cit*., p.161.
[7] *Op. cit*., p. 267.
[8] *Idem*, p. 312.

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response to the challenge of the present. The consciousness resentful by the state of post-communist society does not have perspectives of winning or hope for the better.

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