

THE THEORY OF LITERATURE AS A DECLARATION OF LOVE

Marius MIHET

University of Oradea, Romania/
Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovak Republic

e-mail: mariusmihet@gmail.com

Abstract: *In Frumoasa necunoscută. Literatura și paradoxurile teoriei, Carmen Mușat analyzes and systemizes the relational character of literature and the discourses on literature. She revisits famous notions of modernity which can be capitalized on in our current context, where we speak of the death of the author and even the end of literary theory. In all of the approaches that she takes in the book, the author is certain that the theorist and his presence in the world retain a valid purpose, as they can counterargue, wherever the case may be, and justify the beauty of literature from novel points of view. Frumoasa necunoscută presents to us an inventory for an ideal way to look upon the world and literature. Carmen Mușat is a researcher who is up to date with the most sophisticated conceptual systems. The result of this is a narration under the form of a complex declaration of love for literature and the paradoxes of theory.*

Key words: literary theory; chronotope; the death of the author; palimpsest; literary canon;

Few are the researchers who have remained the captives of a theoretical project as if in a love story. Starting from the very title of her most recent book, Carmen Mușat herself projects her activity as a literary theorist and critic as a sort of perpetual fairytale. Come to think of it, doesn't the relationship with literary theory become, following decades of study and devotion, a fairytale to the connoisseurs? How many still believe in theoretical resources as the years go by and literature changes, inspiring the feeling that we have gone on foolish paths? However pragmatic they may be, literary theorists should be recognized as the most prone towards utopia among philologists. Carmen Mușat stands apart among them as a character, as she harmonizes pragmatism with the most sensitive representations, lucidity with the oneiric, abstract arguments with practical figures and so on. In any case, the words *The Beautiful Unknown* appeal to the imagination of those who study literary theory and search for arguments for its actuality. But, even more than that, it renders in undeniable terms the special status of the discipline in the larger frame of philology.

Carmen Mușat proves herself, from the get-go, to be a passionate reader. Starting with her identification with the heroes of literature to her ideal relationships with family. It all escalates when she discovers something that's apparently unimportant: that reading is, as Gheorghe Crăciun put it, a strategy to keep and potentiate the humanity within us. An alternative form of knowledge. This was, in fact, "the bodiless beauty" that the prose writer was talking about. And thus, we can say that, from the first pages of the book, Carmen Mușat also initiates an implied, subtle dialogue with Gheorghe Crăciun's "Beauty." Bodiless or unknown, "the beauty" represents that inexpressible reality, the unknown in an equation. And besides, the function of literature is for her also a fundamentally human one. The author is convinced that, whether we know it or intuit it, we are looking for answers and interpretations about ourselves and the world that can offer us an ideal coherence. *Frumoasa necunoscută* is a story about looking for meaning.

The first chapters debate longer-standing issues that have extended into the present, all from the sphere of literary theory. The author makes her case around the idea of the frontier between life and literature. What paths of access does such a frontier have to offer? How does literary theory help us in understanding the hazy areas on the border between real life and fiction? Carmen Mușat does not omit the importance of Russian formalism in the theoretical articulation of modernity. The crisis of authority is also meticulously analyzed. Major interest is ignited, she believes, when it becomes clear that the main preoccupation of theory is to constantly challenge all of the concepts that have shaped Western thought. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope has remained probably the most significant in this sense. The Russian theorist's concept seems to Carmen Mușat to be an answer to the challenges set forth by historical context. Bakhtin's chronotope can be perfectly integrated into literary theory, especially given that we cannot read a text without considering its temporal and spatial coordinates. But also without considering it as a possibility of subversive interpretation in the sense that, when interpreting the oeuvre of Rabelais in an era of censorship, Bakhtin manages to read these texts in reference to the dramatic reality of his time (where the perpetual carnival, the world-upside-down, the buffoonery, the appearance vs. essence dichotomy, the comedy of language are ever-present). Another master of allusive discourse, Paul de Man solidifies the author's convictions that there is a fundamental bond between theory and biography. The concept of the American academic also made history ("prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography"). This Greek term means that the person who writes about their past creates a new relationship with themselves, but also that, by leaving aside some aspects or masking others, the author does not render them any less alive and exotic. In other words, in any autobiography, what is absent is

just as important as what is present. The study of Maurice Blanchot is just as applied. Herein, the author correlates the relationship with a secret identity, the literary work as a perfectly autonomous world in itself, and anti-memory; above all else, she concludes that the writer remains a temporal being, who is historically determined. Tzvetan Todorov ends his excursion into the history of literary theories with an emphasis on the theory of evil in a complicated century.

Part two of the book analyzes the manner in which literary theory can become a propaganda tool (socialist realism) and examines the lost author – starting from R. Barthes' concept of the death of the author, all the way to Jean Rousset, Foucault, Derrida, Searle and others. Carmen Mușat is interested in the place and role of the concept of the author in relation with the fictional universe that they always create through the language and social reality that they, the author, find themselves in. In order to complete this archaeological process concerning literary theory, the researcher also analyzes the role of the reader. The guide that takes us through the notions crystallizes in a specific concept: the narrative palimpsest (partially borrowed from G. Genette). These are ingenious interpretations, among them being the one applied to Don Quixote, where there character is filtered even through the plays on language of Wittgenstein.

The chapter dedicated to the literary canon is also very well synthesized and useful. The author is convinced of the fact that no history of literature can have an impact on readers anymore, as it can no longer impose a canon – as was the case last century. She is also sure that the battles concerning the canon will never cease, in the same way that no debate about the canon will ever cease outside ideology. The latter must demonstrate that, between ideology and utopia, there is a relationship that is constructive.

The final part of the book comes to a conclusion that was known for some time, namely that the hypotheses surrounding the end of literary theory are growing more frequent. Gadamer seems to Carmen Mușat a lively and adequate model in this sense. Along with Popper, the two thinkers make a case for the founding order on the principle of freedom, whether it is political, in thought or critical. The author then goes on to run through the entirety of current concepts related to literary theory. Among the conclusions she reaches, one opinion of hers says that a literary work is made all the more mysterious the more it confounds expectations, if it stimulates imagination and, especially, curiosity. On the other hand, the reader's horizon of expectation (Jauss) argues differently, because for too long have critics insisted on the authors' intention and not on the literary work's production of meaning. Thus, meaning, for Gadamer, always exceeds the author. So, given that, how do we read? Carmen Mușat claims that the professional reader must have the qualities of a detective who pays attention to all of the particulars,

who is interested in essential details. By reading and re-reading, we discover and build the meanings of a literary work.

At the end of *Frumoasa necunoscută*, beyond the inventory of issues related to literary theory, Carmen Mușat finds that, in the same way as authors, she too survives through her oeuvre. Through her own beautiful unknown. All in all, the tome is an excellent synthesis, written with academic rigor, dynamic and juicy in many instances. Carmen Mușat is an archaeologist of concepts who steps into their world not unlike Alice in Wonderland and comes out the victor, as if the entire meaning of her life cannot occur anywhere other than inside literature.

References:

Mușat, C. (2017). *Frumoasa necunoscută. Literatura și paradoxurile teoriei (The Beautiful Unknown. Literature and the Paradoxes of Theory)*. Iași: Editura Polirom