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**Ph.D. THESIS**

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**Narrative Themes and Modalities in Augustin Buzura's Novels**

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Keywords: neomodernism, communism, subversive, dissent, mental death

Romanian literature during the communist period was strongly affected by the social-political context in which it was created. Therefore, there is an indisputable relationship between the evolution of Romanian literature and the way in which a totalitarian system made every effort to take control of all significant aspects of a society's life, especially education, art and culture.

The idea of studying Augustin Buzura's novels also had a personal determination. It is extremely difficult to accept (and it will be increasingly difficult for future generations) how a state could be subjected to a totalitarian, absurd and dehumanizing regime for 40 years, without exerting any reaction of opposition or of riot. It would mean accepting that during all this time Romania's intellectual consciences did not exist. The very thing that in Romanian literature can be discussed regarding a novel of ethical consciousness written during this period is the proof that such consciences were present and tried, with all their might, to exercise and maintain confidence in humanistic values. The fate of such books, the obstacles to publication, the struggle with censorship, the consequences they had when they appeared, prove to themselves how uncomfortable they could have been for the communist regime they challenged and represent evidence of survival for literature in particular and the Romanian culture in general.

Thus, Augustin Buzura seems to be the ideal candidate with whose support we can show that, in difficult times, there were present minds that did not remain silent, minds for which the moral criterion represented a principle of creation in general. Buzura was one of the most censored writers of the sixties generation, the one he was part of. He had a certain code through which it addressed directly to the readers, the message of the work being placed in the subtext, everything being a subtle allusion to the historical-social-political state of the period.

I chose to illustrate the novelist's conceptions of the novel, the writings in their chronological order, starting with his debut novel *Absentees*, published in 1970, then *The faces of silence*, a novel published in 1974. I continued the analysis with the novel *Vanity* (1977), *The voices of the night* (1980), *Shelters* (1984), *The Road of Ash* (1988). The

journey was extended with the post-December novels, *Requiem for Fools and Beasts* (1999) and *Report on loneliness* (2009).

In order to highlight the author's belief in art, I chose to analyse also his volumes: *Notebook* (1981), *The temptation to waste* (2003), *The Terror of Illusion*, conversations with Crisula Ștefănescu (2004), *To Live, to Write* (2010), *Neither Dead nor Alive* (2012).

The work **Narrative themes and modalities in Augustin Buzura's novels** is structured in six chapters, Argument, Conclusions and Bibliography.

**The first chapter**, *Profile Augustin Buzura* aims to provide some biographical references discussing the training of the novelist as a doctor, a profession from which, in fact, he never parted, as the ethical commitment of the novelist will always relate to the deontological commitment of the doctor.

The debut will take place in 1963 with a book of stories *The Head of Good Hope*. He continues on the same note and in 1966 publishes the volume *Why does the eagle fly?* As a novelist, he soon proved to be one of the most irritating opponents of the totalitarian communist regime, which attracted intense vigilance from censorship.

Therefore, Augustin Buzura's novels published during the communist period, between 1970-1988, present a vehement protestant, anti-totalitarian character and, therefore, in the informative notes from the Securitate files, the writer appeared as an opponent, as an opponent of power, guilty of subversive intentions. Because he refused to fight communism by means other than art, his literature was a form of dissent, which was based on the belief that a book would always be more important than a newspaper article or a political manifesto.

**Next chapter**, *Augustin Buzura in the context of the Neomodernist generation*, presents an overview of the prose of the sixties discussing the ideological and cultural context of the time.

In 1960 there was an "ideological thaw", a greater tolerance of the authorities towards the variety of forms of literary expression, provided that they did not contradict communist ideas. An imbalance occurs between ethics and aesthetics, at a time when proletarian, rudimentary, poor in meaning, declarative poetry, with folk influences would dominate, lacking major themes: love, death, time, history or themes adopted according to dogmatic conventions.

With these premises, we can talk about the recovery of the reader with the regaining of aesthetics by the generation of the '60s. Many of the novels of these writers - *The Earth's Most Beloved Son*, *The Royal Hunt*, *The Faces of Silence*, *Wild Vine Gallery*, *Alexandria Library*, *Fist and Palm* - circumscribe the epic matter of the "obsessive sixth decade"; the first explanation of the interest for this period must be sought both in what we might call *hunger for truth* which both the authors and the readers of these books feel acutely.

An attempt to classify the works published in 1945-1989 undertaken by Ion Simuț highlights the diversity of attitudes and narrative formulas of the time, but also the way in which the crisis of ethical values intertwines with the crisis of imagination and aesthetic values. In the post-war period, the idea of generation also developed by dealing with four types of literature: *opportunistic*, *subversive*, *dissent*, *escapist*.

The Neomodernist and Postmodernist period of the beginning, in other words the Generation '60 -'80, is marked by the last three types of literatures. In terms of themes, the preoccupations of the epic at this stage revolve around several fundamental themes: the death of the old world, the genesis of the new world, the individual's relationship with society and society's forms of action on the individual, the issue of power. These themes are approached by writers in the spirit of the mentioned coordinates of today's literature - human and social truth, the sincere involvement of the author, his political responsibility, as well as in the spirit of the specific aesthetic respect of literature.

**Narrative strategies in Augustin Buzura** is divided into *two subchapters and three chapter subdivisions*. The first refers to the issue of narrative perspective in the novels *Absentees*, *Faces of Silence*, *Vanity*, *Voices of Night*, *Shelters*, *The Road of Ash*. It is easy to notice that the predominant narrative technique in Buzura's novels is the homodiegetic one, without removing the heterodiegetic one, the combination between the auctorial and the actorial narrative type is subsumed to the characterization of the main characters.

The originality of Augustin Buzura's artistic approach emerges from the analysis of the relationship between the novelist and the novel and between the novelist and the reader.

Augustin Buzura's prose is an eloquent example of the narrative technique of the twentieth century in which modernism foreshadows postmodernism.

In his debut novel, *Absentees*, the narrative is homodiegetic, of an actorial type, in which the narrating self is completely identified with the narrated self, which interprets at the same time the role of protagonist and the role of witness in order to mentally relive its past. The protagonist, Mihai Bogdan, becomes the author of a “prose of slow introspections, the triggering of which is generated by the attempt to find the consumed inner time<sup>1</sup>. The character reaches the drama due to the excess of lucidity, the novel being a lucid and painful test of conscience caused by a certain fact and ending with a decision. In the novel *The faces of silence*, the homodiegetic narration has the same variable, poliscopic characteristic, because the same reality is perceived by different people, from different temporal and spatial planes, which leads to different perspectives and to different types of truth. An interesting technique is the metanarrative.

In *Vanity* the organization in the discourse is done with the help of Ion Cristian, an exceptional surgeon and researcher, who assumes both a narrative perspective of the narrating character and of the acting character. By compacting and superimposing plans based on involuntary memory, the doctor recalls as a narrating character his memories from his student days, on the front or in the cellars where he was imprisoned by Varlaam, passing from the acting character's experiences through the filter of a principal lucidity. Even if the memory requires some retrospectives, in the temporal plan the narration does not seem later, because the reader comes into contact with them only at the level of recollection and not of chance.

In the novel *Shelters* we identify an amazing way for the prose writer to tell stories. Ioana's narrated inner discourse begins in a psychiatric hospital, where the protagonist is hospitalized following a sexual, physical and moral aggression. The moments of lucidity alternate with those of induced rest, and the reverie is triggered by the inverted topos of the gaze. We notice that sometimes a cliché of the mediated ego overlaps with the auctorial homodiegetic narrative type. Here, the framing technique no longer refers to the exteriority of the story, but to its interiority.

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<sup>1</sup>Gabriel Dimisianu, *Nine prose writers*, Eminescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 1977, p.24.

Narrative discourse in ***The Road of Ash*** focuses semantically on the saying: *Man is the measure of all things*. The morphological realization of this sentence is made through the homodiegetic narrative assumed by Adrian Coman, self-narrator identified with self-narrator both as an actor and as a witness.

We notice that the narrative technique used in all Augustin Buzura's novels is predominantly homodiegetic, but without removing the heterodiegetic one, the combination between the auctorial and the actorial narrative type being subsumed to the characterization of the main characters, whose physical and spiritual silhouette overwhelms the epic thread in favour of a monograph of consciousness.

**The next subchapter, *The Epic Formula***, it is organized into three subdivisions *The Novel in the Closed World*, *The Chronicle of a Traumatic World*, *Between Eros and Thanatos*. The subchapter brings to the fore the novelist's difficulties in writing in a time dominated by communist rigors and captures the ability of his characters to fight with themselves and the world to overcome and heal their individual drama.

I identified in ***Absentees***, the novel of the intellectual's dramatic alienation, a leitmotif of Augustin Buzura's prose, that of the redemptive refuge. The hero not only radiographs his inner pains, his relentless-critical eye records the proliferation of the anomaly in the professional climate of a renowned psychiatric research institute. We can read the novel as a self-analytical confession, a kind of diary of the moral crisis. The revolt fueled by the introspective exercise makes it possible to overcome the individual drama.

Based on the need to reconstruct the truth about the drama of the Romanian peasant, about the forced collectivization of agriculture (since the beginning of the '50s), ***The Faces of Silence*** is a complex, polyphonic novel. The book is boldly situated in the vicinity of literature that shook contemporaneity. The novel mirrors, in the context of Romanian history, a time of dehumanization, violence and crime, justified in the name of ideological dogma.

**Vanity** analyzes the relationship of the intellectual, of the superior man with History, being thematically related to *Absentees*. But unlike the protagonist of *Absentees*, a passive and absent-minded character, doctor Ion Cristian is endowed with the feeling of the time in which he lives. The character leads his entire existence on some of the

coordinates: freedom, the destiny of the individual, failure and death. For him, *mental death* it is much more terrifying than the biological one. In dramatic circumstances of destiny, the protagonist proves his inner strength, because despite the physical violence, the torture, he keeps his pride of being equal to his own conscience.

Into the **The Voices of the Night**, the novel of the identity crisis, Buzura analyzes the precariousness of the human being in communism. Under the pressure of an alienated life, Ștefan Pintea lives the drama of alienation.

The era of economic and moral crisis of Romania in the '80s is allegorically reflected in **Shelters** and **The Road of Ash**, included in an epic trilogy, symbolically titled *The Wall of Death*. The novels are centered, like the previous ones, on the theme of human degradation in communist society. Strongly anchored in the social-political reality, they highlight the traumatic psychology of a young woman, a victim of the alienation of essential values: love, freedom, dignity. Following the research, I noticed this dominant theme: alienation, a hidden subject of all Augustin Buzura's books, which here becomes a separate topic of analysis.

We can conclude that in the landscape of post-war Romanian prose, the recovery and rewriting of the historical truth represented an ethical and aesthetic imperative. Literature descended into the life of the city, became involved in the struggle with the dictatorial regime, gained the strength to condemn communism, sometimes abdicating from its artistic prerogatives. The writer's civil commitment to expose the infernal, odious face of totalitarianism has shown that, in this social and political background, moral values have become dominant.

We will analyze **The Chronicle of a traumatic world**, the first novel to appear after 1989. In the post-December literary climate, the thirst for truth, manifested by readers in connection with communism, finds its fulfillment in a vast offer of books of documentary value. Memoirs, journals, autobiographies, interviews seemed to flood the publishing market to the detriment of prose. The epic phenomenon seemed to have entered a stage of crisis.

In this cultural background, Augustin Buzura reappears on the stage of Romanian prose, with **Requiem for Fools and Beasts**, after a long period of absence. The novelty consists in the dynamism of the narrative, the attenuation of the psychologism, but the

contestation of the morals is amplified. The subversiveness of previous writings will be replaced by the assumption of opinion on the present altered by moral distortions. The novel is a chronicle of a traumatic world. The indictment of totalitarianism in the last years of his life is intertwined with the x-ray of the post-communist transition period, of the carcinogenic legacy it left us.

In *Between Eros and Thanatos* we will analyze the last post-December novel signed by Augustin Buzura, **Report on Loneliness**. The novel is a catharsis book written in the vicinity and under threat of death. The novel has a special analytical density that I found in the other writings of the author, only that in his previous writings, the string of the dramatic was the one that vibrated intensely. This time it is the tragic tone that dominates. We are talking about a tragedy of vanity that the protagonists of this novel experience. **Report on loneliness**, structured like a diary, in the fabric of which memorialistic notations are intertwined and, in some places, reflections on the death and loneliness of some great spirits of humanity, Epictetus, Cicero, Tolstoy, etc., remains a serious book, whose intimate springs are deciphered through the interrogative effort of the protagonist. Cassian is, like the doctor Mihai Bogdan in the novel *Absentees* or Ion Cristian from *Vanity*, a hyper-lucid explorer of the inner world, but also of social and political events.

I noticed, therefore, that Augustin Buzura's novels have a narrow epic core, but with a great power of irradiation. Concentrated around a character, they decode the same equation of identification, transforming it into a long line of denunciations of ignorance, cowardice, indifference, unconscious aggression, blind, dogmatic submission, conformity, mediocrity of existence. The past, through which this intensive therapy is done, is political not only because it is confused with times characterized by an exacerbation of politics. The characters feel the present as such and, out of the need to restore an inner order in relation to the immediate actuality, project the imperatives of the present in a space of memory. And in the obstinacy with which the problem of psychic death returns in Augustin Buzura's novels, the essence of the attitude through which the author asserts himself as a consciousness of his time is to be suspected.

**The fourth chapter, *Reflection and consciousness*,** brings into question in *the first subchapter, psychodrama technique*, used mainly in novels such as *Absentees*,

*Faces of Silence and Vanity*. If the narcotic triggers visions of going out of time (but also out of the meaning of words, and out of one's own self), the psychodrama technique tries to find the authenticity of the feelings. The second model of (literary) introspection is found by Buzura in J. L. Moreno's therapeutic psychodrama experiments. The reversibility of the two techniques, as a poison and a cure, imprints the finalist structure of the novels. The artificial deformation of the senses, states, sensations, as a technique of deconstruction (recognized, moreover, without difficulty, as very productive in fictional effects), is doubled by the dramatization, on therapeutic roles, of the inner reflection.

**In the next subchapter, *Psychoanalytic scenarios. Childhood***, I analyzed the continuity between childhood and maturity, but also the discontinuity, both suggested by the alternation between the first and third person of recollection. An identity that anticipates the present one in a universe of rather essentially irrational perceptions.

*The Faces of Silence* and later, *The Voices of the Night* resume and deepen the psychoanalysis of the infantile self by adding to the totemic zoomorphic representations a gallery of tragic mad prophets.

The drifting world is a recurring motif in Buzura's novels. Psychoanalysis is constantly accentuated and I noticed this in his outstanding characters: Mihai Bogdan, Dan Toma, Ștefan Pintea.

**In the subchapter *Psychic Death***, we analyze the phrase itself, obsessively used in Augustin Buzura's books, imposing itself as the center of gravity of moral problems. In Buzura's work, "psychic death" is both the negative pole of his moral ontology and its *deixis*, the horrified gaze turned to the world.

In order to highlight the drama of love in Augustin Buzura, I proposed the novel **Shelters** for analysis. The book remains, to a certain extent, the novel of erotic failures and successive crises of consciousness. Although it is centered on the theme of love, it actually emphasizes its illnesses, disappointment, alienation, suffering, failure, generated by betrayal, jealousy, obsession. The protagonist, Ioana Olaru, traumatized by suffering, deeply analyses her erotic failure, the inner consequences of alienation.

**The fifth chapter, *Truth and history in Augustin Buzura's novels***, emphasizes the importance that the author gives to his much needed documentations in the genesis of his writings. It also analyses *subversive communication strategies* used by the author to

present all the faces of social, civic and political truth. Analyzing the author's novels, I found that they discuss the eternal revolt of man humiliated by an inconvenient social existence, the lack of freedom, and the moral alienation of man.

The novelist writes a novel of the human condition, with its social and political values. In an oppressive political regime, Buzura develops in his characteristic style the conflict between individual and history, thus developing a psychology of fear, of failure, of revolt ruled by fear. It is a rarely ascertained fact, but fear is the first emotion experienced by a character in the Bible. Not desire, not shame, but fear. Political fear perceived as the fear experienced by people concerning a threat to their collective well-being or the intimidation exercised against people by governments or groups. In order for political fear to stimulate us, the object of fear must belong to the territory of politics and yet, somehow, in the minds of the fearful, be detached from it.

**Chapter six, *Testimonials*,** structured in three subchapters, *The Publicist, the Confessional Conscience, The Self-Discovery*, catches the novelist in his position as a publicist. The journalist, like the novelist, assumed the imperative of telling the truth as a duty to his own conscience. The journalist always expressed his "fear of sub-history", his anguish for deepening in the night of the spirit.

In conclusion, Augustin Buzura remains, in the literary landscape of the twentieth century, a remarkable personality. In the fluidity of his writing, the novelist subjects each movement of the soul to a multidisciplinary hermeneutics, each segment of lived history being psychically filtered, psychoanalyzed by virtue of professional instinct, reflected in historical contextualization, philosophical commentaries or segments of universal literature. This refined combination betrays the man of culture and displays the virtues of the intellectual conditioned to cover all possible fields in a heterogeneous, but captivating and aesthetically perfect literary discourse.

