



Mihaela URSA

INDISCIPLINA FICTIUNII. VIAȚA DE DUPĂ CARTE A LITERATURII

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Reviewed by Mihaela MUDURE

Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca

Mihaela Ursa's latest book is an indirect, but extremely convincing response to those who keep groaning in despair that literature is dying, not because the author is dead - that worry is long gone - but because the readers have become an extinct species. Nobody reads any more, writers write in vain, contemporary literary critics and theorists are the last specimens of a dying elite, the end of the world is coming. Culture, as we know it and have long learnt to valorise it, will die out. Everything will descend into the inferno of primitiveness and starkness. These are the wails that Ursa's book argues against and indirectly ironizes.

Firstly, the knowledgeable reader should remember that historically wailing over such crises and apocalypses to come are not new. On the contrary! The appearance of the printing press and the disappearance of the manuscript, the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages, the victory of vernacular languages over the elitist Latin, Greek or Slavonic led to similar despair and anguish over and over again. The problem is to diagnose the new dimensions of the contemporary crisis involving literature and Mihaela Ursa's latest book tackles this issue.

Indisciplina ficțiunii [*The Indiscipline of Fiction*] is divided into two parts that support each other with competence and elegance. The first part is

theoretical. Ursa starts from analysing the factors that have been fashioning the contemporary taste for stories migrating from one semiotic medium to another, namely from the book format to the cinema, and to video games. She delights in commenting on the appearance of the *literature-centrics*, those (professional) readers for whom literature is the epitome of value and culture. She evaluates the situation calmly, reasonably, and competently. Her conclusion is far from being so dramatic. The changes brought about by the digital age will not lead to the death of value and beauty, or to the destruction of all the ideals that have constructed the individual and the communities until very recently. After critically analysing the basis of *literature-centrism*, Ursa offers some interesting explorations of classic(al) writers who crossed the gaps between the media. Jane Austen loses her smiling and benevolent irony when zombified in some recent movies. Cervantes is discovered to have constructed *Don Quixote* relying on a very rich network of metatextual connections, partly valorised when the novel became a movie. And last, but certainly not least, Shakespeare's unfinished play *The Taming of the Shrew* is reframed by its numerous cinema adaptations and then re-reframed by the posters of these movies.

Mihaela Ursa's study is based on a very solid and topical international bibliographical list but there is also a Romanian touch in her scrutiny. I particularly appreciated the way she could find a transmedial connection between *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Buletin de București (Identity Card for Bucharest)*, a Romanian movie of the eighties. She focuses on a particularly short scene from the movie which escaped censorship and transmits a very efficient message about domestic abuse and the violence of the Communist system reverberating into domestic violence.

According to Ursa, the viability of literature, its everlasting youth stem exactly from the fact that nowadays literary texts can be translated into other media and they are often submitted to such transformations. Offering canonized texts in other media is no offence to literature, on the contrary it is the best compliment that contemporaneity may pay to them. Their defamiliarization in this crossing-over is no destruction (Ursa 58).

Although the terminology used by Mihaela Ursa is new, the phenomenon of transmediality as such is not new. Hundreds of years ago hunting stories turned into paintings on the walls of caves and religious service turned into theatre shows in front of the cathedrals. The only difference, in my opinion, is

that procuring pleasure and pleasures is much more often the purpose of contemporary transmediality in comparison with the older forms just mentioned. Instead of fearing media competition, we should favour media coexistence, Ursa (144) advises the angry *literature-centrics*. Or in other words, “literary studies should accept the new paradigm of the open systems overpassing the literature-centrist mourning” (124)¹.

Mihaela Ursa is not only a literary scholar but also a teacher of literature. She insists that the study of literature can no longer be the disciplined study of texts carefully chosen to be taught in school and hyper-valorised in humanities. The indiscipline of literature does not mean decadence or simplification. Literary studies do not die because of the hybridized literary artefacts, on the contrary they are enriched. Classical literature is rejuvenated exactly because of its exposure to several media and because it must satisfy the necessities of new species of readers: the digital travellers and the digital natives. Mihaela Ursa assures us that there will be narrative-fictional life after literature-centrism. Literarity can survive beyond the literature based only on words, and the silences between words and the literary is not the only way to the aesthetic transcendence.

Mihaela Ursa insists on the discussion about the death of literature and grafts it onto the argument about the ethical and the aesthetic, in Romanian contexts. After the fall of the Communist regime, the aesthetic was presented as an ethical strategy, the only strategy allowed to Romanian writers under the totalitarian regime. Those who hold this position should be reminded that the ethical and the aesthetic do not exclude each other and Communist censorship is not the first in history. It is obvious that the historical immediacy of the fall of the Communist regime has left many contemporary Romanian writers with open wounds. History will deal with them and heal what is to be healed. Woke culture and political correctness are not the topics of this book, but these issues are tackled indirectly by Ursa in a very balanced way which incorporates the (Romanian) post-communist experience. She insists that canonized texts - I would say that all the texts of the past – “must be read according to the logic of their time, but it is also compulsory that the logic of their time must be

¹ All the quotations have been translated by Mihaela Mudure.

contextualized” (265) - I would say recontextualized - “in the contemporaneity of the reader” (265).

The book ends with a very rich comparison. The Frankenstein metaphor is fit to describe transmediality both in terms of the birth of this notion and in terms of its lifetime. Mihaela Ursa’s book vigorously but also competently fights against the pride and the prejudice of some scholars who are not aware that their truth is not and cannot be the ultimate truth in history. Her book is an implicit plea for balance and evenness, parity in appreciation. Ursa concludes with a convincing call that the real danger of our times is not literature’s loss of power and influence but to believe only in the power of only one discourse, to neglect the (in)formative power of humanities and turn education into a corporative structure.

Reading Ursa’s academic work is a delight and very, very few observations could be made to this excellent study. For instance, the author compares artistic and cultural revolutions which “are rather cumulative and reintegrative” (60) with the revolutions in hard sciences which are “radical and exclusivist” (60). Not always! If we think of Newton and Einstein, Einstein’s physics incorporates Newton’s mechanics as a particular case. In order to explain light, physicists realized they needed both the theory of the waves and the theory of the corpuscles. Also, the introduction of David Damrosch’s notion of *world literature* into the discussion about the relations among the semiotic media seems a bit problematic to me. The fact that the dominant cultures, which are also the cultures of the countries that dominated the world till now, namely Western cultures, start being concerned about their reception all over the world has to do with the changes in the relations and networks of power in the contemporary world much more than with transmediality. The Indian cinematic transmedialization of books from the Western canon challenges the supremacy of the West and its significance goes beyond the aesthetics and semiotics of several media. The political subtext of such remedializations cannot be overlooked. Nor can we forget that they prove that humanity needs stories and stories can never die.

In conclusion, I think that Mihaela Ursa is one of those rare scholars who are both extremely competent and well-read but who also have the gift of words. For instance, discussing the multiplicity of canonized texts, Ursa uses an intellectual style that impresses with its beauty: “classical books’ are no longer

individual texts, they have become narrative and metanarrative systems, transmedial constellations of travelling fictions” (70). It is the beauty of intelligence and wit. Occasionally, the sparkle of subtle irony shines in this book. The reader is impressed and challenged by Ursa’s capacity to use the Romanian language in creative and eloquent ways in order to render her new and bold analytical options. Here are some examples translated by the reviewer: the reader’s prejudice vs the spectator’s prejudice, digital travellers and digital natives, novelisation, the remedial position. The reviewer mentions them as an invitation to read Mihaela Ursa’ indisiplined book, one of those rare studies that have the beauty and the charm that only competence and acumen can give.

