

## BOOKS

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### **Ioana Bot, *Icoane și privazuri: 7 studii despre figuralitatea literară*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2021, 217 p.**

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Figurality is an essential dimension of literature: it transmits an experience and, at the same time, it encapsulates the endless expressive potential of language. The studies included in Professor Ioana Bot's latest book, published under the title *Icoane și privazuri: 7 studii despre figuralitatea literară* [*Icons and Frames: 7 Studies on Literary Figurality*], approach the body of literature as a figure of the ceaseless signification process it both energizes and disrupts. Ioana Bot proposes a complex and well-structured analysis of the expressive powers of literature, whose very figurality precludes the fixation or exhaustion of its meanings. This is not only a study that brings to light the mechanisms through which literature and its readings resume the original scene of Christian communion, but also a thorough inquiry into the figural as that *topos* that mediates the distance between revelation and concealment, or between transparency and obscurity of meaning.



In the seven chapters of her study, Professor Bot analyzes literary figurality by recourse to several examples. The first section, “Figure, figural, figurative. Difficult to translate”, resumes and amplifies a study originally published in French with the title “Figure, figural, figuré. Du misreading et autres (vieux régimes des) figures”. This is followed by an analysis of Lena Constante’s memorial

writings, bearing the title “Memories from Hell – with figures and images”, and by a text on “Lupa Capitolina and Mathias Rex in Liberty Square. Indirect broadcasting”. Bot’s foray into figurality as the premise and precondition for boundless signification further expands into fascinating chapters on Radu Cosașu’s allegorical fictions, Mircea Cărtărescu’s engagement with the fixed form of the sonnet, and the different forms of linguistic exile in the works of several Romanian writers who chose French as a language of expression.

As the introduction engages readers with the topic of literary figurality, the book further divides the central claim into three main directions, seemingly disparate but highly convergent, on a closer look. The first perspective questions “the capacity of the figural to capture the unspeakable of the ultimate or unique experience, of an existential experience assumed either as revelation [...] or as historical testimony – implicitly, as a testimony about a revealed meaning, that of suffering in Romanian communist prisons” (10). In keeping with a second line of inquiry, Bot carries out in-depth readings of contemporary literature, showing that mechanisms such as “subversion, irony, the play with forms of realistic, journalistic prose, become, in fact, the expression of a defining commitment: as an ethical attitude but also as a poetic option” (11). Last but not least, the third perspective focuses on the “limit phenomenon” involving a writer who aspires to the perfection of literary forms whose “historical memory he scours, transforming the latter into symbols with revelatory functions and consequently wresting their consecrated rhetorical role” (11).

Tracing back the history of the “figural”, Bot explores its usage through fine readings of seminal texts signed by Erich Auerbach, Jean Francis Lyotard and Laurent Jenny. However, the most important theorist of the figural remains Paul de Man, whose original (English) and translated (French) versions of *Allegories of Reading* allow Bot to delve into minute and thorough comparisons between “figure”, the “figural” and the “figurative”. For Ioana Bot the word “figural” is “a figure playing with its ambiguity,” (32) in both a literal sense and a figurative one. The Romanian literary theorist and historian closes her

analysis with another quote from Paul de Man’s work, “This model cannot be closed off by a final reading (because) it engenders, in its turn, a supplementary figural superposition” (35), highlighting that the movement of the figural is unstoppable.

Buttressing the aforementioned definition with several literary examples, Bot emphasizes the importance of Lena Constante’s writings, often described as the outcome of an “imagination ‘on steroids’, which [she] invents and implants so as to produce and reinforce a carapace of spiritual freedom” (Cesereanu qtd. in Bot 39). The type of writing Constante creates is of unquestionable literariness because just as living in Hell had pushed her to discover her spiritual resources as a human being, the recollection of her experiences in the form of a story is predicated on “processes that intuitively lead her to the figural resources of language, those that have always been foundational for literature” (86).

A similar perspective is offered in the following two chapters. In “Lupa Capitolina and Mathias Rex in Liberty Square. Indirect broadcasting” the focus is on Mircea Nedelciu’s short story “Marie-France în Piața Libertății”, published in *Luceafărul* journal in 1978, a text that is rife with strategies of subversion and meaning destabilization – a sign that behind (mis)reading there is always an important map that makes or fails to make sense. The next chapter approaches Radu Cosașu’s prose style, examining his usage of the tropes of oxymoron and infinite lists, as he “writes one thing to communicate another – and to show us that nothing can be said in full certainty that its meaning can be grasped” (136).

Another important section of the book is dedicated to Mircea Cărtărescu’s

sonnets, which are not necessarily a pre-defined verse form, but rather convey a separate image of poetry, a space for the manifestation of literary figurality, opening a symbolic horizon that is continuously shifting its parameters. One salient example is "For the artist the woman is not a woman" written apparently as an ending for "Evening at the opera" but which appears as "Prologue" too, placed in the opening of "Love poems" (without any other explanation regarding its subsequent repetition). The sonnet becomes a metaphor of a character mapping a poetic quest for the lover and wields the perfect tropes and expressions for describing love. Poetry, in Cărtărescu's figural vision, should be like a "flying balloon: a divine sign, a revelation of the transcendent, a vain human endeavor [...] evoked to name that which exceeds human comprehension, that is, perfection" (159).

While up to this moment the study has focused more on forms and types of writings, the last two chapters re-evaluate language and its power to condense the intensity of the experience. Addressing Cărtărescu's prose, the chapter titled "A transatlantic of feelings..." delves into naming the unspeakable through visual images. In the Romanian novelist's *Solenoid*, the absence of the voice, the stillness of the body facing the consequences of terror, as well as the incapacity of language to serve as a conduit for the emotion felt by the subject outline the way in which "the written page does not transmit feeling, but 'stands in' the place of that transmission" (167). In this case, literary figurality is achieved through an image or multiple poetic images of terror whose character is inexpressible, as there is "a shift from the nightmarish content (henceforth, 'untellable') onto the aspect of the

manuscript that relates it, onto the corporeality of a tormented writing, which is itself macabre" (169).

Through these scenarios, whether they belong to the subject controlled by terror or to the lover expressing his love, the question of discursive authenticity emerges, because the language now wielded by the subject previously belonged to others. The conclusion is that Cărtărescu's poems of love are not about feeling itself, but rather about its language and the declaration of love, paradoxically unveiling the notion that "the adventure of love reveals the fact that poetic utterance does not communicate authentic feeling, but conveys it into figural terms, projecting it across corridors of infinite mirrors" (181).

From a similar perspective, the author further analyzes in the chapter "'French expression' in three exemplary situations" cases such as Emil Cioran (who strove to express himself exclusively in a language that was not his mother tongue), Marta Bibescu, Matei Vișniec and Lena Constante. This section taps into the relationship between the two languages, the native language and the borrowed one, the one acquired at home versus the one acquired in exile, which remain locked in complex relationships and, at times, generate internal speech tensions. One such case is Cioran, released from his linguistic "straitjacket" by Alzheimer's disease, so much so that towards the end of his life he lapsed back into his mother tongue, the Romanian language, "which became more and more rudimentary, less and less structured" (153). This is, therefore, a good example of certain neurological problems and their impact on language use, as well as a relevant discussion about the language and identity of exilic writers.

On the other hand, in Marta Bibescu's case, Bot notices that the beautiful style of the novelist degraded after 1947 because of her exile to France. It became a language characterized by linguistic clichés, which indicated a certain social affiliation. At the same time, this became symptomatic, just as in Vişniec's case, of the motif of "death in a foreign country," of linguistic alienation, as well as of an equally famous literary motif, that of the "incomprehensible language" (215).

Ultimately, Ioana Bot's study foregrounds the meaning of language not only as a form of expression but also as a passage between worlds, as the symptom of an exile that has, as the author puts it,

"most profound bearings on the configuration of not only the subject, but also of the work itself" (216). The internal tensions of discourse, are, as the author concludes, "arguments to place the study of 'language change' at the center of critical approaches regarding Romanian literature as transnational literature" (216) because neither political nor geographical borders have the span and depth of literature, as a space that is rendered borderless to the reader thanks to the unlimited resources of figurality. Certainly, literature cannot exist without language and the exploration of its figural potential, which – as the author convincingly proves throughout the book – can express one meaning but foretell another.

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