AUGUSTIN BUZURA. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVEL – *ORGOLII*

SZILAGYI Antoaneta Adela,
PhD Candidate, „George Emil Palade" University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Science and Technology of Târgu Mureș

Abstract: The most famous work of the Transylvanian novelist Augustin Buzura and the best-selling Romanian novel of the last half century is the novel Orgolii. Through the analytical courage of interpersonal relationships, and its unique epic formula, it is perceived as an authentic literary event. The novel was re-edited several times after the first edition emerged in 1977, followed by 1985 and 2008. Orgolii explores the vices of the academical world and captures the story of Ion Cristian, a surgeon whose ego orbits around deciphering the idea of truth. The events take place in a medical research facility, nearing the election of a new rector. Ion Cristian is a brilliant surgeon, wrongly imprisoned, who after being released, finds a relative balance in his research work, his ego revolving around the discovery of a cure for cancer. His qualities, reputation, capacity for work and ethics – attract enemies ready to jeopardize him, driving him out of his laboratory mission. Obsessed by truth, the surgeon follows this concept in two areas of his life: socially and scientifically, even if in his personal life, this quest has brought him much suffering. Thus, through his everlasting confrontations with the human limits and alienation, doctor Ion Cristian represents, out of all the Transylvanian novelist's heroes, the heroic facet of the ethical individual. In the end of the novel, the character analyzes thoroughly all his feelings, successful experiences, and failures, understanding that by using his ego he has managed to attain a lot, but not everything, because the novel is first and foremost the story of a destiny against the bounds of science. The profound analysis of the hero is what transforms the book into the drama of a creative destiny, in a psychological novel that emphasizes every character's lucidity, the rough realism of events is what drives the reader closer to the inner realities of each individual, alongside each dilemma they face.

Keywords: Augustin, Buzura, psychological, orgolii, novel, suffering, realism, destiny, drama, lucidity.

The novel *Orgolii* is the most famous work of the Transylvanian novelist Augustin Buzura and the best-selling Romanian novel of the last half century. Perceived as an authentic literary event "*both through the analytical courage of interpersonal relationships, and its unique epic formula*"[1], the novel was re-edited several times after the first edition emerged in 1977, followed by 1985 and 2008. Valeriu Cristea stated that *Orgolii* is "*a fictional discourse, about moral and political reflections*"[2], the book being a passionate read for its realism and for its "*unforgettable clash of dramatic ideas and ethical explosive confrontations*"[3]. On its debut, in 1977, the author was already known as an "*inconvenient figure that was capable of interpreting the immediate reality of the*

[1] Constantin Cubleșan, *Augustin Buzura prozatorul sondărilor abisale*, Editura Școala Ardeleană, Cluj-Napoca, 2018, p. 64.
[2] Valeriu Cristea, *Modestie și orgoliu*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1984, p. 190 – 194.
[3] Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism*, Editura Polirom, București, p. 269.

*mechanisms involved in the utmost feelings of his heroes, complex characters that searched for personal validation beyond the imposed ethics of an abusive social syste*m"[4].

Orgolii is a social novel whose main theme is the man's struggle with himself and with circumstances of betrayal, distortion, and perversion of self. The protagonist's aim is to reach inner peace, but he also wants to receive answers to his existential questions. The surgeon lives through a painful and intense process of rediscovery, in search for a way out in a society that gets more suffocating by day. Ion Cristian feels trapped, threatened and seized from all sides, and reacts like it: to resist, he turns inward. He wavers in between the fear of being defeated and not always winning.

Due to his medical background as a psychiatrist, Augustin Buzura manages to capture the complexity of his characters, their actions, delving deep into the inner world of the human psyche. Once the novel *Orgolii* was published, Augustin Buzura stands out through his capacity to analyze how reality manifests itself in his characters' inner world. Using a unique epic discourse and the technique of psychoanalysis, Augustin Buzura manages to picture the distorted version of the society.

The novelist surprises by capturing the real dimension of the drama that follows the existence of the individual that must live in an abusive society, the figure that didn't give up his ethics, and for whom his choices seem to be very limited. The options are dramatic, because each individual has few choices – either choosing indifference, in order to keep the rebellion under wraps, therefore becoming a lifeless puppet in the face of power, that loses its humanity step by step, denouncing itself and denouncing its values and personal beliefs; or living in a constant turmoil, accepting an inner conflict that is impossible to solve.

Like the novel *Absenții*, *Orgolii* explores the vices of the academical world. The main character, Ion Cristian is built as an extension of Mihai Bogdan, the *Absenții* protagonist. Both plots revolve around the attempts to escape resignation and psychological compromise. In *Absenții*, the primary theme is represented by individual alienation, while *Orgolii* emphasizes the complex relationship between rebellion and its meaning, even if it isn't felt so acutely, and the primary them is represented by truth. Therefore, the novels of Buzura revolve around psychological pain, not a physical one. This specific type of pain is caused by the restlessness and terror that is caused by inner disturbance, a fact acknowledged by the author himself in an interview for Crisula Ştefănescu, where he affirms that physical pain was instinctively set aside: "*Physical pain can be, in most cases, cured. Moral pain has no healing*."[5] In another words, psychological pain cannot be healed as easily, causing deeper unrest.

With his *Orgolii* novel, Augustin Buzura shines through his capacity to interpret the inner mechanisms of reality, depicting the dark areas of conflict of his heroes, complex characters whose main target is to validate their personality in a restrictive political and social context. Thus, *Orgolii* evokes the story of Ion Cristian, a surgeon who fights against his own destiny and his enemies. The dramatic and confusing states he is

[4] Constantin Cubleşan, *Op. cit.*, p. 64.
[5] Augustin Buzura, *Orgolii*, Editura Rao, Bucureşti, 2016, p. 232.

experiencing don't propel him forward to seek the definite truth: "*And me who simply wanted to scream, I precisely reckon this, I longed to yell, to break apart, maybe I was never quite as humiliated as in this exact moment…*"[6]. The doctor firmly states his beliefs: "*It is tiring to always be yourself, mostly when you're not used to it. Therefore, by speaking daily about our social truth, we're achieving more than you can imagine. We don't have to abandon our condition; we don't have to forget who we are.*"[7] In this novel, between the author and the main character installs a relationship based on convenience. The author lucidly compiles a moral portrait of an aging intellectual, a character that is atypical and idealized, someone that faces history, his social environment, his own inner turmoil, and biological factors. Doctor Cristian is a true positive character, his focus revolving around diagnosing cancer, in a self-denying and stubborn way. It isn't surprising that such a valuable persona is constantly under attack from both nonentities and perseverant characters who think that "nobody is irreplaceable". Therefore, Doctor Cristian always reminds himself that "*the worst illness isn't cancer, it's that which generates stupidity, aggressivity and egocentrism*"[8], being acutely aware of the psychological death that follows the loss of inner freedom. By fully identifying with his character, the author resumes through Ion Cristian's voice: "*Today I am convinced that not biological death must be feared, but that of an intellectual value, the agony of those born already dead – those who never become intellectual and die as simple human beings*."[9]

Orgolii is considered by the literary critics and readers the most famous novel of Augustin Buzura, that tells the story of surgeon Ion Cristian, a victim of the corruption of the medical system. In this novel, the author tries to tell a chronicle of the academical world. Watching the evolution of the characters, Vasile Pistolea observes: "To be yourself, to live a truth close to your heart and nature, to think and speak what you believe – is the supreme obsession of Augustin Buzura's work, an obsession that was assigned to a character very similar to the author himself." We discover in the novel the drama of a creative destiny, therefore the protagonist focuses all of his efforts towards a higher goal – to overcome his own conditioning, despite the ending of the novel that emphasizes the fact that through his ego, he has managed to achieve a lot, but not everything. This character is built on lucidity – it shines through all the existential questions that Ion Cristian asks himself. Consequently, the action of the novel *Orgolii* takes place in a surgery clinic, a space full of outstanding personalities, but also mediocre individuals. Alongside these characters, we encounter the patients who need a cure. The world of the hospital illustrates the image of society in its wholeness, with individuals suffering from a physical illness and others mental ones. The feeling of being deprived of liberty manifests acutely, it generates a syndrome of moral decay under the pressure of non-value and pettiness. The longing of the protagonist, doctor Ion Cristian, seems to be inner peace, but also receiving answers to the existential questions that haunt him. The main character feels stifled, threatened, and attacked from all sides and

[6] Augustin Buzura, *Op. cit*. p. 112.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 123.
[8] *Ibidem*
[9] *Ibidem*

reacts like it: to resist, he turns himself inward. He is caught in a complicated string of relationships and aspirations. This is why, he oscillates in between being offensive and backtracking. He is caught in between the fear of being overwhelmed and not attaining his goals.

Although the author has managed to build a character with strong moral ethics, the protagonist is not idealized by the writer, because the drama and the confusing states he is living through do not encourage Ion Cristian to follow the universal truth. His inner turmoil comes from the belief that his career and political views are not interlinked, a belief that complicates his life. The doctor confesses his most important faith – an all-consuming quest for self-knowledge. Metaphorically, the ego of Doctor Cristian represents the ego of truth – he wants to discover the cause of cancer. Its meaning can be interpreted as a comparison with social evilness, a profound darkness that affects relationships between individuals, changing courses of destiny and creating rifts between generations. Truth lives through individual rebellion, and the spiritual awakening needs, to thrive, a social democracy. Buzura's hero understands that his ego can do a lot, but not everything. There is an outside force that controls him, therefore, the characters from *Orgolii,* just like those from all Buzura's works, own up to the world they live in, and if they can't stop the degrading of humanity, at least they have the courage not to accept it. Equally a classic writer, a creator of authentic social environments, and a modern novelist, Augustin Buzura astonishes through the hesitation his characters feel when facing a decision between rebellion and resignation in face of Evil, transforming the novel *Orgolii* into a grave meditation on life during totalitarianism. Dedicating his life to fighting against a scary illness, Professor Cristian proves that he has the qualities needed to be a researcher, a true eminence who wants to replace surgery with medication – a cytostatic that can stop the cancer from spreading. The doctor has an ambiguous past that can either lift him up or bring him down. During his young adulthood, Cristian was a true adversary to the fascistic regime and was incarcerated in Târgu-Jiu. During communism, he is also condemned to prison for helping an ill man, who later proved to be a member of a terrorist group.

The episode where Cristian remembers the period of time he spent in prison demonstrates the idea that "the fight for truth is a fight for survival"[10]. A man of action, Ion Cristian cannot accept defeat, to him ego represents freedom. The prison is not the only factor that hinders the scientist – multiple obstacles start to appear during the election of the Dean. Ploys against the protagonist start to surface, the conflict generating profound pathological states. Even if what gives him chills is the psychological death, the doctor acknowledges his dehumanization, and his moral integrity is what gives him strength to carry on. Typologically, the protagonist of the novel *Orgolii*, Doctor Cristian represents a sum of qualities that propel him above every other character. He expresses his rebellious stance and his disdain for the cowardice, stupidity, aggressivity and Phariseism of his opponents. The confrontations with his opponents are either dull or violent, each detail written slowly, analyzed, and dissected

[10] Augustin Buzura, *Orgolii*, Editura Rao, Bucureşti, 2016, p. 176.

over multiple angles. Thus, during his showdown with the peers from the academical environment, doctor Cristian develops an ego fueled by internal freedom, in his quest for power. On the other side, the doctor becomes a victim of isolation and solitude – he is always haunted by the feeling of guilt towards his son, consequence of his believed to be wrong faith on education, considering that he shouldn't have protected him from the ups and downs of life.

The novel captures the story of Ion Cristian, a surgeon whose ego orbits around deciphering the idea of truth. The events take place in a medical research facility, nearing the election of a new rector. These circumstances bring out a conundrum, a real ego competition, therefore the analysis is centered on each distinct character involved. Ion Cristian plays the role of honesty, truth and moral compass, Redman is based on an inferiority complex which dehumanizes him, and Codreanu is a go-getter, built mainly through intrigue. Ion Cristian is a brilliant surgeon, wrongly imprisoned, who after being released, finds a relative balance in his research work, his ego revolving around the discovery of a cure for cancer. His qualities, reputation, capacity for work and ethics – attract enemies ready to jeopardize him, driving him out of his laboratory mission. Obsessed by truth, the surgeon follows this concept in two areas of his life: socially and scientifically, even if in his personal life, this quest has brought him much suffering. He is imprisoned on two occasions: the first time during young adulthood, in Târgu-Jiu, for being an opponent to the fascist regime, and the second time during the communist dictatorship, for harboring a terrorist without his knowledge. The struggle of the protagonist began during his student years in Paris, when he took part in protests the Nazi regime. Investigated by Varlaam and condemned to detention, Doctor Cristian finds his strength to defend the nobility of his profession and his right to practice freely. Therefore, despite living through a dramatic period of his life, and despite the torture and violence he is subjected to, the surgeon manages to remain steady in his own conscience. In this regard, Viorica Gligor considers that "*the arrest, investigation and detention of the protagonist was built in multiple initiatic steps. The suffering he indured during his political incarceration was profoundly reshaping*."[11]

Furthermore, the novel approaches the reunion with prosecutor Redman, who used to be Ion Cristian's friend during his youth – a "friend" who did not hesitate to betray him, snitching him to some low-life individuals such as Brainea or Varlaam. Redman reappears in Ion Cristian's life the moment he is hospitalized in the doctor's clinic. Amid the accusations and contradictory confessions of Redman lays Andrei, the son of Doctor Cristian. The prosecutor confesses to Andrei how his father, the renowned surgeon, ended up in prison due to his pride and desire to climb the ladder in his profession. This determines Ion Cristian to refuse the prosecutor's help, leaving Redman no other choice than to take sides with the investigators. Persuaded by Redman's confessions, Andrei believes him and challenges his father. The surgeon feels obligated to explain the events from his own point of view, emphasizing that no matter how hard

[11] Viorica Gligor, *Fețele tăcerii. Dimensiunea morală a romanelor lui Augustin Buzura*, Ed. Scrisul Românesc, Craiova, 2014, p. 54.

it was for him, he never gave up his principles: the love for truth and inner liberty. Also, the doctor reveals to his son the real reason behind Redman's report – his wish to take away his wife Stela, who refuses with dignity. The antithesis between the two characters is obvious in their discourse. While the doctor reaffirms his own ethics, the prosecutor accuses, justifies, and distorts the truth by spinning the facts. Confused by this showdown between truth and lie, courage and cowardice, liberty and constraints, Andrei finds it hard to believe the real picture of his father. Redman falls ill to cancer and finds himself in need of doctor Cristian. The dialogue between the two characters becomes a symbol of a dichotomy between the existence of a higher spirit and the primitiveness of mankind, underlining the surgeon's idea that "*the worst pathology is not cancer, but that which generates stupidity, aggressivity and egocentrism*"[12].

A noteworthy part of the novel remains the reenactment of the time spent in prison for not giving up his strong beliefs about the quest for truth. The doctor is a man of action and does not accept any defeat. To him, the ethics of egocentrism remain those of liberty. The perversion of ideas is the worst evil that happened to the century. Despite all these, Ion Cristian still thinks of himself as a free man. Being an individual that seeks normality, liberty, and truth, he is uncapable of mystification and is instead fascinated by the present moment "*I have the liberty of truth, that which I hold dear more than life itself.*"[13] Andrei starts to clear his mind off Redman's ideas and tries to piece back together a spiritual picture of his father. He sees him as a fighter, who despite every failure, kept on following his own destiny. The tragic death of his wife Stela meant losing his soulmate. She was a discrete presence, full of femininity and gifted with a huge self-sacrifice in the name of love, a stark contrast to the doctor's young adulthood girlfriend, Cristina. That is why, her death, caused by the exact disease the surgeon is trying to cure, is seen as a punishment for his courage to face the impossible – the discovery of the cytostatic agent responsible for healing cancer. To this effect, the doctor withdraws to his laboratory, a real sacred temple where he vows himself to attain this goal. During this time, every single important person in his life falls ill with cancer: Stela, Cristina, Redman. The illnesses that he tries to find a cure for represent a symbol for the world's social problems: immorality, hypocrisy, cowardice, stupidity, criminal charges, demagogy – all of them being facets of "psychic death". Ion Cristian belongs to Augustin Buzura's heroes, a character that is gifted with a hyperlucid conscience, who fights against dehumanization and the decay of moral values in a communist society, that constantly wants to annihilate them. His great merit seems to be the effort to remain humane, this courage of never failing his principles, even in the face of exhaustion. In the end, he manages to find his balance and rest: "*until now, there is no winner or loser. You, Cristian, always strive to move forward, just like the Magi, follow the star…*"[14].

Thus, through his everlasting confrontations with the human limits and alienation, doctor Ion Cristian represents, out of all the Transylvanian novelist's heroes,

[12] Augustin Buzura, *Orgolii*, Editura Rao, București, 2016, p. 119.
[13] Augustin Buzura, *Op. cit.*, p. 259.
[14] *Ibidem*

"*the heroic facet of the ethical individual*"[15]. In the end of the novel, the character analyzes thoroughly all his feelings, successful experiences, and failures, understanding that "*by using his ego he has managed to attain a lot, but not everything*"[16], because the novel is first and foremost the story of a destiny against the bounds of science. "*The destiny of the doctor is the sum of those 118 failures to determine the chemical compound and the repetitive failure and stubbornness to overcome it*."[17]

The originality of the novel stems from the transition of the ethical theme into a social one, Doctor Cristian seems equally passionate to discover the cytostatic and social truth. But the truth "*lies in a rebellious state, the spiritual awakening needs a social democracy in order to thrive*."[18] In the vision of Eugen Simion, "moral and social meditation" is what provides depth to the novel. The profound analysis of the hero is what transforms the book into the drama of a creative destiny, in a psychological novel that emphasizes every character's lucidity, the rough realism of events is what drives the reader closer to the inner realities of each individual, alongside each dilemma they face. The conflict that the doctor faces with the external world confirms the truth that the fight between hostile social power can modify the order of values. Doctor Cristian feels how the desire to climb can pervert moral values, how friendship turns into envy, how the desire to overthrow hierarchy can give birth to a lack of gentility in the soul department and how vindication can destroy human relationships.

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[16] Augustin Buzura, *Op. cit.*, p. 259.
[17] Eugen Simion, *Scriitorii români de azi*, Bucureşti, Editura Cartea Românească, 1974, p. 131.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 135.