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**PHD. THESIS
SUMMARY**

ȘTEFAN BĂNULESCU – A MONOGRAPH STUDY

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Author of a relatively restricted literary work, Ștefan Bănulescu remains a modest presence in the consciousness of his commentators. Except for two monograph studies on his literary productions – *Ștefan Bănulescu, monografie (antologie comentată și receptare critică)* (*Ștefan Bănulescu, Monograph – Commented Anthology and Critical Interception*) by Monica Spiridon and *Ștefan Bănulescu sau ipotezele scrisului* (*Ștefan Bănulescu or Writing Assumptions*) by Georgeta Horodincă – and a biography – *Banul de Aur sau Viața din opera lui Ștefan Bănulescu* (*The Golden Coin or Life within Ștefan Bănulescu's Work*) by Bogdan Popescu – references to mythical and fantastic elements from Ștefan Bănulescu's works have a considerable weight in most studies devoted to his work.

The interest for our theme arose from a desire to offer a panoramic view of the sixties writer works and highlight the epic cores taken from his early reportages which contain the embryo of later characters, symbols and mythic dimension of his representative works – the short stories from *Iarna bărbaților* (*Men's Winter*) and the novel *Cartea de la Metopolis* (*The Book of Metopolis*).

In terms of its structure, the present paper is made of seven chapters to which an introduction and conclusions are added.

The phrase "Ștefan Bănulescu's works" refers to the following writings of the author: memoir texts of posthumous *Elegii la sfârșit de secol* (*Elegies at the End of the Century*), certain memoir fragments published under *Din „Memoriile unui om tânăr”. Locuri misterioase* (*From "Memoirs of a Young Man." Mysterious Places*) reportages included in the volume *Drum în câmpie* (*A Path through the Plain*), or published in magazines, short stories from *Iarna bărbaților* (*Men's Winter*), poems included in *Cântece de câmpie* (*Songs of Plain*), essays brought together under the title *Scrisori din provincia de sud-est sau O bătălie cu povestiri* (*Letters from the Southeastern Province or A Battle with Stories*), the novel *Cartea de la Metopolis* (*The Book of Metopolis*) and fragments that make *Cartea Dicomesiei* (*The Book of Dicomesia*).

The approach starts with placing the writer in a literary age (the sixties generation), highlighting the main features of the literary directions and mentioning the historical events to which postwar Romanian literature was closely related. In subchapter *Ștefan Bănulescu și generația șizecistă* (*Ștefan Bănulescu and the Sixties Generation Writers*) we have emphasized the relation between Ștefan Bănulescu and the Political Power, as shown in memoirs and interviews taken by Adrian Păunescu and Grigore Ilisei, and also the way he

was perceived by some generation colleagues – Lucian Raicu and Traian Filip. We considered it essential to write down the main biographical marks, because, as the author says, "All my books are rooted in the places of origin and the age when the retina is clear and free from fatigue." We focused on interviews and memoirs gathered in *Din „Memoriile unui om tânăr. Locuri misterioase (From "Memoirs of a Young Man." Mysterious Places)* and in *Elegii la sfârșit de secol (Elegies at the End of the Century)*. We have included here the political proses as well, which, although „have nothing memorable" (as Eugen Simion said in the *Foreword* to the edition edited by Oana Soare), depict political events of the 80s in Europe and the Arab world.

In *Debutul și activitatea literară (The Debut and Literary Activity)* the author's literary progress from his debut in „Avântul” magazine – during his high school studies with the poem *La mormântul unui erou (By the Tomb of a Hero)*, to the consecration as a writer, noting awards received from Writers' Union of Romania for the volume of short stories *Iarna bărbaților (Men's Winter)* in 1965, for the volume of essay-writings originally called *Scrisori provinciale (Provincial Letters)* in 1976 and for the novel *Cartea de la Metopolis (The Book of Metopolis)* in 1977.

The assertion of the writer undergoes three distinct periods: the socialist – realism, the period of relative liberalization after 1964, and communist nationalism period. At the beginning Ștefan Bănulescu's texts follow the literary politics of the time. We refer here to the writings dating from his journalistic debut - in 1952 with an essay on Gogol called *Din Petersburg (From St. Petersburg)* - and editorial one – in 1960 with the reportages gathered in *Drum în câmpie (A Path through the Plain)*.

Chapter II, *Ștefan Bănulescu – eseistul (Ștefan Bănulescu – the Essay-Writer)*, considers the reportages included in the volume, and some representative texts from periodicals. Although written in the spirit of socialist – realism, they foreshadow some topics of future projected short stories, since, apart from numbers and the socialist worker's endeavour "overcome the plan", the author also registers failed destinies, the relation between man and the hostile nature, or the condition of country town frozen in a timeless history. *Sat în Deltă (Delta Village)* includes the story that will become the epic nucleus of *Mistreții erau blânzi (The Wild Boars were Tame)*. Symbolic images transcend beyond journalism and permeate publishing fiction, an eloquent example being the bustard, the defining symbol of Ștefan Bănulescu's universe, which appeared in 1963 in the homonym report, subsequently moving into a poem and then a short story. Emblematic characters can be found in these reportages that will inhabit the space imagined by Bănulescu, we should mention here

Constantin Pierdutul I-ul, king of the plain who is mentioned under the name of Costea Nebunul in the lyrics at the beginning of *Drum în câmpie* (*A Path through the Plain*) when the moment of his committing suicide by hanging is caught. The first insertions of some poems from *Cântece the câmpie* (*Songs of Plain*) are also notable: *Salcâmul din Bărăgan* (*Acacia from Bărăgan*) appears at the beginning of *Drum în câmpie* (*A Path through the Plain*), *Omul din nisipuri* (*The Man in the Sands*) in *Aleea din nisipurile zburătoare* (*The Alley in the Flying Sands*), *Trecătorul pământului* (*Earth's Bystander*) and *Rugă pe gheață* (*Pray on Ice*) in *Reportaj la provă* (*Reportage at the Stem*), *Cântec de dimineață* (*Morning Song*) in *Colocviu pe munte* (*Colloquium on the Mountain*), *Omul și moartea* (*Man and Death*) in *Seceriș* (*Reaping*), and *Cere gârla om* (*The Brook Demands a Human*) in *La marginea câmpiei* (*At the End of the Plain*).

We found it necessary to devote a different subchapter to the tours the author made in the villages where great Romanian writers such as Liviu Rebreanu, George Coșbuc or Ion Pop-Reteganul had lived, all grouped under *Popasuri prin stele scriitorilor transilvani* (*Halting through Villages of Transylvanian Writers*). We also mentioned here the text *În satul lui „Ion”* (*Through Ion's Village*), which was included by the author in his debut volume. Most of the reportages are dedicated to Liviu Rebreanu, the writer for whom Bănulescu developed a real obsession admiring the style and "the clear word" in his writings. The journalistic texts about his trips to Ipotești and Haimanale, grouped under the title *La casele memoriale* (*At Memorial Houses*), are a mixture of dull, propaganda passages with pages of lyricism, stressing the importance to establish correspondences between fictional universe and reality.

In what regards the reportages published between 1960 - 1965 we can notice a change of vision and style. Pages that glorify the achievements of socialism are becoming increasingly rare, and the writer's approach is set towards uniting two directions: "the literalization" of reality (the writings which stand out by emphasizing lyricism and by richness of metaphors) and "the unpolishing" of real. Several texts are helpful in this respect: *Ostrovul strugurilor* (1962) a poem-reportage about grape harvest campaign, consisting of verses and similar in terms of style to *The Song of Songs*, being, in fact, a declaration of love disguised in a journalist writing. Another text is *La marginea câmpiei* (*At the End of the Plain*) (1963), a text about the overwhelming sadness of the places where nothing ever happens, containing pages to be found again in the story *Masa cu oglinzi* (*The Table with Mirrors*). In their totality, these early writings can be described as survival exercises, or may be regarded as mere "drafts" of the later masterpieces.

The volume *Scrisori din provincia de sud-est sau O bătălie cu povestiri* (*Letters from the Southeastern Province or A Battle with Stories*) brings together a series of stories unequal in value, written in an original formula of great refinement, organized into three sections: *Loc pentru fiecare în comedia cuvintelor*, (*Everyone has a Place in the Comedy of Words*) *Povestiri din Insulă* (*Island Tales*) and *Povestiri din Muzeul Scrisorilor* (*Letters' Museum Stories*). The writer creates an intimate place, his own home in most cases, which is visited by some ordinary citizens who discuss issues of local literature: the events narrated are not invented but experienced by either "a neighbour", "an acquaintance", or "a friend". The reader becomes witness to a "battle" between our visitors, in which each claims his own literary question by telling stories and not by theoretical arguments. Among the topics addressed we can identify diversity of styles, the importance of individuality of the writer, "polyvinyl language", "topic of the day" that invades and destroys private life, "cried style" or "the ineffable". The technique used is that of the story within the story or the story in the frame, and from this point of view, literary criticism likened Bănulescu's *Letters* to Mihail Sadoveanu's *Hanul Ancuței* (*Ancuța's Inn*), except that Banulescu's texts hide a touch of irony and parody that cannot be met at Sadoveanu.

Reportages and essays within the *Letters*, as well as the interviews led to the "restoration" of Bănulescu's artistic belief. In *Fantezia și reportajul* (*Fantasy and Reportage*) the author makes a distinction between fiction, corresponding to the term "literature", and reality, that is reportage. The theme, form and language of reportages is approached and the need for creative imagination is being emphasized. What is important is the selection of facts and vision, and the reflecting of reality in the text. The novelty lies in the fact that the reporter identifies himself with the character of a world that mirrors in authorial consciousness. Bănulescu wrote in a modern narrative style inclining towards parable, through circulation of local and universal literary motifs. From the beginning theme persistency, topics, ever more sophisticated narrative techniques, impose and lead to a unification of the entire work. Mosaic technique promotes deeper meanings and careful concern for style, towards an exemplary creative program.

Narrative technique is complicated and erudite, the writer is an artist of shades and multi-valent style. There is always a first exposure plan that includes the essential, narrating of events as they happen, or as they might happen in reality, but a situation, a gesture, or even a simple word arouse a chain of unexpected associations and we find ourselves projected to other plans which, keeping in touch with the first, triggers other echoes in different other directions. The characters evolve in the unchanging scenery of the plain and move freely

among short stories, stories, and novel. The perspective is sometimes changed, but the characters do not remain "fossilized" in a permanent attitude. Even death does not seem to change their life in destiny, they continue to wander through the plain long after their earthly existence had ended, carried on by their own legend, and becoming mythical figures of this earth.

Chapter III, *Cronotopi în nuvelele bănulescienne (Chronotopes in Ștefan Bănulescu's Short Stories)* includes an analysis of the short story from *Iarna bărbaților (Men's Winter)*, revealing the territory imagined by the writer, "the southeastern province of the Danube plain" limited by real landmarks (The Danube, Tulcea, Babadag etc.) and carried out by namings that are generic (<< the city >> from *Masa cu oglinzi – The Table with Mirrors*), invented (Glava village in *Vară și viscol – Summer and Blizzard*) or simulating abbreviations (F. village in *Satul de lut – The Clay Village*).

The action in these short stories takes place during or immediately after the war, and the central motif in almost all short stories is the search in vain that does not lead to an unraveling, but reveals the emptiness, or absence: in *Mistreții erau blânzi (The Wild Boars were Tame)* Condrat and Fenia are looking for a place where they can bury their drowned child; the villagers in *Dropia (The Bustard)* are looking for "the mirific corn"; lieutenant Oboga and the ill corporal are looking for the deserter Grigore Nereju in *Vară și viscol (Summer and Blizzard)*. Groups of people are looking for a lost city in the plain in *Masa cu oglinzi (Table with Mirrors)* and in *Casa cu ecouri târzii (The House with Late Echoes)* the character-narrator is looking for the old lady Cuna Bogomileanu. Homogeneous space in the volume is given by the fact that the characters move from one short story to another, filling and giving value to the space between them.

Literary criticism often labeled Ștefan Bănulescu as a surreal writer, opinion which he denied in the interview given to Grigore Ilisei: "Critics have falsely thought that I am a writer of fantasy worlds. Inaccurate. This world is very realistic. What I show was a world that lived and still lives within many people. It is a historical memory of the Romanian society, the Romanian spiritual life. It is not an evasion There is not a surreal evasion, as we were treated by the very communist censorship". In the discussion with Farkas Jenő the same Ștefan Bănulescu notes the importance of surreal in his works: "Spirituality is what counts in literature! and if you have asked me how this slipping from reality to fantasy is made, I would answer: every man who is a singular, particular being, lives this surreal, this miracle. Without this personal and singular surreal, no man could rise to his human condition, to the condition of meditation on existence. [...] about my books, I would say that this fiction, this surreal

ultimately, is a sign of freedom, aspiration to universality - if not supreme, then to maximum freedom". The writer refers here to "the ability of fantasize given to characters who do not adjust their existence to a purely pragmatic and circumstantial perspective, but continually tend to a release from the grasp of reality, through imaginary. " The main source that generates surreal at Bănulescu is a "realism of sight" which successively changes. This method works in *Mistreții erau blânzi* (*The Wild Boars were Tame*), and also in *Dropia* (*The Bustard*), where the villagers searching for work seem a fantastic procession at night, and in *Vară și viscol* (*Summer and Blizzard*) where lieutenant Oboga and a corporal suffering from malaria wander through the swamps and find themselves surrounded by bizarre horses, with long hair and beards yellowed by water-weed, or in *Masa cu oglinzi* (*The Table with Mirrors*) the story that talks about a city-mirage lost in the imensity of the plain. There are also situations where objective description of a situation falls into the classic surreal. In *Dropia* (*The Bustard*) we are told that in Paminode's yard - a peasant living in isolation - a chain rattles though no dog is bound at the end of the wire.

Another generator of surreal in Ștefan Bănulescu's works is a certain "realism" in reproducing conversations. Released by their function in the process of communication, words appear to the reader as a reality of its own. The act of narrating itself seems a meaningless rite which reaches a maximum of refinement in *Vieți provizorii* (*Provisional Lives*): reconstituting scenes from the lives which they tell to each other, a watchmaker, Schwartz, and a merchant, Ion Popescu, reverse their roles in turns.

Chapter IV, *Cântece de câmpie* (*Songs of Plain*), is an analysis of the poems written in folkloristic manner. In the text of the short stories we have noticed the existence of some fragments from the above mentioned volume, the characters thus expressing their feelings and moods which, out of bashfulness, can not express personally. We now understand the desire of the writer, so strongly expressed, that poems and prose to be published in the same volume. Habits or magical practices present in short stories and novel are "summarized" in these poems: we find references to specific Romanian weather rites in *Duda Cruda*, habits of kidnapping the girls at the horse races in *Lunca vrăbiilor* (*Sparrows' Meadow*) or giving magical potential to objects in *Orz pe vatră în noaptea de Anul Nou sau cântec de fată tânără* (*Barley on the Fireplace on New Year or the Song of a Young Girl*) and in *Cuțitul de aur* (*Golden Knife*). Two trees (acacia and willow) and two fantastic birds (the capercaillie and the bustard) become sacred symbols of this place that lacks any other religious infiltration. Bănulescu's lyrics are very simple, but no less loaded with symbols, just like incantations and folkloric exorcism, where words are not as important as what they conceal: magic reality or

the world beyond. The central idea of the *Songs* is that of death and spiritual rebirth, most poems being structured on antithesis "darkness - light", "day - night".

So in *Cântece de câmpie (Songs of Plain)* the image of a unique worlds is created, an archaic world imagined by a writer of modern times, a world governed by primordial elements (water, fire, sun, earth, willow, acacia), populated by fantastic and mythological creatures that preserves ancient traditions and customs such as those of New Year or Sântoader.

Chapter V, *De la nuvelă la roman, (From Short Story to Novel)* aims to analyze the first part of the tetralogy, the novel *Cartea de la Metopolis (The Book of Metopolis)*. Here art of narrating reaches its peak as rounding of atmosphere and motifs from short stories is made here. The reputed critic Nicolae Manolescu states that the novel can be placed under the sign of the ineffable because facts are not "categorically happened nor categorically fiction". The universe created by the writer can be seen, stylistically speaking, on two levels: a parodic and comic one, to which the greater plan of construction belongs with socio-ethnographic chapters presenting the city of Metopolis and Cetatea de Lână, with others that seem a hagiography replica of local saints, with large exposures containing quasi-serious examination of economic and technical aspects, and another one, poetic and fabulous, that paradoxically arises in the other's extension denying the belief that the latter seems less favorable to poetical hatching.

Rites of passage, prenuptial, such as Epiphany or horse racing are taken from folklore, but there are others, invented, such as the red shoes symbolizing the transition from virginhood to womanhood.

Chapter VI, *Modalități ale fantasticului în proza lui Ștefan Bănuțescu, Mircea Eliade și Vasile Voiculescu, (Methods of Fiction in the Prose of Ștefan Bănuțescu, Mircea Eliade and Vasile Voiculescu)*, opens with a theoretical preamble consisting of an evaluation of several meanings of the surreal at Roger Caillois and Tzvetan Todorov. For Roger Caillois the surreal occurs as a system break, as an entropy, and "classic" methods of generating surreal are no longer sufficient to support theoretical scaffolding. Unforeseen, unexpected, surprising, unwonted are the agents meant to produce this breach in the real. We can speak, therefore, in not very "specialized" words, of a sort of permanent "watch" of surreal in what regards reality, which it penetrates and suddenly annihilates.

Tzvetan Todorov is on the opposite positions. For him the text insinuates surreal, it does not penetrate it suddenly so that everyone can see it, as a shock. The receiver gets into a kind of existential state of amazement, as soon as, at some point, notes that inside the world of his text an element of another world has entered, which he does not know how to frame, to

decode, to interpret. Or, the exegete states, it is this indecision, this uncertainty precisely, that is the "cradle" of surreal. It is a space, a short while when our most inner being is disorganized, disheveled. Tzvetan Todorov believes that the surreal is not a matter of text, it is not itself in literature, has no objective existence. Surreal is simply a matter of relationship, and the generating element is precisely the receiver's hesitation.

In what regards Ștefan Bănuțescu critics have agreed, in general, on mythologized character of his prose, on the presence in the text, numerous items of surreal, mythical or symbolic.

An undeniable feature of traditional reality is its coherence. And, we might add, its functionality. Convictions, beliefs and, therefore, members' behavior are identical, they converge to the same common goal, namely the sacred. What critics note at the very beginning at Ștefan Bănuțescu's texts is their inconsistency. It is not an inconsistency of structure, of course, for the Romanian author is extremely careful about formal perfection of his texts, but one of substance. Apparently, we are dealing with elements of folk surreal, mythology, etc. In fact, it is a constructed surreal, bookish, it is true, with elements specific to folk literature. An example is the short story *Mistreții erau blânzi* (*The Wild Boars were Tame*). Here waters have invaded everything, so much, that people have nowhere to even bury their dead. A family is heading, along with other villagers, to an island, a height of land, thinking, hoping there could bury their child. But water springs continually from the muddy ground, so desperation is born in the hearts of the characters. In principle, water is one of the most important mythological element.

Another factor to be mentioned here is that traditional mentality cuts out these limits of personality, precisely; there is no individuality, only community. Or, in this short story, people are alone, abandoned by everyone and everything, the chance, by fellow creatures, even by God. We find, in this story of Ștefan Bănuțescu, the definition of contemporary in relation to the existence in ancient, traditional areas: modern man is alone and lonely, a somehow abandoned by the divine personality, while in archetypal societies existence was fundamentally collective. If in traditional societies we had to do with collective dialogue, modern man is condemned to monologue.

Most critics agree, however, that in Ștefan Bănuțescu's prose imaginary is present, and that infinite distances are designed to create surreal. It bursts out due to exacerbation of some dimensions that otherwise would be considered positive. Also atmosphere is another generator of surreal, and the characters are a synthesis of referential real, namely, imaginary and surreal.

To make a comparison and to enlighten we reviewed, further on surreal in the prose of other Romanian authors of literary fiction.

In Mircea Eliade's prose we can observe an ideological surreal: modern man lives at random and just dies. Gavrilescu, for example, transgresses the boundaries of existence of this world without realizing it. He reaches into the realm of immortality in the afterlife, without noticing it, hence the confusion not only personal, but also that of the reader, himself, convinced that he is facing ordinary surreal, so to speak. Or, as we tried to illustrate, the surreal in Mircea Eliade's prose is mythical, or rather, ritual.

At Vasile Voiculescu there is a different type of surreal that we might call magic. The technique of creating surreal is almost perfect. Another way of generating surreal is to leave the end open.

The final chapter, *Ștefan Bănuțescu interpretat de...* (*Ștefan Bănuțescu Commented by...*) shows the way the writer was "judged" by literary criticism taking into account Nicolae Manolescu and Eugen Simion's comments.

We would be mistaken if we thought that all critics agree with the acception according to which surreal is a feature of Ștefan Bănuțescu's prose. Thus, Nicolae Manolescu, perhaps the most important postwar Romanian literary critic, refuses to texts precisely the quality discussed above, namely that of surreal. The impression of surreal is a result, the reputed critic says, of ambiguous reality through names of places, and especially of characters, and the magic of storytelling, Ștefan Bănuțescu being, according to the exegete, one of the best storytellers in Romanian literature. The illusion of surreal also comes from a certain technique of "expectation" that the author promotes. Time, the critic states, was misinterpreted as generating surreal. Deliberate confusion of times does not result in producing surreal, but only total confusion, maintained on purpose by the characters.

Commentators have been deceived, Nicolae Manolescu says, by the appearance of mythical in Ștefan Bănuțescu's prose. Not true, because the stories of the inhabitants of Dicoimesia are pure puzzling fantasies, and not legends in the true sense of the word. In addition, the reputed Romanian critic advances another concept, apart from those mentioned so far, in order to define the atmosphere of Ștefan Bănuțescu's prose, and which cannot be interpreted as surreal in the vision of the critic, namely mythical fog. Also the motif of maze is present here, but it is not fully functional used. Everything else, at Ștefan Bănuțescu is redesigned, rebuilt, reconstructed, in a totally unmistakable manner, specific and special. The atmosphere of surreal is also created, it seems, by the circular motion of the epic, of the stories, of the characters, of the whole novel, ultimately. The symbol of this circularity is the

wheel itself, which the main character is rolling at the very beginning of the novel, like a key to reading the entire novel.

Anyhow, the Romanian critic agrees to link the Romanian author to the great author of fantastic literature, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, which almost all critics had done, in fact. Of course it is not "an imitation" or anything like that, but the similarity of universes covered by the two writers.

Eugen Simion links Ștefan Bănulescu's prose to Mihail Sadoveanu's, but not in what regards the mythical, traditional, or fantastic lode, but due to language. The critic considers that surreal is generated by rewriting tradition.

For Eugen Simion, what creates surreal is text ambiguity. Plans (the real and the unreal) intermingle, meet and break up naturally. Ștefan Bănulescu continues to create, in other proses as well, delicious rites which do not exist and have never existed, but that fit perfectly in the universe created by author; girls, for example, bathe in the grass, in a barbaric and equally fascinating ritual, the bustard becomes a kind of symbol of a reality that people cannot catch up with. But, Eugen Simion notes, it is not only spaces that mingle (the real and the unreal), but times also. People live in the present (they go to work to collect corn), in a fantastic one (non-existent in terms of referential), and also in the past. Hence the surreal of the novel.

What also generates surreal is, according to the critic, the impression of reality that the writer creates. Everything is fully functional in Ștefan Bănulescu's prose, but on another level, in another mode, on another level of existence, the imaginary, mythical one.

The writer's work urges re-reading and re-interpretation. This paper is an attempt in this manner and is the result of a research that has not been exhausted.

The condition of the quiet writer, obsessed with his literature (he would return several times to the publisher where he had left a literary project to be published) and died almost forgotten, can be summarized by the following excerpt from *Oglinda de oțel* (*Steel Mirror*): "You, sir you have chosen a posthumous profession. The golden coin of your existence shall be discovered and negotiated by others, after you will be gone, and some of the value of this very rare coin, little, not much, shall remain for your memory when you will not have any possibility to realize this and be able to feel and spend the little reward. Artists only enjoy the marvel of that posthumous profession, seen only after they are dead".

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