

A catalogue of „delicate” ideas

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Valeriu Gherghel, *Breviarul sceptic. Și alte eseuri despre simplitate*, Iași, Polirom, 2012, 256 p.

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Valeriu Gherghel’s new book has all it takes to charm its reader and make him stop and ponder. It is, as its author advertizes, a book on simplicity in interpretation or a pladoyer for honesty in the act of reading, against complicating it with „interesting”, but in the end unnecessary significations. However, the plot is a bit thicker than this.

Valeriu Gherghel is an avid investigator of the semiotic fallacies and a collector of bizarre and extreme cases in literature and the craft of reading in general. In the present book, Gherghel concetrates on a single theme for his essays, namely the question of the false knowledge produced by any interpretation that is meant to increase the interpreter’s own glorification. Such interpreters may be extravagant literary critics, always looking for „deeper” significations in places where they are not to be found. Also guilty are the worshippers of a single church, which teaches them the obligatory outcome of their every interpretive act, to which end they are encouraged to employ any necessary means. And equally to blame are the writers who forbid their readers the identification of any meaning in their confuse texts, those who deny interpretation the right to interpret because of a too imprecise or too restrictive dogma of the artistic object. In this context, Gherghel feels free to write texts on delirium in interpretation, on brevity, on tautology, and on the void of

signification. My favourite is the series of four essays dedicated to the arch-symbol of the rose, the four essays dedicated to the semantic unfolding of the rose in Angelus Silesius, William Blake, and Gertrude Stein. In each of these, Gherghel remains a first-rate author, like in his spectacular first volume, *Porunca lui rabbi Akiba* (2006).

Postulating explicitly the problem of interpretation as his object of study, Valeriu Gherghel seems to narrow the angle of his hermeneutical investigation, in comparison with his 2006 book. Maybe, indeed, the essayist wanted to write a more studious book, set on a particular problem: adequation in interpretation, by methodically eliminating everything that seems superfluous. But if this was his intention, it fortunately could not be thoroughly put into practice. As one can easily see, Valeriu Gherghel's essays are just as inventive, efervescent, ingenious, spirited as those in his previous volume. He talks at length about the virtues of a judicious use of Ockham's razor, setting them against the vicious application of an occult reading to the story of the Three Little Pigs. He analyses Erich Auerbach's insistence on the legitimacy of a literal interpretation of *Don Quixote*, and contrasts it with the philosophical allegoresis built around the same book by Miguel de Unamuno. He reveals the uninspired choice of Saint Augustine to look for salvational meanings in what proved to be a simple translation error of a Biblical psalm. He denounces the absurd ipseism propounded by modernist poetry, which denies itself the ambition of „meaning” something, in order to simply „be”, as Archibald MacLeish requires in an unjustly famous verse. He researches the refined curiosities of the bookish writers, from Christian Morgenstern's poem without words to the literature made of blank pages in works by Laurence Sterne, Alexandru Odobescu, Vasilisk Gnedov or Mihai Ursachi. He wonders at the performance to summarize in on line the *Iliad*, of the *Search for Lost Time* or of *Moby Dick*, and questions the ability of book indexes to justly abridge the universe of a book which refers, among others, to Crete, crime, crustaceans or cunnilingus.

One may read Gherghel's essays in favour of simplicity in reading as referring specifically to the troubles in today's

culture. In Romania, tradition has indeed attributed the „tenth muse” to literary criticism, hence a propensity towards abundant and sometimes abusive complexity in the reading of literature. Any critic needs to be reminded sometimes that any reading is already hermeneutic; that the „joy of reading” is never naive enough to be set apart from interpretation; that there are reading habits that can overturn even the best interpretive intentions; that the artist’s mythology must not become the critic’s. Gherghel’s joyous and erudite essays on reading errors and on the definitive opaqueness of several canonical texts fulfil this role elegantly. But I think that the beauty and the importance of his book lay elsewhere.

By putting the problem of the adequate interpretation, Gherghel points towards meaning in reading and towards a good understanding of signs and messages. It is not a mere question of method in interpretation which might be answered by the indication of a critical school or another. The question in this book is the question of the essay in general: how can one read texts without rendering them false and mystifying oneself at the same time? How does one interpret a text without betraying their commitment to truth by forcing a predefinite meaning, an *idée reçue*, upon it? The problem of reading is a personal problem, and writing about Saint Augustine on the Bible or about Auerbach on Quixotte, Valeriu Gherghel is always writing about himself. It is the very condition of the essayist, who knows very well that one cannot be truthful about oneself by writing a flattering autobiography, but maybe, instead, by reading attentively those who once spoke for them. Gherghel makes it clear at one point in his book: „Actually, to be perfectly sincere, it was not so much Albérès’s predecessors who interested me, but my own precursors. They are really not that many...”.

I was also fascinated in this book by the manner in which the author stages his appearances. I don’t mean by this that Gherghel puts on a narcissistic show for the enjoyment of a privileged readership. The author is adamant about „hiding” his presence in the text, a fact proven by some readers’ impression that his new book is more „scientific” than the first. However, one cannot fail to detect the places where the author

ingeniously and abruptly changes the „normal” scholarly protocol by addressing directly his reader on some image in Dante’s *Commedy*: „Do you remember?”. Or the pages which make clear both the affective presence of the author and the parody of such a cliché: the sterile conflict of diverging interpretations generates feelings of „regret, spleen, futility, discretion, uselessness, humility”. Or the ironic presence of ambiguous metaphors: „Here is yellowness: watch the cluster of this grape! Here is sweetness: taste the honey! Here is redness: consider William Blake’s rose!”. I am not simply pointing out these places in the text for their „savour”, because Gherghel’s book does not need special effects to prop its ingenious arguments. But these elements of complexity are relevant for establishing the distance between the essayist and the objects that he „considers”, and not merely „tastes”. And this distance is the very space where interpretation is born. The essayist is obliged to write about interpretation. It is his destiny, for he speculates on the ambiguities and eccentricities of the significations that he discovers in his experience or in the experience of others. This is not about elegance in style: Valeriu Gherghel is one of the most pure-breed essayists in Romania. And it is the literary critic’s duty to say that.

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