

**Alin Mihai Gherman, *Un umanist român: Teodor Corbea*
(A Romanian Humanist: Teodor Corbea)*
– Review –**

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The recent book written by the Romanian philologist, A.M. Gherman tries to emphasize the role of the so-called “minor” personalities in the evolution and development of modern Romanian culture. The author’s interest in studying these type of “cultural facts” and personalities with “minor” status has become a constant concern. Gherman put forward the consequent study of the Transylvanian Romanian manuscript-archives and funds of the inland and foreign libraries in order to determine the organic dimensions of old Romanian culture and its different aspects: humanism, pre-Enlightenment, Enlightenment, pre-romanticism.

The recent monograph dedicated to Teodor Corbea belongs to an intellectual and cultural stream important for the author, which was announced almost a decade ago, in 2001, and was reiterated in 2004: “A forthcoming monographic investigation will have as its subject the study of his cultural and political activity”.¹ In fact, Teodor Corbea, his writings and his diplomatic activity have had Gherman’s attention since the period of completion of his intellectual formation. For example, the subject of his PhD-dissertation was the lexicographic contribution of the scholar from the Scheii Brașovului region. Later, in 2001, a critical edition of the Latin–Romanian dictionary (Cluj-Napoca, 2001) was published due to Gherman’s exegesis.² Studies and articles were dedicated to Teodor Corbea by Gherman in different cultural and scientific periodicals (philology studies), and he was the subject of a series of conferences and papers at home and abroad.

The central topic of the Teodor Corbea-monograph is a series of problems, such as the age (the late-17th early-18th century, the period of his life, approximately

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¹ Alin Mihai Gherman, *Un umanist român puțin cunoscut: Teodor Corbea* (A lesser known Romanian Humanist: Teodor Corbea), in *Aspecte umaniste în cultura românească veche* (Humanist Aspects in Old Romanian Culture) (Bucharest: Ed. Enciclopedică, 2004), 67.

² Alin Mihai Gherman, introduction to Teodor Corbea, *Dictionares latinae cum valachica interpretatione*, ed. Alin Mihai Gherman (Cluj-Napoca: Ed. Clusium, 2001).

1670–1725), his intellectual formation, the cultural horizon and the most important domains of his creation (lexicography, religious literature). The “measurement unit” that defines Gherman’s approach to Teodor Corbea’s personality is given by the efforts made to place his works in the context of Romanian humanism, “a late echo of European humanism”.

Born around the year 1670 in the Scheii Braşovului region in a family with intellectual traditions, Teodor Corbea became Voivode Constantin Brâncoveanu’s “personal clerk”, the Cantacuzinos’ Latin “secretary” and for a certain period a diplomat of Peter the Great’s Russia. His most out-standing writings are the Latin–Romanian dictionary and the versified psalters.

The structure of the book allowed the author to analyze and evaluate Teodor Corbea’s writings from a double perspective. On the one hand, there is the placement in the social, political and cultural context of the second half of the 17th century and the first decades of the following century, focussing on the tension between tradition and modernity, on pointing out the elements specific to late humanism which was characterized by the detachment of the secular and religious culture. On the other hand, there is the perspective of a “cultural archaeology”, a deep study of Corbea’s writings in order to outline his cultural horizon and to survey the extent of his contribution to Romanian lexicography and poetry.

According to Gherman, due to his diplomatic activity and mainly to his lexicographic, poetic and historiographic writings, Teodor Corbea represents “an obvious sign of the secularization of Romanian culture, when the cultural and the religious elements do not coincide and the two worlds evoke different places”.¹ Teodor Corbea – born and formed in the scholar tradition of Scheii Braşovului – “defined himself by rigorously keeping his faith... he was a follower of a religious tradition that he knew very well”.² At the same time, he proved himself to be an encyclopaedist, a “modern spirit”, he gave Antiquity new significances, considering it complementary to Christianity and not oppositional to it. Based on the editorial work of the Dictionary he was “open to western culture”, his work being considered “one of the most important works of Romanian humanism”.³

Gherman’s double perspective – cultural (see pages 49–61) and lexicographic (see pages 64–77) – analysis of the dictionary allowed him to strengthen a conclusion emphasized at other occasions, too: “Such an opening proves that his Latin–Romanian dictionary, *Dictiones Latinae cum Valachica interpretatione*, was not only a means of linguistic equation, but also a cultural report according to the Renaissance lexicographic tradition”.⁴ The “cultural archaeology” – which is Gherman’s term used in his reading of the dictionary – intends to attenuate the tension in perceiving Antiquity as a “pagan world” (“»Those of long ago«, »the old« and »the poets« represented a closed universe, a different civilization and a different world, consequently the problem of any

¹ A. M. Gherman, *Un umanist român: Teodor Corbea*, 62.

² Ibid., 47.

³ Ibid., 48.

⁴ Ibid.

conflict between Christianity and the pagan world of Antiquity did not arise.”¹) and its assimilation from a cultural perspective, as a geographic horizon, as historical literature of Greek and Latin writings, of mythology (“for Teodor Corbea, the real Antiquity was the Antiquity of culture”²). The author suggests that in Teodor Corbea’s case late Antiquity also offered a cultural model represented by Procopius of Caesarea, king Justinian’s court historian. Similarly to Procopius, Corbea introduced into the Romanian culture the “apocryphal” historiographic genre of “secret history”, declaring a detachment from the court culture of lordly support, by his authoring the introductory part of the well-known chronicle *Anonimul brâncovenesc* (The anonymous Brâncoveanu-chronicle) in antithesis to the court chronicle edited by Radu Greceanu who characterized Corbea as being “a parvenu, slave, barbarian and full of wickedness”.³

Teodor Corbea’s contribution to the development of Romanian lexicography is pointed out by Gherman in the monograph realized as a consequence of the conclusions also emphasized at other occasions, for example in the critical edition or in studies published in different periodicals and collective volumes. The author considers carefully the Romanian ancestors in the domain of lexicography, the model followed in Corbea’s work and its creative and innovative dimensions. The problem of authorial status captures the monographer’s attention. The model of the dictionary was the third (Heidelberg, 1621) or the fourth (Frankfurt/Main, 1645) edition of Albert Szenci Molnár’s work, but – as Corbea himself modestly declares – he cannot be considered only a “translator”, but, as the monographer also affirms and demonstrates based on examples, “we are not faced with a faithful translation... The comparison of Szenci’s and Corbea’s Latin words shows that Corbea had a creative attitude shown by eliminating some of the entries and by selecting semantic values that can be equated to Romanian”.⁴

The major provocation proposed by Gherman in the book can be found in the interpretation of a lesser known work of the author, *Psaltirea în versuri* (the Versified psalter). His approach belongs to the register of literary history and theory, European and Romanian alike. From the point of view of the history of books (of disseminations of the manuscripts) it caught the attention by questions of circulation and possessors, as well as its repeated discussion in different Romanian literary histories (pages 37–45). With a subject of history of books, their circulation and their reception, the analysis gives an introduction to the documentation of a deep examination in literary history and theory which focuses on the *Versified psalter*. Analyzed in the proximity of Teodor Corbea’s intellectual biography, it presents itself – according to Gherman – with a “confusing posterity”. First of all, there is a discussion of the “biography” of the manuscript donated by the author to the church of Schei, that later got to the Blaj-library due to Timotei Cipariu, and finally, by the middle of the 20th century, it became part of the manuscript collection of the Library of the Romanian Academy (its Cluj-Napoca Branch). Similarly, the

¹ Ibid., 59–60.

² Ibid., 53.

³ Ibid., 6.

⁴ Ibid., 66–67.

place of this work in the context of the history of Romanian literature was assiduously presented beginning from Franz Joseph Sulzer's remark to I. Bianu's, N. Iorga's, I. Pervain's, L. Galdi's and – more recently – O. Șchiau's and Doina Curtipăceanu's contributions. During this enumeration we must not neglect the monographer's previous studies dedicated to the *Psalter*, studies that emphasized the nature of "poetical experiment" of Corbea's text (1981) or the importance of the psalters in old Romanian literature and culture (2004). The accuracy of the monographer's research, his critical spirit and his creative and innovative interpretations are particularly remarkable.

The interpretation of the versified psalter proposed by Gherman starts from the definition of its literary genre, from the enunciation of a "literary problem", that of specifying "the literary status of the text".¹ Gherman chose to place the versified psalters into the genre of literary paraphrase, the rhetorical exercise of transforming prose into poetry, solution "unconsidered" in the positivist period of literary history and theory which chose to use terms like "processing" or "caricature retort". The appeal to the genre of literary paraphrase is combined in Gherman's vision with the evaluation of the text using aesthetical criteria operating a disjunction between the "source text" and the "new text": "an essential suggestion in the perception of the literary status of the versified paraphrases: if they have to be analyzed in relation to the source text, this has to be carried out starting from their formal analysis, while their artistic evaluation has to be done considering them aesthetically independent works determining their value in itself, and not in relation to the source text".²

The spreading of the versified psalter – that became a literary genre due to certain "religious, cultural and literary factors" – began in the Middle Ages as a phenomena of popular devotion and it was amplified and institutionalized ("what had been endemic during the Middle Ages of the West, became then programmatic"³) in the register of religious literature in the period of the Reform: "For a period of time that certainly ended at the end of the 16th century, the geographic extension of the spreading of the versified psalters coincides with that of the Reform, especially that of Calvinism".⁴ According to Gherman, the circumstances generated by the religious, cultural and literary factors constitute the motivation of the spreading of this literary genre in old Romanian culture. While religiousness appears as an overall aspect of the tradition of Bible interpretation as a type of widely spread hermeneutics, in the case of Romanians, especially those converted to Calvinism, it emerges as a special need of worship, primarily for those from the Hațeg and South-East Banat regions from where the still extant Romanian Calvinist religious writings are known to have originated (*Cartea de cântece* (The book of songs) – *Fragmentul Todorăscu* (The Todorăscu-fragment), *Codicele Agyagfalvi* (The Agyagfalvi Codices), *Gradualele* (The Graduals), the psalter copied by Mihai Halici Snr., *Psaltirea lui I. Viski* (I. Viski's Psalter), *Șoltarile a lui sfânt David crai* (King Saint David's Psalms) written by Ștefan Istvánházi in *Râu de*

¹ Ibid., 79.

² Ibid., 91.

³ Ibid., 84.

⁴ Ibid., 86–87.

Mori in the year 1703). At the same time, the “literary fashion” attached to European mannerism and, according to Gherman, “partially” also to Baroque, “represents one of the moments of synchronization with western culture, which was attempted by Romanian humanism in the second half of the 17th century”.¹

The psalters got from the acknowledgement of their pragmatic functions, the expression of devotional literature, to becoming a “literary fashion”: “At the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the next one, composing a versified paraphrase went beyond the level of confessionalism and belonged to the range of artistic exercise.”² As Gherman points it out, the presence of these literary paraphrases in the mostly Catholic territories like Spain and Italy must not be ascribed only to the “literary fashion” or to surpassing “the level of confessionalism”. Another factor can be introduced into the discussion: the historical literature of the last decades of the 20th century showed that from the point of view of the affirmative strategy and the consolidation of the confessional identity, the Reformation and Counter-reformation used similar instruments. The spreading of the genre of literary paraphrase represented by the versified psalter can be ascribed to this exercise of confessional formation (both to its Catholic and reformed type). The observation that the versified psalters were spread in the context of the Baroque as a consequence of mannerism and the transmitted extreme tensions and sentiments typical to this trend – an observation shared by the author of the discussed monograph (pages 92–93) – would also point to this direction. The analysis of the connection between the versified psalters and the Baroque sensibility could take advantage of this observation. I find the objection concerning this relation formulated by Gherman – “the question of whether the different versified psalters belong to the actual Baroque has to be determined separately for each literary work and not generally³ – too firm and, in spite of the expression, exclusivist. First of all, the Baroque sensibility must not be judged referring only to the literary texts. On the other hand, even the choice of genre marks a certain type of sensibility (imitation – mannerism), while the notional content and the stylistic values signify a profoundness that cannot be found anytime or anywhere.

Teodor Corbea’s analysis of the text of the *Versified Psalter* has the goal of determining the “source text” and the horizon of literary theory concerning versification in Romanian. In order to accomplish this, the author used comparative and statistical methods. Written in the second half of the first decade of the 17th century, probably around 1705, the *Versified Psalter* – as Gherman has demonstrated – had at its basis the psalms from the *Bucharest Bible* and the *Psalter* published in 1694 by Antim Ivireanul. The author of the monograph does not dispute the fact that Teodor Corbea had known the text of Dosoftei’s psalter, but – by means of a detailed and statistically based comparison of the texts, from the perspective of the structure of versification and vocabulary – he came to the conclusion that the work of the author from Braşov is “totally original compared to other similar texts from our old literature... it has all the characteristics of an

¹ Ibid., 94.

² Ibid., 88.

³ Ibid., 92.

independent literary creation and it was composed according to a pre-established aesthetic and stylistic conception”.¹ From the poetical point of view, Gherman’s analysis focuses on items like versification (the metre, the rhyme), artistic means, poetical expressivity, vocabulary and syntax.

Without any distinct section of final conclusions or observations, the monograph dedicated to Teodor Corbea, by means of the detailed analysis of his most important works, imposes a set of value judgements on the Romanian intellectual from the turn of the 17th century. In addition, the general characterization that can be rendered to Gherman’s monograph – in our opinion – is that it aims at revealing and demanding Teodor Corbea’s higher placement in old Romanian culture: “Teodor Corbea, Brâncoveanu’s »secretary« reveals himself to be one of the most informed Romanian scholars of his time, whose cultural horizon can be compared to that of some contemporary scholars: Nicolae Milescu Snr., and also the Stolnic (Seneschal) Constantin Cantacuzino and Dimitrie Cantemir.”²

Gherman’s monograph is, first of all, an erudite work both as a research characterized by the use of published primary sources and primary sources collected from archives and documentary libraries, and as an analysis focused on the exercise of text-deconstruction and on revealing the cultural horizon in which the texts were created. At its basis there is a laborious work of deciphering and understanding Corbea’s works, from which the author offers us samples in the two appendices (fragments from the dictionary, a number of versified psalters) but mainly in the context of the analysis presented in the monograph. Restricted to the specific topic of old Romanian culture, with an eye to humanism in the Historical Regions of Romania, the work is particularly remarkable for its contribution to the research and analysis of literary history and theory regarding the beginnings of Romanian lexicography. The author remains faithful to this bibliographic horizon.

Being conceived as a monographic work, a synthesis of Teodor Corbea’s life and writings, Gherman’s work does not claim to achieve a definitive judgement or completion, it rather constitutes a provocation and an opening to a possible interdisciplinary co-operation between historians and *littérateurs*.

Translated by Boglárka Németh

Playing with the Art of Nietzschean Thoughts

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¹ Ibid., 146.

² Ibid., 130.