I Celebrate Myself & I Sing Myself:
Romulus Bucur on Romulus Bucur’s *Ditties*

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The present paper, in spite of its quite scandalous title, is just a serious reflection, from the inside, on a certain part of the poetry of a contemporary Romanian poet (the author of the paper himself), in the line of a tradition starting with Poe’s *Philosophy of Composition* (1846), passing through the avant-garde and ending, for the moment, in Andy Warhol’s self-promotion. The analysis from the inside and the honest reflection of the interplay between poetry, music, and contemporary popular culture might lead to a better understanding of the poetry made at the end of the 20th century—beginning of the 21st century. The corpus analyzed is a series of poems written between 1994 and the present day, under the generic title of *ditty*, published in several books (between which a bilingual pamphlet, *Ditties/Cîntecel(e)*, 1998), and the paper speaks about their genesis, their poetics, and hopes to help the process of their interpretation, as well as to bring a new interpretation of the poetry/music relationship.

*Keywords:* Ditty, popular culture, urban, poetics, confessional poetry, cultural quotation

A Brief Characterization of Bucur’s Situation in Contemporary Romanian Poetry

One legitimate question that could be asked from the very beginning is simply *Who* is Romulus Bucur? Otherwise formulated, is this author so important to anyone but himself? A brief answer would be that he is one of the founding members of Cenaclul de Luni (Monday’s Literary Group), lead by Romanian critic Nicolae Manolescu, and one of the authors of one cult books of the generation of the eighties, the collective volume *Cinci* (*Five*), together with Ion Bogdan Lefter, Bogdan Ghiu, Mariana Marin, and Alexandru Mușina (Bucur, Lefter, Ghiu, Marin, & Mușina, 1982).

It can also safely be claimed that he got his share of literary prizes, that he enjoys a certain notoriety within contemporary Romania poetry, present in some reference works, such as Simion (2004), that major Romanian critics wrote about his books etc.

On the other hand, it can also safely be said that he is, just as asserted in the very title of his latest book, just a “secondary character” (Bucur, 2009): in counter-distinction to the co-signers of Bucur et al. (1982), he is absent from most of the important reference works dedicated to Romanian literature, such as Pop (2007) or Zaciu Papahagi, & Sasu, 1995).

As regards, the author’s interest in visual poetry perhaps is worth mentioning his early discovery (in high-school years) of Apollinaire and cummings. Although this does not seem to have any connection with music,
their complementary conceptions open the perspective of a syncretic poetry; one of the first results was a poem, written in 1978, *Nu trageți în pianist (Don’t Shoot the Piano Player)*, and made into a short film at the beginning of the eighties (Bucur, 2010).

**Objectives of the Present Paper**

The present paper, in spite of its quite scandalous title, is just a serious reflection, from the inside, on a certain part of the poetry of a contemporary Romanian poet (the author of the paper himself), in the line of a tradition starting with Poe’s *Philosophy of Composition* (1846), passing through the avant-garde and ending, for the moment, in Andy Warhol’s self-promotion. The analysis from the inside and the honest reflection of the interplay between poetry, music, and contemporary popular culture might lead to a better understanding of the poetry made at the end of the 20th century—the beginning of the 21st century.

**Corpus Used**

The corpus analyzed is a series of poems written between 1994 and the present day, under the generic title of *ditty*, published in several books, among which (Bucur, 1998) bears this very title; also, a series of earlier poems might be considered, and the paper speaks about their genesis, their poetics, and hopes to help the process of their interpretation, as well as to bring a new interpretation of the poetry/music relationship.

It should be noted also that Diaconu (2002, pp. 93-99) selected as examples a series of poems representative for their musical references, speaking also about a “diffuse musicality” (Diaconu, 2002, p. 100).

In the published version of his Ph.D. dissertation, Vakulovski (2010) considered that “[S]ynthesis, combining written text (in various languages) with video and audio text is one of the main features of this book” (p. 71).

**Theoretical Premises**

As a theoretical foundation, besides the already mentioned *Philosophy of Composition*, the remarks of two major poets and theorists of 20th century poetry can be added, namely that of Ezra Pound:

> No man writes much poetry that “matters” (…) When a man is not doing the highest thing, the saying the thing once and for all and perfectly (…) he had much better be making the sorts of experiment which may be of use to him in his later work, or to his successors. (Pound, 1968, p. 10)

And T. S. Eliot, who, in his essay “From Poe to Valéry” (1974) refers to the relationship between a poet’s theory about his own poetry, and his practice, irrespective of its degree of general validity (Eliot, 1974, p. 376).

**A Few Examples**

In the first place, it has to be mentioned the function of music in this poetry. It may be the starting point of a poem, the state created by listening a song, such as in *sentiment pe o melodie, să zicem de…* (Feeling Built upon a Song, Say By…) (Bucur, 2008, p. 56), or by reference to a singer (and a poet, too), such as Leonard Cohen, in *HIC & NUNC, INC.* (Bucur, 2008, p. 14). Actually, the song alluded to it was Buffy-Sainte Marie’s *Universal Soldier*, covered by Donovan. Or something like a discreet background, half present, half absent, such as in “Should the void between words/be filled with music?” (Bucur & Cârtărescu, 1994, p. 8). Also, the kind of music envisioned by the author should be mentioned: it is pop/rock/folk music, that is, part of popular culture, such as in
The Guitar Man, a web of intertextual references: a double allusion, to the song with the same title by Bread, and to Wallace Stevens’ poem The Man with the Blue Guitar: “you won’t drive crowds wild/with it/and it isn’t/even blue” (Bucur & Cărtărescu, 1994, p. 21), then to visual arts (Picasso), plus the reference to a famous reportage by Geo Bogza1, Țara de piatră (A Land of Stone).

From allusions to music—one more example would be Salată de fructe (Fruit Salad), with reference to Bourvil’s song Salate de fructe (Bucur, 2008, p. 28)—the next step is cultural quotation: again, a poem such as Dincolo de oglindă (Through the Looking Glass) (Bucur, 2008, p. 79) ends with a quotation from Leonard Cohen’s Chelsea Hotel #2: “We are ugly but we have the music”. Earlier instances of such quotations are: “the idiot cassette repeating/sylvia’s mother said…” (Bucur & Cărtărescu, 1994, p. 19).

The turning point occurs in 1994, with the first poem entitled ditty (Bucur, 1998, p. 7); nothing about music in it, except the title. It aims at reconstructing an urban scenery, with fast-foods, long-distance calls, shop windows, and people in the streets, ads, in short, an updating of the atmosphere created at the beginning of 20th century by Apollinaire, in his poem Zone.

Gradually, a certain common characteristic appeared: a sort of Allie McBeal/Winnie the Pooh character, playing an encouraging song in his/her head (or listening to it on a Walkman or music player), while walking in the street, contemplating shop windows, looking at people and at ads, thinking of their problems, and having a sandwich or a Coca-Cola. In short, the outward aspect of contemporary urban people; the inside it does not seem to matter, so the music they listen to becomes extremely important. From such a virtual play-list we can mention, almost randomly, “Don’t Worry Be Happy”, “Tom’s Diner”, “Twist in My Sobriety”, and other similar songs.

A certain change occurs, when radio becomes a character too (Bucur, 1998, pp. 9, 11), that is, when something that is randomly played becomes the pretext of a poem (or, at least, gives it some background), and, further, when the author attempts to re-create various musical genres by means of the poem: rock2 (Bucur, 1998, p. 15), rap (Bucur, 1998, p. 17), jazz (Bucur, 1998, p. 5), chanson (Bucur, 1998, p. 25; Bucur, 2008, p. 90), or blues (Bucur, 2008, pp. 110-111). In this poem, for instance, one can notice the cultural quotation, from Whitman (“I celebrate myself and I sing myself”), introduced as a graphical image, a graffito, and the linguistic hybrid: The poem is written half in Romanian and half in English, in the idea of capturing somehow the blues-spirit.

Conclusions

Generally, the poetry of Romulus Bucur has been labelled as one of the Romanian hypostases of confessional poetry. Its characteristic aspect, nevertheless, is the attempt at reconciling visual and auditory perception, combining them with cultural memory, so as that an updated version of the objective correlative (Eliot, 1921) is obtained. But this is far beyond the author’s capacity of foreseeing.

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2 For this poem, there is a multimedia version too (Kinema, “Opera Prima”, 1996), more close to the author’s intention of creating a syncretic poem—clicking on a certain place of the poem brings the chorus of Alright Now, of the band Free.
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