

## GRIGORE V. CIOBAN – A CROSS-ARTS CASE

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*Abstract: Stranger manifestations such as associating painting with literature or, more precisely, the territory of words, often occur within the dreamt empire of arts syncretism. Grigore V. Coban, a philologist was at the same time a professor and an art critic, the most famous art reviewer in Bacău, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His preoccupations extended to systematic research of Nicu Enea, a representative painter of the Moldavian territory, to whom he dedicated a solid monographic approach. As a literature specialist he dealt with translating from Russian and as a proper creator he was an outstanding epigram writer.*

*Our present work suggests a first synthesis of Grigore V Coban's work as a useful dedication to his one hundredth anniversary of his birth (1914).*

*Keywords: cross-arts; syncretism; art criticism; Moldavian territory*

There are cases of apparently *inadequacy to the object* – an accusing syntagma whose content is useless when the evolution of the product of that artistic action is estimated. For instance, it was stated that Spiru Haret's educational system might not have been valuable as long as he was a mathematician – even if a famous one – and not a schoolmaster. As the time passed by it was confirmed that his free and long lasting conception in the field of teaching – learning system that was proved even during his lifetime. (In 2012, on the occasion of his centenary, there were not as many signs of celebrations compared to the huge benefits made to the Romanian school system.)

As far as the plastic arts are concerned, the situation is almost the same, as long as the admirers of paintings are not necessarily his fellows, but all kinds of different specialists: doctors, engineers, economists, journalists, teachers etc. Among these we may notice a visible distinction between the humanistic teachers and the exact sciences specialists: the former activate their subconsciousness and deal with the work of art as they do with all literary texts (etymologically, "texture"): they discompose it to reconstruct it again, in the name of the two essential principles: cohesion and coherence.

He who knew Grigore V. Coban (1914-1986) rapidly turned from the image of the Russian language and literature professor to the cultural journalist reviewer, since his art reviews are almost artistic essays.

We don't have other documents except his death certificate<sup>1)</sup>, out of which we learn that he was born on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1914, in the town of Soroca, S.U., parents Vasile and Maria, his first name Grigorii, and his last address: 46, Războieni street, Bacău. He died on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January 1986, a day before his 74<sup>th</sup> birthday<sup>2)</sup>.

A thorough research of his family tree was done by Sergiu Patrașcu<sup>3)</sup>. He recalls his ancestors: Benchici, Dabija and, of course, Coban, having their roots in Sudarca<sup>4)</sup> (region of Soroca), the place from which their grandparents came to Romania in September 1956, to join their three children Elena (Liusea), Grigore (Grișa) and Dumitru (Michea). They all lived in Iași where they have their tombs in "Eternitatea" graveyard<sup>5)</sup>. Sergiu Patrașcu is most interested in the personality of "Grigus" – Grigore Coban, "whom they were very fond of"<sup>6)</sup>.

We get to learn about his school years at the Agricultural High School – Soroca, where he also learned German, about the school gazette where he used to publish articles, and about “Al. I. Cuza” University of Iași – the Law School<sup>7)</sup>. Among his favourite professors was A. C. Cuza<sup>7)</sup>, to whom he dedicated a 56 - page booklet in 1939 entitled “The Phenomenon A. C. Cuza” (Academy Library, Bucharest, II 156652). Grigore Coban visited him to take an interview, while the painter Costache Agafiței was sketching his portrait.

His graduation subject was “The Judicial Regime of the Black Sea Straits” (international law), after that he prepared to become a judge being first a lawyer; in fact, he seemed to be on the list that the king had to sign up<sup>8)</sup>, but he was replaced by someone else, since the “relations” were quite strong at that time as well<sup>9)</sup>. Of course, he was thoroughly depressed by it<sup>10)</sup>.

After graduating the Reserve Officers School in Bacău, he went to war in 1941, to free Bessarabia. He send many war reports to the newspaper “Bacăul”<sup>11)</sup>, and the following year he was caught prisoner by the Russians. He changed the labour camps and managed to hide his Moldavian origin and refused to take part in the military groups of communists made from camp prisoners. In 1951, he was freed, threatened to be caught again “owing to his political past and his patriotic attitude during his being a prisoner”<sup>12)</sup>.

Lucidly, he understood that it was useless to try hard and be a professional lawyer so he turned to Russian language and literature. As he could speak it fluently he attended “Maxim Gorki” Institute in Bucharest, he became a teacher, but this was not his most pleasant activity<sup>13)</sup>.

So he became a cultural journalist, “soon deprived of the right to sign articles”<sup>14)</sup>, but “since he was a valuable art critic, he was allowed to sign only reviews”<sup>15)</sup>.

We can also find descriptions of his personality by Sergiu Patrașcu and Cornel Galben<sup>16)</sup>, about a certain dictionary dedicated to the contemporary artists of Bacău, “lost in some publishing house”<sup>17)</sup>, and about a volume of epigrams that had to be issued in 1937, still a manuscript. He was inscribed in a “Lexicon of Contemporary Artists”<sup>18)</sup>, mentioned just as a “professor and art critic” in “Encyclopaedia of Bacau county”<sup>19)</sup>.

The force of the written word and his literary-journalistic career constituted an example for Bacău, the city that adopted him. Practically, the local section of the Union of Plastic Artists in Bacău is attributed to Grigore V. Coban<sup>20)</sup>. The cultural gazette, “Ateneu”, initiated by Grigore Tabacaru and George Bacovia in 1925, still active, contributed to the promotion of arts in this region<sup>21)</sup>. For instance, he published three articles in 1970, a faire-part for Romul Ladea, “who made us feel the stone and wood, shaped by the throbbing of hearts which will last forever”<sup>22)</sup>, a mini group portrait about Aurel Stanciu, Ștefan Pristavu, Mihai Butnaru, Miluș Semenov, facing the audience and another review of Ilie Boca, “a famous name”<sup>24)</sup> in the local and national art.

He also dedicated a good part of his reviewer activity at “Ateneu” to the monograph of Nicu Enea’s “the painter of Bacău landscapes” – 1979<sup>25)</sup>. In fact, Grigore V. Coban has become the authorized review commenter of the artist born in Valea-Arini, Măgurești<sup>26)</sup>.

He was also mentioned in a dictionary made by Ion Hangiu (2004), with the single article “Timpul” though he appeared in many literary magazines<sup>27)</sup>.

To master a foreign language may be a symbol of the pleasure to deal with the literary text, directly. Grigore V. Coban gained the title of Russian Translator when the Romanian

press had to celebrate Lenin's anniversary, Grigore V. Coban, a teacher at "Vasile Alecsandri" High School or later "Vasile Alecsandri" University of Bacău, was asked to publish the Romanian version of the Russian authors<sup>28)</sup>. In the same year, 5 months later, he was to sign up poems written by A. Blok ("High up, at the Kingly Gate / A witness, a child is crying / Because no one will ever come back")<sup>29)</sup>, Anna Ahmatova, ("As the white stone, deep down the well / Only the holly hammer sounds in me"), Boris Pasternak ("Cinderella crosses the town in an elegant carriage / But when she wastes all money, she comes back on foot") or B. A. Ahmadullina ("Do you fancy that my pride / Kept you far from me? / No, not it, but my pain is all that separates us")<sup>30)</sup>.

We think that Grigore V. Coban should have been included in literary dictionaries, if not for his translations, at least for his epigrams. He became a character in a literary work written by Constantin Călin<sup>32)</sup>. His nephew mentioned two epigrams on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 1933 issue of the "Orientations" Magazine 1935. This volume, "Absinth Flowers", includes stanzas like these: "To Mr. *Dinboi Vasile – father of two of my private students*": "I'll give your money back / I won't teach them, I made up my mind / Your children, just like you / Prove to be quite stupid" or "*Correction: «Between Mr. Gr. V. Coban and Liana Jar I can't find any difference. Their pens are dipped in the same inexhaustible jar of beliefs »*" (The Voice of Students): "Between Me and Liana / The difference is not just small; / I have had sparkles (puns, cf. Rom. *jar*) my whole life, / Whereas she - just in her youth!"<sup>33)</sup>. Some other times, his tone becomes more rebellious, imposed on by the historical times. "An ordinary lullaby "composed as a family heirloom, but in an (un)proper moment - the return from prisoner camp - ends in an ordinary note of the outlaw or cult ballads (George Coșbuc): "Let Stephen and Michael burn / In your eyes. / Your eyes – a flash, your hand – an ax, / Glory over realm! - July 15, 1951, Grigus"<sup>34)</sup>.

In 2014, we have initiated a complex manifestation even to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, activity regarded as a spontaneous artistic and professional evaluation, made by people who knew him: "It's true that he deserved being better known. [...] He used to be the director of the Students' Club" (C. Călin), "he used to paint pictures, replicas, that he offered his friends, and theatre and opera sceneries" (Ilie Boca), "he possessed real painting collections" (Valeriu Bogdăneț), "he used to impose on us through his comprehension which was far from being acceptance" (Elena Bulai), "he created in the Language Department a real beneficial atmosphere for intellectual activities" (Doina Cmeciu)<sup>35)</sup>.

Being "the first art critic in the city of Bacău" (Ilie Boca), an *in absentia* apprentice of Tonitza, Grigore V. Coban represents a landmark in the local literary and cultural history. From the point of view of his publishing products we have to remark noteworthy qualities of writing and themes: the property of his terms, his critical thinking, his minute information. *Stricto sensu*, his art reviews are a possible demonstration of syncretism of arts. The accuracy of the document, almighty in his case, is placed over the Canons of his style and composition: concision, clarity and expressive power and communication. The image and the letter are in a happy marriage in everything became art criticism, exercises of admiration or incursion in evolution of visual arts in a fertile geographical area – Middle Moldova.

## Bibliographical notes

People's Council of Bacau, the Executive Committee, Death Certificate, D.7 series, no. 001 079 issued under number 20992 / 29.01.1986. Act we were provided by Professor Violeta Coban, daughter-in-law of the celebrated centenary, whom I thank.

*Ibidem.* The Death was entered in the Register of civil status at No. 125, of January 29, 1986. On April 10, 2014, being in Iași, I intended to visit the Patrașcus to obtain additional information. The poor health of the two nonagenarians forced me to postpone the appointment, but I got into account their solicitude to be useful in completing a biographical picture.

Sergiu Patrașcu, *Povestea familiei mele*, [Iași], f.e., 2008, cap.IV „About the Coban «branch»”.

*Ibidem*, p.30. The text is accompanied by photographs.

*Ibidem*, p.31.

Sergiu Patrașcu makes an important clarification: “As far as I know and as I've read, it appears beyond doubt that Grigus did not take part into the legionary movement (very blasphemous now)” (*ib.*, p. 32.)

*Ibidem*, p. 34.

*Ibidem.*

Sergiu Patrașcu tells a relevant story: “I was in the attic of my grandparents barn, where I found and browsed newspapers brought by Grigus when coming in, he was reading a letter aloud. I heard only the last words: ‘All this will end sometimes with a revolver bullet’. I guess that it was his own letter that he was rereading” (p. 34).

Sergiu Patrașcu quotes the article “St. Demetrius on the front”, that he had read in the columns, of the newspaper “Bacăul”.

Sergiu Patrașcu, *op.cit.*, p. 34.

*Ibidem*, p. 38.

*Ibidem.*

*Ibidem.*

Cf. *Personalități băcăuane*, I, Bacău, Corgal Press Publising House, 2000, pp. 66-69. Sergiu Patrașcu expresses his doubts that Grigore V. Coban would have prepared his PhD on “The Problem of Straits” (better said “The Legal Regime of the Black Sea Straits”), citing the risks of such a scientific approach concerning his uncle. Cornel Galben's work is also valuable through the bibliographical notes. There are numerous references about / by Grigore V. Coban in “Ateneu” (1971, 1973), “Steagul roșu” ( 1974), “Sinteze” (1997), “Așa” (1999).

*Ibidem*, p. 67.

Bacău, Editura Corgal Press, 2000

V[asile] B[ulgariu], *Grigore Coban*, in “Encyclopaedia of Bacău county” (Emilian Drehuță coordinator), Bacău, “Agora” Publishing House, 2007/2008. The references to Otto Brieser, about whom he had written in 1967 and 1974 are missing.

“The first steps –the art historian Constantin Prut mentioned - is placed in the late '60s, when several young creators begin to gather around the art critic Grigore V. Coban active for a long time, and the painter Ilie Boca [...] not only for a job, but also for the promise of artistic achievement” (*Art 2003 - Bacau Branch of the Union of the Plastic Artists*, p. 8). Not

coincidentally prominently placed in a simple enumeration, it is inferred that he must be associated with proper creators: “Such names as Grigore Coban, Ion Burdujoc, Gheorghe Velea” etc. constitute “an artistic avanguard core” (Carmen Istrate-Murariu in *UAP 40 - Bacău Branch of the Union of the Plastic Artists - 1969-2009*, Bacău, Rovimed Publishers, 2009, p.7).

Starting with the second year (1965) of the new series of, the “Ateneu” magazine numerous texts signed by Grigore Coban will be published, from profiles of plastic artists to artistic events and from obituaries (Ion Frunzetti, Ion Burdujoc, etc.) to anniversaries, all in the columns having the headline “Plastic Notebook”. Marilena Donea notes that in 1974 Grigore V. Coban used the phrase “the spiritual geography of the municipality city and the county of Bacău”, occurring again in the dictionary written by Mândica Mardare and Liliana Cioroianu in 2001 (“*Ateneu*” 40. *Bibliography 1964-2004*, II, Bacău, f.e, p. 392).

Grigore V. Coban, *Ladea*, in “Ateneu” (Bacău), new series, an VII, nr. 9 (74), September 1970, p. 17.

Idem, *Penelul alb*, in “Ateneu”, publ. cit., nr. 12 (77), dec. 1970, p. 18.

Idem, *Expoziția interjudețeană – Bacău-Botoșani-Suceava*, in “Ateneu”, publ. cit., nr. 2 (67), febr. 1970, p. 17. Implicitly, I corrected the second word in the title, handpicked in printing form, “interjudețiană”. We consider that the text proves that the author does not make spelling mistakes.

Idem, *Nicu Enea – un pictor al vieții rustice*, in “Ateneu”, publ. cit., nr. 10 (75), oct. 1970, p.17. Previously, in “Scânteia” (July 29, 1978), he made references about “Nicu Enea Retrospective”.

At the centenary of the birth of the painter, the magazine “Ateneu” (new series, year 34, no. 4 (331), April, 1997, p.1) reprints an excerpt of the study, entitled “Equilibrium and Strength”, recognizing in his art “a constant aversion to colourful sentimentality and unessential effect”. In “Cetatea Moldovei”, for example, Grigore Coban writes two articles published in a single issue (4-6, year III, Volume V, 1942, p 205, 322).

Grigore Coban gave the Romanian version of a fragment from the Evgheni Evtușenko’s “Bratsk Hydro Power Station”: “The strong wind screaming roars. / The frost gathers delegations pliers. / Lenin thinking of the future - / Forgetting about himself, but he cannot forget them. / He knows all ideas are but useless ‘isms’, / when the poor Russian cottages, full of tears, are forgotten” (“Ateneu”, publ. cit., nr. 4 (69), 1970, p. 19).

In the “Ateneu”, publ. cit., no. 10 (75), October 1970, p. 19. We allowed ourselves to operate three modifications for a more fluent reading: elision of the *î* vowel, marked by a hyphen – in the first verse; the missing dash in the “plânge-un” and the restoring of the hiatus - the second verse and the missing comma before the last verse.

*Ibidem.*

It deals with “Bacăul literar” by Eugen Budău, the most valuable specialised dictionary in the county. It is said that he mentioned the father’s initial letter to avoid confusion with the names of other publishers and writers. For example, in the “Ateneu”, the writer G[eorge] B[ălăiță] responds at “Readers Column” to an aspiring poet Vasile Coban, Romanian language and literature teacher in Ploiești: “... your lyrics, correct, elaborate, do not exceed the attitude of a poetry lover”. In the next column, the editor of that time of the magazine cautiously analyzes the correspondence received from Ion Lilă, in which “poetry exists even if not crystal clear”.

As long as the latter confirmed, it can be assumed that Vasile Coban would have had the same destiny (cf. “Ateneu”, publ. cit., No. 4 (69), 1970, p. 7).

“Grigore Soroceanu in a short story of mine still a manuscript” (quoted Sergiu Patrașcu, *op. cit.*, p. 38). The name of the Bessarabian province is mentioned by the last artist in a group: the works of Nicu Enea “were welcomed by eminent writers and art critics like Victor Ion Popa, Felix Aderca, Cicerone Theodorescu, Meny Toneghin, N. N. Tonitza, G. Oprescu, Tache Soroceanu etc.” (Grigore V. Coban, in “Ateneu”, publ. cit., no. 10 (75), October 1970, p. 17).

Sergiu Patrașcu, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

*Ibidem*, p.37.

A Master’s degree student in Letters - Iuliana Chirilă - elaborated an interesting seminar paper on the subject *The Methodology of Scientific Research*, and she dealt with the content of the event on January 30, 2014.