

**Mircea Păduraru, *Fondul interzis: incursiune în antropologia folclorului licențios* [The Prohibited Fund: Journey into the Anthropology of Erotic Folklore], vol. I, Iași, Editura Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, 2023, 301 p., ISBN 978-606-714-812-1**

There are bad books, average books, important books, and then, there are landmark books. Sometimes, the difference between the last two categories is not easy to trace, because, of course, every landmark book is important, but not every important book is also a landmark. Thus said, I will affirm since the very beginning that the book written by Mircea Păduraru (professor of ethnology at the Iași

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University, Romania) about the reception of the Romanian erotic/sexual folklore is a landmark in its own right for the Romanian ethnology. And this for two reasons: one is linked to the subject of the book, while the other lies in the approach of the author. (As a parenthesis, I should remark that the polemic stance seems – fortunately for our discipline – embedded in Mircea Păduraru, who finds delight in approaching sensitive subjects, thus opening new paths in thinking the Romanian ethnology).

*Fondul interzis...* (The Prohibited Fund) comes to fill a void which (still) reigns in the Romanian ethnology. It is the void left by the almost non-existent collections and studies about erotic and forbidden (because “dirty”) folklore. This kind of omission is by no means something specific only to the Romanian ethnology. In many other countries the studies of erotic folklore took a bit long to develop. For instance, as the author of this book mentions, in 1962, during the first Symposium on Obscenity in Folklore that took place in USA, the American folklorist Gershon Legman was deploring the Anglo-American retard in developing of such studies, in opposition with what was happening in other European countries, such as France or even Russia, where the first large collections of erotic folklore had been published since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In his study, *Misconceptions in Erotic Folklore*, G. Legman suggested that one of the causes of this retard lied in the “famously antisexual Anglo-Saxon morality”<sup>1</sup>, which prevented scholars to collect and/or interpret this sensitive part of the general folklore, unless they wanted to jeopardize their academic career. Nevertheless, since the ’60s the situation changed dramatically in the United States, studies in erotic folklore being now published regularly there.

In Romania, not only the studies on the erotic/obscene folklore are almost totally absent, but, in a country which did never lack interest for collecting folklore, considered to be a key factor in the forging of the national identity, there are only four collections of erotic folklore published until the present days. This figure results from Mircea Păduraru’s exhaustive survey of the Romanian publications containing erotic folklore and it speaks volumes, especially when we take a close look at the apparition dates of these collections: 1900 (Tocilescu collection, also known as Țapu fund), 1930 (Novacovicu collection), 1967 (Béla Bartók collection, which, *nota bene*, was published in Holland and remained largely unknown in Romania), and 2008 (Patză collection). Apart from Tocilescu–Țapu folklore collection, which was largely used by folklorists, but *not* for its erotic samples, the three others passed largely unnoticed and did not leave many traces in the interpreting of the Romanian folklore, as the Iași-based researcher demonstrates in his book.

The situation is somehow better, Mircea Păduraru remarks, for the studies analysing the erotic folklore, especially in the last two decades, when the scholars have begun to fill the gap. But this does not mean that the resistances disappeared. In fact, the book opens with an “autoethnographic prologue”, in which the author relates a personal experience: in 2013, during a conference, he gave a presentation about the erotic folklore, providing the audience with some papers which contained the “juicy” samples he was referring to, in order to avoid to utter the “incendiary”

<sup>1</sup> Gershon Legman, “Misconceptions in Erotic Folklore”, in *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 75, No. 297, Symposium on Obscenity in Folklore (Jul.-Sep. 1962), p. 200.

words. Nevertheless, a member of the audience, who also happened to belong to the political/cultural local establishment, reacted vigorously, reprimanding him for presenting such “foul porn stuff” [pornoșaguri] in an academic context. Although not all participants to that conference were of the same opinion, they did not stand for it in public, but expressed it in *post factum* private discussions with the author. Proof enough that, in Romania, the subject is still very sensitive and difficult to approach. And this makes the discussed text even more important.

The book, elaborated in two volumes (the second still to be printed), contains both a history and a hermeneutic of the erotic folklore reception. The fact should be stressed, because in this first volume the author *does not proceed* to an analysis of the erotic folklore. Instead, as I already mentioned, he analyses the way this category of folklore was received/rejected by the Romanian scholars, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present days. The first part is dedicated on one hand to the defence of the domain, the author replying extensively to his opponent from 2013, this way affirming both the right to existence of the “prohibited fund” and the legitimacy of all the informants, especially those rejected by the “traditional” folk collectors as being nothing more than “drunkards” [bețivi] or “rascals” [potlogari].

On the other hand, the author makes a short, but poignant analysis of the verbal obscenity, considered in its multiple facets, as a form of verbal, political, and social violence. Walking in the footsteps of researchers such as Mary Douglas, Pierre Bourdieu or Lucienne Frappier-Mazur, he sees the obscenity as a threat to purity and order, as a quasi-material thing (because the obscene words have an enormous ability to evoke the very thing – anatomic parts, or acts – they are naming), or as something having the power to bring chaos in the social structure, by the way it breaks the linguistic taboos. His conclusion, after presenting these different approaches of the matter, is that obscene representations “evoke in our minds *not that which is shameful into another person*, but what (we learned that) is shameful in ourselves, and thus they are an unpleasant revelation about ourselves, although we condemn it in others” (p. 72).

The last chapter of the first part of the book presents thoroughly the ideas of the American folklorist Gershon Legman, whose approach on the erotic folklore is embraced by Mircea Păduraru, who starts nowadays his own “quixotic crusade for filth”<sup>2</sup> in order to free the domain from the chains of (auto)censorship.

The second part of the book is dedicated to the analysis of the four collections which constitute the Romanian published fund of erotic folklore. It is necessary to stress that the author limited his research to published works, although the folklore archives of the Romanian folklore institutes contain a great number of erotic texts, because his interest was to shed light on the darkness which reigned over this area of the folklore research. (And from this point of view, no matter how rich an archive may be, as long as it is not brought to light, this richness is of no use for the students of folklore.) Mircea Păduraru analyses thoroughly the content and organizing principles of these collections (I mentioned them above), in order to shed light on the different approaches that were put at work in different times. Most interesting is the first of

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<sup>2</sup> Legman, *Misconceptions*, p. 204.

these collections, the so-called Tocilescu-Țapu fund. The Romanian ethnologists know well that this fund, which was meant to be a general and exhaustive folklore collection, was not made by the first of the authors, Gr. Tocilescu, an historian and politician, who actually asked his collaborator, Christea Țapu, to do the collecting and then just put his name on the resulting book. The erotic/obscene folklore samples contained in it seem to be a totally unknown (to Tocilescu) by-product of the researches of Christea Țapu. At that time, the official author was confronted with a storm of criticism for publishing these pieces of 'dirty' folklore, but the collection, whose value, otherwise, had been instantly recognized, is the only one of the four who was reprinted in the '80s.

Of the three other collections, only two were published in Romania, but, as Mircea Păduraru notices, none of them exerted any real influence on the folklorists. The Novacovicu collection, despite its name – *Folclor pornografic bănățean* (Pornographic Folklore from Banat Region) – is too shy, even lame. The Bartók collection, although containing better texts, was practically unknown to the Romanian public and researchers, while the Patza collection did not reach a large audience, although it was published after the Romanian Revolution of 1989, at a time where writing taboos had become a thing from the past. Thus, it is even more important to give credit to the author for bringing these scarce collections into the limelight in order to be the object of further analyses, for which purpose he quote them at length and programmatically.

In the last part of the book, Mircea Păduraru proceeds to a critic of critics, seasoning his analysis with poignant remarks about the retards and idiosyncrasies of the Romanian ethnology. Under his scalpel, not a single idol remains unshackled. He starts with Vasile Alecsandri, one of the most important Romanian poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, in the same time, an unfamous forger of the pieces of folklore he collected. His methods of "correcting" folklore are exposed time and again in this book, and so are his attempts at producing fakelore. Mircea Păduraru quotes a letter of Alecsandri where the poet acknowledges, even proudly, that he is willing to write (read: to forge) a certain "folk" ballad, in order to make up for its absence from the province of Moldova (p. 204). But, even though the forgery of Alecsandri is evident, and it was so even for many contemporary scholars (such as Titu Maiorescu or the folklorist Moses Schwarzfeld, who did not fail to nail the lies present in the writings of the poet), his overall image does not have to suffer too much. In a fair approach, Mircea Păduraru stresses the fact that for Alecsandri and many other scholars of that time the concept of authenticity had a different meaning. For them, authenticity in folk literature was meant to be a supposed state of purity and elevation, lost during the course of time because of the oral transmission of knowledge and the decadence of people. So, in their (including Alecsandri) opinion, it was necessary to repair the corrupted songs, tales, ballads or other folk production in order for them to regain their long-lost pure form. But, as everybody knows, the road to hell is paved with good intentions and, obviously, Alecsandri's method created monsters, by managing to irremediably falsify many folk creations. More than that, it imposed a biased way of regarding the folklore as an aesthetic product of the people, which persists even today. And, in what concerns the subject of the erotic folklore, Alecsandri had

an important contribution (of course, this is an ironic way of speaking) to the long-lasting prohibition of its publishing and studying.

The author does not limit his study to the opponents to the erotic folklore. He also dissects the writings of three important Romanian scholars who, apparently, spoke in favour of the “obscenity”: Ion Diaconu, Ovidiu Bîrlea and Petru Caraman. Ion Diaconu has the merit of being not only the first Romanian scholar who analyses the concept of obscenity, but also the first who uses the Freudian theories in his writings. In short, he recommends – and this is a huge step forward – to write down the whole obscene words, not to replace them by dots or other euphemistic subterfuges. But, and this is something which needs to be stressed, he also recommends not to publish everything, “because in man some of the animal lubricity will always be lingering”<sup>3</sup>. In other words, obscenity is safe as long as it remains confined to swearing (because this is what Diaconu means by it), but has to be totally forbidden when it enters the realm of the eros (that is, its own domain). This could be a naïve approach, had not it been a harmful way of thinking, in Alecsandri line of thought. And this is even sadder, since Ion Diaconu really struggles to keep the pace with the newest (psychoanalytic) researches of his time. But, according to Mircea Păduraru, his approach is all wrong, his prejudices keeping him away from the real understanding of the essence of vernacular culture, and, thus, he harms the folklore studies. As Mircea Păduraru puts it, “the lubricity condemned by Diaconu, rhetorically and unjustly called *animalic*, is in fact essentially human, cultural in a complex way, and has many folkloric variants [...] by taking this principial stance, the folklorist [Ion Diaconu] (...) shows the same sovereign contempt for the psycho-mental reality of the Romanians (p. 229). Thus, it is no wonder that Mircea Păduraru concludes, sharply as a guillotine: “In fact, basically, the folklore scholar positions himself rather against the psychoanalytic perspective. Moreover, by reading and applying it in a truncated way, and inside a culture which knows it rather indirectly, through minimizing stereotypes and labels, Diaconu also compromises it from the folklore point of view” (p. 240).

After having exposed the fails and errors of Ion Diaconu, Mircea Păduraru starts to dissect the writings of Ovidiu Bîrlea, a “sacred monster” of the Romanian folklore studies, allegedly the most important Romanian folklore scholar from the communist period. Mircea Păduraru credits him for taking a huge step farther from Ion Diaconu, as he recognizes the folkloric value of the obscenities and even quotes some moderate ones in his seminal work *Folclorul românesc* (The Romanian Folklore) (1982, 1983), under the chapter destined to the analysis of dance chants [strigături]. His approach seems thus very innovative and open, especially since, as our author remarks, he does not separate between the erotic folklore and other forms of folklore, and also, because he carefully chooses to put in brackets terms like “obscenity” or “pornography”, in order not to show biases toward a moral meaning. But, even so, as Mircea Păduraru puts it, Ovidiu Bîrlea does not dare to push the analysis farther. This self-imposed limit becomes glaringly apparent in a volume dedicated to the tales of Ion Creangă, an important 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanian

<sup>3</sup> Ion Diaconu, *Folclor din Rîmnicul-Sărat* (Folklore from Rîmnicul-Sărat), XLIII, Focșani, Tipografie Cultura, 1934, quoted in Mircea Păduraru, *Fondul interzis...*, p. 228.

writer, whose creations demonstrate a strong inspiration from the folk literature. Among others, Ion Creangă is known for having written two erotic tales, longtime kept unpublished because of their subject and language. Ovidiu Bîrlea declares that these tales should be kept unpublished, because only some refined intellectuals could really appreciate their beauty and meaning, which is linked to “archaic fertility rites” and is a proof for an “archaic rural mentality”. Mircea Păduraru sheds light on this interpretation, which he considers to be biased, exposing the exaggerations behind these and other similar formulas who are defining the scientific approach of the great folklorist. The accusation of Mircea Păduraru is that through this kind of analysis, which actually rejects the functionalism, the study of folklore falls into a speculating pit, not very far from Alecsandri school of thought, that ends by perverting it and could even lead to fakelore (or should I say *fakethought?*). The Iași-based scholar clearly signals this danger, present not only in the volume mentioned above, but also, and more importantly, in the last book of Ovidiu Bîrlea, *Eseu despre dansul popular românesc* (Essay on the Romanian Folk Dance).

This volume, especially, is relevant for the subject of the *Fondul interzis...* in a subtle, but even more important way. Dance is its subject, not the erotic texts, be they banned or accepted. O. Bîrlea gets the credit for presenting a history of Romanian folk and folk-inspired dances. It is an important book for those who are researching the Romanian dance techniques and structures. But the method used to describe and analyse the dances is the one which catches the eye of Mircea Păduraru. He observes the volutes and the subterfuges Ovidiu Bîrlea does in order to interpret the dances as an expression of an archaic mentality, bringing in discussion the fertility rites, the sacred orgies that could have had no other reason to exist than to ensure the order of the universe. Like with Ion Creangă tales, he goes on overinterpreting all dances in this key, thus stripping them of any suggestion of eroticism. But, and credit is to be given to Mircea Păduraru for bringing forth this frame of mind of the eminent folklorist, while doing this, Ovidiu Bîrlea falls in his own trap, because the words and descriptions he is choosing for the description of the dances reveal a hidden sexual hint, unknown to himself, but even more pregnant. It is as if the sexuality repressed from the interpretation of dance had found a way to go in the sunlight, despite the conscient intentions of the author.

After an analysis conducted in such a sharp manner, far from mincing his words, Mircea Păduraru affirms: “To archaize the sexual folklore, so full of strength and violence, seeing in it fertility rites, apotropaic functions, etc., is to diminish it, almost to falsify it” (p. 270). The accusation is so serious, that the author seems to feel the need to tame it, since he immediately continues by asking rhetorically if Ovidiu Bîrlea’s text does not contain a double meaning, that is, an interpretation in an archaic key and an allusion to the reader, in order to reveal his own ideas, opposed to the communist doctrine. This interpretation is refuted instantly, but what remains is the idea of protecting the erotic folklore. For Mircea Păduraru, Ovidiu Bîrlea’s approach has two sides: it reveals the clichés and the idiosyncrasies of the communist regime and, in the same time, it is trying to safeguard the erotic folklore (present both at Creangă and in folklore texts) from the communists ban: “by the

fact that in these texts he finds arguments for reconstituting an archaic mentality (accepted, even conjured by the communist establishment), the ethnologist is scoring both disciplinary and politically” (p. 271). And the consequence does not fail to come, again, empathically expressed: “Although the width and versatility of Bîrlea’s interests are recommending him as probably the most important ethnologist from the communist era, in this matter, his opinions are by no means out of the box” (p. 273).

The volume closes with a short discussion of the approach of another important folklorist, Petru Caraman. The author of a monumental comparatist ethnology volume, *Descolindatul în Orientul și Sud-Estul Europei* (“Curse-Caroling” Formulas and Rituals in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe), printed posthumously, where he thoroughly analyses the rites of cursing people who refuse to receive the carollers during the Christmas feast, could have not avoid to deal with cursing and other “pornological” texts which populate the mentioned rituals and formulas. Mircea Păduraru remarks that Petru Caraman’s position in this matter seems to be somewhere between Ion Diaconu’s and Ovidiu Bîrlea’s: although he acknowledges the magical role detained by the cursing and violent/vulgar sexual expressions in the rituals he analyses (which is also Diaconu’s stand), he seems to be closer to Ovidiu Bîrlea when “he produces an evolutionary scheme of the magical dimension erosion that starts in sacred archaicity and ends up in ‘pure poetry’, freed from magic” (p. 278). Mircea Păduraru considers that “without a shadow of a doubt, Caraman could have had the ability to analyse the folkloric forms related to pleasure and the erotic and lusty playfulness” (p. 279), and this, I think, is the most benevolent appreciation in the entire book. But, although his appreciation for Petru Caraman is apparent, the Iași-based ethnologist does not forget that the limits imposed by the pudic communist regime and the project of the great folklorists of the era, including Caraman, that is, “the elaboration of an honourable and dignified micronarrative about the Romanian nation” (p. 280), did not allow anyone to err and research a subject so vile as the erotic/obscene folklore was considered to be.

At the end of this presentation, the affirmation with which I started this review, that *Fondul interzis. Incursiune în antropologia folclorului licențios* represents a landmark for the Romanian ethnology, finds its entire value. Mircea Păduraru succeeded a *tour de force*, both by stressing the few published collections containing erotic/sexual folklore and dissecting the fewer works which are analysing it. It is, thus, a book that could be read as a radiography of the Romanian society of yesterday and of yore, a pudic society, in the same time admiring a (fake) poetic image of the Romanians and oblivious of the hidden but vigorous dimension of sexuality of the same Romanians. Mircea Păduraru puts a mirror in front of this society, in front of us, forcing us to see the hypocrisy and the want of professionalism of those who choose not to take in consideration this part of the folklore. And after mirroring ourselves in it, we could acknowledge the new way of thinking this landmark book opens for us. Some researchers already took this path. Some others will follow, but nobody will ignore this book. And the author did not say his last word, because the second volume of *Fondul interzis*... is on its way. Let us hope it will be at least as good as the first one.