

A DIFFERENT WAY OF READING SCHOOL MEMORIES

(Considerations on the volume *7th Grade A Easy sketches*,

author **Marta D. Radulescu**)

Elena ILIE^{*}, Ana and Alexandra ILIE^{}**

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A notable segment of memorialistic literature is represented by the years spent in school. In Romanian literature, this type of «memories» and their authors is considerable: Costache Negruzzi, Ion Creangă, Mihail Sadoveanu, Alexandru Vlahuță, I. L. Caragiale, Barbu Stefanescu Delavrancea and... I will stop here for space reasons only. Some of them have become familiar to us during our own school years, as these memories have become integral part of study.

I must confess that I haven't, until recently, read the book written by Marta D. Rădulescu¹: the volume *Clasa VII a A Schițe ușoare*² (7th Grade A Easy sketches), edited in 1931 by Scrisul Românesc S. A. Craiova in two editions. Both editions can be found in the Museum of Braila Memorialist Section's well endowed book collection; one book belonged to Vasile Băncilă, and bears his annotations³, and another, from the second edition, belonged to D. P. Perpessicius and, on the top first page is dedicated to: *Dsale/Domnului Perpessicius/Omagiu distins și recunoscător al autoarei,/cu ocazia ediției a doua./Marta D. Rădulescu/Cluj 25 XI 931*⁴ (To/Mr Perpessicius/ Distinguished and grateful homage of the author/ on the occasion of the second edition/ Marta D. Radulescu/Cluj 25 XI 931). Exquisite calligraphy, in black ink. Clue of the author's age: 19 years! To these first information add that she was the daughter of a University professor, (Dan Rădulescu, University of Cluj, 1919-1940), that she was, originally, from the Kingdom of Moldova and Muntenia, and that the atmosphere and the «events» sketched in this textbook all depict life at «Cluj's first girl's high school». The first because it was, quite literally, the first school for girls in Transylvania, opened in 1919 by the Dirigent Council, and the first, also, because it acquired a prestige unaltered by time. Although both owners of this textbook had close links to the school environment, this book was in theirrr respective libraries for different reasons: Perpessicius studied it with the literary critic's interest, whereas Vasile Băncilă was strictly interested in the learning process. Teacher by excellence, Vasile Bancila has cultivated this inclination up until, from political reasons, he was forced to give up teaching.

«7th Grade A» by young Marta D. Radulescu can be classified as memorialistic literature from the first years of school, with distinguished forefathers in Romanian literature, who gave the best examples of this type of literature, such as mentioned before. Perpessicius assessed it as «a highly amusing documentary... of secondary school life».

Without highlighting the highs and lows of literary style, we cannot ignore, nevertheless, certain educational and teaching qualities, even though the volume is, modestly and delicately titled, «Easy sketches» - which is also illustrated by the titles of the sketches: *Exam in philosophy, Law class, Rehearsal for the baccalaureate, Exam of hygiene etc.*

This is a subject worthy of attention inasmuch Marta D. Rădulescu's book did not pass unnoticed by the literary critics of the time and the literary history. Correctly by Perpessicius,

* Muséographe "D. P. Perpessicius Memorial House", Braila Museum.

** The translators of this text.

¹ Marta D. Radulescu (1912-1959), writer and poet; member of the Romanian Writers Society, since 1933. Studies: Cluj Highschool „Regina Maria” and the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy, University of Bucharest.

² Photo 1.

³ Photo 2.

⁴ Photo 3.

condescendingly by Eugen Lovinescu, acidly by Pompiliu Constantinescu, the most important Romanian critics have formulated a point of view on this volume of sketches «7th Grade A».

For the purpose of my study, I will resort to this book from the perspective of two important men of culture, represented by important collections in the Museum of Braila: Vasile Băncilă and D. P. Perpesicius.

For Vasile Băncilă, this was an interesting read, as he has written on the side of the pages, with the declared intention to use it on his studies about school. For example, he remarks the «dark humor» and the «nicknames» in the sketch *Scaloi*.⁵ I will reproduce a fragment, for the picturesque of the text and the imaginative richness of 7th grade pupils, worthy of a dictionary of nicknames: () Mrs Giubea is «moima», Miss Mărcuțiu «the dwarf», Father Vulcan is «Bampire», «răskirata» (nota bene: with a k, n.n) is Madam Mucerea, who usually sits like an old cowboy, with a leg in the N. and another in the S., «Encyclopedia» is Mrs Badea, teacher of German who has an answer for everything. The Madam Principal is «Missa», The Principal «Moș Dirî», and Mrs Socaciu, teacher of Physics, is «scorpio» and «naja».

Vasile Băncilă is glad to follow a special trait of Romanian interwar education, which is «humor»! In the sketch *Limba română* (Romanian language, o.n.) he identifies a branch of comedy which he names «humor on command» - of the teachers, of course! (On a side note, Vasile Băncilă was a restless defender of pupil's rights, and in the name of the «active school», en vogue in the first half of the 19th century, he promoted not only interactive teaching methods but also democratic principles in the relationship teacher – student). But I digress. On the matter of «humor on command», he believes that «*Nevertheless, this humor is not completely useless: the pupils need to laugh. See Alcsandri's joke at the Junimea*». ⁶ When the humor is extreme and hurts, our critic is always protecting the personality and sensitivity of the pupil. As he is an adept of patterns and systems, he identifies another category of humor, which he believes is practiced knowingly by the teachers: «*They torture the class like it was prey. They torture the pupil's souls.*»⁷ He continues with another category: *imitation humor*⁸, whose author is generally the pupil. From Marta Rădulescu's text it is understood that this kind of situation is determined by the attitude of the teacher. Maybe this is why Vasile Băncilă doesn't comment and takes pupils' side.

«*Making faces humor* another category of humor, has, as root and developmental idea, the text «*În fața oglinzii*» (In front of the Mirror, o.n.). Vasile Băncilă appreciates this so much that he covers an entire margin of page with his comments: «*Children laugh about their face as if they are laughing about an actor. The novelty of making faces amuses them (which is exactly why they are making faces). They care less about becoming ugly, as we say to them. We're not right in condemning them. The child looks in the mirror with the delight of the uncultivated adult (to see himself), as in the theater! Here's a new type of humor in school, in a child: the mirror is for him a scene of burlesque theater: in front of the mirror the child is dual – an actor and a spectator. For the child has a great ease to consider himself as someone from outside (the child says: Ion, Gigi... are here, but Ion or Gigi are himself!). The mirror reflects a role in child's life (from another point of view, he doesn't need it!) It's his first menagerie! See the power of instinct in children. And this is what brings them in front of the mirror.*»⁹

«*The kindness and the value of humor*» in school are another two determinations of the educational and instructional act which are pointed out in Vasile Băncilă's «easy sketches». Smiling in school, thinks Băncilă, is «*even more valuable than the comedic act in itself. Laughter is a flower of the soul*». ¹⁰ Revealing his preoccupation with child psychology, he makes a connection between the candid laughter of children and the comedy of school life, exemplifying only the second part of the relationship, suggesting that behind the candor of the child, the pupil can generate jokes about

⁵ P. 20, writing in black ink.

⁶ P. 48

⁷ P. 49.

⁸ P. 55, *Marga învață lecția*.

⁹ P. 122-123, *În fața oglinzii*.

¹⁰ P. 115, *Profesori dragi*.

teachers: «*V. (see; note) and how the children hang things behind the teachers backs or put stuff in their pockets*». A page further, another notation will also be used in subsequent studies of Vasile Băncilă: The psychology of female adolescence. At the end of the sketch he decides: “*See this piece for the role of the mirror in the life of the child and adolescents. Let's see how it is when talking about boys*”.

What is the motivation of this interest of Vasile Bancila in Marta Radulescu's text? At that time, the interest of the readers towards Marta d. Radulescu's sketches had its origins in the humorous way that she describes the teachers, which in turn caused a favourable opinion among the pupils. Vasile Băncilă is not in this situation in 1927 or a few decades after, the period when he makes his notations for “7th Grade A”. He finds himself more in the role of the teacher or school inspector. He would be rather offended from the point of view of his status. However, teacher, school and especially devoted student, has precedence over the authority represented by the teacher - a teacher or professor.

So Vasile Bancila's interest is scientific and connected with the importance of such "memories" in child psychology: “*It was necessary to wait on the one hand, the methodical offensive spirit of modern science, and on the other hand, memories from childhood of some writers, as well as affinities of the female souls, which, in our times have devoted themselves with the soul of a child to the work on education, in order to study the nature of child psychology!*”¹¹

Going back to Perpessicius and the volume in his library, we think that this is not the one on which the critic worked, more so because there is no evidence of his marks on the text. His notes appeared have appeared on the first edition. The words of Perpessicius are in part appreciation and in part an account of the sensible parts in the author's work: «[...]the author possesses a good 'hand' at caricatures”¹² or «Miss Marta D. Rădulescu [...] has this creative instinct and her talent will only have to gain from the internalizing and humanizing the subjects”¹³. Perpessicius is also very careful with the young girl's feelings in the observations that he makes: “I will not reproach [...] anything else but the ending of that trial of conscience “In front of the mirror” (*În fața oglinzii*), small inquisitorial of the school and its artificiality and which sounds a bit dark...”¹⁴. On the other hand, Vasile Băncilă found in the same sketch ideas of future study of the child's psychology.

We also find in Perpessicius the feeling of voluptuousness in the reading of Radulescu's texts: «[...] the author has a good hand at caricatures, thanks to which she sketches numerous 'beasts' of school life».¹⁵ Here is where the discreet Perpessicius and the elegant critic, the pupil Dumitru P. Panaitescu, school award winner, mentioned many a times, find here the place where they can express their inevitable troubles with school life!

And once again, in the case of Marta Radulescu, Perpessicius proves himself to be the exegetic which does not eliminate, does not break wings of people who wish to fly. In *Opere*, vol. 6, p. 202, speaking of the «seal of approval» that Marta Rădulescu got by writing «7th Grade», and «I am Student», and understanding the destiny, present and future, of a young writer, says: those written volumes «[...] give away qualities which will be encouraged to flourish by future experiences and a more attentive self-critic. Because the style of Miss Marta Radulescu, which might seem, at a first glance, easy and fun, contains a vein of humanity which is waiting for its time.»

The other later writings of Marta Radulescu never got appreciation as good as this one, a fact which is established by the history and critic of literature.

Pompiliu Constantinescu also appreciated the biographical sketches of Marta Rădulescu, in an article in “*Vremea*”, although its point of view is more acid, at least compared to that of Perpessicius:

¹¹ Vasile Bancila, *Filosofia vârstelor*, Editura Anastasia, București, 1997, p. 136.

¹² Perpessicius, quote, V, p. 141.

¹³ Idem.

¹⁴ Idem.

¹⁵ Idem.

"What this nice debutante is missing, in all honesty, is passing from copy to a new original, melted in the synthesis of fiction. The art starts here".

Interesting in what the echoes of the sketches of Marta Rădulescu are concerned, apart from the notes of the literary critics, are information comprised in *Epilog la ediție a II-a* (Second edition epilogue, o.n.), with the explanation title *Drept corespondență cu cititori* (Correspondence to the readers, o.n.). These lines belong to Marta: «To the writer's surprise, «7th Grade A» had an unexpected echo. The first edition was not only exhausted in the first three months, but the benevolence of the critics – with only one amusing exception, (o.n.- we shall explain!)- was unanimous; the funny author saw herself the object of proofs of sympathy and curiosity which, usually, are enjoyed by the artists of theater and film. In their nice letters, the readers, unknown to me, have requested my autograph and illustrated cards with my photo.» Indeed, the text of the second edition is preceded by the photograph of young¹⁶ Marta Rădulescu. Easily retouched, the portrait is a fine example of inter-war feminine beauty. Nothing suggests the literary and artistic inclinations of the author, who has a preoccupied look, with a delicate coiffure, longing gaze, carefully chosen position in front of the camera. No trace of irony or humor, both which are pervasive in her texts. Rather nice, dreamer, romantic. And attractive, as observed by the contemporaries.

Returning to the «amusing exception» invoked by the author in the quote above, besides a critical position triggered mostly by hurt feelings, we notice, not without surprise, a note of sarcasm and contempt, determined by the fact that the author is the daughter of a university professor; and the contempt does not stop here! With a fury which I personally have encountered only in the pages of protelcultist critic, the contrary opinions «reveal»: «The awful hate towards Romanians from Ardeal.»¹⁷ And towards the orthodox religion in Ardeal!: «If you don't like religion and the church in Ardeal, why have you come to Ardeal? Do you think I have suffered the misery of Hungarian prisons, and the 800 thousand have given their life, so that those coming from the sedentary part of the war can come here and mock the Romanians from Ardeal and bring them in the despicable situation of being understood by the Hungarians? You are wrong, Mademoiselle!»¹⁸

The fury of the attack launched by Adelina Istrate, who reviewed this volume! Apparently, this is a pen name of a member of the Church, which puts me in a tight spot: by invoking the «ethnic origin of the professor's daughter», the person reviewing the volume suggests, without subtlety, that thus «We understand the purpose of this slurring of the Romanian institution»¹⁹ (the school, o.n.).

If only it is a unique position, it is difficult to understand and blame only personal grudge.

And here is how the sketches of Marta D. Rădulescu, although «easy», have revealed a theme of reflection which I intend to explore in depth in the future. Maybe I will also decipher it!

¹⁶ photo 4

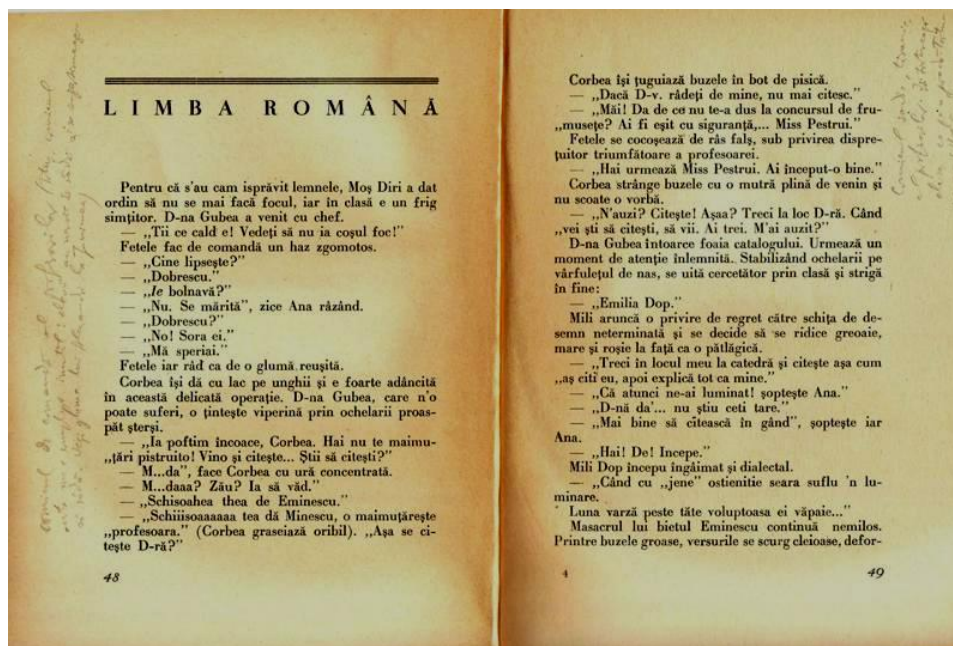
¹⁷ Marta D. Rădulescu, quote, p. 189

¹⁸ Idem, p. 190

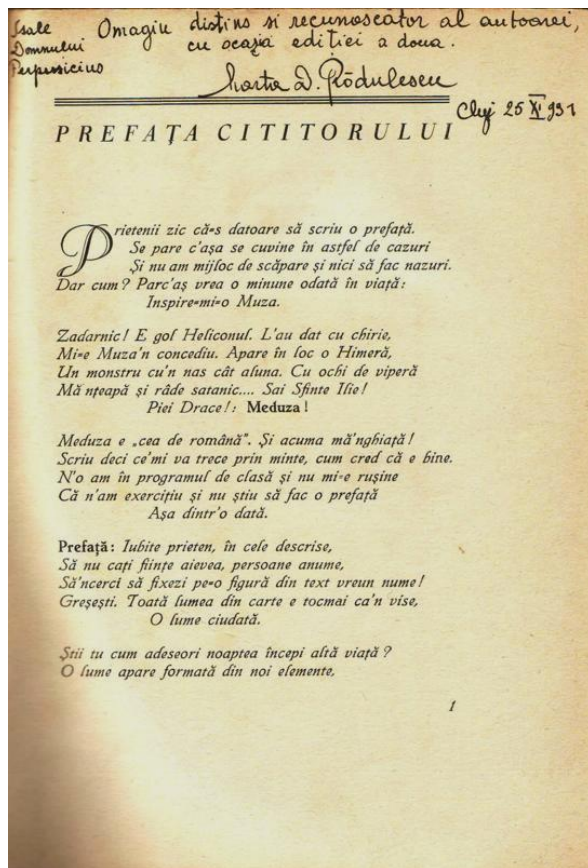
¹⁹ Idem, p. 191



1. Cover of the 1st edition, 7th Grade A Easy sketches, Marta D. Radulescu.



2. Pages with annotations/ comments by Vasile Băncilă.



3. Page with the author's dedication for D. P. Perpessicius.



4. Portrait of the author (second edition volume).