

# Cotadi and Dragomir

Urmuz

## Translator's Note:

### Work in Progress: Sketches and Novellas.... Almost.... Futurist

In one life he was Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău, clerk at the Supreme Court in Bucharest; in another life he was Urmuz, creator of visionary literary compositions. During the day he was a civil servant, and at night a composer of symphonies and sonatas.

Urmuz was born in 1883 in the Kingdom of Romania. He is considered by many to be at the root of the twentieth-century modernist global revolution in literature and art, and has been identified as a major source of influence on Romanian writers such as Tudor Arghezi,<sup>1</sup> George Ciprian,<sup>2</sup> Tristan Tzara, and Eugene Ionesco. His known oeuvre is comprised of a collection of eight short stories, covering no more than fifty pages, which became known in Romanian literature under the title *Pagini Bizare* (Bizarre Pages).

Written in the decade before the First World War, Urmuz's stories first circulated orally, and were performed in Bucharest's bohemian circles by a few of his actor friends who, over the years, had committed his compositions to memory. It wasn't until 1922 that his work was first published.

Urmuz made his literary debut in 1922 in the newly established monthly magazine *Cugetul Românesc*, edited by Tudor Arghezi.<sup>3</sup> The invitation to publish from Arghezi, who was already an established modernist poet, must have pleased Urmuz, but at the same time he expressed reluctance. After much consideration, he agreed on condition that his contribution appear under a pseudonym. Unwilling to use his real name for fear of being discovered by the Court, Demetrescu-Buzău, with Arghezi as godfather, became Urmuz. The collaboration between the two resulted in the first publication of three of Urmuz's tales. He would publish nothing else during his lifetime.

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<sup>1</sup> Tudor Arghezi (1880-1967), poet, novelist, and essayist, one of the foremost Romanian writers.

<sup>2</sup> George Ciprian (1883-1968), actor and playwright, connected with the emergence of the theater of the absurd.

<sup>3</sup> *Cugetul Românesc* (Romanian Thought) was co-edited by Arghezi with poet Ion Pillat.

On a late November night in 1923, in a park in Bucharest, Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău committed suicide by shooting himself in the head with a revolver.

The mood of alienation, imaginative logic, the inner space of intense psychological tension in his strikingly original tales, as well as the author's tragic destiny, profoundly influenced a group of avant-garde poets, for whom the discovery of the mysterious Urmuz was as significant as the discovery of the works of the enigmatic Comte de Lautréamont was for the French surrealists. In 1930 Sașa Pană, Geo Bogza, and Ilarie Voronca visited Urmuz's mother, Eliza Ionescu-Buzău, to request access to her son's archives for the purpose of publishing in book form, for the first time, his collected works. To their astonishment, Mrs. Ionescu-Buzău produced a big trunk full of her son's manuscripts, containing thousands of pages of literary and musical compositions, as well as two large notebooks of thoughts and maxims, too precious or too sensitive in her eyes to disclose, since she withdrew them before the three visitors had a chance to examine them. They soon realized that the numerous literary manuscripts written in exercise notebooks contained the same cycle of tales, written, corrected, and re-written over and over again, with slight changes. Pană's job as an editor was to find the last version, and that was the text he sent to the press. His own small press, *unu*, published the first edition of Urmuz's complete works in 1930 under the title *Algazy & Grummer* (Pană 87-88). Meanwhile, the trunk, with everything in it, vanished without a trace, and so the works of Urmuz travelled through time in the 1930 *unu* edition. Later, while retaining the text edited by Pană, the title was changed to *Pagini Bizare*, which Urmuz himself had suggested to Argezei in 1922.

Since his suicide in 1923, all traces of Demetrescu-Buzău vanished from the public archives; and of the enigmatic Urmuz, only two manuscripts survive.

In the mid-1950s two Urmuz manuscripts entered the collection of the Romanian Academy: a loose page with the text "După furtună" ("After the Storm"), written in 1922 for publication in *Cugetul Românesc* and given to the Academy by the Pillat family, and a notebook of unknown provenance, dated in the catalogue description to circa 1913-1922. Titled *Schițe și nuvele... aproape... futuriste* (Sketches and Novellas... Almost... Futurist), the notebook entered the Academy's collection in 1955, and is a variant of the published text, a work in progress, containing all Urmuz's pieces, including "Fuchsiada" ("The Fuchsiad"), his last and longest work.

The existence of the notebook had been known to critics and researchers since it entered the archives, but for mysterious reasons, it was never published or commented upon at length until 2012.<sup>4</sup> On my first encounter with Urmuz's red

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<sup>4</sup> *Nuvele și schițe... aproape... futuriste*, ed. Ion Pop. An English translation of one story from the manuscript has been published so far ("The Funnel and Stamate," trans. Florina Kostulias [Jenkins]).

notebook at the Romanian Academy Library I was filled with a mixture of excitement and disbelief. Might this be the only surviving manuscript from Urmuz's lost family archives?

Apart from the main body of the text and corrections attributed to Urmuz, the notebook is filled with marginalia, notes written in pencil and ink in different hands. A set of marginal comments, written in ink in a different hand from that of the main text and other marginalia, signed and dated to the 1950s, make observations on the differences between the notebook and the 1930 *unu* edition. These annotations belong to Eliza Vorvoreanu, Urmuz's sister, and it seems almost certain that the Academy acquired the notebook from her.

References in the text of "The Fuchsiad" to George Enesco's Third Symphony, which was composed in 1918, certainly date the notebook between 1918 and 1922. Upon closer examination, apart from the main body of the text and corrections made by Urmuz, the marginal notes in pencil are in at least two different hands. Comments such as: "use old form," "more piquant and concise the old version," "long sentence," "end here plus one sentence," as well as typographical specifications suggest that this text was edited in preparation for publication, and as such, it may date precisely from 1922.

The notebook, now dated and with its provenance solved, is perhaps the sole survivor of the legendary trunk; it is a unique and meaningful object capturing Urmuz barely a year before his death, writing one of his final drafts, agonizing over each comma, word, and sentence. He did not regard his stories as finished pieces; they remain works in progress.

Some of the stories are only slightly different from the established text, while others depart from it more drastically. "Cotadi and Dragomir" is one of the short stories that differs quite significantly from the 1930 *unu* edition. In translating this manuscript version, I found myself mirroring Urmuz's method by producing countless variations. Urmuz expresses his alienation through language, and in translating the piece I endeavored to retain the profound uncanniness of the text and to remain faithful to it, while being also mindful of the oral origins of his lifelong literary project.

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## Cotadi and Dragomir

Cotadi is short and shaped like a cube; he has bulging muscles, and his legs are bent twice in the outward direction, and once inwards... His raven-black hair is covered in dandruff, and stacked with sparkling tortoise-shell combs...

Cotadi is almost never able to stand up straight on account of his attire, a suit made of wooden tiles encasing him like a sort of body armor. Although he finds it most uncomfortable, he wears it with total self-abnegation underneath the tasseled peasant shirt with which he never parts...

A peculiarity of Cotadi is that, quite unwittingly, he doubles in width and loses all color, but only twice a year, when the sun arrives at the two solstices...

Cotadi's greatest pleasure – apart from applying on the soft skin of his underchin, with gum Arabic, different types of buttons and dead insects – is to entice the occasional client, from behind the counter where he sits, into all sorts of interesting conversations, until he manages, speaking faster and faster, to be contradicted at least once. In retaliation, he slams the floor with a wooden crate top fixed with screws on his back, just above the buttocks, in a display meant to show off his authority and expertise in the matter...

It is also known of Cotadi that he only feeds on ants' eggs which he ingests through a funnel, and then expels as soda water; and that, for six months a year, he is sealed in a champagne bottle, and every time when he releases the cork, he endeavors to divide it into inalienable lots to be distributed to the rural population in the hope that he can solve in this manner, totally empirically and primitively, the mystifying agrarian question...

Of Cotadi's origins and relatives nothing is known for certain...It is supposed, however, that he comes from an aristocratic family, whose last remaining descendant is an old aunt living in a distant quarter of the city, in the *mahala*<sup>5</sup>... She sends Cotadi daily letters with witty epigrams in the Macedonian dialect<sup>6</sup>, as well as tiny packages filled with chaff, hoping to turn him into a brute and force him to return to her while she's still alive, the inheritance he is entitled to after her death...She sends all this stuff to Cotadi through a very clever boy with nickel-plated ears and striped trousers, named Tudose...

Cotadi, who is a practical man, puts up with the old woman's eccentricities, finding consolation from all life's miseries in the true friendship shown to him by Dragomir, an old school mate and best pal....

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<sup>5</sup> Translator's note: "Mahala" is a word of Turkish origin meaning "neighborhood." After replacing the medieval *enorie* (parish), the *mahala* had remained an urban administrative unit until early twentieth century when it officially became "suburban district." Its connotations have varied over time, ranging from neutral to negative; here it seems to suggest a space where the faded Oriental ambiance of the past mixes with Western modernity and progress.

<sup>6</sup> Editors' note: The Aromanian dialect of Romanian, also known as Macedo-Romanian, spoken chiefly in the southern Balkans.

Dragomir is very tall, snub-nosed and has dark, round and mobile eyes. His neck is cylindrical, lacking an “Adam’s Apple”. Dangling – like a metric tape measure – over the nape of his neck are two tufts of fine, shiny black hair dripping with limpid...French oil...

Dragomir is very kind-hearted...Aware of the exquisite and enjoyable aesthetic pleasure his friend seeks, when he sees that Cotadi, despite all the bangs to the floor is unable to impose his superiority over the simpleton who dares to contradict him – then Dragomir comes to his aid, and to vanquish the obstinate client, he elongates his neck with a cardboard supplement – measuring one meter and twenty – covered in graceful ivy and other climbing plants, and ending at the top with an instrument showing “the four cardinal points”...

For this important service, and many others, Dragomir is amply rewarded, being permitted to dine at Cotadi’s, the menu always consisting of wood-wine and black halva in a gaseous state.

As for Dragomir’s family, they no longer have any worries, they graze in the fields and graze in the pastures of one of Cotadi’s domains in the country...

But nothing has been heard of these two great heroes in a long time...

The latest version to circulate is that Cotadi, a savvy business man, recognizing the potential arising from the rich resources within his friend’s skull, requested permission to take his head into use... Struggling to come up with an answer, Dragomir, who had been without a brain until now, observed that he had spontaneously grown one (according to the theory that the function creates the organs)...But, to his great misfortune, his newly developed brain caused all the oil to be spilled out of his head...

Left oil-less and futureless, but having gained a mind instead, Dragomir realized that neither he nor Cotadi were able to take care of business, and so he resolved to devote the rest of his existence to cultural endeavors and the instruction of future generations...For this purpose, Dragomir activated his neck supplement, and without wasting a single moment, he rushed to an astronomical observatory, where he was hired on the spot as an instrument showing “the four cardinal points”...

As for Cotadi, filled with remorse for his idea and what he did to Dragomir, he too requested to be hired at the same observatory, next to his former friend, as instrument showing the exact two moments when the sun arrives at solstices...

Conclusion and Moral: “Only through action can you contribute to the common good, and only in this manner can you justify your right to existence.”

Translated from the Romanian by  
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