

## Book Review:

**Ionela-Carmen Banța, *Ovidiu Bîrlea. Critical edition from the original documentary funds*, National Museum of Romanian Literature Publishing House, Aula Magna Collection, 2013**

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### 1. About author and book



In 2013, at the Publishing House of the Romanian National Literature Museum, the light of the printing press was a work that would record and disseminate the fruits of an extensive research on the Bîrlea brothers, made by a reference frame of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Craiova: university doctor Carmen Banta, under the coordination of professor Nicolae Panea. With a rich research activity, Mrs. conf. Dr. Carmen Banta revolves around vast fields such as folklore, ethnology, cultural anthropology, Romanian literature, etc., supporting many courses in related fields at the Faculty of Letters in Craiova.

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## 2. Structure and content

The central personality of the work is Ovidiu Bîrlea (1917-1990), a well-known Romanian folklorist, writer, researcher and ethnologist, brother of the historian, theologian and Monsignor Octavian Bârlea (1993-2005).

The book is structured in two parts: the first part comprises a theoretical synthesis, which is divided into four chapters, and the second one brings together in a corpus the most relevant texts from the correspondence of the folklorist. To this is added a Preliminary Argument, the bibliography, the abstract in English and the contents.

In the first chapter, the author outlines the biographical profile of the folklorist Ovidiu Bîrlea, using two complementary categories of sources: direct sources (folkloric interviews, personal correspondence) and indirect sources (testimonials of some colleagues and his collaborators; other specialists who have leaned on the subject, including the lady academician Sabina Ispas, the file from the Securitate of the brother of the folklorist, Monsignor Octavian Bârlea). After graduating from primary school in the native village and continuing gymnasium in Baia de Arieș, the young Ovidiu Bîrlea manages to enter the military high school, where he follows the school of officers. After finishing high school studies, he studies modern philology at the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Bucharest, where he participates in the famous sociological campaigns in the Dâmbovnic and Transnistria area, where he discovers and develops his passion for folk culture, the German paradigm to approach it paving his intellectual training and subsequent work. He is frequenting the courses of Nicolae Iorga, which he describes from a novel perspective, broadly presented in the pages of this book. He is a disciple of the folklorists Dimitrie Caracostea and Constantin Brăiloiu, from the latter he learns the meaning of the sociology of the folkloric product (Banța, 2013: 23) and the art of interaction with the respondents.

Completion of studies coincided with the onset of a bad period in his biography. He is sent to the front, taken prisoner and subjected to living conditions characteristic of the Soviet gulag, which will both psychically and physically mark the subsequent course of his existence. He then works at the Department of Nationalities and the Institute of Folklore, where he holds important leadership positions, refining and improving his folklore skills. He records over a thousand popular creations on tapes, of which he transcribes 154, which formed the basis of his famous works, *Folklore Anthology* (3 volumes, 1966) and *Folklore Research Method* (1969). He will continue to carry out numerous research fields, the results of which were reflected in reference works for Romanian folklore, ethnology and sociology. He will be pursued by a series of failures in occupying high academic positions and, at the same time, goodwill, failure justified by his political non-involvement, doubled by a radical

anti-Communist position, expressed as direct as possible. The first chapter ends with the full reproduction of the strictly secret record of the folklorist, found by the author in his brother's Security file, which reveals some particularly interesting details, but which I find it inappropriate to provide in the review of the book.

Proving a formidable capacity for synthesis and comprehension, the author reconstructs in the second chapter the evolution of Ovidiu Bîrlea's folklore, compiling in this regard all the documentary resources available: manuscripts, epistles, testimonies, other scientific works. The chapter starts with the reproduction of some sequences from the correspondence of the folklorist, in which he not only reveals the difficulties he has when he writes the conditions of the creative and innovative spirit, but also carries out an autocratic reflection on his own texts. The work of the folklorist is presented to us, taking into account the particularities of each stage of creation. An element of originality is conferred to us by the classification made by the author, which distinguishes five taxonomic categories in which the texts collected and exploited by the folklorist fall: I. The ritual of the dead, II. Funeral lamentations (Reconstruction) Feregi, III. Funeral wreaths IV. Lamentations parody V. Recruitment lamentations.

The third chapter is dedicated to the sketch of the troubled destiny of the historian Octavian Bârlea, the brother and the confidant of the folklorist, to whom the author dedicates a large number of pages and in the *Vatican Voice of Romanians* (1968-1974). *Documenti di archivio, Aius Publishing House, Craiova, 2015.*

### **3. Sociological and methodological relevance**

Through an effort of remarkable originality, the author reconstitutes in the fourth chapter the whole family tree of the Bîrlea family, starting in this direction exclusively from the correspondence available. The technique of personal correspondence analysis, as part of the method of analysis of social documents, acquires new methodological valences, thanks to the ingenuity of the author. In addition to giving us important objective information about the folklorist and his family, and especially about the whole family relationship system, he puts us in front of Ovidiu Bîrlea radically different from the one presented in the first two chapters. The cold, communicative, lucid, and profoundly rational man in the first half of the book comes in obvious antithesis with the sensitive man, interested in his family life, able to wait many times for the turmoil of inner feelings. Thanks to the methods and sources of information used, the author presents Ovidiu Bîrlea in his entirety: as a professional, whose quill has normalized Romanian folklore, but also as a social actor, oscilating

permanently between reason and affectivity, between professional life and personal life . The correspondence inserted in the corpus of texts also reveals a great deal of information not only about the protagonist's psycho-intellectual profile and the social micro-universe in which he acted, but also about the socio-historical reality in which he lived and wrote, his relationship with the exiled brother being probably a paradigm for that historical period and the related social context.

Through the present paper, as well as many other materials (books and articles) signed by the associate professor Carmen Banta, the author puts us in front of an imperative approach for the Romanian ethnological and sociological science: the monograph of the interwar and post-war personalities, in circles of specialists. Restoring the link with interwar thinking, both at the spiritual and epistemic level, and rehabilitating the elements marginalized by the communist ideology criminality, should guide the concerns of more and more researchers in the field. The road opened by Mrs. Carmen Banta, updating and rehabilitating the contribution and memory of the Bîrlea brothers, should, in my opinion, continue to be the monograph of other resonance names of the Romanian socio-anthropological and ethnological reflection. Virgil Iuliu Barbat, Ernest Bernea, Traian Brăileanu, Vasile Caramelea, Alexandru Claudiu, Anton Golopenția - these are just a few names waiting for the rehabilitation and updating of their memory and ideas, as well as their placement in the wider context of international debates.