

Elisabeth Axmann

*Wege, Städte – Erinnerungen*

Aachen, Rimbaud, 2005, 160 pages, ISBN 978-3-89086-627-7

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This book written by Elisabeth Axmann was published about a decade ago in Aachen. The language is German. I read it almost immediately, as the author presented me a copy shortly after the volume came out of the printing house.

We both thought that the book could be of interest to a larger Romanian audience. My few attempts to find a publisher were unsuccessful and after a while I gave up any kind of inquiry. It was not until the early days of 2015 that, together with Nadia Badrus, who also read the book, liked it and was willing to help me with the translation; and we found the Hora publishing house in Sibiu, interested in carrying out the project. We expect the Romanian version to appear during this fall, with the title *Drumuri, orașe – Amintiri* [Roads, Cities – Remembrances].

However, this is the lesser reason for writing a book review dedicated to this volume published a relatively long time ago.

It is quite an unusual sort of memoir we are dealing with. The author remembers and tells about places and events she has experienced; about people she has known. Yet the emphasis is always on the others, even if the observer is very much present; she never refrains from letting herself speak out. She takes the measure of things and positions herself in relation to them, but always in order to bear witness. Her book fulfils the mission of a person acknowledging the duties of someone who has seen more clearly and understood more thoroughly than many of her fellow humans.

In the case of Elisabeth Axmann, the means to achieve her task comprehend a daring self exposure, involving the vulnerability of the artist who, in order to let her message go through, allows the gaze of the reader into the intimacy of her feelings, judgments, reasoning. Hence the title of the memoir: “roads, cities”. During one’s lifetime, one must travel from one place to another. The title diverts the attention from the person of the author and indicates, through an architectural metaphor, what the talking is about: the world of humans as she has learned to know it.

Apparently offering a clarification of the title-metaphor, the subtitle, “remembrances”, is indeed a plea for accepting the superlative subjectivity of the report that follows. Seldom does a memoir succeed in being at the same time so outspokenly sincere as well as achieving such matter-of-factness. Her manner of writing does a good service to the author in her achieving this performance. Clear and simple, almost dry, her prose – and also her poetry – contains all the tension one can perceive behind the sentences. Nothing is held back, yet everything is mastered and worked through by the artist, who does *les belles lettres* while creating the illusion of merely telling stories of her life.

As for the structure of the book, it seems to follow the random, labyrinthine, sequential succession of our thoughts. However, the parts composing the tale are carefully composed – with the art of someone who knows both how human memory works and what being a writer supposes. The evocation of the cities she lived in and the roads she travelled to reach them is her technique to weave the fabric of the story, to put together an apparently disparate series of glimpses, sounds, characters, times, events – fragments. It is also a knack to catch the passing of time in her writing, uneven and ineffable as we experience it.

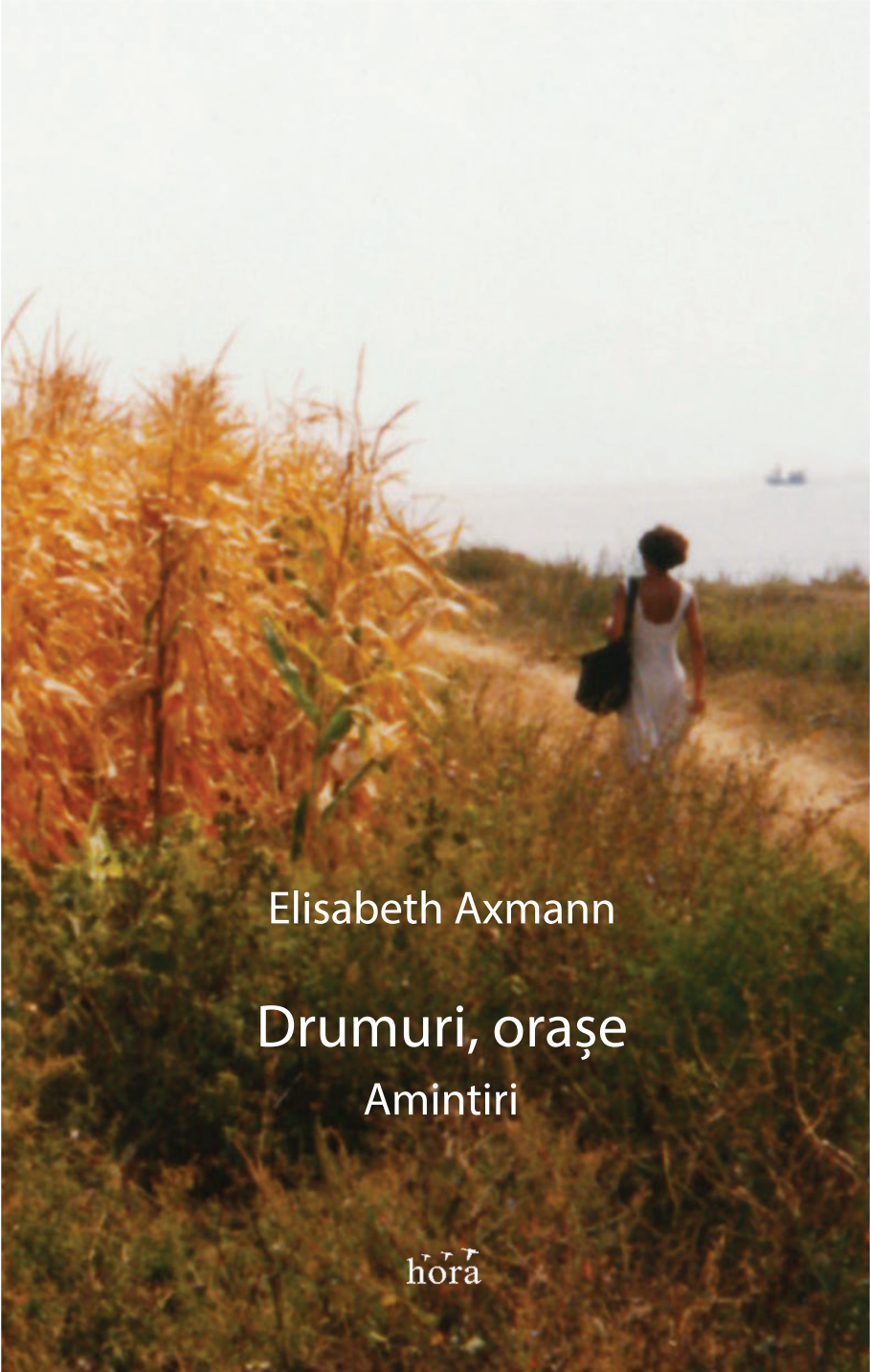
This does not diminish the reality of places and people she remembers. However, the emphasis is rather on the reality of their perception by Axmann herself. The *hic et nunc* of the book is where the story meanders on; it is deliberately shaped by her personal experience. Like the existence of a rainbow, the possibility of the particular account of a specific situation – be it a miniature memory of early childhood or the beginning of the German offensive against the Soviet Union, during the Second World War – is conditioned by the presence of the observer. This is how memory functions and this is what makes this book telling personal stories the account of an experience we all share.

It remains to explain what this memoir has to do with marginal architecture, apart from the metaphor in the title. Cities are to be found everywhere all through its pages; suggestive descriptions abound: of homes, of streets, of urban vistas. Yet, more importantly, architecture is acknowledged in *Wege, Städte* as a fellow witness of the narrator. She often calls it to give testimony, supporting or enhancing her own positions and judgement.

For about the last ten thousand years, sedentary societies have taken for granted the presence of built environment as a depository of collective memories. This statement is even truer in our post-industrial times, where preserving the built heritage has become an everyday practice for planning our milieu. In Elisabeth Axmann's book, this apparent truism is reformulated in a manner so powerful that the reader is left with a sense of discovering not only places the author mentions, such as Storozhynets, Sibiu, Berlin or Brăila, but also places of one's own past, the names of which never occur in the book.

Therefore, Axmann's account of cities is well written architecture – becoming one of the marginals ways to live the built environment. And also a guide to understanding it. Rarely if ever does architectural theory achieve a comparably clear and articulate statement of the truth – ancient, of course – namely that a city is the symbiosis of *urbs* and *civitas*. The built urban environment, something architects and planners are to a large extent responsible of, exists in the proper sense only when it is inhabited. Inhabiting also involves meaning: its accumulation with the passing of time, as well as the capacity of inhabitants to decipher the various semantic strata carried by cities. If the road is necessarily the space between a departure and a destination, this book reminds us that journeying is also a cognitive process and part of inhabiting.

For Elisabeth Axmann, remembering the roads she travelled from cities to cities, the people she met on the way, and writing a truthful, artful and knowledgeable account of all this is a way of life. An exemplary one.



Elisabeth Axmann

Drumuri, orașe

Amintiri

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