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THE WORLD OF THE LIVING DEAD: MYTHICAL REWRITINGS OF HISTORY IN THE POSTAPOCALYPTIC NARRATIVES ABOUT LATE COMMUNISM

The selection of our analytical corpus was influenced by a survey of Romanian literature in the 2000s, when (twenty years after the Romanian Revolution of 1989) novels that aim at the revealing of untold historical truths about the communist past still hold a prominent place¹. In the last ten years, besides fiction, there have appeared many border-line prose titles; they are “writings of the self”, “ego-graphies”² and their main purpose is neither to document a historical time, nor to testify against the horrors (as was the case in the first post-communist decade), but to seek for minor reminiscences, the “trifles” of everyday life. The authors (or the editors of collective volumes) argue explicitly in favor of the “how” of storytelling, and of the modalities that can be used to narrate a personal experience within the wider frames of collective history³.

The novels I shall analyze in what follows were published in 2007-2008 and they are *Orbitor. Aripa dreaptă* [Blinding. The Right Wing] by Mircea Cărtărescu, *Fantomă din moară* [The Ghost in the Mill] by Doina Ruști and *Cine adoarme ultimul* [Whoever Falls Asleep Last] by Bogdan Popescu⁴. These fictions will be approached typologically, as different modalities of “ego-graphies”. By rewriting the past, they shape an identity and point to specific behavioral patterns in the post-communist era. In the analysis of these three novels I focus on structural and

¹ To name just a few titles besides the ones which will be discussed here: Gheorghe Crăciun, *Pupa russă* (2004), Bogdan Suceavă, *Noaptea în care cineva a murit pentru tine* [The Night Somebody Died for You] (2010), Radu Pavel Gheo, *Noapte bună, copii!* [Good Night, Children!] (2010), Lucian Dan Teodorovici, *Matei Brunul* [Matei the Brown] (2011), Bogdan Alexandru Stănescu, *Copilăria lui Kaspar Hauser* [The Childhood of Kaspar Hauser] (2017).

² Many titles were published in the Egografi collection of the Polirom Publishing House: *O lume dispărută* [A Lost World] (2004), *Tovarășe de drum: experiența feminină în comunism* [Feminine Road-Fellows: Women's Experience in Communism] (2008), *Cartea copilăriilor* [The Book of Childhoods] (2016). Other titles, from different publishers, were: *Cum era? Cum aşa...* [How Did It Feel? That's What We Felt...] (2006), *Şi eu am trăit în comunism* [I Too Lived Under Communism] (2017).

³ Marielle Macé (*Styles. Critique de nos formes de vie*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, p. 13), advocates for the centrality of this issue, which she calls “la question foncièrement ouverte, requérante, et toujours réengagée, du *comment* de la vie [...]. Mais aussi comment regarder ce *comment*, comment en parler, lui faire droit, le juger”.

⁴ The last two titles appeared in the Egoproză collection, of the same Polirom Publishing House, a sort of fictional double for the memoir series Egografi.

thematic features, following the emergence of literary motifs and the stylistic forms they trigger, because they correspond to ways of life. The recurrent structural or stylistic elements tell something about the memory conducts, the destiny schemata, and the time configurations that are produced while reading and that can be regarded as frames of perception in the relation between the self and the world⁵.

The three novels develop against the backdrop of late communism and describe the daily life of some peripheral communities caught in the absurd, depersonalizing treadmill of totalitarian history. The authors share the elements of a common biography: they are actors, victims or witnesses in the events that marked the last decades of the twentieth century and they make use of these biographical details in the creation of their protagonists and for mapping the fictional spaces.

Considering the structure, the narratives have in common a chronotope fractured between the story remembered in the present and the past of the actually lived life. The bias is caused by the double role played by the narrator-protagonist: the main character is placed in a fragile position and charged with a double mission – to tell his/her own story, while also being the witness to major historical events; to recover his/her own mythical time, the golden age of childhood, which, unfortunately, overlaps with the “Golden Communist Era”. In the resulting double narrative frame, the individual acts as a marginal for the official history but also as a hero (the Savior) in the personal mythical story.

The novels also have a common theme. History is remodeled in accordance with the apocalyptic pattern: the old world is destroyed (with or without the epilogue of a New Jerusalem). These apocalyptic motifs become essential for understanding and appropriating the official discourse, shaping the relationships between the collective and the individual histories. There is also a supernatural element attached to the stories, since all these fictional worlds are haunted by ghosts with uncertain identities, metaphors for an “unfinished past”.

The ways these discourses are constructed place the narratives on the edge between satirical realism, fantastic and magical realism. Each novel is, simultaneously, a historical chronicle and a fairytale; each implies an unsolved contradiction and, consequently, becomes the scene of two colliding styles: the enticingly bright style of magical realism – which recuperates the infantile view of the world – is in confrontation with a grotesque magical realism – which features the adult’s perspective about the horrors of history. The magical manipulation of words (metaphors used literally, defamiliarization of former dead metaphors – as typically magical realist procedures) also stresses the tension between the historical referent and its fictional representation.

⁵ Marielle Macé, *Styles*, p. 32: “gestes, rythmes, habitudes, habits, habitats, paroles, costumes, coutumes, pratiques du corps, pratiques du temps”.

How to Tell the Individual Story of a Collective Past

After introducing the common thematic, structural, and stylistic features of these novels, we question their relevance in describing certain memory protocols and attitudes towards the past. For this, the protagonists' split identity, the apocalyptic myths, the recurrent ghost motifs and the magical realism stylistic features are interpreted as surface textual forms which facilitate the understanding of a mode of life that, in turn, shapes, in a circular manner, certain existential models that inform the act of reading⁶.

From the perspective described by Yves Citton, the analysis I propose functions as an implicit political gesture, as it mobilizes a chorus of interpretive practices which have the power to make or mar forms of life⁷. Readers are invited to recognize the particular relation of a cultural community to its recent history and to identify the modalities used for shaping a critical narrative about the past. It is a bidirectional act, states Citton: we re-read the past, discovering its new, unexplored semantic virtualities, but, in this past-oriented reading, the present is also given a new legibility. Thus, analyzing the modalities of remembering and rewriting one's (collective and individual) history, one aims at new forms of life characteristic for the post-communist decades.

Blinding, *The Ghost in the Mill* and *Whoever Falls Asleep Last* are Babelic novels because they gather characters representing different generations and social classes, which frequently have conflicting representations of their (presumptive) common past. Different memory practices correspond to different rhythms for relating to the past, to different modes of harmonizing one's time with a shared life⁸. The protagonists-narrators rewrite history as their own (and their communities') story, and repeatedly make connections between the lived and the narrated past. As Michel de Certeau stated, we can read these novels as the fictional embodiment of the radical alterity of the past: writing about the past always implies its reinvention in relation to a permanently oscillating present⁹. These novels "about communism" are, equally, about the present of remembering and also about the present of reading, as each re-reading is a performance that

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 52: "Le comment comme lieu d'émergence des valeurs".

⁷ Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?*, Paris, Editions Amsterdam, 2007, p. 295: "Lire, sélectionner, élire, interpréter, actualiser, c'est toujours affirmer ou mettre en crise (implicite ou explicitement, consciemment ou non), les critères communs qui font d'une multitude d'êtres une collectivité, soit une collection d'individus qui partagent une certaine lecture commune des choses singulières qui les entourent et les constituent".

⁸ Marielle Macé, *Styles*, p. 51: "la façon dont les sujets accordent et désaccordent leur temps dans une vie en commun".

⁹ Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975, p. 59.

implies a certain mode of relating to the past, a certain commemorative *mise en scène* style.

The novels can represent, to a certain extent, fictional forms of archiving collective memory. In Ruști's novel, the Ghost becomes, for Adela Nicolescu, the speaker: “the brand of a consumed history, thrown to the dustbin or deposited in a blog, in a book, finally, in an archive read only by those people convinced, like me, that the story is about them”¹⁰. These narratives “access the past in the minor key, using the grid of personal histories”¹¹. But each of these personal memories stands in a metonymical relation with the Whole. Each peripheral and (apparently, unrepresentative) accident evokes the historical event¹².

Cristina and Dragoș Petrescu emphasize that the act of remembering is always placed in a certain socio-cultural context, and the things one remembers or forgets are selected (rather unconsciously) according to external influences¹³. The modalities used to interpret the past in these novels are influenced by collective memory frames. Although these frames of collective memory should offer a firm zone for intermediating between past and present, collective remembering seems rather insecure. We advance the idea that, given the inconsistent past and the insecure present¹⁴, the historical discourse is replaced by stereotypical and mythological representations of the past. It is at this point that personalized fictional narratives interact with collective representations. The apocalypse and the ghost figures become metaphors, stylistic hallmarks that refer to the complex, ambiguous ways of coping with one's memories.

The Protagonist's Split Identity

The double pose of the protagonist is one way of translating within the text the ambivalent retrieval of the person's past. In Mircea Cărtărescu's novels, the main character is built in the two, terrestrial and metaphysical dimensions. The terrestrial one implies a failed life in a peripheral community: Mircișor, the poor

¹⁰ Doina Ruști, *Fantoma din moară* [The Ghost in the Mill], Iași, Polirom, 2008, p. 171.

¹¹ Andrei Simuț, *Romanul românesc postcomunist între trauma totalitară și criza prezentului. Tipologii, periodizări, contextualizări* [Post-communist Romanian Fiction: Its Location between Totalitarian Trauma and the Crisis of the Present], București, Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, 2015, p. 102.

¹² Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien, I. Arts de faire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990, p. 88.

¹³ Cristina Petrescu, Dragoș Petrescu, “The Canon of Remembering Romanian Communism: From Autobiographic Recollections to Collective Representations”, in Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou, Stefan Troebst (eds.), *Remembering Communism. Private and Public Recollections of Lived experience in Southeast Europe*, I, Budapest – New York, Central European University Press, 2014, p. 53.

¹⁴ Oana Popescu-Sandu, “Let's all freeze up until 2100 or so: Nostalgic Directions in Post-communist Romania”, in Maria Todorova, Zsuzsa Gille (eds.), *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2010, p. 118.

child in the common backyard, the wry, isolated young man, the failed writer. But in a metaphysical dimension, Mircea becomes the Savior: the People of the Book are manipulated by the Sect of the Knowledgeable Ones in order to give birth to their Messiah, the one who will save every single creature of the fictional world by inserting it in the Story.

In Bogdan Popescu's novel the double identity of the two main characters is clearly emphasized: The Student, who is also the son of the Schoolmaster in the Village of Saints, functions as the typical anti-hero: the bullied child, the shy, inadequate youngster, the failed intellectual nicknamed Monstricle, The Drop-Out or "Ectoraș de la oraș" (Principal's town-bred little son). The other one, Foiște, the eternal "teacher on supply for all the subjects", who is old, sick and always drunk, comes to deliver his speech in front of an empty classroom. This "genuine man of letters, endowed with the highest of sensibilities" gives six ample "summer school" lectures to teach the poor pupils the history of their village. The discourses blend the scientific structure of a monograph and the mythical content, creating a false community chronicle, which ranges from prehistoric times (when the archetypal meeting took place between the Ancestor and the Maiden) up to the present. But these two "losers" (in their social, professional and private life), the histrionic and the suicidal, become, in the end, the saviors of their community, two foolish gods that go into the Livid Woods to replace The One Who Sleeps, to dream the lives of the villagers more peacefully and, thus, to soften their destinies. The village caught in the web of chaotic events —whose inhabitants perceive their life as a succession of meaningless catastrophes— is, consequently, in a position to be saved through dreaming.

The Ghost in the Mill focuses on the Ghost and its ambivalence. The apparition is both protective and devastating, both passive and active: it is the effect of an accidental murder and of social collapse, but it further becomes a manipulating agent, destroying the villagers' lives. The mill is "the heart of the village", but also the devouring stomach, a source of life and an instrument of death. These double-sided characters (active/passive, central/peripheral, hero/loser) stand as metaphorical figures for the double relation with one's past: the chronicle of the official history (where the characters had no place to exist and no importance) is rewritten from the apocalyptic perspective, in which the narrator adopts the Creator's view of the world.

History as Apocalypse

Rewriting the collapse of communism in terms of Apocalypse would imply offering a coherent, countervailing story meant to assign meaning to chaotic events

incompatible with a community's representation on history¹⁵. But the use of apocalyptic patterns has different implications in the above-mentioned novels. Rather than unifying dissipated facts under a new meaning, the apocalypse deepens the identity fractures and highlights the passivity of the presumed saviors.

In *Blinding. The Right Wing* there is a continuous tension between damnation and salvation, accompanied by the oscillation between myth and history, between magical and grotesque realism. The book begins like a historical chronicle, suggesting real events: "It was God's year 1989". But the account is loaded with biblical references: "It was like in Noah's time [...] the last year of man on Earth"¹⁶. The Revolution of December is described with hyper-realistic, grotesque details: for example, the burning of the Party member card, signifying metonymically the fall of communism. Nevertheless, these highly symbolic scenes actually recycle canonical *Old Testament* images: e.g. the burnt offerings, the Chosen People, the smoke column, Sodom and Gomorrah:

That night, in an apocalyptic crash, communism was falling in Romania [...] Hundreds of waves of white smoke were rising from every kitchen to the dull sky, merging there, in a thick column that merged, in its turn, with others and others and others coming from all the blocks and all the districts, until a giant column of flickering ashes was rising, as above Sodom and Gomorrah, above București, reaching the sky¹⁷.

This is just one of the multiple occurrences that show how the apocalyptic and the textualist¹⁸ scenarios, the biblical symbolism and the personal myths (of the Knowledgeable Ones, the Elect, the People of the Book) are interrelated. The End of the story is doubled by the end of History: an entire world is destroyed in order to be transposed into a New Jerusalem. Each inhabitant of București is enlightened by the flames of the Holy Spirit, changed into a new man¹⁹, stripped of

¹⁵ For a more detailed analysis of postmodern apocalyptic narratives see Lucian Boia, *La fin du monde. Une histoire sans fin*, Paris, La Découverte, 1999, Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformations: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination*, New York, Lexington Books, 2008, and Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

¹⁶ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Orbitor. Aripa dreaptă* [Blinding. The Right Wing], București, Humanitas, 2007, pp. 10-12 *passim*.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 294. When not specified otherwise, the English translations from Romanian are mine.

¹⁸ Textualism denotes a literary movement dominant in the Romanian prose of the 1980s influenced by the French writers grouped around the Tel Quel literary magazine. The Romanian "textualists" believed in the self-sufficiency of the text, the world being generated in the process of writing. In Mircea Cărtărescu's novels, the Author is, simultaneously, the figure absorbed in the text and the (omniscient) god of the fictional world.

¹⁹ The New Man being preached by Saint Paul in his letters ("Lie not one to another, seeing that ye had put off the old man with his deeds and have put on the new man which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him.", Colossians 3:9-10, *The Holy Bible*, London,

his daily rags, drawn out from the ruins of “the most grievous town on Earth” and raised to Heaven. The texistence (Rom. *texistență*, Cărtărescu’s term for the symbiosis text-life) is the canvas used to paint history scenes, as the Revolution is followed by the Revelation: people are freed from communism, souls are freed from the jail of the material world, characters are allowed to glimpse their god, the Author.

But this holistic obsession that integrates the smallest acts of daily existence into the divine plan (as in textualism the Story includes and determines reality) suggests a Gnostic belief behind the details of the Christian Revelation²⁰. The Security’s control over the individuals is exceeded only by the absolute control held by a divine Author over his text-world; the Sect of the Knowledgeable Ones manipulates each character and cancels the freedom of the will. The unnamable tortures endured by the Elect are described as both instances of supreme horror and of supreme happiness. Being chosen means being just a character in a book, but only this Book can offer meaning²¹.

Therefore, the overlapping of Gnostic beliefs, apocalyptic imagery and textualist techniques generates deep, insoluble contradictions²²: the narrator is the chronicler of a historical time, a position that implies a moral dimension (to condemn the totalitarian regime), while the divine Author suspends the freedom of the will and thus absolves human beings of responsibility or guilt: “you are like an ant caught in a grain of amber, paralyzed in your own destiny. If you are good, God made you so [...] if you are evil, God made you evil, for His glory”²³. In *Blinding*, as in the other two novels, the narrators create stories that, unintentionally, justify evil at a metaphysical level and make it appear banal and natural. The One Who Sleeps or the Ghost can be read as meta-fictions that explain the people’s destinies and function as links between official and individual history. A person’s life makes sense only when assembled in a story told by somebody else, from outside (“the reality is given to you by the story, not by

The British and Foreign Bible Society, Cambridge University Press, 1939), but also the ironic-parodic reference to the “new man” of the communist ideology.

²⁰ Roxana-Andreea Ghiță, *Poetica și poietica Revoluției: de la romanticismul german la anul 1989 în romanul contemporan din România și din Germania* [The Poetics and the Poetics of Revolution: from German Romanticism to the year 1989 in the Contemporary Romanian and German Novel], București, Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, 2013, p. 258.

²¹ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Orbito. Aripa stângă* [Blinding. The Left Wing], p. 329: “Because you know, you, the Knowledgeable Ones, that you will be created at one future moment... and, in fact, by knowing, you exist already and, because you exist, you have already been saved, even be it for appearance’s sake.”

²² Roxana Ghiță, *Poetica*, p. 268: “There is an unsolved tension between the historical level, at which *Blinding* aims to build a humanistic discourse that condemns historical evil, and the mythical level, where the characters enter the role of mere instruments in the hands of a transcendental power, beyond reason and ethics”.

²³ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Orbito. Aripa dreaptă* [Blinding. The Right Wing], p. 513.

substance”²⁴, says the narrator in *Blinding*), while freedom plays no role in this scenario²⁵.

In Bogdan Popescu’s novel, a rural community is caught in the chaotic events before and after the Revolution of 1989, in a meaningless “transition”. The nightmare of official history has its correspondent in the nightmare lives of the villagers. The grotesque scenes narrated in the book are beyond good and evil, as they emerge from a sleeping mind. And if everything goes wrong because Somebody dreams wrongly, the solution cannot be found anywhere else than outside the community: The One Who Sleeps is tired, so he has to be replaced. Thus, Foiște, the eternal teacher on supply comes to replace his Dreamer. Foiște and the Student assume the role of scapegoats, and the Dreamed ones become the Dreamers, in order to save their people.

Although the anti-heroes become Saviors, they remain deeply passive. Popescu’s foolish gods choose to enter “some kind of death”, to sleep and to dream²⁶ the world they should save. The idea that the world can be saved only by withdrawal implies a deep skepticism regarding the Savior’s powers. The new Gods would be only some Sleepers, aligned along others, in a post-apocalyptic field where bodies of solid ashes are scattered. Thus, the oneiric determinism in *Whoever Falls Asleep Last* converges, on the one hand, with the textualist games of *Blinding* (the dreaming Mind, the crossroad of reality with imagination and with dream), and, on the other hand, with the Ghost metaphor that “possesses” the devitalized bodies of the villagers in *Comoșteni*.

In Doina Ruști’s novel, Apocalypse is represented by the dismantling of the mill (“the heart of the village”). But the destruction of the old world is not accompanied by the revelation of a new one. It is a false ending, as conflicts are perpetuated and guilt is denied. The collapse of the mill does not function as a symbolic death accompanying the death of the victims of history that the building witnessed. The destruction of the mammoth red building is not a fictional way to make peace with the past, but it represents, symbolically, the cover of this traumatic past. After this “fake” apocalypse of 1986, history continues in even more abject forms: when the mill is destroyed, The Ghost (i.e. the essence of history) dissipates in hundreds of sparkles, unites with its victims, and, from that moment on, it possesses them from within, permanently. The Apocalypse is, here, the anti-revelation of a little demon that found for himself “a stable dwelling

²⁴ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Orbitor. Aripa stângă* [Blinding. The Left Wing], București, Humanitas, 2002, p.199.

²⁵ In *Cine adoarme ultimul* [Whoever Falls Asleep Last], p. 158, one character observed that “things began to move as under somebody else’s control. I do not know if that happens under Godicle’s hands; I don’t know if things are moved by the mind working by itself of The One Who Sleeps”.

²⁶ The enumeration sounds like an echo from *Hamlet*: “To die, to sleep / To sleep, perchance to dream” (Act III, scene 1).

within the living flesh of those people so that not only did they not count for history, but they also came to signify nothing for themselves either”²⁷.

We can identify a common belief underlying the three narratives: faced with the nightmare of history, the individual remains passive, handled by a divine instance or possessed by specters of the past. The common themes of these holistically mythical meta-narratives (devoted to the predestination of the Elect, to absolute determinism, to the absurdity of history) mirror common modalities of representing one’s destiny (one’s place and role in history).

A Reversed Nostalgia

These passive (because skeptical) forms of life, which have just been identified in narratives could also be found in pop-culture texts of the 2000s. It is more than a mere coincidence that, in the lyrics of *Taxi* (a pop-rock band that launched the track *Cryogeny saves Romania* at the beginning of the new millennium) one can find the same false Salvationist solutions. The imagery bears a striking resemblance to that of Bogdan Popescu: whereas the withdrawal in sleep and dreaming seems to be the solutions for a better world, the lyrics suggest, highly ironically, that cryogeny would apply as a general solution for the problems of post-communist transition. Oana Popescu-Sandu analyzes what hides behind this popular song: insecurity in facing the present, contradictions in the historical discourse about the past (the embittered reference to the saving arrival of the Americans after the end of the Second World War), the withdrawal from history and the utopian salvation in a better future²⁸. Under these playful appearances a deeply negative vision is articulated, as people resign from participating in the making of their destiny, “the self is not willing to transform itself in order to survive the future”²⁹. It is a frozen representation, which comes in a general climate of disappointment and disorientation. In a similar manner, Bogdan Popescu’s protagonists barely dare to accept the truth (“It’s some sort of death what we are performing here, isn’t it?”³⁰), just before they lie down, suggesting a similar paradox: the virtual future worlds seem to be more appealing than past or present ones.

²⁷ Doina Ruști, *Fantoma din moară* [The Ghost in the Mill], p. 378.

²⁸ Oana Popescu-Sandu, “Let’s All Freeze Up”, pp. 113-120: “Let’s all cram ourselves/ in some big refrigerators/ Let us freeze ourselves/ For about a hundred years/ And wait, calmly/ For the Americans. // The Japanese can come / The Germans can come, too / To perform the reform./ We’ll have no complaints, see/ All that we ask is/ That they don’t forget us in the refrigerators// We’ll lie quietly on our backs –/ A real pleasure./ And if there’s enough Freon/ It’s all gonna be great// The whole country frozen / Nobody’s gonna work [...] Ahead the future lies:/ Romania on ice.” (the author’s translation).

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

³⁰ Bogdan Popescu, *Cine adoarme ultimul* [Whoever Falls Asleep Last], p. 426.

Svetlana Boym calls this form of life “a reversed nostalgia” oriented towards the future rather than to the past, offering an illusory refuge, “a phantasmal escape from the present of the *living dead*”. In a sharp analysis of this attitude, Boym stresses its historical nature, which implies the relation between individual biographies and the history of communities, between personal and collective memory: “The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time as space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition”³¹. This perspective modifies the common meanings of nostalgia, stressing its inherently double-edged orientation, towards the past and towards the future, which is directly linked to its utopian nature.

A similar perspective is symbolically transposed into Cărtărescu’s narrative. A form of life and a memory practice – nostalgia as the double orientation towards a mythical past and a utopian future, made into an eschatological project – unfolds in *Blinding* by the recurrent butterfly motif. But, like in Bogdan Popescu’s novel, or in the lyrics of *Taxi*, this reversed nostalgia implies an etherized present, sacrificed in the name of an improbable future.

We are silkworms, but it is exactly by this stage that we know we shall be butterflies. That hairy, wired worm, completely blind in regard to the future, does not understand... There comes a time when the big worm ceases to drink or to eat. Twilight nostalgia wraps it, a *reversed nostalgia, directed not towards the past, but towards the future* the worm cannot reach because of its strange cecity [emphasis added]³².

To conclude, the apocalyptic scenario and the protagonist’s double stance, the eschatological projection and the reversed nostalgia have a crucial role in the narrative by this ambivalent relation with the past. The same ambivalence can be seen in the twofold description of space. Cărtărescu’s București is the darkest place on earth, with the hideous outgrowth of the House of the People, with a fairy-like city as its double and the districts of childhood (Floreasca) housed under giant glass domes. In a similar manner, the Bogdan Popescu’s Village of the Saints or Doina Ruști’s Comoșteni are, simultaneously, spaces of magic and spaces of horror, mirroring what Boym identified as “the imperative of a contemporary nostalgic: to be homesick and to be sick of being at home – occasionally at the same time”³³:

In this venter... people felt covered, sheltered from all worries, or terrified to death, abandoned and left there to be ground like in a giant stomach, because the mill

³¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic, 2001, p. 55.

³² Mircea Cărtărescu, *Orbitoar. Aripa dreaptă* [Orbitoar. The Right Wing], pp. 209-210.

³³ Svetlana Boym, *The Future*, p. 67.

was the most visited, but also the most feared place, as everybody knew there was the burrow of the Ghost that was haunting the village and control the people's souls³⁴.

This ambivalence is stylistically reflected in the double register: miraculous vs. grotesque realism, which doubles the splits past-present and remembered-lived. The intuition of an irretrievable distance stands behind one's need to tell a story that relates past, present and future. And in the act of telling the story the narrator discovers that the past has not ended, but it returns into present and vampirically consumes its vitality.

The Ghosts and the Living Dead

Whereas the past could be seen, metaphorically, as a crypt that accommodates a dead person³⁵, the present of the fictional world is, literally, populated by zombies, by "the living dead". The ends written from a post-apocalyptic perspective contradict the incapacity of rewriting history in closed chapters. In magical realist novels, ghosts are bodily entities that invade reality, illustrating in a sensible manner the continuous "return of the repressed". By this, the world of the dead interacts with everyday life and finally replaces it.

In *The Ghost in the Mill*, the relationship between the Ghost and the villagers takes different forms (they range from visceral repulsion to passionate, erotic love). The majority of characters describe the encounter with the phantom as physical aggression, followed by routine and the banalization of evil. Adela Nicolescu confesses: "I felt the thick tongue licking my nape, warming my head and then sucking all my thoughts in such a frequent embrace, that I didn't even feel its harmful effects anymore"³⁶. Each encounter is felt like a violation of one's intimacy, the magical penetration of body and mind. The Ghost is like "a lewd snake, sticking to Iulica's forehead, as if it would tell her that she had no escape from its hold, that she was only a slave that it could trample and crumple anytime"³⁷. Other characters describe it like "a bullet of fire"³⁸, "a bold imbedded in the nape"³⁹, or "a locust that penetrated my brain like a blade"⁴⁰. All these occurrences mark its absolute, manipulative power and the slave-like dependency of humans under this alienating presence.

In a different manner than in the popular ghost stories, this phantom does not haunt the exterior world but fuses with the inner self and, in the end, the

³⁴ Doina Ruști, *Fantoma [The Ghost]*, p. 174.

³⁵ Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture*, pp. 103, 117-120 *passim*.

³⁶ Doina Ruști, *Fantoma [The Ghost]*, p. 37.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 204.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 263.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 376.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 377.

depersonalization and the numbing are complete; it is impossible to tell the borders between human and “alien” identity. Characters appear like possessed bodies as the initial “ghost story” is replaced by one with “living dead”:

Then the cold snake crept through her lips, thinned like a nylon staple, fine and harsh, and when it reached the esophagus, it coiled in like a hedgehog that exploded throwing its needles in every corner of her flesh. Nothing hurt her anymore, nothing troubled her. She was like a body made of seedy oilcloth, without emotions, without desires, without dreams⁴¹.

The Ghost could thus be understood as the alienating force of history that invaded human beings replacing their inner selves. The human being is defined through alienation and tarnish, as besmirched on the inside:

“Lucica felt her body made up of drawers riddled with sweepings, leftovers, dejections, moldy or putrescent clothes and she would have wished with her whole heart to let herself immerse into a scented bath, to be cleaned of all the oozing phlegm that was fermenting inside her”⁴².

The passage functions as a metaphorical anticipation of Lucica’s rape at a Party feast and the consequent unwanted pregnancy. The little embryo “fermenting” inside her is felt as something alien and decaying, the concrete sign of tainting, and the woman’s body is only a container for guilt.

Unlike the victims, the agents of the Power are involved in amorous, erotic encounters with the Ghost. Grigore, the militiaman, could feel pulsating in his blood “the warm body of the ghost, which made him feel like a velvet cover inside which a precious jewel was sleeping carelessly”⁴³. Despite the obvious differences, despite their antagonistic emotions, both victims and oppressors have a common form of life: even for the privileged of the communist regime, the individual is just a hollow case whose only purpose is to find something else outside, to fill the void. After the mystical-erotic union with his ghost, Gabriel Neicușoru abruptly loses his memory, “and this sudden detachment was flowering together with his new and comfortable position, of being the shell of his beloved”⁴⁴. It is a “union” that falsifies both past and present events and cancels responsibility. Neicușoru, the one who had previously abused Lucica, is convinced, in the end, that “he was the only one untouched by the atrocities of a historical flow that had thrown up all over his fellows”⁴⁵. It is significant that in *The Ghost...*, as in *Whoever Falls*

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 376.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 221.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 383.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 383.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 384.

Asleep Last, characters receive an important role in the narrative only after they become “something else”, after they are “transformed into rags by history”⁴⁶.

In *Blinding*, “the phantom that haunted this unreadable book from its very first word, the ghost that descended and mounted the endless plateaus of my mind, night after night” is the dark double of Mircea, his lost twin, Victor. First, he is remembered as absence (the torn half of a family photo, or as part of confusing memories left behind by Mircea’s image in the mirror); the demonic twin represents both the total alterity and organic affinity; he is the apocalyptic destructive agent but, eventually, his arrival brings (divine) knowledge, the coronation of the divine (autorial) Plan. All the characters are included in this plan, as they are manipulated from outside or from within by an almighty deity: “if you are handled, you must be very scared, because you do not live anymore, but someone else lives inside you and makes of you whatever he wants”⁴⁷.

The larva and the silkworm are, again, double-edged metaphors. The larva implies the future existence of the butterfly (and the reversed nostalgia already mentioned), but, in the same novel, it becomes important by ignoring and destroying this potentiality:

Patiently, the Gods were waiting. [...] That spun silk, and not the life within, was precious for them. [...] The cocoons in which the living bodies were dreaming undisturbed [...] would be thrown in boiling water [...] they would perish in unbearable torture, under the smiling eyes of the great Gods [that would throw, disgustedly] in the garbage the corpse that had secreted the miraculous spun⁴⁸.

The repetitive question “What would the angels reap from us?” at the end of time suggests that humanity is a multitude of crawling larvae under the eyes of some merciless gods. The Chosen are selected only for damnation. Herman, the prophet, the forerunner, would give birth to the child that formed under his skull, a Messiah for the People of the Book. For Herman, for Coca or for Celia, the epiphany (unlike the Annunciation in *The New Testament*) implies the destruction of the human body (like that of the “host” in the SF scenarios): tissues are torn, bones are broken only to reveal the “butterfly”⁴⁹. The image of the body-grave meets the non-Christian, Gnostic contempt for the body seen as the mortal “flesh” used for the gestation of the “new man”.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 386.

⁴⁷ Mircea Cărtărescu, *Orbito. Aripa dreaptă* [*Blinding. The Right Wing*], p. 152. Thus, Cărtărescu’s characters share the same fate as those of Doina Ruști.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 304.

⁴⁹ The same metaphor of the exposed, eviscerated body also applies to the city: “It was as if București had been a giant anatomic exhibit, a livid animal with damaged skin, trepanned ribs and with the sectioned peritoneum pinned with little insectarium needles.”, Mircea Cărtărescu, *Orbito. Aripa dreaptă* [*Blinding. The Right Wing*], p. 393.

The passive attitude of the narrators (the canceling of free will due to Gnostic and/or textualist premises) is doubled by figures of passivity (the cocoon bodies, possessed by alienating entities) and stressed stylistically by the passive voice⁵⁰. In *The Ghost in the Mill*, in a game of multiplying narrative perspectives, the author introduces a belated spectator⁵¹ that steals the memory of the witness Adela Nicolescu, manipulates and falsifies it, commercially presenting it as a popular novel, *The Secret Life of Adela Nicolescu*. The protagonist sees herself as a character in somebody else's story. This narrative formula could be interpreted as an attempt to illustrate the "exotic" past, the stolen life, the treacherous memory, the self-as-other, the morphing of a human person into a personage in a popular play that sees her past life represented without having been understood.

"A Story by Foreign Lips Retold..."

These narrative games and the magical-realist hallmarks are used in the novels about communism written in the 2000s. They define a style that becomes, as Marielle Macé suggests, an interpreting force for the real, which offers a name for the ideas of life⁵². The apocalyptic scenario, the reversed nostalgia, the ghosts (not haunting, but living inside the human bodies transformed into carcasses devoid of life and free will) and the chaotic events coherently integrated in a Story told by an alien Instance are the common features identified and analyzed in the three novels of our corpus. This literary mode of writing about the past becomes relevant for the description of life forms in the seemingly endless post-communist transition. Although we have initially considered them as retrieving fictional endeavors, sustaining the process of integration of personal histories on the larger canvas of collective history, we have to conclude, in the end, that these narratives testify rather to the alienation than to the recovery of the self.

Each of the three novels activates, at the narrative-stylistic level, the tension between homo- and hetero-diegesis, using sophisticated auctorial polyphonies: the seeming identity narrator-protagonist is undermined by the orchestration of discourses. Doina Ruști stages a cybernetic version of the "found manuscript" (through which Adela Nicolescu loses narrative omniscience and becomes a secondary character in an electronic archive). Mircea Cărtărescu still plays with textualist conventions (as Mircea the narrator is not identical with Mircișor, the character seen and compounded from outside, despite the name homonymy and the common biographical details). Bogdan Popescu includes the homodiegetic discourses of his "heroes" (the Student's letters, Foiște's mystifications) in a

⁵⁰ The characters are dreamed by The One who Sleeps, are risen to heaven by angels/aliens, are penetrated by ghosts. They are never the agents but the victims of the events they cannot control.

⁵¹ Florian Pavel, the nephew of Andronache Pavel, the ex-pupil and the symbolic murderer of old teacher Ion Nicolescu, Adela's grandfather.

⁵² Marielle Mace, *Styles*, p. 37.

detached meta-narrative that comments upon the two voices, anticipating the final revelation of the lives determined by a dreaming mind. By looking backwards, the narrator seems to lose his power upon his own life and story and is reduced to the humble role of spectator of his own alienated past. Thus, the myth of the Savior and the all-embracing apocalyptic perspective⁵³ hide an ambiguous attitude, that of the hero/victim, and of passivity about one's destiny.

This attitude is even harder to depict in magical-realist or fantastic fictional worlds. Recent views on magical realism⁵⁴ stress the therapeutic function of this style that both simulates the confrontation with ghosts of the past and stimulates empathy with the victims of history. By rewriting history in mythical patterns, in poetic dialogue with the collective mentalities (metaphorically treating the commonplaces of public discourses and creating literal, material objects for metaphors), using a wide range of literary subgenres, from fantastic to grotesque ones, these novels can facilitate the representation of the “unnamable”. Other critics consider magical realism an old-fashioned form of escapism, a spectacular detour from an honest fictional representation of history⁵⁵, analogous with Svetlana Boym's analysis of nostalgia as “history without guilt”⁵⁶.

As presented so far, the argument above would invite considering a third hypothesis: for these novels about communism the repeated, manneristic use of the same literary mode points to an obstacle in one's own relationship to the past. On a different level, the forms of life identified in these texts are, in fact, hypostases of death (the apocalypse, the ghosts, the living dead). Emphasized by the massive use of the passive voice, these repetitions put in a literary form the self-images which represent the post-communist Romanian communities as devitalized, powerless and passive. Although they repeatedly retell their stories under communism in various guises, they are not able to master the past, but are possessed by its specters. Finally, although the authors formally adopt the post-apocalyptic perspective that judge history as ended and its atrocities understood from the Creator's position, the stories reenact the deterministic scenario according to which human destinies are written by an unknown Controlling Agency and humans see their own life as “a story by foreign lips retold”⁵⁷.

⁵³ That should be, as Lois Parkinson Zamora states (*Writing the Apocalypse*, p. 5), the Creator's last word about His creation.

⁵⁴ Eugene Arva, Hubert Roland, “Writing trauma: Magical Realism and the Traumatic Imagination”, *Interférences littéraires*, 2014, October, 14, pp. 5-14.

⁵⁵ Cf. Rodica Grigore, *Realismul magic în proza latino-americană a secolului XX. (Re)configurări formale și de conținut* [Magical Realism in Latin-American Fiction of the Century. (Re)configurations of Form and Content], Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2015, pp. 25-37, for the diachronic perspective on magical realism.

⁵⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future*, p. 70.

⁵⁷ “When I look back on living, the past seems to unfold/ As though it were a story by foreign lips retold./ As though I had not lived it, nor made of life a part.”, M. Eminescu, *Melancholy*, in *Poezii*/

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**THE WORLD OF THE LIVING DEAD.
MYTHICAL REWRITINGS OF HISTORY IN THE APOCALYPTIC
NARRATIVES ABOUT LATE COMMUNISM**
(Abstract)

Starting from Marielle Macé's considerations about style as a place of emerging values, this paper identifies a correspondence between the style of three Romanian novels published in 2007-2008 (*Blinding*, *Whoever Falls Asleep Last*, *The Ghost in the Mill*) and some forms of life shared by the post-totalitarian society. Through the use of different ways of remembering, these novels do not only archive collective memory, but they also stage the relations with the present, emphasizing the representations of "transition" communities about themselves. The apocalyptic scenario, the ghost motif, the dominant attitude of "reversed nostalgia" and the magical realism mode are textual formulas that reflect the image of devitalized communities, which have no power over their own destinies, whereas individuals, in spite of their being part of dominant homodiegetical narratives, perceive themselves as manipulated characters in somebody else's story.

Keywords: apocalypse, memory, ghosts, nostalgia, magical realism.

**LUMEA MORȚILOR VII.
RESCRIERI MITICE ALE ISTORIEI ÎN NARĂȚIUNILE APOCALIPTICE
DESPRE COMUNISMUL TÂRZIU**
(Rezumat)

Pornind de la considerațiile lui Marielle Macé despre stil ca loc de emergență a valorilor, această lucrare identifică unele corespondențe între stilul a trei romane publicate în 2007-2008 în România (*Orbitor III*, *Cine adoarme ultimul*, *Fantoma din moară*) și anumite forme de viață împărtășite de societatea post-totalitară. Prin modalitățile de rememorare a trecutului recent, aceste romane sunt nu doar depozitare ale memoriei colective, ci și puneri în scenă ale raporturilor cu prezentul, evidențierând reprezentările despre sine ale comunităților „de tranziție”. Scenariul apocaliptic, motivul fantomei, „nostalgia inversă” ca atitudine dominantă, precum și modalitățile realismului magic sunt formule textuale ce reflectă imaginea unor comunități devitalizate, lipsite de putere asupra propriului destin, în care (în pofida narațiunilor homodiegetice dominante) instanțele umane se percep pe ele însele drept personaje manipulate într-o poveste străină.

Cuvinte-cheie: apocalipsă, memorie, fantome, nostalgia, realism magic.