

CRISTIAN PAȘCALĂU

**POST-COMMUNIST IRONY AND ANTI-UTOPIA: THE
APARTMENT BLOCK AS A SPACE OF MARGINALITY
IN *SIMION LIFTNICUL* [*SIMION THE ELEVATOR MAN*]
BY PETRU CIMPOEȘU**

The perception of communism in the novels of the Romanian transition period is a theme inextricably linked to the resurrection of irony, which leads us to propose for analysis a novel whose epic core is life in the apartment block. Through the filters of authorial irony, the motif of the block as a space of marginality generated a revolution of writing techniques, offering the novelist the opportunity to explore the characters' obsessions in a tutelary setting. In the novel we analyse, the block works as a myth or urban symbol of degradation, as an inner setting of personal dramas or as a melancholic, neurotic or absurd mental reality.

Communism and Post-communism. Irony Enacted

With regard to communism, a scholar from Cluj once stated that “by deconstructing communism”, we have to “measure its radioactivity not in the ceremonial speeches that we give on several festive occasions, but in our microscopic gestures, in our common words and in our unrevealed thoughts”¹. Like all the other regimes of the European Eastern bloc, the communist regime in Romania is characterized by several key elements: a single doctrinal source, the economic pre-eminence over social life and the violent socialization of property, the unique and omnipotent political party, no separation of state powers, the ideological dogma and its extension in the sphere of all social relations, the unanimity principle imposed to every citizen, disregard for the fundamental rights and freedoms, the repressive apparatus involved in the entire social life, the cult of the infallible leader, the manipulation of the masses, the inoculation of suspicion and the severe cultural dirigisme.

The communist utopia extracts its substance from a matrix that irradiates propaganda, whose avatars persist in the rhetoric of cultural memory. In this sense, the communist dogma adopts simulacra of freedom and identity, speculating the

¹ Ciprian Mihali, “Avatarurile deconstrucției în Est” [“The Avatars of Deconstruction in the East”], *Echinox*, 34, 2002, 1-2-3, p. 14: “printr-o deconstrucție a comunismului [trebuie] să-i măsurăm radioactivitatea nu în discursurile ceremoniale pe care le ținem la atâtea ocazii festive, ci în gesturile noastre microscopice, în vorbele noastre comune și în gândurile noastre nemărturisite”. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

masses' desire for social equity. On this account, the ideal society is a closed system, purified and ideologically levelled, a monist homogeneous system establishing a guarantee of internal coherence which is actually imposed to all common citizens. Ever since its establishment in Romania, the local communist regime cherished the illusion of absolute legitimacy. Emil Cioran would note, in this respect, that "Utopia is a hypostasized illusion; communism, going even further, will be an illusion decreed, imposed: defying the ubiquity of evil, it is a *mandatory optimism*"². While abolishing illiteracy was one of the top priorities of the communist regime, the educational system took the form of a radical transformation operated in the consciousness of the individual, in the attempt to materialize an aberrant concept of the *new man*.

The discourse of propagandistic re-education acquires the valences of a rhetoric oriented towards the absolute, which imposes itself with overwhelming authority. The doctrinal construct becomes an effective means for the power to enslave society. Censorship was meant to deprive society of any foreign conceptions or representations that were not in line with the communist program. Terms such as *justice, righteousness, democracy, freedom, goodness, welfare* and so forth were trapped in the linguistic structures of the ideological apparatus and used without any practical purpose whatsoever. The fabric of reality, presented in the rhetorical package of the cliché, is the basis for expressing the unique thinking pattern. Repressions through censorship, intimidation, denigration, blackmail or violence lead to the annihilation of the critical, interrogative spirit. That is why the party only formally recognizes the value of public opinion. The civil society is almost non-existent. Effective communication between the ruling political power and the representatives of the society takes the form of hierarchical channelling, which greatly favours the dissemination of propaganda among the masses. From this point of view, there is no ontological right or wrong, no sin or fault, no divine authority above the political establishment. Furthermore, a situational form of ethics and double standard work massively in the communist regime, mixing both the perfidious mechanism of the oppressors and some of the victims' complicity.

The phenomenon was perpetuated insidiously for a long time after 1989, with the same negative consequences. Marked by apparent democratization and a supposed consecration of fundamental citizens' rights, the post-Decembrist Romanian society would be submitted to the same manipulation, oppression, and ideological censorship. Politically, behaviourally and mentally, it would remain connected to the ghosts of the communist doctrine. To this extent, history generates correlative realities in the field of literature: "both utopia and anti-utopia

² Emil Cioran, *Istorie și utopie [History and Utopia]*, București, Humanitas, 1992, p. 115: "Utopia este iluzia ipostaziată; comunismul, mergînd și mai departe, va fi iluzie decretată, impusă: o sfidare la adresa omniprezenței răului, un optimism *obligatoriu*".

rely on a firm oligarchic system, which has seized the place meant for God”³. Obviously, the historical utopia takes on “a non-hidden totalitarian character”, in the sense that “the good that utopia promises will be achieved through [...] the same design, uniformity, personality levelling and tireless control over the individual”⁴. As a matter of principle,

Negative utopia is an extreme form of the other [utopia]. [...] In fact, negative utopia only reveals what necessarily follows when leaders seek to systematize the future, to scientifically design goodness, to build an ideal world, to try to ensure (or impose) happiness at the collective level. Anti-utopia somehow pulls aside the curtain, betraying the histrionic character of the utopian discourse, its pernicious mirage once it is transformed into a historical act. As for the means of writing, anti-utopia reinstates proper narrative itself. It is much closer to the novelesque, even though, for the most part, it builds its world through the same reduced, apathetic means of description⁵.

Of course, one cannot deny the presence of anti- or counterculture movements against the official version implemented by the Communists. Those movements acted in various forms and at various levels of the civil society during Ceausescu’s regime. The need for freedom and communication led to the development of resistance cells which took different forms (dissent, protests and subversive prints), as a counterculture to the official version imposed by the regime. Ovidiu Pecican reviews several forms of underground protest: Neo-protestant movements; literary circles (especially the Sci-Fi phenomenon of the 80s); the transcendental meditation groups; the yoga movement. Between the lines, one can read an important conclusion: an exhortation towards the recovery of some aspects and values not infrequently disregarded when debating the phenomenon of ideology penetrating the masses during the pre-Decembrist dictatorship:

All these cores of emerging freedom of opinion and self-thought, erudition intertwined with good literary and artistic taste, have had a greater impact on the intelligentsia than is commonly thought in such a culture as the

³ Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă în literatura română [The Negative Utopia in Romanian Literature]*, București, Cartea Românească, 2008, p. 26: “și utopia, și antiutopia se bazează pe un sistem oligarhic ferm, care a acaparat locul cuvenit divinității”.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 28: “un neascuns caracter totalitar [...] acel bine pe care utopia îl promite se obține prin [...] aceeași planificare, aceeași uniformizare, nivelare a personalității, același neobosit control asupra individului”.

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 28-29: “utopia negativă este o formă absolutizată a celeilalte [utopiei – n.n.]. [...] De fapt, utopia negativă nu face decât să dea în vileag ceea ce urmează în mod necesar atunci când liderii caută să sistematizeze viitorul, să planifice științific binele, să construiască o lume ideală, să încerce să asigure (sau să-i impună) colectivității fericirea. Antiutopia trage la o parte, într-un fel, cortina, trădând cabotinismul discursului utopic, mirajul pernicios al acestuia, după ce el a fost transformat în act istoric. În ceea ce privește mijloacele scriiturii, antiutopia repune în drepturi narațiunea propriuzisă. Ea este mult mai apropiată de romanesc, chiar dacă, în mare parte, lumea și-o construiește tot prin mijloacele reduse, apatice ale descrierii”.

Romanian one, where literature and writers have always had priority in expressing authentic public trends, mediating between the powerful men of the day and society, unravelling the deep currents that penetrated the thought of a given age⁶.

The Romanian society will experience a paradoxical split in political terms after 1990. If, before 1990, the ruling power was omnipresent and omnipotent while the opposition acted at the peripheries of ideological irradiation centres, in relatively isolated points, after the execution of Ceausescu, when the new oligarchy overtook the political scene, those who wanted only a team change at the top of the same system would immediately restore their privileges. In order to maintain its direct and major interests, the old power, already metamorphosed, granted little access to a new political life. Thus, two planes or two realities of power were designed: an occult one, in which true power acts and little information can be outsourced, and a surface one, in which parliamentary democracy is mimicked. At the same time, post-Decembrist Romania suffers the shock of adapting to the new rules at international level. The political spectrum does not admit a way back: the sacrifices during communism will soon be replaced by poverty, manipulation, social sycophantism, theft of resources and fragmentation of the traditional values. Moreover, the high degree of confusion among the population, combined with the lack of the most elementary political culture, paved the way for the new oligarchs. Misunderstanding the new forms taken by the political life would cause citizens to be easily manipulated. Also the poor quality of the political staff, the lack of clarity or precision, the absence of strong political platforms or social programs caused the large majority of the electorate to form their options based on sympathy or antipathy for some notorious figures, rather than on information about political parties or movements. Each time the power and the opposition cannot perceive the need for partnership in the difficult process of fixing the course of society, they end up acting like inscrutable enemies. In its surface form, political power represents the projection of real power, serving onerous interests for those behind the scenes.

Under these circumstances, the mechanism of Romanians' social resistance during the communist period is perpetuated after the revolution of 1989, at different levels yet with approximately the same consequences. During the communist period, people were manipulated by the system, but at the same time

⁶ Ovidiu Pecican, "Societatea civilă în România ceașistă" ["The Civil Society in Ceaușescu's Romania"], *Tribuna*, 8, 2009, 154, p. 10: "Toate aceste nuclee de emergență a libertății de opinie și a gândirii pe cont propriu, a erudiției împletite cu bunul gust literar și artistic, au avut un impact mai mare decât se consideră îndeobște în rândul intelectualității, într-o cultură precum cea română, unde literatura și scriitorii au deținut mereu prioritatea în exprimarea tendințelor publice autentice, în medierea dintre puterile zilei și societate, în deslușirea curenților profunde ce traversau gândirea dintr-o epocă dată".

they manipulated the system. Although the ideological system has created true resistance cells in the marginal spaces, which would carry the memory of the centre even after the latter eventually disappeared, daily resistance resurfaced. In order to better cope with the imperative of constant negotiation with the structures of the totalitarian regime, these structures did not pervade some discursive spaces so strongly, thus allowing some niches of subversion and alternative subjectivity. This mechanism implied the division of the social sphere into a public and a private one:

Activities, identities, and interactions can be separated into private and public parts, and each of these parts can be separated again, following the same public/private distinction. The result is that within any public sphere one can always create a private one; within any private sphere one can create a public one. [...] Another way to say this is that every day public and private distinctions – whether of activities, spaces, or social groups – are subject to reframing and subdivisions in which part of what is public is redefined as private, and vice versa”⁷.

The implications were not difficult to predict: false reporting and statistics, public lying, purposely misleading, duplicity elevated to the rank of ordinary practice. The dual fragmentation of the self into public and private causes a correlative fragmentation of discursive instances. While the public self is engaged in the act of carrying out individual work under the directives of power – of course, by appropriate speech and behaviour – the private self is withdrawn into the depths of the mind, acting as a second nature, an internalization of individual thinking. Duplicity can be the foundation for discursive and cultural practices defining the case of the Romanian communist space. In response, new forms of counterculture would eventually appear: “[...] popular culture is a biopolitical space created in the private/public spheres of civil society, from where it stems out as a form of reactive energy and a counter-hegemonic cultural moment challenging a dominant, authoritarian political society and its hegemonic, official cultures”⁸. The blue jeans generation and the PRO generation are forms of urban popular counterculture, expanding nuclei of identity and resistance emerging directly from post-communism. Various resistance movements of the young generation voiced real counterarguments to the status quo of society. Hip-hop music is a catalyst among others that culminated with the anti-globalist protests of the 2000s.

Taking into account this economic and political background, it comes easy to understand why irony plays a capital role in shaping the Romanian post-communist society and its cultural and artistic environment. In the following

⁷ Susan Gal, Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism. A Comparative-Historical Essay*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 41.

⁸ Denise Roman, *Fragmented Identities. Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2007, p. 26.

paragraphs, we revisit several theoretical frames on irony, in order to further explore Cimpoieșu's novel as a skeptical-ironic metonymic projection of the transition from communism to capitalism.

Irony entangles various aspects that can be outlined depending on what level of analysis and interpretation we place ourselves at. Comprehensive research⁹ on irony and its literary hypostases has been common over the last decades of the past century and onward, following linguistic, pragmatic, semiotic, aesthetic, and stylistic conceptual framings. From a pragmatic perspective, irony is defined as a meta-communicational process¹⁰ or as a discursive phenomenon consisting in apparently embracing a point of view just to further dismantle it by placing it in a context that determines its absurdity, grotesqueness or mere inadequacy. In this way, the speaker dissociates himself from his statement and reveals his genuine point of view, which, apart from always being the opposite of the content stated, is necessarily oriented towards a negative conclusion:

Irony consists in rejecting the responsibility of what is expressed on an enunciator to whom the speaker pretends to identify with, only to oppose and target him. [...] By pretending to adhere to the point of view of others, the ironist aims on the one hand to target others by definitively rejecting the point of view or the statement which he echoes, and on the other hand to communicate his own point of view by means of antiphrasis¹¹.

Irony presupposes clichés and exaggerations that function as a type of quotation designers, in which even the suspension points, the quotation marks, the italics, the oxymoron (which combines two contradictory terms and forces the receiver to build two incompatible semantic universes, among which there is no possibility of conciliation except as a reflex of the ironic intention of the speaker), the combination of disparate ideas (which also reveals the incongruity of the semantic universes depicted), or the cliché (abstract referents are rendered automatically, creating an ideology out of phrases without words) are rendered as specific elements of the stereotypical pre-construct¹². The first enunciator builds an overloaded stereotypical context by virtue of which the speaker creates a distance

⁹ It is worth mentioning D.C. Muecke, *The Compass of Irony*, third edition, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, a study in which irony is tackled as a cultural phenomenon; Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, a study that regards irony in its semantic and discursive specificity, communicative features and trans-ideological status; Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1975.

¹⁰ Alain Berrendonner, *Eléments de pragmatique linguistique*, Paris, Minuit, 1981.

¹¹ Laurent Perrin, *L'ironie mise en trope*, Paris, Kimé, 1996, p. 176: "L'ironie consiste à rejeter la responsabilité de ce qui est exprimé sur un énonciateur auquel le locuteur ne feint de s'identifier que pour s'y opposer et le prendre pour cible. [...] En prétendant adhérer au point de vue d'autrui l'ironiste vise d'une part à prendre autrui pour cible en rejetant définitivement le point de vue ou le propos auquel il fait écho, et d'autre part à communiquer son propre point de vue par antiphrase".

¹² Jacqueline Authier-Revuz, "Hétérogénéité énonciative", *Langages*, 19, 1984, 73, pp. 98-111.

between the situation and the actors of the statement uttered. This sharp connectedness of the entities involved in the discourse is noticed by previous researchers, who argue that irony can mix superlative utterances¹³, false paradoxes and so forth, placing under suspicion a variety of states of affair and permanently superposing the meta-discourse upon discourse¹⁴. In this way, the line between mention and use is erased, whereas the confusion between enunciation and statements tends to create loops in the actual universe of discourse.

The many occurrences of the oxymoron, zeugma, paradox, antithesis, and antiphrasis achieve the effect of keeping the receiver in a state of permanent alert, which allows him to build, under the surface, a deep semantic universe by balancing antinomies against the discursive surface. It is precisely in this balance that lies the mechanism by which irony acquires its specificity¹⁵. Hence its privileged operator would be antiphrasis, even if other operators intervened. Irony is a complex and integrative discursive pattern, in the sense that it incorporates various instances and can take various forms of manifestation. As antiphrasis consists in using words with meanings contrary to the global textual sense, this process can be equally well applied to appreciation and devaluation. Moreover, antiphrasis camouflages a negative judgment under a positive-oriented statement and generates a form of inverted irony consisting in flattering someone by playing the comedy of blame. The high degree of negativity that irony normally masks is sometimes shown through a negative operator inserted at the surface level of the utterance. But when negativity is masked, the path of interpretation that claims to release ironic meanings proves all the more complex. This is due to the fact that, in its positive form, the ironic meaning emerges only after some internal paraphrasing and re-contextualizing operations take place at some prior levels of interpretation. The irony forces the receiver to convene and stage a conceptual universe that is not only contrary to the one advanced by the apparent speaker, but also overloaded with negativity.

If the trope value of irony resides in its spectacular path of interpretation, it should be noticed that this journey will vary in its effects once the receiver is in the position of victim or observer. The “theatre of words” put into play by irony is virtually indefinite, a double discourse issued by a doubled enunciator¹⁶ for an external audience divided, to the same extent, between those who interpret the

¹³ Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, M. Le Guern, P. Bange, A. Bony (eds.), *L'ironie*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1978, p. 34.

¹⁴ Dominique Maingueneau, *Pragmatică pentru discursul literar [Pragmatics for Literary Discourse]*. Translated by Raluca-Nicoleta Balațchi, preface by Alexandra Cuniță, Iași, Institutul European, 2007, p. 212.

¹⁵ See, in this respect, Christian Vanderdorpe, “Notes sur la figure de l’ironie en marge de *La Clutte* d’Albert Camus”, *La revue canadienne d’études rhétoriques*, 2001, 12, pp. 43-63.

¹⁶ Carmen Vlad, *Textul-aisberg. Elemente de teorie și analiză [The Iceberg Text. Elements of Theory and Analysis]*, Cluj-Napoca, Echinoc, 2000, pp. 101-102.

message adequately and those who interpret it literally¹⁷. To understand it, irony does not only require a subtle way of playing with words and specific knowledge of a particular culture; it also requires information about the relations that the speaker maintains with the group targeted by his speech. When the target coincides with the receiver, irony produces a punitive effect, forcing the ironized to apply an operator of negation to the positive terms in which the statement is uttered and, therefore, trigger the cognitive process of its own devaluation. Should the target be dissociated from the receiver, the effect of irony will give the latter the opportunity to sympathize with the speaker at the expense of the one who is actually the subject matter of the ironic statement. From this perspective, irony is undoubtedly linked to cultural stereotypes and knowledge shared by a particular group or community of speakers. Under a seemingly positive and difficult-to-attack literal statement, irony reveals the ridiculousness of an opponent who has no time to retaliate. Therefore, irony invades and corrodes the entire discursive space, saturating it with negativity.

All these facts are more or less identifiable in the novel. As a kind of witness involved and detached at the same time, Cimpoescu either declares from time to time that he does not know what is happening next, or he anticipates and tells us directly from the beginning how an action will conclude. Paradoxically, Petru Cimpoescu's satire lacks vehemence. The narrator's tone has a conspiratorial air and he juggles with the information he offers to the readers, giving them the impression that he could say more, but either things are not important or the details will be disclosed at the right time. Cimpoescu's humour is liberating and merges the aesthetic categories of tragic and comic as two complementary facets of one and the same reality. It is a cathartic kind of humour generated by the grotesque, which, with its existential mind-blowing turn of events, hides an inner space constantly devastated by chimeras. In this respect, Alex Goldiș argues the following:

If there is a *Weltanschauung* of the Romanian transition period, it would be found in its entirety in Cimpoescu's imaginary. *Simion liftnicul* is neither a postmodern novel, nor a novel of the '80s, but a human comedy of characters who populate the post-revolutionary world. Closer to Balzac than to Caragiale in creating types (the irony of the prose writer is not sharp, but pathetic and sentimental), Cimpoescu is the fanciful archivist of the "new humanity" after the '90s¹⁸.

¹⁷ Philippe Hamon, *L'ironie littéraire*, Paris, Hachette, 1996, p. 56. See also Ștefan Oltean, *Introducere în semantica referențială [Introduction to Referential Semantics]*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2006, p. 199, who argues that irony is a symptom of plurivocality, linking it to the intentionality of the speaker and the truth values of one's statements.

¹⁸ Alex Goldiș, "Elegie pentru optzecism" ["Elegy for the 1980s"], *Cultura*, 2008, 186, <https://revistacultura.ro/nou/primele-editii/?idart=2166>. Accessed October 21, 2021: "dacă există un *Weltanschauung* al perioadei românești de tranziție, el e de regăsit, pe de-a-ntregul, în imaginarul lui

The author “remains an atypical writer of the ’80s due to at least three elements: he is a self-made-man and an outsider, he experienced a revelation of a mystical-religious sort [...], and he wrote the most iconic novel of the transition period”¹⁹.

The sphere of irony is related to the “second-order empathy”²⁰ and ambiguity which are typical for such a novel. Firstly, we are talking about allusive irony, which on the one hand plays on the complicity between the author and the readers, and on the other hand presupposes a convergence between several levels of knowledge, an “axiological alignment”²¹ reflected in the negative evaluation of the facts either presented as such, or partially hidden in the depths of the textual meaning. Secondly, we refer to direct irony, through which the situations confronted on the surface of the textual meaning, without euphemistic fuss, divert the levels of knowledge and the axiological evaluation. In either case we have to admit that, from the point of view of novelistic creativity, the contribution of irony is overwhelming. The verbal and the situational irony, unified in a single field of representation, pinpoint the social stereotypes and conventions assumed at the collective level to unmask not only a disturbed background directly derived from the socio-economic status (the Romanian post-communist transition), but also the individual vices, maintained through the projections of a false kind of national psychology, structured and carried by rhetorical clichés established in advance in the collective imaginary.

However, the capital merit of Petru Cimpoeșu is, in our opinion, that of having enacted, with incomparable aesthetic virtues, a spectacle of masks in the museology of the grotesque, dismantling numerous metaphors-cliché expressing the nationalist perception regarding what is usually considered the daily reality of our lives and the attitude towards it. In this respect, we can read the novel as “a mirror for the imaginary of our identity”²², as it „exhibits identity projections that

Cimpoeșu. *Simion liftnicul* nu e un roman postmodern sau optzecist, ci o comedie umană a caracterelor care populează lumea postrevoluționară. Mai apropiat de Balzac decât de Caragiale în crearea tipurilor (ironia prozatorului nu e tăioasă, ci patetică și sentimentală), Cimpoeșu e arhivarul fantezist al ‘noii umanități’ de după ’90”.

¹⁹ Cristina Timar, “Cotidian și metafizică în *Simion liftnicul* de Petru Cimpoeșu” [“Quotidian and Metaphysics in Petru Cimpoeșu’s *Simion liftnicul*”], *The Proceedings of the “European Integration – Between Tradition and Modernity” Congress*, 2009, 3, p. 457: “rămâne un optzecist atipic prin cel puțin trei componente: e un autodidact și un outsider, a trecut printr-o experiență revelatoare de ordin mistic-religios [...], a scris cel mai reprezentativ roman al perioadei de tranziție”.

²⁰ Dirk Geeraerts, “Second-order Empathy, Pragmatic Ambiguity, and Irony”, in Augusto Soares da Silva (ed.), *Figurative Language – Intersubjectivity and Usage*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2021, pp. 19-40.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

²² Anca Ursa, “Românii – proiecții identitare” [“The Romanians – Identity Projections”], in Corin Braga, Elena Platon (eds.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. II. *Patrimoniul și imaginar*

are identifiable in precise epochs, places, and circumstances”²³, suggesting perceptive labels that reach not the ethnic or national essence, but the ideological illnesses and the linguistic obsession for “collective delusions”²⁴. The authorial strategies in this regard are diverse, from the use of verbal or adverbial expressions of modality by means of which marks of irony are assigned, to the opposite situations that shock the natural order of things, generating an overwhelmingly comical mood: “The essence of ethical irony lies in the relation of the subject to life and to the concrete routine”²⁵, and “it has both a logical side, one of transmitting a sense that is contrary to the one expressed, and an axiological dimension, one of evaluating the persiflage of the object, which betrays, without exception, an idealistic aspiration [...] as a worldview”²⁶.

Post-communist Anti-utopia: the Block as a Space of Marginality

Petru Cimpoeșu’s novel (2001), a brilliant radiography of the Romanian society in the first post-Decembrist decade, shows a sceptical-ironic projection in the slipstream of anti-utopia, exploring some ordinary people’s lives caught in a bizarre world. They are tenants of a block of flats, whom we may recognize every day on the street, in shops, at the market, and so on. The author describes their life problems and soul struggles in metaphysical terms loaded with intellectual flavour. In this respect, the novel is a fresco in which the Romanian transition period is exhibited in all its essential aspects, from the marginal spirit of the city, drowned in provincialism and under-education, to the urgent problems regarding politics and religion that grind society²⁷. The characters illustrate a society from the late ’90s, whose attitudinal and behavioural atavisms we are still able to perceive today, more than 30 years after the revolution. Incidentally, the characters and the

lingvistic [*The Encyclopaedia of Romanian Imaginaries*, vol. II. *Linguistic Heritage and Imaginary*], Iași, Polirom, 2020, p. 276: “oglindă a imaginarului identitar”.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 276: “exhibă niște proiecții identitare, identificabile în perioade, spații și circumstanțe precise”.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 276: “fantasmelor colective”.

²⁵ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei în poezia românească sub comunism* [*The Politics of Irony in the Romanian Poetry under the Communist Regime*], Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2014, p. 22: “Esența ironiei etice stă în raportarea subiectului la viață și la concretul cotidian”.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 24: “are atât o latură logică, de transmitere a unui sens contrar celui exprimat, cât și o dimensiune axiologică, de evaluare a obiectului persiflat, care trădează o aspirație fără excepție idealistă [...] ca viziune asupra lumii”.

²⁷ Echoes from the landscape of literary criticism and cultural press (among whose representatives we mention Mircea Iorgulescu, Luminița Marcu, Sanda Cordoș, Constantin Acosmei, Daniel Cristea Enache, Ștefan Agopian, Cornel Nistorescu, Ciprian Corneanu, Pavel Mandys) are eloquently superlative and praise the robustness of their writing, as well as the authors’ talent to construct everyday situations imbued with propensities towards metaphysics and marked by an ironic reconstruction of a society that offers all the ingredients for such an endeavor.

whole slum “vertically compressed”²⁸ represent, through metonymic processing, the entire Romanian society of the first post-Decembrist decade, “all the typologies that populate post-Decembrist Romania [...] on the scale of a block that restores, in miniature fashion, the image of the whole country”²⁹.

“Having been considered the standard novel of the transition period”³⁰, *Simion liftnicul* [*Simion the Elevator Man*] satirises the problems of capitalism inevitably related to the communist and post-communist situation in Romania. The author places his characters directly under the magnifying glass of sociological and psychological explorations, thus strengthening the background for epic events. Such notations may be regarded as fascinating essayistic cores that manage to grasp, in a narrative spared superfluous words, the essence of his vision. The main character, a kind of *raisonneur*, analyses his neighbours in their juvenile specificity, which is that of spoiled children in a society freshly “re-treaded”, but stuffed in spirit. The author’s satire reveals the Romanian society on the verge of total surrender to a bizarre type of capitalism. Petru Cimpoeșu explores the ethics of an American-type of consumerism by framing it in a broader horizon of personal experience achieved not only under the communist and post-communist regimes, but also as a result of his readings and innate areas of sensitivity. Cimpoeșu’s anti-utopia exploits and enriches this “burlesque, carnival-type vision”³¹ by expanding the metonymic projection of the post-Decembrist transition period. On this account, the tenant-society equation endorses a space of values in crisis. *Simion liftnicul* “can be read, without much strain, as an anti-utopia emerging from the gloomy auspices of totalitarianism, which points out not to a totalitarian society, but to a consumerist one, revealing new ideologies still unnoticed as such”³².

Post-Decembrist anti-utopia unravels the discrepancy between the centre and marginality, especially in terms of cultural decay, false values, elites made up of corrupt politicians, crooked businessmen or old and current Security agents. The novel stores, in this respect, a sealed world, a universe functioning by means of reduplicating society’s codes and procedures, which are necessarily schematised and thickly caricatured. For the characters are not limited to doctrinal rituals, they show or conceal utopian worlds fragmented by ideology, in whose interstices censorship, the interference of the agents of power in the private space, the

²⁸ Aritina Micu, “Petru Cimpoeșu or the Compression of the Periphery in a Block of Flats”, in Iulian Boldea (ed.), *Discourse as a Form of Multiculturalism in Literature and Communication. Section: Literature*, Târgu Mureș, Arhipelag XXI, 2015, p. 1364.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 1364.

³⁰ Cristina Timar, “Cotidian și metafizică”, p. 455: “Socotit romanul etalon al perioadei de tranziție”.

³¹ Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă*, p. 247: “viziunea bufă, carnavalescă”.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 247: “poate fi citit, fără prea mare încordare, ca o antiutopie ieșită de sub auspiciile sumbre ale totalitarismului, care își îndreaptă indexul nu către o societate totalitară, ci către una consumistă, dând în vileag ideologiile noi, încă nesensizate ca atare”.

shortage of food, the lack of hot water or heat during the winter season and the relativity of values are largely perpetuated. The poor capacity for mitigating the shock of the market economy, acutely felt by ordinary people, is responsible, to a large extent, for the characters' anxieties. The novel is overloaded, through projective schemas in the fictional universe, with such references to and speculations about political, economic, financial or cultural topics (for example, the BBC shows that Mr. Toma comments on, or the exit-poll conducted by Mr. Vasile about Horia Roman Patapievici³³), espionage, diversions, exploitation of the country's natural resources, electoral manoeuvres, the apocalypse, millennialism, astrological prophecies, occultism, the ambiguous status of secret organisations, and so forth, all weaving a dense canvas of anti-utopian mood.

The apartment block becomes an anti-utopian space, in which the pressure of the environment, the society, and the centres of power act altogether as alienating factors for the character-tenants, turning them into ideological vectors of some atavistic behaviours. Thus, a strong dissolution of the phenomenon of knowledge is involved. At the same time, values, facts, situations are reordered, so the accuracy of information, the veracity of facts, or even the "historical truth" no longer apply. The crisis of knowledge determines an optics of reality denial and, subsequently, the creation of a compensatory universe that implies a constant redefinition of the public domain through the lens of the private one and vice versa. The subjective, sensitive motivations of the characters require the introduction of the script in a random circuit: mendacity, the need for experiencing the ideal, an overwhelming desire for self-analysis are all subjective factors that outline a stereotypical and nude, caricatured profile of the characters.

Many conflicts of consciousness emerge in a world shaped by speed, craving for sensational events, and by pragmatism. All these factors have imprinted their *Zeitgeist* upon the characters' subconscious. The author discloses with finesse the characters' physical state (determined by the spiritual one), relying on their inner conflict as a catalyst for the reactions and obsessions that shape the novelistic universe. As a privileged space for the expansion of criminal circles, block optics work, in Cimpoeșu's novel, "beyond good and evil", projecting a natural background for individuals eager to conquer or recapture a time and place that would correspond to the aura of behavioural freedom. In the Romanian post-

³³ Horia Roman Patapievici is a Romanian essayist and editorialist, author of *Cerul văzut prin lentilă* [*The Sky Seen through the Lens*], *Zbor în bătaia săgeții* [*Flight within Arrow's Reach*], *Omul recent* [*The Recent Man*], among other books. He won several prizes for his contributions to the literary, cultural, and journalistic field. Among his political views we can mention his support for libertarian economic policies. Patapievici is a controversial figure on the political scene, as he was strongly criticized for supporting Traian Băsescu in the campaign for the presidential elections. He was a member of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (2002–2005) and the head of the Romanian Cultural Institute (2005–2012).

communist society, pragmatism and cynicism led to the configuration of an urban space in which criminality was more or less accepted, with a certain degree of effectiveness. Maintaining a criminal environment that could eventually be exploited illustrates unequivocally the degradation of society under the pervasive aegis of the authorities. In post-Decembrist Romania, even a form of pastoral manipulation emerged, giving a new meaning to redemption: health, welfare, security and protection against accidents – all these mundane goals acted as substitutes for the genuine traditional religious goals and explained the rapid expansion of criminal networks to the depths of society as well as into the citizens' private space. Without false nostalgia in this respect, Ioan Stoica's Caritas³⁴, as well as the hopes for enrichment by playing lotto games are evoked. Mr. Toma would be swindled by a young woman who sells him second-hand products by using a classic stratagem of recruitment and customer trick. From this angle, the novel displays, in an ironical, grotesque or absurd key, the entire corruption of our post-communist society.

Cimpoescu's dialogues and characters bear the mark of a unique class of humour. Their solemn names (Nicostrat, Evlampia, Fevronia, Gudelia) contrast with the goofy concerns of their bearers. Some of them listen to the BBC and are concerned about how to enrich their vocabulary – "But it is a nice word, worth using, Mr. Toma went on. Listen to this: cir-cum-spect! It has something about it, I don't know what, like a whiff of medicine, doesn't it? A really noble word"³⁵ –, others deal with establishing the Party of the Undecided or the Popescu Party and come together to decide whether Patapievici is a genius or not. The epic pretext, namely the blocking of the elevator on the 8th floor by the shoemaker Simion, who lives on the ground floor, generates contradictory reactions among the characters. Mr. Gheorghe, who never uses it and prefers to walk, is glad that the neighbours have this opportunity and does not feel bothered by the broken elevator. Mr. Elefterie is far too preoccupied with the lottery and a potential gain (absolutely certain in his vision, because he played some dream numbers). Mrs. Pelaghia is

³⁴ Caritas was a Ponzi scheme active in Romania between April 1992 and August 1994. It attracted millions of depositors from all over the country, who invested more than a trillion old lei (between 1 and 5 billion dollars) before it finally went bankrupt on 14 August 1994, having a debt of 450 million dollars. The Caritas company was founded by Ioan Stoica, an accountant from Brașov who moved to Cluj-Napoca, with the support of the city manager of that time, Gheorghe Funar. There are rumours that many political figures took great financial advantage of this pyramidal scheme. Stoica was sentenced in 1995 by the Cluj Courthouse to seven years in prison for fraud, but he appealed and the sentence was reduced to two years. Then he went to the Supreme Court of Justice and the sentence was reduced to one year and a half. He has been free from June 14, 1996 and lived in poverty until 2019 when he presumably died. The majority of the of the depositors have not recovered the money they invested.

³⁵ Petru Cimpoescu, *Simion liftnicul: roman cu îngeri și moldoveni* [*Simion the Elevator Man: A Novel with Angels and Moldavians*], Iași, Poliorm, 2007, p. 123: "Dar e un cuvânt frumos, merită să-l folosești, continuă domnul Toma. I-auzi: cir-cum-spect! Are... nu știu ce, așa, ca un miros de doctorie în el, nu? Un cuvânt cu adevărat nobil!".

absorbed by the idyll with “the gentleman whose name we pass under silence”, but also by her Christian reverence, which actually does not prevent her from cheating on her husband during the day and returning to prayer in the evening. Mr. Eftimie, a biology teacher, goes through difficult times when a student informs him that she is pregnant and that he is the blessed father. Temistocle, a thirteen-year-old student who lives with his adoptive grandmother, Elemosina, does not use the elevator so that he can save power. Moreover, Mr. Ilie, who is just trying to repair his motorcycle, resigns himself to the failure of the elevator, dismantles the motorcycle, carries all its parts in his apartment for repair and scares all the tenants as, while he tries to start the engine, his neighbours believe that they witness an earthquake.

In turn, other characters are calling for remedial action to be taken. The problem of the elevator gives rise to the same kind of ad-hoc gatherings secretly called “Iocan’s Glade” by Mrs. Pelaghia and her lover, a neighbour “whose name we pass under silence”. Simion sets up a kind of monastic cell in the elevator, where he prays and from where he secretly gives advice to his neighbours. In the end, he goes out into the world along with Temistocle, the latter being perhaps one of the best and most beautifully outlined characters. The small adventures of the tenants on the Sheep Street are intertwined with the parables of Simion. Fulfilling one of the essential characteristics of anti-utopia, “against this gray, monotonous background”, Simion is “a character that rebels, who stubbornly goes against the mainstream and struggles to recover normality”³⁶. We agree with the statement that Simion and Temistocle “represent goodness, the natural way, the standard of morality, they still preserve the last drops of vigor and vitality as opposed to an aberrant system that, in turn, puts lucidity and reason to sleep while changing the individual into a stultified being”³⁷.

In contrast with the ironic passages that depict the tenants’ habits, the tribulations set against an erotic-sentimental background restore, under the sign of banality, the restlessness of the human condition. Despite some elements of parody, the world of the novel has its own laws by which it operates and takes form, driven by impressive density and coherence. Subtitled “a novel with angels and Moldavians”, Petru Cimpoeșu’s novel imagines a gospel of the Romanian transition period, filled with well-defined characters, each of them illustrating a peculiar kind of mentality. The couple’s tensions exhibit genuine provincialism. The Tomas are arguing amid the inherent problems raised by the transition to a market economy. Mr. Elefterie and his wife end up robbing one of the Lotto

³⁶ Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă*, p. 29: “pe acest fundal cenușiu, monoton [...] un personaj care se revoltă, care se încapățânează să meargă contra curentului și să recupereze normalitatea”.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 29: “reprezintă binele, firescul, etalonul moralității, ei mai conservă ultimii stropi de vlagă, de vitalitate și se opun unui sistem aberant, care adoarme luciditatea, discernământul individului și-l transformă în mancurt”.

agencies, as they are unable to understand that his dreamed-of luck had not hit the numbers he played. A verbal quarrel between the couple and the employee, carried on to the limit of the absurd and the grotesque, degenerates into physical violence, placing the characters into derisory situations.

Due to their anecdotally-inclined natures, Cimpoeșu's heroes make abusive use of language as a tool for creating illusory universes, personal utopias that ultimately degenerate into a collective anti-utopia. Among linguistic clichés and the chaotic use of words, they submit themselves to discursive snobbery. By using and compelling simple rumours or alleged information taken from the press, they create a kind of media folklore in response to the need for adapting to the way of the world. For instance, Mr. Toma, who listens to the BBC in order to mitigate the danger of manipulation, makes absolute judgments:

In fact, Mr. Toma divides people into two categories: those who listen to the BBC and those who do not. He has no respect whatsoever for those who take for granted only what is said on the "News". He considers them intellectually insignificant. All their opinions are wrong because of the manipulative information they are based on. [...] People's trust in all the lies that are shoved down their throats by the media is hard to shake because people simply refuse to change their way of thinking³⁸.

At the opposite end, Gheorghe Compotecras expresses himself in verse, generating a comic formal mannerism.

Other times, the contrast arises between what is said about a situation and the situation itself. For example, the lamentations of Mrs. Pelaghia who, although engaged in an adulterous relationship with "the gentleman whose name we pass under silence", prays every night to the Mother of God for her sins to be forgiven. Generally speaking, all the tenants in the block are "God-fearing" people, but the contrast between Christian prayers and daily life reveals an atmosphere of absurdity, nonsense, and duplicity. Duality is gradually developed, depending on the theme, the context, the situation, which correspond to the rhythm of the action. The writer emphasizes the falsehood of faith and its correlative masquerade. The novel as a whole leaves a bitter taste, given the authenticity of the narrative world and its ironic accuracy:

I am not too convinced that God needs all our flattery, our sporting religious performances. As if, after decades of atheism, we were so ambitious as to suddenly become some kind of world champions. [...] Romanians believe in a God that is a bit strange, who, although he primarily forbids lying, theft, cunning and other sins, seems

³⁸ Pentru Cimpoeșu, *Simion liftnicul*, pp. 12-13: "De altfel, domnul Toma îi împarte pe oameni în două categorii: cei care ascultă și cei care nu ascultă BBC. Pentru că cei care se iau numai după ce se spune la 'Actualități', dumnealui nu are nicio considerație. Îi socotește ne semnificativi din punct de vedere intelectual. Toate opiniile lor sunt greșite, deoarece se bazează pe informații manipulate. [...] Încrederea poporului în toate minciunile care i se bagă pe gât prin mass-media e greu de zdruncinat, fiindcă poporul refuză pur și simplu să-și schimbe mentalitatea".

to allow them with largesse on some particular occasions. A God who allows us to do evil while saving our peace of mind³⁹.

At the same time, Mr. Elefterie recounts the people's fake faith in the Caritas gambling phenomenon to which he fell victim:

God had decided to help people overcome the hardships of the transition period, and emergency measures had to be taken in order to do so. Not by giving them oil, as he had done with the Arabs – oil is made to order, wherever there's an Arab, if you dig under him, you will get oil. Not by inventions either, as with the Japanese. Not even by giving cars, as the Americans got. No: He had to give the Romanians cash. It would be much simpler that way. Money can buy you anything. For this purpose, God decided to send Ion Stoica down to earth. Unfortunately, Mr. Elefterie did not believe this miracle to begin with, although everyone was talking about it, and by the time he gained trust it would be too late. He himself would state, a few years later: "A Christian people, eh!... What sort of people, what sort of Christian? If this people were a Christian one, they would not run in a hurry to give money to Ion Stoica and his Caritas but mind their own business and take care of their problems"⁴⁰.

Genuine religious coordinates are extremely important in the novel, but they converge from different directions. In order to be able to circumscribe the nature and the eschatological functionality of Petru Cimpoeșu's passages that are charged with genuine religious significance, it is necessary to explore the slow transition from the duplicitous language and behaviour, which are undeniably attached to Romanian society, to individualizing the protagonist's expression, Simion, who finds himself in search of divine mysteries.

Simion's parables, which are genuine allegories, follow the main body of the novel sparking a kind of epic appendix. The parables of the old cobbler have the status of pseudo-pranks, as they are mounted in a mockery that summarises the entire communist system. The parable of the wire is iconic for the Romanian people's spirit, especially if we take into account its organizational culture.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 142-143: "Nu sunt prea convins că Dumnezeu are nevoie de toate linguşelile noastre, de performanţele noastre sportivo-religioase. Ca și cum, după decenii de ateism, ne-am ambiționa să devenim dintr-odată un fel de campioni mondiali. [...] românii cred într-un Dumnezeu puținel ciudat, care, deși interzice în principiu minciuna, furtul, vicleșugul și celelalte păcate, în anumite cazuri particulare pare să le îngăduie cu o mare larghețe. Un Dumnezeu care ne permite să facem rău cu conștiința împăcată".

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 24: "Dumnezeu hotărâse să ajute poporul să depășească greutățile tranziției – și trebuiau luate măsuri de urgență în acest sens. Nu să-i dea petrol, cum le-a dat arabilor – că parcă-i un făcut, unde e un arab, dacă sapi sub el, dai de petrol. Nici invenții, ca japonezilor. Nici mașini, ca americanilor. Nu: românilor trebuia să le dea direct bani. Era mai simplu așa. Cu banii poți cumpăra orice. În acest scop, Dumnezeu a hotărât să-l trimită pe pământ pe Ion Stoica. Din păcate, domnul Elefterie n-a crezut de la început în această minune, deși toată lumea vorbea despre ea, iar atunci când a crezut era prea târziu. Dumnealui însuși va spune peste câțiva ani: 'Hm, popor creștin!...Ce popor, ce creștin? Dacă era creștin poporul ăsta, nu alerga cu mic, cu mare să-i dea bani lui Ion Stoica, la Caritas, își vedea fiecare de treburile lui, de necazurile lui'".

Moreover, there is a polemical dimension that connects all the stories. The parable of apartment block living could serve as a motto for the whole urban literature that exploits this narrative motif. Eager to find a proper explanation to the purposes of life, Simion offers allegorical solutions for inner states that are only suggested. Like a new apostle, he proposes a direct focus on the deep levels of consciousness. The sacred is sought through keen exploration of the self. Therefore, aspiration towards God means acceptance and expansion of the inner conflict generally caused by the struggle between the sacred and the profane, as well as the desire to recover a dimension that should be governed by real moral values. In the explanations he gives to Temistocle, Simion argues that science, with all its rigour and complexity, could not access the layers of the soul, the latter being an illogical subject from the point of view of the purely rational way of looking at existence. Religious experience, on the other hand, offers the perfect structure for accessing the meanings and vast horizons of the soul, ultimately transcending the limits of logic and granting in turn true existential freedom. Temistocle the student, a teenager under the fever of early youth, is very perceptive to the erotic euphoria transpiring from the next apartment, between Miss Zenovia, his Romanian teacher, and Nicostrat, her yoga teacher, which haunts his subconscious and drives him to dwell into fantasy worlds nourished by readings and games. Forcing him to fall asleep, these worlds are meant to populate his dreams and extract him from the unpleasant context of the soul disease gradually taking hold of his consciousness. In the end, the character becomes Simion's assistant and the two leave the ship of fools, like a Don Quixote pair. However, novelistic anti-utopia is far from being transcended by this gesture of departure, as a real fracture in the coercive space of marginality cannot leave the characters without any traces or shadows of bitterness.

The thematic sphere of the urban space and the motif of life in the apartment block, iconic for our literature of transition, unite the characters into a collective imaginary destiny. The butaphorical agglomeration of people, things and stories that fill in the inhabitable environment grants it complete existential legitimation, a trace of the old mythical urban areas. It is worth noticing that this space can sometimes become a source of epiphanies, as if its corners hide transcendent mysteries (for instance, this is how the abyss of the elevator works, which tempts Temistocle from time to time). However, one of the novelistic axes envisions the relationship between center and marginality, which lets the author explore both individual and group identity: "Cimpoșu works with the banality of urban biographies constituted rather at the periphery"⁴¹. The identity gap between the individual/the collective and the axiological centre acts oppressively at individual

⁴¹ Sanda Cordoș, "Scara păcătoșilor" ["The Sinners' Ladder"], *Vatra*, 36, 2003, 11-12, p. 73: "Cimpoșu lucrează cu banalitatea unor biografii citadine mai degrabă de periferie (mahala)".

level, causing natural reactions of enclosure and rejection of the hard core of the system. The post-Decembrist Romanian city lives either by the power of money or by its citizens' relentless bustle, the latter being the product and effect of disorientation caused by the anxiety of synchronization with the European model. At the same time, the citizens suffer from a shock of adaptation to the challenges that the new millennium poses, as they are not able to understand the stakes of the competition systems that sometimes require some positive break with tradition. However, in a consumerist society progressively returning to the condition of global servitude by mimicking integration into a democratic system, the citizen will undoubtedly represent an absolutely marginal entity. In relation to a social environment where bread and circus represent the supreme finality, the average individual recognizes the stakes of integration into, or elimination from, both productivity standards and everyday pragmatism. As an alternative to reification, those that are left out internalize the important issues that define the centre, but often treat them in a derisory way, having no genuine awareness of their essence. Moreover, mockery, which shapes the Balkans as a matter of collective behaviour, is constantly colouring the daily greyness in sarcastic shades.

The relationship between centre and periphery undertakes substantial changes in the configuration of the novelistic levels. Almost all the time, marginality acts subversively, seeking to destabilize the higher structures. These undermining movements occur not only in the orbit of socio-historical determinations spotted in the background, but at the very action core of the novel. Marginal spaces take the prerogatives of justice, seeking to break the balance established before by means of social conventions. Marginality does not express only a place, but also an age, as far as its double polarization lies both in the intention to seize the centre and the situated derisory of ostracized, inertial, self-forgetful individuals. Hence the characters are those left behind, the unwanted, the ones disregarded by the rest of society. Their fate bears the seal of marginality and derision from the first moment of their epic evolution. They have no place anywhere at the centre of the system. Moreover, their complacency with a convenient life in the urban periphery is a magnifying glass for marginality and a sense of ineluctable apathy. Predetermined in the frames of daily reality, the block encloses autarchic flats, as marginality triumphs over the entire structure and expands into the tragedy of existence, summing up the relationship between the concrete box and the human mind as two spaces intersected by lockdown.

Floor, apartment, elevator, box, cell, all these labels imply a consecration by name or, more simply, by numbers. The marginal space is claimed and imposed not only by the world, as a form of defence against the precarious individuality, but also by individuality itself as defence against the suffocating world. The problem of inadequacy (social awkwardness) automatically changes the relationship between man and the world. The fracture between being and the environment, on the one hand, and society on the other, fully outlines the profile of

the misfit, of the hero who is unable to comply with an order imposed “by the centre”. Consequently, the prototype of the chosen one most often include attributes of the rebel against a world subservient to petty interests. It is the case of Simion, who goes beyond the conformism of a quiet life in order to turn his ideas into acts. At the same time, enrolling in marginal spatiality leads to an acute experience of space, mediating the confrontation with numerous anxieties in the inner space of consciousness. But such a physical limitation may be a revealing one, representing an incentive for the sleeping spirit, a motivation for it to break false limitations. The difference between the nature of physical, as opposed to the nature of mental, spatiality can be rediscovered in these borderline experiences.

The Romanian city in the transition period, with its gloomy landscapes and trading posts derived from provincial fairs, fully illustrates marginality. The blocks, ordered like matchboxes, stand for the pharaonic structures designed during the communist regime. Under these circumstances, life in the apartment block can be considered as the core engine for both objective and subjective marginality, submitted to derision and shaped by the background of post-industrial ruins. As a space of marginality, the block encloses the human interrelations under the sign of certain sociocultural conditionings, according to the antinomy centre/marginality. The mentality of the tenants, their system of ethical and religious values, their political affinities, their moral (or cynical, as the case may be) conduct are tributary to a provincial worldview, as the entire community closes itself in the tight circle of daily existence. Everyone knows something about the others in the block. Each tenant tries to impose a personal set of rules and values, but, at the same time, shows an indescribable contrast between appearance and essence. As a disorganized anthill that revolves with centripetal force around the preoccupation of tomorrow and the neighbourhood scandals, the block reflects the degree of the tenants’ provincialism, their cultural obtuseness, prejudices, fixed ideas, stereotypes and clichés of conduct and language. A sign that marginality tends to take over the centre can be found in the characters’ firm convictions, which they assert whether they are asked for their opinion or not, when debating with ardour the issues of the day. These issues comprise a wide spectrum of referees: economy, politics, Ion Iliescu, Emil Constantinescu, the expedients of everyday life, urgent cultural issues among which Kant, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Stéphane Lupasco, Nichita Stănescu, Patapievici or Cărtărescu are invoked. The effect of this polyphonic verbiage (often rendered by an ironic auctorial voice) is irresistibly comic.

In the midst of this general fuss, the out of service elevator symbolizes a crisis of consciousness. Simion the cobbler suffers a sensational metamorphosis: from the banal tenant of a studio on the ground floor, he will become a *sui generis* monk, blocking the elevator on the eighth floor and spending a few days there praying and issuing fables and tales. This fact alone generates a semantic contrast and correlated situational incongruity in the perspective open by the novelistic

universe. The contrast between the derisory nature of daily life in a post-communist workers' block and the metamorphosis of Simion, who becomes a spiritual guide for other tenants, takes the engine of the exhilarating novelistic creativity to an absurd mood. The novel does not lack intertextual references, which are sometimes more than explicit (it is worth mentioning the case of Mr. Elefterie, who recalls the hero of Caragiale's *Două loturi* [*Two Lottery Tickets*] and reflects the same bad luck, mental failure and violent madness). At the same time, the unexpected turns and the constant play between sordid, mundane small happenings, and people that mimic high spirituality works perfectly in order to generate irony out of contrast. Communist society, governed by a repressive system in which human values were inevitably forced to respond to arbitrary commands, is followed by capitalist society, which designates, in its essence, a tragic life reshaped in an ironic key. Classical human values no longer find their place in a world where the only recognized power is money and the only form of permissible pain is lack of it. Where the power of money brings laws and principles to their knees, truth will suffer alterations of substance, generating the chain collapse of humanistic systems.

At the opposite end, Simion illustrates, through attitude and behaviour, the wisdom of the elders, expressed in a self-devotion that, paradoxically, isolates him from the world. Simion does not feel marginality, and this is what allows him metaphysical salvation. This is also the reason why he owns the right to get out of the block for good. The character escapes from an enslaved community, eaten from the inside by a petty existence of which people are not even fully aware. His normality lies in giving up on himself, in eliminating any drop of selfishness. In his expiatory innocence, Simion stands at the antipode of the cobbler who played dictator in the darkness of pre-Decembrist history. The relationship between Simion and Temistocle the student also proves relevant for this course of events. Both characters search for marginal spaces, finding, in the end, the antidote to their perpetual waste. Both of them refuse to participate in the spectacle of a world full of ever-deeper compromises. They both choose to retreat into small spaces: one in the elevator, the other in his mind, in books and fantasies. As they acutely perceive the hostility of the world, the marginal space seems to protect them. This does not mean that the marginal space would actually be protective, or that it would be a good, positive, cozy environment. On the contrary, any blatant ideal vision projects life in the block under the pressure of searching for the metaphysical centre, in a journey of the self which brings out axiological landmarks essential for the human condition. Thus, marginal space becomes compensatory space. The characters exhibit an acute deficiency of authenticity, indulging in a sense of marginality. Beyond authenticity, marginality pervades the block as a form of fatality dominating human existence. At this level, another fracture takes place, namely that between the institutional-administrative role of the block, necessarily

connected to the factors of power, and the private space as refuge from everyday aggressions:

For a long time I thought about something else, I refocused on social issues. My organisation was no longer concerned with politics, but with education for the masses. There are many who spit, eat seeds, throw papers and butts on the street or on the bus, etc. These were the guys I had clashed with. We were forming teams of three or four agents to monitor the situation. If they encountered any case, for example, if a punk threw a paper at random, my men would pick it up from the floor and return it to him, speaking to him as politely as possible: "Sorry, something has fallen out of your hand, perhaps by mistake". If he refused to take the paper and dispose of it in the trash can, the men would apply a few cudgel hits to his back – to teach him a lesson!⁴².

In the end, nostalgia, the mood for solitude, the need for rich inner experience and the spark of introspection are among the subjective factors which lead us to consider the block as a space that reveals the spirit of the age as an ultimate imprint, since the transition period highlights the ideological pressures on the peripheral environments of society.

Concluding Remarks

A novel of transition, *Simion lifnicul* is born out of the absurdity of existence, out of events where heroes move from the sublime to the ridiculous unaware of the limits and of the transgressions they actually perform. The irony in the novel involves a wide spectrum of shades, from gentle, lenient irony to subtle oxymoronic contrast, reaching the edge of satire and sarcasm, but always keeping an exit door from the cruelty of total enclosure. Significantly, the author includes spicy or sordid details from the world of experience in the same frame of creativity, as a way of grasping the uncanny mood of human condition in its basic routine and idiosyncrasies.

Anti-utopian block life is seemingly the hardcore that wraps up the characters' destinies in a coherent imaginary universe. In this context, deconstructing discourse as well as undermining linguistic and, hence, existential clichés, are major coordinates of Cimpoșu's writing technique, based on such strategies as irony of contrast, parallel mixtures, overlapped or interlaced sequences regarded

⁴² Petru Cimpoșu, *Simion lifnicul*, pp. 239-240: "O bună bucată de timp m-am gândit la altceva, m-am reorientat spre problemele sociale. Organizația mea nu se mai ocupa de politică, ci de educarea maselor. Sunt o mulțime de nesimțiți care scuipă, mănâncă semințe, aruncă hârtii și mucuri pe stradă sau în autobuz etc. Cuăștia intrasem în conflict. Formam echipe de câte trei-patru agenți care monitorizau situația. Dacă întâlneau vreun caz, de exemplu un derbedeu arunca o hârtie la întâmplare, oamenii mei o culegeau de pe jos și i-o înapoiau, vorbindu-i cât mai politicos: 'Nu vă supărați, v-a căzut ceva din mână, poate din neatenție'. Dacă însă acela refuza să ia hârtia din mână și s-o pună la coș, îi ardeau câteva bastoane pe spinare – să-l învețe minte!'"

from different contexts and perspectives. Irony grants authenticity for the situational narrative in the midst of events and in the flow of thoughts.

As a way of self-ironic reshaping, the author expands an overflowing linguistic and cultural stereotypy, strongly highlighted by playful, intertextual strategies of parody. The novel can be interpreted as an inventory of vices that clearly reflect the events of our daily realities. Last but not least, the melancholic atmosphere, with discrete post-apocalyptic shades, leads a competent reader to spiritual elevation as a possible happy exit from the labyrinth of nonsense and absurdity, in his/her attempt to reach self-enlightenment.

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POST-COMMUNIST IRONY AND ANTI-UTOPIA: THE APARTMENT
BLOCK AS A SPACE OF MARGINALITY IN *SIMION LIFTNICUL* [*SIMION
THE ELEVATOR MAN*] BY PETRU CIMPOEȘU
(Abstract)

The purpose of our work is to analyse the motif of the apartment block as a space of marginality in the Romanian novel of transition. From an expressive, but also a thematic point of view, the novels of transition involve an interfering area of discursive registers (informative, descriptive, symbolic), creating layers of meaning and various levels of interpretation. We follow the meanings of this motif along a natural hermeneutical route, seeking to reveal its overall complexity, thematic density and specific coherence. At the same time, we briefly present the socio-economic and cultural situation during the communist and post-communist period, we investigate the novelesque technique and we integrate the post-communist anti-utopia in the series of formulas illustrating the novelesque expression of irony. We propose for analysis the novel *Simion liftnicul* [*Simion the Elevator Man*] by Petru Cimpoeșu, taking into account that it is representative of the Romanian mentality, cultural background, receptivity, individual and collective psychology, even political-economic factors, in a fictional space whose semantic core irradiates irony in gentle or vehement tones.

Keywords: irony, anti-utopia, Petru Cimpoeșu, post-communism, transition.

IRONIA POSTCOMUNISTĂ ȘI ANTIUTOPIA: APARTAMENTUL CA
SPAȚIU AL MARGINALITĂȚII
ÎN *SIMION LIFTNICUL* DE PETRU CIMPOEȘU
(Rezumat)

Scopul lucrării noastre este de a analiza motivul blocului ca spațiu al marginalității în romanul românesc de tranziție. Sub aspect expresiv, dar și tematic, romanele tranziției implică o zonă interferentă de registre discursive (informativ, descriptiv, simbolic), creând straturi de sens și nivele de interpretare diverse. Urmărim semnificațiile acestui motiv pe un traseu hermeneutic firesc, căutând să-i relevăm complexitatea de ansamblu, densitatea tematică și coerența specifică. Totodată, prezentăm succint situația socio-economică și culturală din perioada comunistă și postcomunistă, investigăm tehnica romanescă și încadrăm antiutopia postcomunistă în seria formulelor de exprimare romanescă a ironiei. Propunem spre analiză romanul *Simion liftnicul* de Petru Cimpoescu, considerând că acest text este reprezentativ pentru mentalitatea, fundalul cultural, receptivitatea, psihologia individuală și colectivă, chiar factorii politico-economici românești, într-un spațiu ficțional al cărui nucleu semantic iradiază ironia în nuanțe blânde sau vehemente.

Cuvinte-cheie: ironie, antiutopie, Petru Cimpoescu, postcomunism, tranziție.