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**FACETS OF IRONY IN COMMUNIST TESTIMONIAL
LITERATURE. CASE STUDY: ANNIE BENTOIU,
TIMPUL CE NI S-A DAT [THE TIME WE WERE GIVEN]**

Inner freedom is also accessible to those condemned to death, and therefore to all of us. All we have to do is not make it dependent on outer freedom, over which we have less power¹.
Annie Bentiou, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat* [*The Time We Were Given*]

Memory and Irony: A Dialogue

Several years elapsed between the Revolution of 1989 and the writing and publication of Annie Bentiou's memoirs (suggestively entitled *The Time We Were Given*). The first two-volume edition was published in 2000 and 2006. Far from being insignificant, this temporal distance is a reminder of at least two aspects that are specific to all the volumes of memoirs available to the reader – in a considerable amount – since the last decade of the last century. On the one hand, it is a reminder of the impossibility of publishing such a discourse during the years of the totalitarian regime (with the exception of those published in exile, which had a different fate), and thus becomes a testimony to the silence imposed on those who did not accept to renounce their own values during their most difficult times². On the other hand, temporal distance allows a necessary and sometimes even a healing detachment, so that the process of remembering can take place under the imperative of naming a truth (of personal and collective life) retrieved from the overlapping layers of a sinuous, difficult, never fully known history. This is an intellectual effort, and memoirists mention the labor it involves³. Often

¹ Annie Bentiou, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat. Memorii: 1944–1959* [*The Time We Were Given: Memoirs 1944–1959*], București, Humanitas, 2019, p. 468: “Libertatea interioară este accesibilă și condamnaților la moarte, deci nouă tuturor. Totul e să n-o facem să depindă de cea exterioară, asupra căreia avem mai puțină putere”. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

² The reason for the abundance of subjective literature after the Revolution is succinctly expressed in the following excerpt: “We have all lived in timid silence, each knowing well only his/her own history, and that for many decades” – *Ibidem*, p. 538: “Am viețuit cu toții într-o tăcere timorată, fiecare cunoscându-și bine numai propria istorie și asta timp de mai multe decenii”.

³ I think here not only about Annie Bentiou, but also about other great names who will take on this labour that sometimes becomes too hard (as is the case, for example, for Adriana Georgescu or Oana Orlea, who experienced detention and who remember this period with great difficulty). From a

highlighting common time intervals, the memoirs that aim to revisit the years of the Romanian communist regime are, however, very different. This is perhaps the best argument in favor of memoirs as ego-documents: although they may recount a common collective history of the same epoch or society, memoirs inevitably bear the imprint of subjectivity. Collective history – which ultimately allows an objective verification of the events narrated – is reordered through the prism of a subjective history, of a voice that assumes the authorship of the discourse⁴. Annie Bentoiu herself gave up the study of history towards the end of the 1940s because she was forbidden to revisit the past in a way that would make it be more vivid and therefore more authentic than a “dry string of dates, battles or peace treaties”⁵. It was not until several decades later that she had the opportunity to put this principle into practice by writing her memoirs about the first years of the communist regime in Romania.

Annie Bentoiu’s memoirs transcend subjective history into collective history, highlighting the intertwining of these two inseparable existential levels. The man conditioned by the history of his time, the man trapped in the chains of a totalitarian regime, be they invisible or otherwise, lives his existence in a context that can become merciless. This is the case of some of the great Romanian intellectuals, who during the communist regime took up the struggle for resistance through culture or faith. Among their testimonies, Annie Bentoiu’s writing is defined by a discursive complexity that is due to her erudition and inner richness, two elements that frame a personal vision of life and a series of moral values firmly exposed and defended. These memoirs tell the story of a world and an era by their key events, revisited through a double filter: the personal and the collective reality, always interacting and impacting each other⁶. The discourse is not only about oneself (and this is the essential point which, according to Georges Gusdorf, distinguishes memoirs from autobiography⁷), as it involves much more: a retrospective narrative which concerns both the events of personal life and of society, covering a clearly defined period of time and depicting a specific

philosophical point of view, this intellectual effort imposed by the exercise of remembering is discussed by Henri Bergson, quoted by Paul Ricoeur in the volume *Memoria, istoria, uitarea* [*Memory, History, Forgetting*]. Translated from French by Ilie Gyurcsik and Margareta Gyurcsik, Timișoara, Amarcord, 2001, pp. 45-46.

⁴ Georges Gusdorf, *Les écritures du moi. Lignes de vie I*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1991, Digital edition, Chicoutimi, Québec, 2018, p. 328,

http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/gusdorf_georges/ecritures_du_moi_lignes_de_vie_t1/ecritures_du_moi_lignes_de_vie_t1.pdf. Accessed October 30, 2021. Although written from a personal perspective, memoirs concern history, and are, paradoxically, ego-documents whose main focus is not on the ego.

⁵ Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 188: “o seacă înșiruire de date, de bătălii sau tratate de pace”.

⁶ I discussed the amazing complexity of this memoir discourse in an article entitled “Memory and History – Reading a Woman’s Past: Annie Bentoiu”, following my presentation with the same title at CONCEF – National Conference of Young Researchers in Philology, Sibiu, 22-24 October 2020.

⁷ Georges Gusdorf, *Les écritures du moi*, pp. 327-328.

historical context, but also including brief sociological studies, historical fragments, political explanations, juridical analyses, psychological insights, literary and artistic examples, etc.⁸ The aim is to understand a phenomenon that shaped an entire generation – and that still impacts today’s Romanian society. Inside these pages we read a history divided into multiple levels rendered in an elevated style. This history reveals both the example of one’s own way of settling in a false and rigid communist world, and – in a deeper reading – the finest characteristics of a mature writing style. The memoir practice is meant to restore a time 'that we were given', a time that at first glance seems to be lost, given the impossibility of employing the talents, the education, the work of a capable, admirable young woman. As the discourse advances, it becomes clear, however, that this absence is compensated by her human fulfillment and extraordinary inner growth. Thus, the memoirs are defined by their complexity, read in multiple keys: thematically, these concern human dignity, inner beauty and a way of life; stylistically, they regard the way the narrative is articulated and organized.

The very center of these memoirs is a fresco of the public life in the first years of communist Romania, along with a sketch of the private lives of the author and of those close to her, recalled in their major events. The historical account is marked by precision and gravity, the analyses provide density to the discourse, and the overall picture of the period evoked is complex and sober. Nevertheless, Annie Benteoiu’s memories are a colorful retrospective, scrutinizing and bringing together the atrocities of the time – in the major historical events – and the domestic everyday life, which, while carrying its own burdens, is deeply rooted in practices that allow inner survival. These practices include reading, enjoying nature, friendships and family, sharing spiritual and cultural experiences. At times, the use of irony itself can become such a practice, a way of reclaiming intimate freedoms and, more deeply, a form of resistance through words. Consequently, there is an ethical dimension of irony as a type of approach to the historical events of the establishment of the totalitarian regime in Romania in the 1950s⁹. Moreover, irony can also have a political dimension, since it obeys the principle of confronting “a reality that is both unethical and immoral”¹⁰, which defines the totalitarian experience and requires from both the individual and the community a status of opposition and resistance. This aim is visible in those fragments that describe people’s attitudes towards historical reality, where irony can even acquire a moral

⁸ The unfolding of this discourse as a palimpsest which overlaps several narrative layers has been discussed more extensively in the article referenced above, see footnote 6.

⁹ Corina Croitoru explains in *Politica ironiei în poezia românească sub comunism [The Politics of Irony in Romanian Poetry under the Communist Regime]* (Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2014, p. 40) that in Eastern European societies, after the Second World War, irony preserves an ethical meaning and becomes an indirect response to the urgencies of history.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

value¹¹, insofar as it implies a reaction to the society of the time and to its contradictions. These characteristics define a “subversive and oppositional”¹² type of irony, in which the attempt to undermine the dominant ideology indicates “evidence of a democratic aspiration to an alternative”¹³. Officially impossible, the alternative has to be formulated clandestinely, advocating the human need to preserve a person’s values and individual dignity. In other words, the ironic response to the reality of the time allows man, even within a totalitarian regime, the kind of freedom which no one can take away from him, the freedom of thought and the freedom of spirit (even if not the freedom of expression¹⁴). Finally, it is an inner freedom very close to cultural (intellectual) freedom and spiritual (religious) freedom to which the writings of those who lived the prison experience testify in particular¹⁵. Thus, at a deep level, the hermeneutical exercise can reveal how irony “in totalitarian societies presents sustained tendencies, however fragile, to recover lost freedoms”¹⁶. I will try to prove, through the following analysis, that, in addition, by assuming this restorative function, irony can also denote the revendication of lost human dignity.

But while it is typical for fiction in totalitarian societies to attack the political system through ironic, subversive allusions allowed by the very oblique nature of writing¹⁷, in the case of memoirs, which aspire to be as faithful as possible to objective historical events, such openings are only possible in the context of a political turnaround (which is what happened in Romania after 1989). In such a context, to record – even ironically – the reality of oppression means to turn a

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

¹⁴ What Annie Benteoiu, like many other Romanian intellectuals, succeeds in doing only in the 1990s, through writing, is to overcome “the obligation to speak in only one way” – Annie Benteoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 676: “obligația de a vorbi într-un singur fel”. Moreover, the author explains: “In fact, the story I am trying to tell here could never have been written if it had not been for the dramatic collapse of states in 1989, so often compared to dominoes. In the fifties we didn’t know the details, but all this, suspected or presumed, formed above our heads a compact and dark sky under which we had to survive as best we could.” – *Ibidem*, p. 538: “De fapt, povestirea pe care o încerc aici nici n-ar fi putut fi scrisă vreodată, dacă nu se întâmpla în 1989 acea dramatică prăbușire de state, comparate de atâtea ori cu niște piese de domino. În anii cincizeci nu știam amănunte, dar toate acestea, bănuite sau presimțite, alcătuiau deasupra capetelor noastre un cer compact și întunecat, sub care trebuia să supraviețuim cum om putea”.

¹⁵ Some of the best known writings about the experience of detention, in which cultural and spiritual freedom play a crucial role, are those by Lena Constante and Harry Brauner, Galina Răduleanu, Nicole Valéry-Grossu or Sabina and Richard Wurmbrand. Annie Benteoiu points out the “weight” of these testimonies compared to those of the “free” people: “The testimonies that came to us from prisons have a completely different tragic force” – *Ibidem*, p. 507: “Mărturiile care ne-au venit din închisori au cu totul altă forță tragică”.

¹⁶ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 45.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 41.

lucid eye on *a different, past time* and to provide an answer to the question of how that era unfolded, in all its aspects¹⁸. These practices engage a second purpose of irony, which can be identified by analyzing the specificity of post-communist writing, more precisely those examples that highlight the ironic or critical lines of the author towards the revisited past. Without necessarily having a subversive stake, as they were written after the falling of the political regime, they can still demonstrate the author's detachment from this past, a detachment necessary for healing and for the fulfillment of one's own destiny.

The examples discussed in this study are classified according to the different forms of irony identified in the text, and they target the two distinct levels mentioned above: on the one hand, irony as an attitude of individuals or communities towards the communist regime (with ethical, moral and political stakes) and, on the other hand, irony as a literary practice of post-communist memoir writing (with critical and restorative stakes). I select from these memoirs only fragments in which irony (or its close forms: humor, comedy, self-irony) is readable explicitly or implicitly. Such a selection is based on the concept of *semiotic cut* (*coupe sémiotique*) proposed by Leo Spitzer in his studies of stylistics, a method which requires the choice of a single theme, closely examined and analyzed, and then correlated, when interpreting, with the narrative discourse as a whole¹⁹. This kind of approach allows a reflection on the forms and functions of irony in the memoir discourse. Following Spitzer's stylistic reading exercises, a second important notion for this study is that of *stylistic deviation* (*écart stylistique*), which implies the possibility of identifying variations or meaningful deviations at different levels of a text (at the level of the language, therefore, in relation to the linguistic norm; at the level of the form, thus in relation to the stylistic norm; or at the level of the overall organization of the text). For the literary researcher what is important is both *how* the deviation occurs and – above all – *why* the deviation occurs²⁰. I will therefore try, in the following, to highlight some ironic fragments identified in Annie Bentoiu's memoirs, starting from the premise that they represent a deviation from the norm governing the overall organization of the text, given that, as I have already shown, this text is marked

¹⁸ Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 553. The "obsessive need to understand" (*Ibidem*, p. 632: "nevoia obsesivă de a înțelege") is a painful process, but, precisely because of this, it is also purifying.

¹⁹ Leo Spitzer, *Études de style*, précédé par "Leo Spitzer et la lecture stylistique" de Jean Starobinski. Translated from English and German by Éliane Kaufholz, Alain Coulon and Michel Foucault, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p. 28. The essential steps for this semiotic cut are also explained here: François Conne, "Coupes sémiotiques", in Jean-Pierre Sautot (ed.), *Le film de classe. Étude sémiotique et enjeux didactiques*, Limoges, Lambert – Lucas, 2008, pp. 105-142.

²⁰ Leo Spitzer, *Études de style*, pp. 18-19. Also Pierre Schoentjes identifies deviations (verbal deviations or, in writing, stylistic deviations), among the textual indicators of irony (along with tone, punctuation, repetition, juxtaposition, etc.), see *Poétique de l'ironie*, Paris, Seuil, 2001, p. 174.

rather by gravity, density and complexity, inviting the reader to reflection, comments and questions. Moreover, it is an erudite text where the author's intellectual upbringing plays a central role (Annie Bentoiu took courses in literature, history and law as a young student). The stakes of her discourse are not ironic, since irony can be identified at the local level but not at the level of the overall meaning of the text. In the density of this discourse, counterbalancing its gravity – or, on the contrary, reinforcing it – irony appears as a deviation, as *something else*, and precisely for this reason it becomes a meaningful aspect.

Facets of Irony in the Testimonial Discourse

As a first example, the very title of the volume, in its intertextuality, can be read in an ironic key. Such a reading reveals a very subtle literary practice: the reference to Mihai Eminescu's poem opens up a horizon of expectation and anticipates a personal and collective evolution. The "instant that we were given"²¹ in Eminescu's poem recalls the literary motif of *fugit irreparabile tempus* and is equated, in the text of these memoirs, with a "time" unfolding on two levels, thus charged with a double connotation. There is a time of personal history, which reveals a subjective charge as formative time, a time of maturation and of fundamental inner experiences, despite a context of marginalization and suffering. This is the time which, at the end of the narrative, can be invested with a positive value, since it has allowed the author's human, spiritual and intellectual development. But there is also a historical time, the time of the collectivities, the time of the repression, which is not a time to be regretted; in this case, it is "not a pity" that it should be consumed, that it should be "shed", that it should undergo profound transformations²². At this level, the contradiction between the time of inner history (in the poem quoted above, and in the writer's personal evolution) and the time of outer history imposed by constraining events opens up the possibility of a subtle interpretation using an ironic key, in the sense of an opposition between appearance and essence. Remembering "the time we were given" means revisiting the past in all its facets, reconstructing the whole of an "eternally mutilated"²³ mosaic; it means putting together, with lucidity, sometimes

²¹ The title of the memoirs invokes a verse of the poem *Stelele-n cer* [*Stars in the Sky*], slightly modified. A linguistic study might reveal the rich connotations of this modification itself. "The fleeting instant/ that we were given" (M. Eminescu, *Opere alese II. [Selected Works II]*. Edited and preface by Perpessicius, București, Minerva, 1973, p. 407: „clipa cea repede/ ce ni s-a dat”) becomes "the time we were given", thus suggesting a much longer interval.

²² See the last stanza of the poem mentioned above, "Is it not a pity/ To shed/ The fleeting instant/ That we were given?" (*Ibidem*, pp. 406-407: "Nu e păcat/ Ca să se lepede/ Clipa cea repede/ Ce ni s-a dat?").

²³ Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat.*, p. 350: "veșnic mutilat".

with humor, but especially with a certain freedom, history and intimacy, saved and recovered through memory.

But this memory also reflects on the few responses allowed to Romanians when faced with the major political games that shaped the country's history in the second half of the 20th century. Among these possible responses is also the "sad and humorous' wisdom"²⁴, that is the attempt to verbalize, ironically and clandestinely, their resistance as a (temporary) way of overturning the hierarchy²⁵ and standing up for their own principles and values. In the "simple, sober and austere"²⁶ everyday existence, the recourse to irony takes on specific meanings and receives various forms of expression, suggesting different degrees of individual or community involvement in the struggle against the oppressive regime.

Both rhetorical (or verbal) irony, as an antiphrastic figure which involves saying something but conveying – intentionally – the exact opposite, and irony as a worldview involving various levels of meaning (cosmic irony, tragic irony, irony of fate)²⁷, are discursive forms that can be found in Annie Benteoiu's memoirs. In addition, some fragments touch the very fine lines of difference between irony, comedy and humor, the latter categories being included in the reference zone of irony by some authors²⁸. The first samples that I choose fall into these categories of comedy and humor, and belong to a collective oral memory. They are attributed to different personalities of the society of the time, and they recount jokes, anecdotes, or famous lines²⁹ that made the "tour of Bucharest"³⁰. This category includes, for example, phrases such as the one uttered by an actor on whom party obligations were imposed: "Well, I joined you as a louse, not as a fool!"³¹ or the bold and humorous reply that Mihail Jora utters when called on the telephone: "– Hello, *tovarășul* [*comrade*] Jora? – Jora yes, *tovarăș* [*comrade*] no!"³². More serious and demanding of the reader's reflection are the narratives in which serious realities of the time are veiled in humor (which saves them, to some extent only,

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 675: "înțelepciunea 'tristă și plină de umor'".

²⁵ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 42.

²⁶ Annie Benteoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 666: "simplă, sobră și cazonă". The more national decisions affect personal histories, the more people grow serious, reserved and rigid, the more irony becomes a form of resistance – *Ibidem*, p. 556.

²⁷ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 13, 17.

²⁸ Linda Hutcheon proposes such an association (in *Irony's Edge. The Theory and Politics of Irony*, New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 46), while Pierre Schoentjes considers humor and comedy to be situated "at the edge of irony" – *Poétique de l'ironie*, chapter "Aux frontières de l'ironie", pp. 212 and following.

²⁹ For Pierre Schoentjes, a significant difference consists in the fact that irony hurts, while humor is harmless (*Poétique de l'ironie*, p. 137).

³⁰ Annie Benteoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 456: "ocolul Bucureștilor".

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 82: "Mă, eu m-am înscris la voi de lichea, nu de tâmpit!".

³² *Ibidem*, p. 456. "Tovarăș" is a specific direct address formula in the communist system, which can also suggest one's adherence to it. For this reason, Mihail Jora refuses, with humour, but very clear and firmly, this title: "– Alo! tovarășul Jora? – Jora da, tovarăș ba!".

from their tragedy). Pascal Benteoiu tells one such story, at the heart of which is a fictional trial in which workers brought in solely for the purpose of denouncing the accused take the floor as false witnesses, blaming Mihail Andricu, vice-president of the Union of Composers: “Pascal remembers one who began to denigrate the man in question and, forgetting what his name was, took a little piece of paper out of his pocket and spelt out ‘Tovarășul Andruică’, which created a moment of relaxation [...]”³³, but also pointed out the harsh reality of these false seats of judgment, which have shattered so many lives, unjustly condemning them.

The difference between the examples above, which illustrate situations of comedy and humor, and those that follow, which fall into the category of irony, lies in what Linda Hutcheon calls the critical edge of irony³⁴, the result of the fact that irony always weighs axiologically the situations to which it applies. Examples of this type differ in form, but they all share an evaluative side. First of all, I would like to point out the comments that Annie Benteoiu makes on fragments of official discourse (news, laws and decrees, etc.), which reveal an ironic writing practice through the reinterpretation of some of the most important official texts, absurd in their essence. Such is the case, for example, with the legal article which states, with regard to the expropriation of wealthy peasants, that if public officials and persons responsible for executing the decree refuse to carry out this task, they shall be punished by correctional imprisonment and a fine. The text, faithfully reproduced, is followed by this personal comment: “A civil war in which those who refuse to attack are punished by imprisonment! The situation was no doubt quite original”³⁵. In fact, a second reading of these legislative fragments allows Annie Benteoiu to understand some of the reasons of those who accepted to take part “in such humiliations of fellow human beings and in such senseless predation”³⁶. In a brief fragment concerning the political changeover of 23 August 1944, Annie Benteoiu comments on the bombastic style of the official discourse, the irony here more obvious and at the same time sharper: “[...] With determination and patriotic eagerness, the Romanian soldiers turned their weapons against the real enemy – the German-fascist imperialism – and joined the Soviet Army.’ Simple and beautiful! How didn’t we realize that this was the case?”³⁷. The meaning the sentences convey is explicitly the opposite of what they express (the

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 775: “Pascal își amintește de unul care a început să-l denigreze pe cel în cauză și, uitând care-i era numele, a scos din buzunar o hârtiuță și a silabisit ‘tovarășul Andruică’, ceea ce a creat un moment de destindere [...]”.

³⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s edge*, p. 35.

³⁵ Annie Benteoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 414: “Un război civil în care cei care refuză să atace sunt pedepsiți cu închisoarea! Situația era fără îndoială destul de originală”.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 414: “la asemenea umiliri ale unor semeni și la acele prădăciuni fără sens”.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 433: “[...] Cu hotărâre și avînt patriotic, ostașii români au întors armele împotriva adevăratului dușman – imperialismul germano-fascist – și s-au alăturat Armatei Sovietice’. Simplu și frumos! Cum de nu ne-a trecut prin minte că așa a fost?”.

way the Soviet army occupied Romania and the brutal behavior of the Russian soldiers are well-known today). The government's misleading statements are denounced ironically; this is the case with the warning that follows: "Also, in the very year in which Catholic and Greek Catholic priests filled the prisons and churches were confiscated, it is simply stated: '*religious communities enjoy freedom of worship and are provided with the necessary premises and property*'"³⁸.

The ironic reference to the written text is not limited to political discourse, but also occurs in personal documents. An example of this is found in the family correspondence: it is a letter from her father, a doctor forced to work at Canalul Dunăre–Marea Neagră at the age of sixty, where health problems caused him great discomfort. Reading this correspondence, Annie Bentoiu will add, in a sadly ironic note, by taking up one of the famous expressions of the regime and turning it into the subject of a rhetorical question: "What 'work productivity' must those poor toothless sexagenarians have had on the building sites?"³⁹. A similar situation is recorded on the occasion of her father's return home, followed by his obligation to practice medicine exclusively in the countryside: "With naive pride, my father showed us that his population certificate did not mention D.O. (mandatory residence). What use was that if he was not allowed to live anywhere else?"⁴⁰.

Among the fragments that ironically interpret situations of the time, symptomatic of a disproportionate relationship between appearance and essence, I recall the episode called "Festival Fast", an opportunity to point out, with bitter irony, the paradox of reality in communist society. The event is meant to show foreigners the "well-being" of Romanians, while they themselves are subjected – by force – to abstinence from food, as food is no longer sold. In this context, a possible solution relies on the same appearance-essence approach, through disguise:

In August, when it started [the "Festival Fast" – my note C.S.], the food shops, practically empty, did their best to organise their shop windows with what they had saved. This was an extra hardship for the people of Bucharest, because the goods in the window were not for sale. Aunt Aline and a friend of hers went around the shops, dressed as modernly as possible and chattering in French, in the hope that they would be taken for strangers and not refused a few things. If I remember correctly, they had some success⁴¹.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 431: "De asemenea, în chiar anul în care preoții catolici și greco-catolici au înțesat închisorile și bisericile au fost confiscate, se declară simplu: '*comunitățile religioase se bucură de libertatea cultului și dispun de localurile și bunurile necesare*'".

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 532: "Ce 'productivitate în muncă' or fi avut pe șantiere acei bieți sexagenari fără dinți?"

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 668-669: "Cu naivă mândrie, tata ne arăta că pe buletinul său de populație nu figura mențiunea D.O. (domiciliu obligatoriu). Ce folos, dacă nu i se îngăduia să locuiască în altă parte?"

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 639-640: "În august, când a început desfășurarea propriu-zisă a acestuia [a 'Postului Festivalului' – my note, C.S.], magazinele alimentare, practic goale, și-au dat toată osteneala să-și organizeze totuși vitrine cu ce puseseră deoparte. Aceasta a fost pentru bucureșteni o suferință în plus,

The same contradiction emerges in the following fragment, built around the motif of the *hunger* of the 1950s:

You went in – you watched – the shopkeeper watched you – and you came out. Two less desired goods had stayed in the shops, decorating the shelves with their neatly spaced presence: they were boxes of toothpicks and jars of mustard, auxiliary products that no one wanted because the main element that would have made them necessary was missing⁴².

Comic but ironic (and therefore critical) events are recorded as testimony to the complexity of the epoch. They can explain some of the most absurd and difficult contexts, while remaining ridiculous, as in the case of the arrested baker who tells his story while weeping:

I'm a confectioner by trade, I had a tiny shop and I sold sweets, some boxes of the best Turkish delight were in special demand, you don't know how good it was, tidy boxes, in nice paper wraps... I wanted to give praise to the regime as much as I could, and I wrote on the lid, on the top left, "Long live August 23!". Below that, in larger, gold letters, it said RAHAT [Turkish delight]. And they brought me here...⁴³.

The story of a neighbour explaining one manager's advice to the employees in his office is received with a more trenchant attitude: "*All right, tovărășelelor, I can see you're working, you're industrious, but why don't you go to the hairdresser's, put on a little lipstick, get a manicure now and again?*"⁴⁴ The answer, critical and ironic, is at the same time antiphrastic, as the author concludes that "it's an extraordinary experience to live in a regime where you are told when to use lipstick and when not to..."⁴⁵.

pentru că mărfurile din vitrină nu se vindeau. Tante Aline și o prietenă a ei au colindat atunci prăvăliile, îmbrăcate cât mai modern cu puțință și sporovăind între ele în limba franceză, cu speranța că vor fi luate drept străine și nu li se va refuza să cumpere câte ceva. Dacă-mi amintesc bine, mici succese au avut".

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 502: "Intrai – priveai – vânzătorul te privea și el – și ieșeau. Rămăseseră în magazine două mărfuri mai puțin căutate, care decorau rafturile cu prezența lor, ordonat distanțată: erau cutii de scobitori și borcanele cu muștar, produse auxiliare pe care nu le voia nimeni pentru că lipsea elementul principal, cel care le-ar fi făcut necesare".

⁴³ In Romanian, the Turkish delight is called "rahat turcesc". The same word can be used with a pejorative meaning and this is why, due to an absurd misunderstanding, the confectioner was put in prison for offending the political system – *Ibidem*: „Eu de meserie sunt cofetar, aveam o prăvălioară și vindeam dulciuri, mai ales aveau căutare niște cutii cu rahat din cel mai bun, nu știți ce bun era, cutii dichisite, cu hârtie frumoasă... Am vrut să aduc și eu laudă în cinstea regimului, după puterile mele, și am scris pe capac, sus în stânga, 'Trăiască 23 august!'. Mai jos, în litere mai mărișoare, de aur, scria RAHAT. Și m-au adus aici...".

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 570: "*Bine, tovărășelelor, văd că lucrați, sunteți harnice, dar de ce nu vă mai duceți și voi pe la coafor, nu vă dați cu un pic de ruj, nu vă mai faceți câte o manichiură?*".

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 570: "este o experiență extraordinară să trăiești într-un regim în care ți se spune când să folosești rujul de buze și când nu...".

A very different and subtle irony, imbued with sadness, is outlined in the episode of the investigation of Aurelian Benteoiu's detention, based on documents from his *Securitate* file. A former minister of justice, imprisoned without any solid evidence, he becomes the character of a very interesting case, in which irony arouses neither laughter nor tears, but rather compassion. Aurelian Benteoiu's young "friend"⁴⁶, a false cellmate whose real identity is that of an informer, in his attempts to question his victim, obtains from the latter, sincere in his intentions, promises of help, which he later reports: "*He told me to ask Rădulescu-Dobrogea at the trial and when I get in touch with him at the registry to tell him that I am Benteoiu's man, and to ask him to pay the bar association's fee for me, and they would talk about this when they get out of prison.*"⁴⁷. "Benteoiu's man" is, in fact, his executioner!

Finally, I will consider the fragments in which the presence of irony concerning oneself can be identified. The first example is built around the second leitmotif of the epoch, the cold. It is a personal story, inspired by the delivery of the wood needed to heat a family's room: "I can see myself returning home on a Sunday evening after a wait that began at five in the morning, riding on the back of a carriage with the 500 kg of wood from the 'second parcel' that was granted to us: I was a victorious general, bringing home his prize, to the joy of all"⁴⁸.

This ability to detach and not take the burden of one's own life too seriously is proving to be extremely useful, even beneficial, in a historical era marked by restrictions and absurdities. The profound paradox that marks the youth of Annie Benteoiu and those around her (starting with Pascal Benteoiu, continuing with Marta Cozmin and Mircea Alexandru Pop, for example) appears in these memoirs, in the clearest ironic way, towards the end, summing up the years of her youth, a time that oscillates between what is and what is not to be regretted. When asked "What does your father do?", the answer of the pupil Ioana Benteoiu is simple and "victorious": "He is a composer!" But when asked the next question: "And your mother?", the child answered: "My mother? She's a cook and a 'dactylographer'..."⁴⁹. In recording this dialogue, Annie Benteoiu shows a detached

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 750: "amic".

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*: "*Mi-a spus că să cer pe Rădulescu-Dobrogea la proces și când oi lua legătură cu el la greșă să-i spun că sunt omul lui Benteoiu, iar taxa baroului să o pună de la el, că se vor socoti ei amândoi când or ieși afară*". There is a fine irony even in this candid way in which the prisoners received their own denunciators.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 504: "Mă văd când vreau, întorcându-mă într-o duminică seara după o așteptare începută la cinci dimineața, cocoțată pe capra unei căruțe în care se aflau cele 500 kg de lemne din 'tranșa a doua' cuvenită nouă: eram un general victorios, ce-și aducea acasă prada, spre bucuria tuturor".

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 815: "– Ce e tatăl tău?" "– E compozitor!" "– Și mama?" "– Mama? E bucătăreasă și 'dactoligrafă'...". This type of irony also appears in other similar episodes. With reference to the typist's job, I recall Annie Benteoiu's attempt to get a job and the requirement that she should submit seven references "only from party members" ("numai de la membri de partid"). Her commentary

awareness of herself, of her own professional unfulfillment⁵⁰, of the constraint (and “restraint”) of typing for years and of remaining only an “autodidact”, despite her high intellectual capacities⁵¹. Even this “modest” mission is distorted in the child’s voice⁵² – the irony all the more delicate – just as a destiny with enormous potential has been completely transformed by the whirlwind of history that influenced it. We read in this ironic line both bitterness and dignity as two sides of the same coin: the refusal of any compromise that would have allowed a higher social status⁵³. However, although the regime, in its thirst for power, tramples on individual destinies, it is precisely these that prove, over time, to be the most relevant in terms of value. Along Annie Bentoiu’s path, human dignity is fully defined when the person becomes aware of a fundamental existential point: the establishment of one’s own intellectual, moral and Christian values and the formulation of one’s own beliefs that save them at an inner level, while condemning them at an outer level⁵⁴. In the gap between these personal beliefs and the external laws, the practice of humour and irony can play a central role: “Through irony we can discern the meaning or significance of a context without taking part in it or engaging with that context”⁵⁵. Irony can be identified here both at the level of the literary formula and at the level of a personal approach to one’s own history. In the end, this “mother” is much more than a typewriter, for the text of her memoirs and her rich inner world do her justice. There is, therefore, something noble in this humility, reminding us that human identity lies first and foremost in the soul, and not in the external conditions imposed on man by the system. Together with Annie Bentoiu’s other literary works, her memoirs become a mirror and a fruit of this world hidden behind an interrupted, fragmented

points out, “Still, still... seven party members for one poor typist.... It took me a while to realize that he was mocking me” – *Ibidem*, p. 440: “Totuși, totuși, șapte membri de partid pentru o biată dactilografă... Mi-a trebuit câtva timp ca să înțeleg că-și bătuse joc de mine”.

⁵⁰ Giving up studies is a personal decision in the face of history and involves giving up a vocation. At the beginning of the 1950s, it was impossible for the author to go back to studying literature and law: “The roads were closing. The best years were passing, the years in which my memory, my understanding, my assimilation faculties were still working well” – *Ibidem*, p. 592: “Drumurile se închideau. Anii cei mai buni treceau, cei în care mi-ar fi funcționat încă bine memoria, înțelegerea, facultățile de asimilare”.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 815. Since 1960, Annie Bentoiu has been a contributor to the French version of the *Revue roumaine*. Later, she would publish various translations and literary works (particularly in French), but would give up the idea of writing a novel about life under communism in favour of these memoirs – *Ibidem*, p. 816.

⁵² “Dactoligrafă” is a distorted form of “dactilografă” (dactylographer).

⁵³ In a dictatorial system, personal events are conditioned by political decisions. The firm moral principles and the families that both Annie and Pascal Bentoiu come from become the reason for the social stigma they suffer.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 574-575.

⁵⁵ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 3.

existential path, which may seem incomplete on the outside, but which is remarkably coherent on the inside.

Interpretations and Conclusions

The fragments discussed above illustrate various forms of irony and fall under two purposes of irony. Subtle or sharp, explicit or merely insinuated, more easily or more difficult to read, irony is, in this memorialist discourse, a concrete way of engaging with the political regime and a critical way of revisiting the realities of the time⁵⁶. In the landscape of a world founded on hatred and falsity⁵⁷, escapes are only possible through such “deviations” or “fissures”. But also after the falling of communism, recalling the past through memoir writing involves an ironic detachment from one’s own dissappointments, hardships and failures. The affective and therefore evaluative or critical charge of irony is all the more powerful the more significant its functions become. The evaluative scale proposed by Linda Hutcheon assumes different degrees of intensity of irony identifiable at the discursive level⁵⁸. Thus, irony can have a ludic function, to which are subscribed comic and humorous fragments, anecdotes and jokes, critically inoffensive, that arouse *laughter*. On a higher level, irony with a distancing function is intended to allow a positive perspective on situations and a certain detachment in communicating them through writing. Fragments where irony is self-directed, producing *smiles*, can be included in this category. Inevitably, there is also an irony in such discourse that is specific to those who have suffered some form of political oppression; this is irony with a defensive, self-protective and auto-immunizing function. Probably most of the fragments selected above also fall into this category, serving a defensive function in the face of a rigid, absurd and inhuman regime. Articulated as a response to this reality, the ironic attitude seeks not only to evaluate but also to correct, aspiring, in fact, to restore a righteous mentality. Annie Bentoiu’s memoirs are an example in favour of using irony – along with other discursive solutions – in contexts where people have to deal with trauma and suffering.

At a human level, irony can suggest finesse of character, gentleness, freedom or honesty. Although it portrays such a difficult period, the text also claims a humanity that can be discovered in every person or situation. The detachment and psychological finesse allow for an ironic insight; it is, however, a harmless, rather positively charged irony that was a justifiable constant of the epoch. The text has a

⁵⁶ Pierre Schoentjes, *Poétique de l’ironie*, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 266.

⁵⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s edge*, pp. 43 and following.

precious documentary value but also a literary one, as it is written with the consciousness of the narrator telling (also) her own story.

Irony plays a significant role in the historical context described above and, later, in the context of the reception of these memoirs, because it requires a solidarity between the ironist and the interpreter, thus implying the idea of unity⁵⁹. By “capturing the discordance between the real world and the ideal world”⁶⁰, the appeal to irony can reveal some fundamental aspects of this inconsistency, because it challenges the utopian myth of communism and predicts, in a way, its failure. Already in 1829, Schlegel wrote that beneath the smiling appearance of irony lies a hidden meaning, a higher meaning, sometimes suggesting the most sublime seriousness⁶¹. This explains why, in Annie Bentoiu’s writing, irony is not only rhetorical; it often appears at the verbal level, but also at the situational level, sometimes rising to the level of a worldview, in order to allow a way of confronting historical reality and a key for its retrospective interpretation.

Hence, irony takes into account a political context and some social norms that citizens face, but also “a kind of stubborn hope”⁶² in the face of changes that overturn existence and that man cannot fully control⁶³. A deeper reading of this hope opens up avenues of interpretation to deeper areas of the human condition: reflections on how man actually seeks, through his irony, to regain his dignity and his status as a free human being – to make his own decisions, to define himself, to fulfil himself in accordance with what dwells within him. Consequently, irony has a capacity to transcend ideology⁶⁴ and simultaneously constitutes a way of recovering human dignity, particularly in regimes where fundamental human freedoms have been abrogated, thus becoming a weapon against the temptation to become paralyzed – especially inwardly – by the fact that everything seems fixed forever⁶⁵, in a perpetual state of desolation.

Finally, as a writing practice, the ironic “deviations” actually suggest a triumph, pleading that no time “that we were given”, however oppressive, however cruel, is deprived of the opportunity to complete the individual human destiny, insofar as man is willing to preserve, at all costs, his inner coherence. The firm decision in this regard is recorded in Pascal Bentoiu’s letters: “My dear, moral heroism is the only reasonable path left to us”⁶⁶. This path is also fundamental, for

⁵⁹ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 43. One of the functions of irony is actually recalling the fact that it is created by communities and can create communities – Linda Hutcheon, *Irony’s edge*, p. 51.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁶¹ Ernst Behler, *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1990, p. 82.

⁶² Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*: “un fel de încăpățânată speranță”.

⁶³ Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 13.

⁶⁴ Corina Croitoru, *Politica ironiei*, p. 43.

⁶⁵ Annie Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, p. 638.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 325: “Dragă, eroismul moral e singura cale rezonabilă care ne rămâne”.

without a choice there is no responsibility and, consequently, no freedom. The sacrifice made in the name of inner coherence reminds us today of the importance of man as a unique and irreplaceable being. Annie Bentoiu shows us that during the communist regime irony was, along with other means of moral survival, a possible response to historical and personal reality, because it allowed the detachment necessary to keep human dignity untouched. After the Revolution of 1989, not subversive any longer but preserving its critical stakes, irony becomes a literary practice and thus a significant aspect of the discourse of the author's memoirs.

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FACETS OF IRONY IN COMMUNIST TESTIMONIAL LITERATURE. CASE STUDY: ANNIE BENTOIU, *TIMPUL CE NI S-A DAT* [*THE TIME WE WERE GIVEN*]
(Abstract)

Annie Bentoiu's memoirs, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat: Memorii: 1944–1959* [*The Time We Were Given: Memoirs: 1944–1959*] present an erudite, rigorously documented discourse, interwoven with a history of personal development. Rather sober and always lucid, the text contains, at times, notes of subtle irony, suggesting both a critical attitude towards the realities of the time (through the brief stories of people remembered) and a way of detachment from the hardships imposed by the totalitarian regime (through the literary practices chosen by the author). The starting point of this study is the concept of *semiotic cut* ("coupe sémiotique"), and its aim is to make a very precise selection of fragments in which ironic lines or attitudes can be identified either as an individual or collective response to the oppressions of the communist regime or as a retrospective interpretation of this specific historical context. The research involves three steps: the selection of this corpus, its analysis and its interpretation. Based on Leo Spitzer's stylistic studies, the discussion will also focus on irony as a *stylistic deviation* ("écart stylistique") from the general rules of this memoir discourse.

Keywords: irony, literary semiotics, stylistics, testimonial literature, communism.

FEȚELE IRONEI ÎN LITERATURA MEMORIALISTICĂ A COMUNISMULUI.
STUDIUL DE CAZ: ANNIE BENTOIU, *TIMPUL CE NI S-A DAT*
(Rezumat)

Memoriile semnate de Annie Bentoiu (*Timpul ce ni s-a dat: memorii: 1944–1959*) se concretizează într-un discurs erudit, riguros documentat, împletit cu o istorie a devenirii personale. Mai degrabă grav, mereu lucid, textul prezintă, pe alocuri, note de subtilă ironie, semnalizând atât o atitudine critică cu privire la realitățile epocii, cât și un mod de detașare (sau dăinuire) în contextul regimului totalitar. Studiul pe care îl propun are ca punct de pornire noțiunea de decupaj semiotic (*coupe sémiotique*) și vizează o selecție foarte precisă a fragmentelor în care pot fi identificate replici sau atitudini ironice, cel mai adesea formulate ca răspuns, individual sau colectiv, la opresiunile regimului comunist. Cercetarea se desfășoară în trei pași, implicând alcătuirea acestui corpus, analiza și interpretarea lui. Pornind de la studiile de stilistică ale lui Leo Spitzer, ironia va fi discutată și ca abatere (*écart*) de la regulile generale ale discursului memorialistic citat.

Cuvinte-cheie: ironie, semiotică textuală, stilistică, memorialistică, comunism.