

Reading in Communist Power Plants and Factories

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“I would have recommended you books that could have helped you solve your personal problems, if you had any.”

The Reader As a New Man

THOSE WHO have had the curiosity of skimming through *România literară* (Literary Romania) magazine from the early '70s (shortly after the rebranding of the *Gazeta literară*/Literary Gazette magazine) will have noticed that, starting with issue no. 30 from the summer of 1970, the magazine hosted a series of surveys or opinion polls conducted among readers in “plants, factories, work sites.”¹ Why this choice? We find the explanation several lines further down, in the opening paragraph of the first article: because it is in these places that “we can find the centers of social life where prototypes of the future world are created, where the prefiguration of an existential frame which will become a norm in the very near

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future originates; these are the incandescent areas where the development of socialism contributes, to a great extent, to shaping a new human conscience.”²²

In other words, there was a feeling of ideological change, of stricter political control mainly oriented towards the future (focusing on the strategies needed to create “the new man”), which would culminate, a year later, in the proposals regarding the measures to be taken in order to improve the political and ideological activity, the Marxist-Leninist education of party members and of the entire working class, proposals made by Nicolae Ceaușescu on 6 July 1971, known under the generic name of “July Theses.”

In the following pages, we will try to analyze the way in which the portrait of the “new reader” is constructed, starting from the thirty or so surveys published in *România literară* magazine over approximately three years. In spite of all the artificiality implied in such a construct, it is not so difficult to distinguish traces of what Tzvetan Todorov called “the fragmentary mentality,”²³ a permanent characteristic of the totalitarian historical context, especially in what the reporters’ attitude is concerned (many of them were respected intellectuals such as Dorin Tudoran or Bujor Nedelcovici). Actually, as inconceivable as it first may seem, these surveys acquire, beyond a certain point, a somewhat honorable function, from the perspective of their authors, who were either contributors or editors of the magazine. Despite the obviously propagandistic package offered each and every time, the journalists seem to delude themselves that they are doing the right thing and they take their mission of promoters of new literature among the working men very seriously. Since, as it is loudly stated in the same programmatic introduction to the series of investigations (signed by the entire editorial office as RL), “we are interested to find out, and to disclose to our readers, the echo contemporary Romanian literature has upon the manufacturers of material goods, to show which are the works that have drawn their attention, what authors and what literary trends attract this audience which is representative for the sensibility and artistic taste of the period, from so many points of view.”²⁴

The surveys are broadly conducted after the same pattern: the reporter goes into the factory, stopping firstly at the library of the institution (where he asks the librarian several questions and skims through the reading lists of the readers), sometimes he interviews a few employees that come his way (engineers, blue collar workers, technicians, clerks) regarding their literary preferences, drops in at the factory bookstore (if there is one) and, in the end, he drafts an “enlightening” program for the working class (getting them accustomed to the subtleties of modern poetry seems, by far, one of the most challenging tasks).

There is no need to insist upon the fact that many of these surveys seem comical today, although involuntarily so (especially because both the interviewees

and the interviewers put quantity first, just as it happened in the news bulletins of the time that focused on the success brought by reaching and even exceeding the annual or five-year production quotas). It is more interesting to try to establish the differences (few as they are) in the way the readers of the fundamentalist regime of the '50s were "trained" and even "involved in the creative process" (let us remember the famous 1948 issue of *Scânteia*/Sparkle magazine where blue collar workers presented writers with a list of interesting topics for the new literature).⁵

As for the surveys we are analyzing, the desire of the editorial team to avert any possible doubts regarding the authenticity of the materials presented is quite explicit: "The surveys presented here have been conducted by the editors and contributors of our magazine in full compliance with the material offered to them by the factory supervisors, conveying the answers of the readers, and the editorial team invites those who will participate in the surveys in the future to embrace our action and to openly, clearly and fundamentally express their personal opinions regarding today's literature."⁶ It is highly possible that this really was the case (although, when one of the "roving correspondents" highlights that "ideological literature . . . is very popular, not only for political education,"⁷ we have serious reasons to question his integrity). All in all, even if—by reduction *ad absurdum*—we accept the premises of "perfect compliance" with the reality discovered at the factory, what is debatable is precisely the purpose of the journalistic quest: the attempt to transform, once again, the act of reading (in line with the abusive spirit of the '50s) from a personal and private activity, into a collective (and at the same time collectivist) behavior where both the writer and the reader work to "shape a new human conscience." We are fairly close to the attempt to revive the semi-illiterate and easily manipulated reader of the Stalin period whom Evgheni Dobrenko called "state reader,"⁸ referring to the situation in the Soviet Union.

On the whole, we are dealing with a reader created according to the aesthetic doctrine of socialist realism, at the opposite pole of the "book consumers" of the Western world, a reader whose only expectation is to be modeled, transformed by imposed reading, in line with the egalitarian principles of communism. However, it is also true that in the USSR, as well as in its satellite countries, this project did not account for the inherent subversive potential of reading (sometimes, paradoxically, even if reading was programmed and regulated). Sociologists of reading know fairly well that it is not easy to cope with the diversity, variety and dynamism reading entails as a multi-layered and polymorphous phenomenon. Needless to say that in such a context, the Model Reader mentioned in semiotics treatises is scattered into a confusing variety of situations. The reader is no more than a heterogeneous character, caught in the intricate web of constraints.

This is why reading will never, not even under the strictest totalitarian regime, be exclusively subordinated to hierarchical control. There will always be room for functions additional to those of training/education: escapism, entertainment, knowledge etc., to the extent to which any society is a mosaic of different cultural layers, with their own preferences, interests, tastes and concerns. If we also add to this the personal characteristics of each and every reader, the resulting picture is one of confusing diversity.

The Contradictory '70s

ON THE other hand, it is also true that, in the Romanian public milieu of the '70s, institutional constraints were a powerful presence, with a further complication brought by “the ambiguous nature of the ideology that sets out to define a collective future without mentioning an absolute criterion for response.” If to this image we add “the combination of the precipitated shifts between ‘closeness’ and ‘openness’ of a vulnerable period of looser regulations,”¹⁰ and, on the other hand, the vanity and the cowardice of the writers caught between the pressures coming from the party and the natural desire to assert themselves, what we get is an image of a “revolution allowed by the police.” It is not by chance that Matei Călinescu talked about the “psychological and moral tensions of duplicity,”¹¹ which, far from being limited only to the 1950s, characterized even the period of relative liberalization of the mid-1960s. This is essentially the counterpart to the fragmentary mind-set Todorov spoke about, which is responsible for double reading and for the reactions of a certain part of the public, willing to discover in political novels, for example, truths that were taboo and which could hardly be found in history schoolbooks.

In a nutshell, there is no doubt that, in the early '70s, “re-reading texts that had long been considered taboo could not be done easily, as it involved delicate calculations and premeditation . . . doubled by the revival of the critical spirit that was to account for the validity of this reinstatement.”¹²

Translating all this into a metaphorical register, we can think about Truffaut's vision from the final scene of *Fahrenheit 451* (the screen version of Ray Bradbury's novel). The context we are analyzing is just as unusual as that one, a world where “never-ending communist happiness” is instituted at first by burning books, and later by selective reinstatement of literary works, only to lead, in the end, to the revival of “the nation of statues” (trends and figures of the past) for obvious propaganda purposes.

Going back to the surveys conducted by *România literară* magazine we notice firstly that the so-called liberalization period of the mid-'60s had several effects

that should be taken into account, which were little or not at all anticipated by the party representatives. Among them, the diffuse individual perception (especially among intellectual elites) that there was no turning back to the dark Stalinist era, that individual liberties (though fragile) could not be taken away easily, once earned.

This aspect is quite evident in the survey conducted by Bujor Nedelcovici, for example, at the Electrical Company of Bucharest. Of course, the sensation of a diversity of opinions, beyond the role played by the readers who were interviewed, some of them really intelligent and “competent,” comes, first and foremost, from the writer’s abilities (the writer transforms his “subjects” into characters, and the survey into a genuine prose piece). Perhaps it would not be an exaggeration to consider, even, a sort of hidden polemic addressing the uniformity that the collectivist and gregarious spirit entails. We listen, for example, to comrade Ciobanu Petru (the factory physician) who expresses his opinions about *Matei Iliescu*, Radu Petrescu’s work, “an interesting novel given its artistic method involving the interference of the plot with the hero’s thoughts and memories,”¹³ or about *Bietul Ioanide*, by G. Călinescu, a memorable novel “that shows exactly how a social class vanished from history.”¹⁴

Comrade Boanță Pavel, an electrician with the Complaints Services, admits that he prefers adventure and travel books, plays by Aurel Baranga, Horia Lovinescu and Teodor Mazilu, but that he does not read much poetry: “I like poetry less, because it is complicated and I don’t have too much time.”¹⁵ We can sense a trace of guilt in his words, as he has not met his quota for contemporary poetry...

A recurrent figure in all these surveys is that of the librarian. Discrete or aggressive, his or her presence offers us enough arguments to bring into discussion what Thomas Pavel once called the absurdity of the new man.¹⁶ Here are the coordinates of the dialogue between Ovidiu Ștefănescu (reporter) and comrade Sandu Nadia, librarian at the library of the Electromagnetica power plant, “a micro-space of book flow”:¹⁷

Reporter: “This means that each subscriber has read 35 books a year, 3 books a month.”

Librarian: “Please, you should not mention these absolute figures . . . Besides the fact the library has functioned poorly (due to my illness), we also have a book stand where we sell books. As far as I know, over 50,000 copies are sold here every year. So, apart from the library, there is a second reading . . . I would like to inform you that many books pass from subscribers to non-subscribers. I could say that every reader in the power plant reads at least 20 books a year.”¹⁸

Comrade Sandu Nadia proves to be a dedicated worker, being very persuasive in her job, also acting as a sort of psychologist, since she considers that

recommending a book should be done depending on the readers' personal state of mind. "I had recommended to a reader *The Sun Also Rises* [published in Romanian under the title *Fiesta*], by Hemingway, but when he returned the book I had to recommend *Animale bolnave* [Sick animals, a novel by Nicolae Breban], two seemingly different books."¹⁹ She rebukes a young woman worker who had not been to the library even once by saying: "I would have recommended you books that could have helped you solve your personal problems, if you had any."²⁰

Another comrade librarian, Haită Lenuța, a very serious person, with a lot of experience in the field ("I have been a librarian here, at Republica factory, for ten years"²¹ as she proudly informs the reporter), admits that she encounters difficulties when it comes to "directing" the readers' choices: "Adventure books are most in demand. The readers influence each other. Word of mouth from one reader to another is stronger than recommendations coming from the librarian . . . On most occasions the reader asks for a certain book, one that was recommended by a fellow worker or which he heard about . . . As for us, we do our best to direct the choices of the readers who are willing to trusting (*sic!*) our recommendations."²² What Dorin Tudoran says, that "the reader's trust in the librarian's recommendations represents 80 per cent of the reason for having this job,"²³ makes Haită Lenuța launch a counterattack, arguing that librarians have no support from the young writers or the critics. If the books written by the writers of the new wave (such as N. Velea, I. Neacșu, D. Țepeneag, Gabriela Melinescu, L. Dimov, etc.) had prefaces and biographical tables, things would be different, the librarian would be supported in his dissemination job:

Librarian: Couldn't literary critics or historians who often offer lengthy studies, difficult for the mass readers, draft these pages which are much more interesting for them, rather than show off with precious subtleties, often to no avail?

Reporter: Those who write the adventure novels you mentioned also do not benefit from the miraculous notes you are proposing, and yet...

Librarian: You might think I have something against the 'others,' but really, it's like people are really different too.

Reporter: What do you mean?

Librarian: Every time we invited writers like H. Zincă, C. Chiriță, I. Grecea, N. Tăutu, R. Tudoran, T. Uba, T. Filip to meet the readers, they happily accepted and answered eagerly to all the questions they were asked. On the other hand, other writers that were invited to come to our factory acted very surprised by our proposal, hinting to us that these meetings are completely uninteresting for them.²⁴

From the “Dogmatic Complex” to the “Reinstatement Complex”

WE CAN distinguish the implicit premises of the conflict (inside the world of literature) between the writers that prefer the “ivory tower” (showing indifference or even contempt towards the great mass of readers, manufacturers of material goods) and their more sociable peers, willing to step down into the crowd to “actively and revolutionarily take part in creating the bright future” (even by increasing the number of entries in the reading lists of the working class).

These suggestions must have alarmed many of the representatives of the cultural world of the 1970s who feared that the abuses characterizing the early years of totalitarianism might come back (the prudent, yet numerous references to “the dogmatic complex” present in the literary press of the time stand proof to that).

As it would soon become obvious, it all came down to a new ideological twist, (the national-communist trend) which was to be accompanied by new constraints and “complexes.” Thus, the recently rehabilitated books (and, in some cases, even their authors, if they were still alive) became only pretexts to strengthen the official ideology, against a background dominated by what Ioana Macrea-Toma calls “the reinstatement complex.”²⁵ The almost “missionary” fervor most intellectuals put into the project meant to “valorize the cultural legacy”²⁶ was justified, because beyond the self-justifying dimension, this “reinstatement” also had an emotional impact on the Romanian intelligentsia: it meant that books that had been previously banned could now be reinstated. And these were books upon which writers had projected “their aspirations of cultural liberty and autonomy.”²⁷

It did not matter too much that the editions were, most of the time, combined or that some of the re-published volumes were delayed way beyond the usual deadlines (as it was the case with G. Călinescu’s *History of Romanian Literature*):²⁸ what was important was the fact that books long considered taboo could be read again.

Besides, even at a glance, by examining the reading lists, the reporters could spot the names of famous poets and prose writers of the interwar period (Tudor Arghezi, Lucian Blaga, Ion Barbu, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, Liviu Rebreanu, Mateiu I. Caragiale etc.). Octavian Goga, recently rehabilitated, is also mentioned: “It is interesting to notice,” Ovidiu Ștefănescu writes as a conclusion of his survey (but without a direct connection to it), “that good literature meets politics spontaneously, as preoccupations focused on world reality. Through them, man is reabsorbed in the community as a lucid conscience, a dynamo used to transform life. Goga is first among the poets in this category.”²⁹

Of the more contemporary writers, the subscribers of the factory libraries seem to prefer Zaharia Stancu, Marin Preda, D. R. Popescu, Fănuș Neagu, Eugen Barbu, while international literature is represented by famous authors (Balzac, Flaubert, Dickens, Hemingway, Dostoevsky, Moravia etc.)

Heroes of the Socialist Reading List

HERE ARE some examples worth mentioning from Dorin Tudoran's survey: "Browsing the reading list of Sălăjan Mihai, an engineer aged 40, or of Teodoriu Niculaie, a ticket clerk, aged 53, one gets the feeling that one stands in front of avid readers, with good taste, accustomed to systematic reading. Their lists feature the names of distinguished authors and works: Benoit, Stancu, Eliade, Dickens, Balzac, Barbu, Grillet, Čapek, Preda, Minulescu, Flaubert."³⁰

The reading list of Pascale Silviu, a locksmith aged 24, the graduate of a secondary school and with 3 years of technical school education, containing 70 titles of books, both Romanian and international (among which Radiguet, Moravia, Miller, Poe, Istrati, Teodoreanu, Beligan, Balzac, Dostoevsky, Hemingway, Hesse) could also confirm the presence of a true hero of socialist reading, if it did not rise suspicions of falsehood:

Reporter: "Doesn't it seem that 70 authors, even represented by only a single volume, is too much, given that this reading list belongs to a man that works 8 hours a day, is only 24 years old and that the list only covers the period between 1 January and 8 June 1970?"

Librarian: "I, too, was surprised by the voraciousness of this reader. You might think that this list is . . . bogus. In a sense, it is, because when I asked comrade Pascale how come he reads so much, he confessed that not all the books appeal to him, and he finishes only those that truly attract him."³¹

Reading such a dialogue takes us into the absurd (we have the feeling that we have just opened Mircea Horia Simionescu's *Dicționarul onomastic*/Onomastic dictionary), just as the next passage taken out from Bujor Nedelcovici's article "Noi aprindem în fiecare seară luminile acestui oraș" (We switch on the city lights every night), also requires a discussion upon the absurdity of the "new man":

Interviewee: *My name is Zarifopol P., I am an engineer in the Technical Service department.*

Reporter: *Are you related to the literary critic?*

Interviewee: *You wanted to ask me something, right?*

Reporter: Yes. What do you look for when you read a book? The plot, or...

Interviewee: I understand. Today's literature looks for that extraordinary event to maintain the reader's attention, maybe this is the general taste. I remember a short story by Poe where nothing happens, he just describes a pub. You cannot make true literature with a sensational event which can only be a starting point for a good book . . . I can say that, when reading a book, I'm not always interested in the idea, but in that trampoline that projects me into another world . . . Maybe I am old fashioned, the public enjoys thrillers, I prefer Proust.³²

In this particular situation the surprise comes neither from the numbers discussed, nor from the elevated discourse of the blue collar worker, but from the simple fact that the engineer's name is none other than Zarifopol P. and from the fact that he inexplicably avoids to answer the question "are you related to the literary critic?"

At Unirea factory in the city of Cluj, Romulus Barcani also discovers a "leader" of socialist reading, the young commuter Oșan Ion, whose reading list "has reached 300 titles."³³ The author of the survey mentions several of these titles: *Moromeții* (M. Preda); *Aventurile unui timid* (The adventures of a shy man) (C. Omescu); *Povestiri de dragoste* (Love stories) (Z. Stancu); *Somnul pământului* (The slumber of the earth) (D. R. Popescu); *Cazul doctorului Udrea* (The case of Doctor Udrea) (Ben Corlaciuc) etc.

The librarian, Karczagi Iosif, also deserves some credit for this, as, although he works full time in the plant, he saves time for the library (working here voluntarily). But there are plenty of reasons to be satisfied, he says: "People read a lot of historical novels, especially about the Second World War. Most readers are young. They prefer spy thrillers, but also read other books."³⁴

"Modern Poetry Confuses Me . . . Maybe I Don't Understand It"

THIS STATEMENT is mentioned time and time again, almost in the same words, nearly every time readers are asked if they are interested in poetry or what they think about contemporary poets. We are under the impression that this lack of interest large audiences have for poetry risks to diminish even the poets themselves, since their poetic "production" has no echo among blue collar workers. On the one hand, there is a sort of nostalgia (among the masses of readers) for the propaganda poetry of the 1950s, which everybody could easily understand and, on the other hand, there is the writers' fear that this model might, once again, return. This can explain, for example, the eagerness of

one of the reporters (Ovidiu Alexandru) who has decided to make workers understand and love modern poetry. After the rhetorical question he asks himself (“These workers have the right to beauty, just as we do. So who should read to them our contemporary poetry, so controversial and multi-layered, characteristic of the consciousness and sensibility of nowadays Romania?”)³⁵ the journalist takes matters into his own hands and goes to factories and plants, armed with poems, in order to stimulate the readers’ appetite for such reading. To Socrate Vânătoru, engineer at the Tractorul Braşov plant, he reads a poem by Ion Caration (*Timpule/You, time*), to Băbuş Gheorghe (lathe operator)—he reads *Imnul garoafei* (Hymn to a daffodil) by Ion Alexandru, and to Dobre Vasile (technical supervisor at Mecanică I plant, 1 Mai Ploieşti)—*Rondelul serii de duminică* (Rondel to a Sunday evening) by Leonid Dimov and so on.

Some of them try hard to discover the causes for such a lack of interest (as if poetry was not, in almost all cultures, a genre less accessible to mass audiences). For example, librarian Haită Lenuţa considers that the way poetry is taught in school and discussed by literary critics in magazines, using a forbidding phraseology, is to blame for this unfortunate situation.

Another librarian (Sandu Nadia) invents an efficient strategy to stimulate the readers: “I gave to one reader,” she confesses, “both Baudelaire and Marin Sorescu at the same time, in order to encourage him to choose. Also, on returning the books, we discussed the content and drew conclusions applicable in life.”³⁶

There are many similar examples and most of them lead to a portrait (manufactured, of course) of the reader from the early national communist period: a *homo universalis* in all his greatness, who, while assembling tractors or fitting screws, finds the resources to read dozens of books. It is true that this voracious reader, sometimes even against his own will, has the duty, in turn, to (trans)form the writer. Both of them are first and foremost manufacturers of values (either material or spiritual) and both need to perform in as many fields of activity as possible.

It is useless to say that, in such a context, reading mainly loses one of its essential functions, that of helping the individual to form his own opinions and make his own choices, and the writer sees himself constrained to give up his own freedom of speech: “The limited man is caught up in the realm of concepts and contemporary art just as much as the artist himself. In fighting space and time, his features and those of the poet are similar.”³⁷

This is, of course, just one of the many aspects of the phenomenon of reading during the last decades of communism (in its manufactured or counterfeit state). Beyond the ghost of the model reader there is a large number of real functions that reading has (if we think just about the clandestine practices analyzed by Sanda Cordoş in one of her articles, not long ago).³⁸

The party did not forget, even for a second, that in the end, all *true* reading is subversive (as Alberto Manguel proved, among many others)³⁹ and that is why it tried to control this activity through any means possible (from oppression to persuasion). And, to a large extent, it succeeded.

On the other hand, these surveys help us understand the environment dominated by confusion, characteristic for 1970s Romania and, also to reconsider, through this filter, the mutations (even the slightest ones) occurred in the collective mindset, during the transition from one stage of communism to another. □

Notes

1. Dorin Tudoran, "Cartea în uzină I," *România literară* (Bucharest) 3, 30 (1970): 2.
2. Ibid.
3. Tzvetan Todorov, *Omul deznădăcinat*, trans. and notes by Ion Pop (Iași: Institutul European, 1999), 28.
4. Tudoran, 2.
5. Ana Selejan, *Literatura în totalitarism (1949–1951)* (Sibiu: Thausib, 1994), 174.
6. Tudoran, 2.
7. Ovidiu Ștefănescu, "Cartea în uzină II," *România literară* 3, 32 (1970): 2.
8. Evgheni Dobrenko, *Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997). In this volume, Dobrenko drafts a history of the reader in Soviet literature and, at the same time, a history of the strategies used to this purpose; the way in which book trade used to be done and the way in which libraries, publishing houses, schools were organized served a single purpose: to shape the reader as the "new man."
9. Ioana Macrea-Toma, *Privileghiul: Instituții literare în comunismul românesc* (Cluj: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2009), 241–242.
10. Ibid., 242.
11. Matei Călinescu and Ion Vianu, *Amintiri în dialog: Memorii*, 3rd edition (Iași: Polirom, 2005), 155.
12. Ioana Macrea-Toma, "La mise en valeur de l'héritage national et 'le peuple des statues': enjeux identitaires à l'époque de libéralisation," in *Identité nationale: réalité, histoire, littérature*, eds. Ioana Bot and Adrian Tudurachi (Bucharest: Institutul Cultural Român, 2008), 133.
13. Bujor Nedelcovici, "Noi aprindem în fiecare seară luminile acestui oraș," *România literară* 3, 34 (1970): 2.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Thomas Pavel, "Culture and Control: The Legitimacy of Literature and of the Communist Regime in Romania (1948–1960)," in *Literature in Totalitarian Re-*

gimes: Confrontation, Autonomy, Survival, eds. Rodica Ilie, Andrei Bodiou, and Adrian Lăcătuș (Brașov: Transilvania University Publishing Press, 2011), 71–72.

17. Ștefănescu, 2.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Tudoran, 2.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Macrea-Toma, “La mise en valeur,” 161.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. During the same period of time, in an article also published in *România literară* magazine, called “Două cuvinte despre ediții și editori” (A few words about editions and editors) (no. 17, 1970), Eugen Simion asks some legitimate questions regarding the (re)publishing done at the time. For the second part of the question (how do we edit?), the critic notices some huge mistakes encountered especially when it came to republishing books of criticism: there was a tendency to offer a “just and beautiful image” to earlier criticism, eliminating all judgments that were not confirmed by posterity. This is a false opinion, of course, a critic being equally interesting through what he rejects, as well as through what he accepts, when he is wrong, or when his opinion is accepted by his followers. Not even in exceptional cases (such as Iorga’s, for example) must one “censure” post-mortem such a personality whose greatness depends on his contradictions and his wholeness.
29. Ștefănescu, 2.
30. Tudoran, 2.
31. Ibid.
32. Nedelcovici, 2.
33. Romulus Barcani, “Cartea și timpul,” *România literară* 4, 9 (1971): 2.
34. Ibid.
35. Ovidiu Alexandru, “O lume poetică,” *România literară* 3, 36 (1970): 2.
36. Ștefănescu, 2.
37. Alexandru, 2.
38. Sanda Cordoș, “Clandestine Reading in Communist Romania: A Few Considerations,” *Transylvanian Review* 19, 2 (Summer 2010): 73; the author also quotes Alexandru Vlad’s opinion according to which “the assiduous reading practiced by Romanians, up to a certain December night in 1989, must have acted as a sort of therapy . . . A group therapy in which we were, alternately and concurrently, objects and subjects, patients and confessors, sanitary agents and submissive guinea pigs.”
39. Regarding the inherently subversive character of true reading, Alberto Manguel argued that “all true readings are subversive, against the grain, as Alice, a sane reader, discovered in the Looking-Glass world of mad name-givers. The Duchess calls mus-

tard a *mineral*; the Cheshire Cat purrs and calls it *growling*; a Canadian prime minister tears up the railway and calls it *progress*; a Swiss businessman traffics in loot and calls it *commerce*; an Argentinian president shelters murderers and calls it *amnesty*. Against such misnomers, readers can open the pages of their books. In such cases of willful madness, reading helps us to maintain coherence in the chaos.” Alberto Manguel, *A Reader on Reading* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

Abstract

Reading in Communist Power Plants and Factories

In the early '70s, the Romanian cultural magazine *România literară* published a series of interviews with “common readers” (workers from factories, engineers, librarians) in order to demonstrate not only that Romanians were well-read people, but also that the communist rulers had reached their aim of creating a New Man. Analyzed nowadays, these pages show how absurd this *homo legens* invented by the communist propaganda actually was. They also prove how dangerous reading was considered, since the officials were continuously looking for ways of controlling it and monitoring its practices. The fake portrait of the Romanian common reader as a hero of the public sphere acquires several distinct significances when related to the political tensions of the '70s, when all the small liberties granted to the intellectuals in the mid-60's would prove to be but a house of cards, maneuvers skillfully effected by the communist authorities with the aim of achieving complete power. Even if this shift of Ceaușescu's dictatorship towards an imitation of Stalinism, but bordering on the hilarious, did not have consequences similar to those of the '50s, Romanian culture was once more diverted from its normal evolution.

Keywords

reading, print culture, library, dictatorship, communist Romania, editions