Mirrored Otherness and Microhistory in Post-Soviet Literature

The Estranged Milieus in Vasile Ernu's Essays and Fiction

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*Thus, the old people in Bratkov's portraits are old in a different way; young people are young in a different way. Even those who are equals are equal in a culturally different way. But this otherness lies in the gaze itself. This otherness constitutes the subject of the post-communist gaze as something that is not in itself post-communist. The reason people gawp with such fascination at post-communism is that they think they do **not** have to recognize themselves in it.* (Boris Buden[1])

A cultural space can accurately be described through its potential of creating aversion towards other cultures. In world literature, as in world politics, interferences between cultures may take the form of harsh or soft stances towards alterity through the creation of stereotypes. Edward Said's concept of Orientalism[2] has often been employed to describe the *aversion to* or common *objectification of* "the Orient" or any "overseas" culture by Eurocentric structures. His premises are by now largely known, and some of its further developments have been extremely useful in imagining those kinds of cultural projections in scalable geographic contexts. We are first and foremost referring to Maria Todorova's subspecies, Balkanism,[3] through which Todorova drew on Said's famous concept by *scaling* it and defining Southeast European cultural situations and the image the West cultivates about the Balkans. In Romania, one can witness an even *more specific* situation within this series of scalable Orientalism, and it is what we use here as the "mirrored otherness"[4] of Bessarabian or "Basa" literature, a term that has generated a category of contemporary East European writing shortened as Basa poetry or Basa fiction. The concept of "mirrored otherness" describes the relationship established between very close communities sharing a common language and culture, but which nonetheless create specific otherness structures through "cultural triangulation"[5]—through a third culture that inflicts their connections. In this case, our third party is represented by the Russian and Soviet administrations, which instilled a strong alterity from the perspective of Romanian culture when referring to Bessarabian literature. This is a very similar concept

to what authors such as Milica Bakić-Hayden—for the Yugoslav space—and Manuela Boatcă—who expanded the concept for the entire Eastern Europe—have described as a form of "nesting colonialism,"[6] namely the regional *rivalry* among East European countries in their aspiration to become *more European* and *less Eastern*. This rivalry gave birth to local forms of Orientalism between countries that are at the same time Orientalized as a cluster: South Slavs, Balkans, East Europeans etc. What we hereby pursue are some of the techniques used for bridging the gap entailed by this "mirrored otherness" through Life Writing and Microhistory.

Life Writing has often been seen as a way of putting biography in the center of literary discourse, yet seldomly described as a way of *translating cultural milieus* through microhistories.[7] Every biography is embedded with *scapes* of cultural material,[8] and sometimes Life Writing is more of a socially engaged domain than individual storytelling might seem to be. As Hans Renders recently stressed out,

> *Life Writing claims to bring into the limelight individuals and groups of people hitherto neglected by scholarship by using autobiographical documents. Unfortunately, many Life Writing researchers leave out the historical context and historiographical practices.*[9]

In Romanian literature, life writings made their debut with the depiction of foreign milieus. If we consider Nicolae Milescu Spătaru's account of his journeys to China, written in 1675–1678, or Dinicu Golescu's 1826 *Însemnare a călătoriei mele* (My travelogue) describing his journey to Western Europe—works that are nowadays read as "geocultural networks"[10]—we might find out that Life Writing is greatly indebted to alterity. Its contribution to world literature studies lies in embedded contexts of biographical writing. We already put forward a thesis on the origins of memoirs and diaries in Romanian culture as determined by exile,[11] so our interest now falls on Life Writing as cultural milieu accommodator. In this respect, we have chosen to describe a very particular facet of contemporary Life Writing, namely the literary production of essays and works of fiction by authors *born in the USSR* (to anticipate one of the most important titles in our analysis), authors who have adapted Soviet and post-Soviet Bessarabian cultural milieus to the geographically adjacent, yet structurally biased Romanian audiences. What we mean by 'biased audiences' is the general tendency to create and cultivate stereotypes owing to the bicentennial tensions between Romanian and Russian administrations, through which Bessarabia was subjected to a slow process of assimilation and, at the same time, alterization.[12] In the current world system, both the polarized narratives of post-Cold War tension and Global South emancipation are central to understanding communist and post-communist cultures.[13] The former narratives have cultivated a state of emergency in world politics and created stereotypes about and between post-Soviet cultures. The latter situation became a constant operator through comparisons made by scholars between post-communism and postcolonialism.[14] For Romanian audiences, Soviet culture has been an uneasy subject during the past 30 years, since it seems almost impossible to eschew the dualist perspective instilled by the Cold War in the East. Even the Bessarabian space, shaped by the Romanian-speaking population of the Republic of Moldova, needs proper cultural accommodators, since Romanians tend to exoticize this proximity. This

is—in our reading—an example of *mirrored otherness*, through which geographically close areas that essentially share a similar culture create fully active stereotypes of otherness due to their administrative and symbolic belonging to other spaces: although being fundamentally close to Romania, both culturally and linguistically, the strong administrative Russification of Bessarabia during the long 19th century and its later Sovietization were a deciding factor on its heavy alterization in Romania. This alterization is never innocent, since the general Russophobia shared among Romanian intellectuals and general media is the main impetus for this otherness.[15] The two decades during which the larger part of Bessarabia was assimilated into Greater Romania were not sufficient for a proper erasure of those build-ups of otherness[16] and as a result, the Moldavian and Bessarabian social and cultural milieus are very much ascribable to the concept of *cultural other* for the Romanian public. In this article we would like to address this cultural other, as it is nowadays created within Romanian literature and how some writers build on strategies of decompressing this mirrored otherness.

THEREFORE, WE chose to build the arguments of this article drawing on Vasile Ernu's writings. Born in Odessa in 1971, in the intercultural hotbed of Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian populations, Ernu spent his youth in the USSR—in Odessa, Cahul, Chișinău—before attending University in Romania—in Iași and Cluj-Napoca—and settling in Bucharest. His debut with *Născut în URSS* (Born in the USSR, 2006),[17] the ensuing "brief trilogy of marginals" comprising *Sectanții* (The sectarians, 2015), *Bandiții* (The bandits, 2016), and *Izgoniții* (The banished, 2019),[18] and his *Sălbaticii copii dingo* (The savage dingo kids, 2021)[19] are Life Writing documents of what we here call *mirrored otherness*, a particular category of what Andre Gingrich described as "frontier Orientalism."[20] This concept goes against Said's main idea that Orientalism has an "overseas" component and attempts to illustrate how close cultures interfere through acute stereotypes of otherness as well.

Vasile Ernu's prose is difficult to subsume to a specific formula, as the author constantly asserts his comfort with and openness to stylistic, discursive, and literary diversity, being equally drawn to bursts of essayistic eloquence, interesting historical and anthropological digressions, as well as autobiographical excursions, confessions, and poetic insertions, aptly woven into stories which—supposedly—he is merely recording. More than once in his books, during a dialogue with his implied readership, he exhibits this indeterminacy regarding his status as a writer. In the second volume of "a brief trilogy of marginals" *The Bandits*, the narrator claims that he "never wanted to be a writer":

> *I don't see anything special about it. I adore literature or, rather, part of it, the way I adore a certain brand of essays and philosophy. I think an essayist should know how to explain, while a writer should, above all else, know how to tell a story. An essayist must speak in arguments, a writer must know how to listen. How do you reconcile the two?*[21]

We interpret this confession as a form of avoiding potential links between the microhistories described in his writing and devices pertaining to *fictional writing*. "I never wanted to be a writer" reads, in our view, as "I never wanted to fictionalize." Vasile Ernu's literature

ultimately attempts this reconciliation between the fascination for "collected" stories—drawing on "composite fiction," which works both as collection of short stories and novelistic product[22]—the historical backdrop against which they are projected, and the essayistic nerve of the voice recalling this history through his characters, "experimental egos" built according to Milan Kundera's consecrated formula.

Although he is one of the most interesting contemporary Romanian writers, his name is especially associated with his ideological stance, 'leftism', and therefore the columnist often overshadows the writer due to the Romanian post-communist anticommunist discourse.[23] Yet, in *Istoria literaturii române contemporane 1990–2020* (The history of contemporary Romanian literature 1900–2020), Mihai Iovănel sees the publication of "Vasile Ernu's revisionist memoirs, *Născut in* URSS (2006)" as one of the notable moments in "the evolution of ideology" in post-communist Romania. In it, "Ernu replaces *de rigueur* anticommunism with a perspective that is comparable, according to Sorin Antohi's afterword, to the East German phenomenon of 'ostalgia.'" The critic emphasizes that "Ernu's strategy [of] reinspecting communism ironically and without anger" is in sharp contrast to the post–1989 tradition of the genre,[24] and therefore Vasile Ernu is a "provocateur" who "speaks fondly about hundreds of sociocultural details of life under communism," capitalizing on the literary effect of "a combination of calm humor and false naivety." Beyond this effect, Mihai Iovănel insists on "the visibly transgressive political function" of the book, seen as an important historical milestone in the process of revealing a leftist consciousness."[25] The writer brings together, in a sometimes ironic, self-deprecating manner, snapshots from a past world, writing about pioneers, communal apartments ("komunalka"), the first pair of jeans, children's books (*Buratino, Habarnam*), political jokes, movie stars, the representation of sex in cinema, propaganda, alcohol consumption, schooling, a passion for chess, Ostap Bender (Ilf and Petrov's hero), revolutionary heroes, the Soviet condom, the Soviet Jewish situation, popular music and Soviet rock, etc. The texts address a rich variety of themes pertaining to the Soviet world—which have made the subject of cultural studies in recent years under the label of *socialist fun*[26]— adding nuance to certain aspects of communism which, in many ways, can also be found in Romania. This is his *first step* in facing the Romanian audience with a mirror: the *other* of Bessarabian Soviet culture is presented quite like a twinning culture to the Romanian public. Yet, unlike other similar in-depth representations of Romanian communism,[27] Ernu's debut volume, like his other books, adds a certain guise of *lived experience*, whose appeal lies in the marginal milieu it describes. The author avoids any moralizing tendencies and criticism in exploring—with humor and a certain degree of nostalgia—this network of institutions, customs, and objects. In doing so, he delivers a recipe for recognizing the artefacts of this world, as well as its dynamics, through subtitles such as these: "How to know whether someone is born in the 1970s in the USSR," "The heroes of our age," "*Steclopunct* or what can be done with a ruble," "What a Soviet citizen would drink," "The Soviet adventure of objects," "What to do?," etc. Eventually, what the memorialist is explicitly trying to prove, stating his intention clearly in the book's "P.S."/afterword, is that "we should not approach this world we came from with hatred, contempt, love, or ignorance, but we must understand and face up to it":

*Another conclusion bothers people greatly today, making them uncomfortable: the fact that, from my point of view, there is no fundamental difference between the world we came from and the world we entered, there are only nuances, a different packaging. While the world we used to live in focused on **political repression**, the one we joined is based on **economic repression**. These are two sides of the same coin. Both are means of repression and control. Both control and make us subservient: they are trying to turn us into slaves and machines that answer to pre-established commands. Both brainwash us just as insidiously and alienate us just as efficiently . . . Finally, considering all of the above, I maintain that we should not trust in any of the **possible political worlds**, but must rather inquire, interrogate them, resist rather than submit, and even try to change something. I believe that such an approach can make the world a little bit better.*[28]

Starting from these conclusions of the 2006 volume, we consider that we can classify Vasile Ernu's characters according to typologies and inquire how they function in taming otherness: the marginals are the unyielding ones, those who oppose the system, whichever this system may be, those who boycott the world "in a radical fashion." Through a very intriguing selection of both geographical and socially marginal groups, Ernu points out the fact that the otherness of the Budjak region in Southern Bessarabia can function as a mirror for Romanian culture and for the post-Soviet world by large. As indicated by the narrator in *The Bandits* while explaining the Professor's lecture, this is precisely what brings the marginals—the bandits, the thieves, the sectarians—together, even though their two worlds keep colliding: "an almost religious cult for a minimal ethic code and set of rules" and "the almost instinctive refusal to submit to the Leviathan": "Some wanted to save the world, to be the luminous example, to bring life, while the others wanted to bury it for good, to sow fear and death."[29] In each of the trilogy's volumes, the representatives of their respective classes explain and declare this ex-centricity. And here lies his main strategy: in our understanding, through these marginal communities, Ernu projected the ethos of resistance which, in turn, rendered anticommunist stances redundant. The sectarians, the bandits, and the banished are already categories disputing the system. This allowed him to adopt a contestatory perspective that had access both to the anticommunist and anticapitalist system of desires. In *The Sectarians*, we encounter the survival techniques developed by the community in relation to the three entities it is confronted with: the state, the dominant church, and the secular world. The premise is that the sectarians do not believe in a neutral or good state, be it communist or capitalist, since the state is "a form of enslavement, which should be evaded" by creating a parallel world:

This was also the secret of my sect. The more they withdrew, the easier it was for them to find better, more efficient resources in order to resist and organize themselves. The marginality they were faced with forced them to find inexhaustible resources in completely unknown areas, to discover forms and ways of life unsuspected even by the dreaded regime, which believed it knew and controlled everything.[30]

One of the novel's characters explains the lack of treatises or press coverage of the sect by invoking the regime's desire to camouflage its existence, as the sectarians were the only ones able to openly confront the regime in an organized manner and without aspiring to engage in state politics. Unsurprisingly, their situation is compared to that of the bandits:

> *Where do we place the bandits? Many are locked up not because they were caught breaking the law, but because the idea of being a bandit has been ascribed ideological and political meaning, contradicting the official Party line. For the Party, being a bandit means, first and foremost, being an anti-Soviet element and only secondarily a criminal, a criminal case, as the saying goes.*[31]

Likewise, in *The Bandits*, the Professor, the narrator's outlaw uncle, comes from the world of the sectarians and proclaims this marginality as a form of dissidence:

> *The bandits have gone much further in their insubordination—they resorted to a complete boycott of any collaboration with the official powers, the state and its institutions. Because they saw themselves as the power and, in the end, they would truly conquer it. They knew how to live outside the state. Only jail made them meet the Leviathan from time to time. But they knew how to vanquish that, as well.*[32]

Gravitating around the main theme, i.e., marginality, the trilogy thus recreates, on the one hand, the stories of two communities—a religious one, stretching over four generations across multiple regimes, and a criminal one, "the kingdom of thieves," belonging to smugglers, prostitutes, murderers, and beggars—and, on the other hand, the individual histories of certain members of these communities.

In *The Sectarians*, the author relies on historical documentation, namely on "oral histories," in order to describe the community. He puts together a genealogy of the group as well, starting with great-grandfather Culachi, but also delving deeper into Russia's history, as early as the times of the Rasskolniks, a branch of the old-ritualist pravoslavniks who, in the 17th century, rejected the reforms imposed by the Russian Patriarch Nikon and prompted a series of events that would ultimately provoke a historical shift through Archpriest Avakkum, the first radical uprising against power, the source—according to the narrator—of the Russian sentiment called *bunt*. The narrator tells the story of the community from the moment of its establishment in the late 19th century until present times, capturing its interactions with all the regimes under which it existed, the Tsarist Empire, the period of Greater Romania, the Soviet Union and, later on, the Republic of Moldova. This is the second most important strategy for mirroring those cultures in order to present the Bessarabian otherness as self-otherness: the shared history, the very similar Orthodox belief system, and the fundamentally recognizable elements of multiculturalism. This representative situation is summarized in a charming manner, through a story read by the narrator and addressed to him by Shalom Isakovich, who belongs to the community's sixth generation and who, after the dismantling of the USSR and the transformation of the former sister republics into independent states, decides to move

to Israel. At the customs office, the clerk is impressed by the old man's travel record, which states that he was born in the Tsarist Empire, was educated in Greater Romania, worked in the USSR as a music teacher, and eventually became a pensioner in the Republic of Moldova: "'Not at all,' the old Jew answered, sadly. 'I have never left my neighborhood in my entire life, not even once. This is my first time outside the city . . . '"[33] This specific moment indicates the layered otherness that is—within the context of frontier identity—always determined by the political whirlpool. The engagement in the community's microhistory and the reconstruction of key-moments in its evolution are conducted through relatively vast digressions, "detours," in the narrator's own words, that are motivated by the desire to make the driving force, the functional mechanisms of the community in relation to state institutions as clear as possible. This is, in our reading, a way of using microhistory as form of digression, yet it never serves any purpose. In a "conversation about the art of the novel" with Christian Salmon, included in his 1986 volume, Milan Kundera states that his novelistic technique implies a two-tier design—"on the first, I compose the novel's story; over that, I develop the themes."[34] Likewise, in the context of Vasile Ernu's prose, due to this propensity towards digression, the exploration of the maze of history is marked by such theme-words, explicitly signaled throughout the narrative, but also sometimes mentioned at the beginning of each book, serving either as "explanations"—such as in *The Sectarians*—or as a "minimal bandits' dictionary for losers"—as we encounter in *The Bandits*. During the same interview, when asked about his approach to history, Milan Kundera lists a few of his principles: treating historical circumstances as efficiently as possible, selecting only those historical circumstances that create a significant existential situation for the characters; moreover, historiography records the history of society, not of the human being. Therefore, Kundera believes, the historical events included in his novels are forgotten by historiography. In Vasile Ernu's work, the particularity of the investigated community, its physiology, defined by withdrawal and insurrection, determines a similar approach, since these represent small, marginal groups creating their own history:

> *Grand history owes its meaning to the small, apparently insignificant events in people's lives. Looking at the world and its grand history through the prism of these small, marginal communities is like turning a pair of binoculars and gazing through the other end.*[35]

Ernu is equally fascinated and preoccupied with recreating the linguistic exoticism of his marginals as faithfully as possible, somehow shedding light on the exoticized Bessarabian dialect, with its Russian inflexions. In addition, he delves into the exploration of the bandits' slang, *fenea*, the language that "is not meant for foreign ears," with many keywords borrowed from Yiddish, but also many Russian terms.[36] The monstrous world captured in *The Bandits* through the characters' stories, which reached the narrator only thanks to the Professor's recommendations, is revealed and summarized using the terminology belonging to the minimal dictionary "for losers" (those living outside the world of the thieves). This dictionary explains the meanings of, among other terms, *bazar* (serious conversation), *bespredel* (chaos, disorder), *blatar* (thieves by law), *komuneara, komuneaga* (derogatory term for the representatives of communist power), *musor* ("gar-

bage," a name given to militiamen), *paṭani*, *basota*, *baistruk*, *ṣpana* (young delinquents), etc. In the narrative, we can almost identify certain mechanisms providing a "plurilinguistic, heteroglosic" organization of the discourse, although Vasile Ernu is less preoccupied with merging languages, with their hybridization or parodic reframing, than with the contexts and the traits of the bandits' community. The theorist who coined the concept a century ago, Mikhail Bakhtin, highlighted the fact that the humorous-parodic reproduction of almost all the strata of literary language—spoken and written—had been a constant feature in the British comic novel of the 18th century while discussing the parodic works of Fielding, Sterne, Smollett, or Thackeray.

BAKHTIN REFERRED, first of all, to an active heteroglossia practiced by the author, a continuous movement to and from language, a permanent change in the distance between author and language and, in other words, foreign linguistic registers being woven into the writer's own register. Otherwise, Bakhtin believes, "this style would be monotonous or would require the individuation of the narrator, that is, another way of introducing and organizing heteroglossia." Indeed, a certain narrative monotony is noticeable in Vasile Ernu's prose, precisely because he brings no further nuance to the voices of his characters, who become, *à tour de rôle*, narrators, although the subject of the books provides enough material for this to take place. The discourse of his narrators is somehow linear, even, no matter if the one speaking is the Professor, the master pickpocket, the Pianist, the thieves' tattoo artist, the brothel matron, or the famous assassin Finkă. The stories built into the main narrative are by and large educational in style; the narrators, selected from among the bandits, "teach" the young writer life lessons and resistance strategies, sometimes in a prophetic tone, easily drawing on and commenting Biblical fragments and episodes, producing perfectly articulate discourses whereby the only way of knowing which group they belong to is looking at their use of slang. This takes place, we believe, on account of the necessary alteration in the narration made in order to ensure a better communication with the Romanian readership, as the culturally specific attributes of the Basa discourse had to be mirrored to the Romanian audience. The narrator avoids the overt specificity of linguistic registers, choosing not to feature samples of Bessarabian orality, as done by other Bessarabian writers such as Alexandru Vakulovski, Mihail Vakulovski, Dumitru Crudu, and especially by Dinu Guțu in his more recent novel, *Perestroika Boys*. At one point, explains Vasile Ernu through the voice of his narrator in *The Bandits*, it all has to do with a sort of self-censorship, derived from his self-preservation instinct:

> *When I arrived in Romania, I understood or, rather, my intuition told me that in order to protect myself I had to speak like the majority, and that each word and each gesture that betray my belonging to a different or "inferior species" would hinder my progress. This is how I started to control my instincts, to tame my sounds and letters in order to produce words, sounds, and phrases required by the majority, so that they can pave my road to success or, in fact, so that I can also integrate into the indistinct masses, the majority. The power and the position that you acquire, however minor, begin to have a strong influence on you. You force yourself to do things better, by the book, in order to advance. It is the ultimate form*

of social training. Training and training again . . . Most Bessarabians who have lived for many years in Romania and who have adapted and integrated perfectly speak a language that has completely lost its accent and style, the so-called Basa jargon, strongly influenced by Russian. And they all speak the "civilized language," which won't set them apart. But as soon as they get tipsy or feel comfortable, with no strangers around, the register suddenly changes. When among themselves, they speak in their familiar, intimate linguistic register.[37]

This means that, while his works represent, in a way, a conscious effort of bridging the gap of "otherness" through exploring the Basa cultural milieu, as the author acknowledges, this often takes place through a very lengthy process in which he gradually renounces his Basa specificity. "Mirrored otherness" functions as a very particular type of Orientalism, in which the proximity of the cultures decides, on the one hand, over an easier assimilation, while at the same time bearing witness to the loss of the plural dimension of regional cultural milieus and the standardization of narrative discourse.

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Notes

1. Boris Buden, *Transition to Nowhere: Art in History after 1989* (n.p. [Berlin]: Archive Books, n.d. [2020]), 91.
2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
3. See Maria Todorova, "The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention," *Slavic Review* 53, 2 (1994): 453–482; ead., *Imagining the Balkans* (New York–Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
4. We are grateful to this issue's editor, Andrei Terian, who kindly helped us with coining this concept. His use of frontier Orientalism in the case of modern Romanian literature in respect to the "Images of the Tatars" was also fundamental for our endeavor. See Andrei Terian, "From Frontier Orientalism to Transnational Communities: Images of the Tatars in Modern Romanian Literature," *World Literature Studies* 10, 1 (2018): 50–62.
5. This process has been described of late as the intervention of a third party within the meeting of other two cultures, determining the shape of their connection. See Andrei Terian, "Cultural Triangulation in Romanian Travelogues to China under Communism," *World Literature Studies* 11, 2 (2019): 16–30.
6. Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, 4 (1995): 917–931; Manuela Boatcă, "No Race to the Swift: Negotiating Racial Identity in Past and Present Eastern Europe," *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5, 1 (2006): 91–104.
7. Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István M. Szijártó, *What is Microhistory? Theory and Practice* (London–New York: Routledge, 2013). The authors draw on the works of Ginzburg to describe microhistory as "the intensive historical investigation of a relatively well-defined smaller object, most often a single event, or 'a village community, a group of families, even an individual person.'" See also Carlo Ginzburg, "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It," *Critical Inquiry* 20, 1 (1993): 10–35.
8. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis–London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

9. Hans Renders, "The Limits of Representativeness: Biography, Life Writing, and Micro-history," in *Theoretical Discussions of Biography: Approaches from History, Microhistory, and Life Writing*, revised and augmented edition, edited by Hans Renders and Binne De Haan, with a Foreword by Nigel Hamilton (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2014), 129–138.

10. See Carmen Muşat, "After 'Imitation': Aesthetic Intersections, Geocultural Networks, and the Rise of Modern Romanian Literature," in *Romanian Literature As World Literature*, edited by Mircea Martin, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York–London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 115–131.

11. Dragoş Varga and Ştefan Baghiu, "Theories of the Biographical Genres in Romanian Postwar Criticism," *Transylvanian Review* 28, suppl. 1 (2019): 33–43.

12. See for more details Tatiana G. Bitkova, "The Place of Romania and Russia in the Context of East-West Relations: Political and Cultural Aspects," *Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations* 11, 2 (2014): 44–52; Keith Hitchins, *A Concise History of Romania* (Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

13. See Ştefan Baghiu, "Geocritique: Siting, Poverty, and the Global Southeast," in *Theory in the "Post" Era: A Vocabulary for the Twenty-First-Century Conceptual Commons*, edited by Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 235–250.

14. This comparison was, of course, the pillar of Maria Todorova's concept of Balkanism, akin to Said's postcolonial concept of Orientalism. Yet debates on post-communism as postcolonialism in Romania can be found in Ioana Galleron and Bogdan Ştefănescu, "Postcommunism: An Other Postcolonialism," *Word & Text: A Journal of Literary Studies and Linguistics* 2, 1 (2012): 5–12; Andrei Terian, "Is There an East-Central European Postcolonialism? Towards a Unified Theory of (Inter)Literary Dependency," *World Literature Studies* 4, 3 (2012): 21–36.

15. See Florin Poenaru, "Originile istorice ale antirusismului românesc," *CriticAtac*, 18 March 2014, https://www.criticatac.ro/originile-istorice-ale-anti-rusismului-romanesc/. Poenaru states both that anti-Russian ideology has defined every historical milestone in the national history of Romania, and that it is embedded in the 19th century birth of the national state.

16. See Petru Negura, "Nation-Building and Mass Schooling of Ethnic Minorities on the Romanian and Soviet Peripheries (1918–1940): A Comparative Study of Bessarabia and Transnistria," *National Identities* 23, 4 (2021): 433–454.

17. Vasile Ernu, *Născut în URSS* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2006).

18. Vasile Ernu, *Sectanţii: Mica trilogie a marginalilor* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2015); id., *Bandiţii: Mica trilogie a marginalilor* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2016); Vasile Ernu, *Izgoniţii: Mica trilogie a marginalilor* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2019).

19. Vasile Ernu, *Sălbaticii copii dingo* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2021).

20. See Andre Gingrich, "Frontier Myths of Orientalism: The Muslim World in Public and Popular Cultures of Central Europe," in *MESS: Mediterranean Ethnological Summer School*, vol. 2, edited by Bojan Baskar and Borut Brumen (Ljubljana: Institut za multikulturne raziskave, 1998), 99–127.

21. Ernu, *Bandiţii*, 116.

22. As Victor Cobuz recently argued, the late 20th century composite fiction in Romania either "describes a specific community" or "follow an individual." See Victor Cobuz, "Proza compozită românească după 2000 (III)," *Observator cultural* 1047 (28 Janu-

ary 2021), https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/proza-compozita-romaneasca-du-pa-2000-iii/.

23. The anti-communist discourse often decided on the lack of class analysis in Romania, where class-analysis is usually dismissed as *leftist*. For a detailed approach see Cornel Ban, "Beyond Anticommunism: The Fragility of Class Analysis in Romania," *East European Politics and Societies* 51, 2–3 (2015): 640–650. See also Raluca Grosescu, Laure Neumayer, and Eva-Clarita Pettai, "Introduction: Transnational Activism and the Globalisation of Anti-Communism After 1989," *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest* 23, 2 (2020): 9–19; Dana Domşodi and Florin Poenaru, "Life in Transition and in Crisis: The Political Autobiography of a Generation," in *The Political Economy of Eastern Europe 30 Years into the "Transition": New Left Perspectives from the Region*, edited by Agnes Gagyi and Ondřej Slačálek (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 17–40. See the contemporary metahistorical drive to explain the communist period in Andrei Terian, "Representing Romanian Communism: Evolutionary Models and Metanarrative Scenarios," in *Beyond the Iron Curtain: Revisiting the Literary System of Communist Romania*, edited by Ştefan Baghiu, Ovio Olaru, and Andrei Terian (Berlin etc.: Peter Lang, 2021), 23–42.

24. Iovănel himself has been criticized for using post-Marxist language and methods. See some contextualization of his history and the reactions it generated in Romania in Christian Moraru, "Literary Historiography As Event: Mihai Iovănel's History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990–2020," *Transilvania* 7–8 (2021): 1–13; Ştefan Baghiu, "Critica ideologică în epoca limbajului administrativ de stânga: O istorie New Left a literaturii române contemporane," *Transilvania* 7–8 (2021): 80–89.

25. Mihai Iovănel, *Istoria literaturii române contemporane 1990–2020* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2021), 43–44.

26. Gleb Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union 1945–1970* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016). See also William Jay Risch, ed., *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music, and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014). For a Romanian perspective on the connection between post-Soviet nostalgia and Life Writing see Simona Mitroiu, "Youth in Late Communism: Post-transitional Life Writing and Autobiographical Representations," *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 42 (2020): 87–115.

27. Such as Paul Cernat et al., *Explorări in comunismul românesc*, 3 vols. (Iaşi: Polirom, 2004–2005) or Gabriel H. Decuble, ed., *Cartea roz a comunismului*, vol. 1 (Iaşi: Versus, 2004).

28. Ernu, *Născut in URSS*, 243.

29. Ernu, *Bandiţii*, 217.

30. Ernu, *Sectanţii*, 240.

31. Ernu, *Bandiţii*, 171.

32. Ernu, *Bandiţii*, 271.

33. Ernu, *Sectanţii*, 182.

34. Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, translated from the French by Linda Asher (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 133.

35. Ernu, *Sectanţii*, 136.

36. Ernu, *Bandiţii*, 7–10.

37. Ernu, *Bandiţii*, 131–133.

Abstract
Mirrored Otherness and Microhistory in Post-Soviet Literature:
The Estranged Milieus in Vasile Ernu's Essays and Fiction

This article explains the concept of "mirrored otherness" through Vasile Ernu's writings. Born in Odessa in 1971, in the intercultural hotbed of Russian, Ukrainian, and Romanian populations, Ernu spent his youth in the USSR—in Odessa, Cahul, Chişinău—before attending University in Romania—in Iaşi and Cluj-Napoca—and settling in Bucharest. His debut with *Născut în URSS* (Born in the USSR, 2006), the ensuing "brief trilogy of marginals" comprising *Sectanţii* (The sectarians, 2015), *Bandiţii* (The bandits, 2016), and *Izgoniţii* (The banished, 2019), and his *Sălbaticii copii dingo* (The savage dingo kids, 2021) are Life Writing documents of what we here call *mirrored otherness*, a particular category of what Andre Gingrich described as "frontier Orientalism." This is a concept that tries to understand how geographically close areas that essentially share a similar culture create fully active stereotypes of otherness due to their administrative and symbolic belonging to other spaces: although being fundamentally close to Romania, both culturally and linguistically, the strong administrative Russification of Bessarabia during the long 19th century and its later Sovietization were a deciding factor in its heavy alterization in Romania.

Keywords

Life Writing, Vasile Ernu, mirrored otherness, frontier Orientalism, Basa literature, Bessarabia, Soviet culture, post-Soviet culture