The Ruin as Milestone:
Negociating National Identity in 19ᵗʰ and 21ˢᵗ Century Romanian Literature*

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T HERE IS an ambiguity characteristic to ruins, and this ambiguity is enacted by the very condition of a deserted city, a ruined temple or a destitute fortress: they all evoke in an instant both the glory of their prime and the irrevocable destruction that came upon them. The ruin is the site of something present, but it symbolizes the thing which is no longer there, its absence or its loss. One critic defines ruins as the place of encounter between the visible and the invisible, between what can be seen and the thing no longer there that one is compelled to imagine.[1] According to the mood of the contemplative spectator, the ruins are "beautiful," "idilically minor," "tragic" or "too new."[2] By suddenly conjuring to the mind what is no longer before the eye, the ruin is a powerful metaphor of temporality, bringing with it an awareness of the passing of time and everything associated with it.

In this article, I shall study the presence of ruins in as diverse contexts as a romantic poem from the 19ᵗʰ century and a social novel of the 21ˢᵗ century. The history of this literary motif and the historical context at large must be taken into account, since in each case ruins may mean something else, according to the frame of reference. The romantic ruin is, initially, an emblem of the past which can be used to conjure a common identity, shared by the past and by the present time. To explain this, one has to remember that in the context of 19ᵗʰ century nationalism, the ruins are rediscovered in Western Europe as remnants from feudal wars and imperial conquests that strengthened the state or united the nation in the face of collective disaster. But modernity changes the situation, as the once "natural" solidarity of the present and past nation starts to fade away and a bitter consciousness of "belatedness" invades literature. The situation is different at the turn of the 21ˢᵗ century, in the wake of devastating wars with heavy bomb-

ings, as the ones in World War II, life-wrecking destruction, such as the 9/11 attacks in New York, or the collapse of the once proud emblems of industrialized socialism, as can still be seen in the numerous abandoned factories in postcommunist Eastern Europe. Ruins are, alternatively, an image of destruction and a celebration of togetherness, "the symbol of an ancient alliance now broken" or "a condemnation of the present by the past."[3] Different ages and different artists view ruins differently; they ascribe to this ancient motif divergent significations, depending on individual inclination, historical and political context, aesthetic influences. In what follows, I shall discuss two such illustrations of the motif in Romanian literature, one from the 19th, the other from the 21st century. The ruins change, but the human mind is still intrigued by this sign of absence and duration. Given the distance in time between the two authors and the asymmetry in their canonical status, I am more interested in the description of the particular type of historical conditioning in the case of each of the two authors, instead of trying to evaluate their purely aesthetic performance. The first author is the foremost canonical author in Romanian literature, the romantic Mihai Eminescu, with his epic poem *Memento mori* (1872), and the other Ioana Bradea, a prominent prose-writer from the younger generation in today's Romania, with her novel *Scotch* (2010). The focal point of this article is the persistence of the Romantic motif of the ruins well into the 21st century, in the context of a change in the aspect of the ruins and in their ethical valorisation.

The romantic ruin: the naturalization of history

T HE RUIN becomes a celebrated place of national memory in the age of romanticism, when, for instance, in England emerges a real "ruino-philia" favoured by the rhetoric of nationalism and by Lord Elgin's expedition to the Acropolis.[4] Ruins are now the site of a fierce negotiation of identity, whereby a writer tries to recapture from the past an aspect of national character that seems lost or forgotten. It is therefore necessary to study the romantic "ruin poem" as an active way of "imagining the national community"[5] in a particular style. Poets are exploiting the ruin from a political perspective, as the place where history, and especially national history becomes manifest. Given its identification as a relic from the past, the ruin seems to point to a previous epoch when the nation was sheltered and the buildings stood tall, but it also reminds one of times of struggle and sometimes defeat. In any case, "the spectacle of ruins in the landscape offers evidence of a nation possessed of a long history,"[6] and therefore it may be the occasion for feelings of pride and calls to rally around a common national cause. Romanticism "was built as much from anxiety, frustration and irresolution as from the poetic shapes of self-mastery and joy,"[7] this is why ruins may be both a spectacle of sadness and delectation. But in sadness as well as in delight, the ruin serves as a confirmation of the belief in the common destiny of a nation, becoming the occasion for the expression of literary nationalism. The process whereby the meditation on ruins receives a political dimension is thus described by Anne Jannowitz: "ruins were admired as blending into the countryside, while the sense of 'country' as rural terrain and 'country' as

nation also began to melt one into the other."[8] This is how the "naturalization of national history" takes place.

A similar interpretation, without the political emphasis (but with political implications), is provided by Georg Simmel in his account of the ruin as an interplay of spirit and nature. In architecture, the human spirit makes use of materials from nature, therefore it brings relief to see that, through ruins, nature recuperates from the spirit what belonged to her in the first place. A devastated human construction, therefore, represents the end of a fraudulous evolution, bringing satisfaction to the greater scheme of things: "Because of its material and its objective reality, creation has all this time remained nature, and when nature dominates creation again, it only exercises its prerogative, previously unclaimed, but which it, in fact, never gave up."[9] Simmel's metaphysical interpretation of ruins is reassuring, as it provides closure to a crisis brought about by human intervention and ended with the intervention of a "higher arbiter." Nature prevails over spirit, as it resolves the crisis brought about by the intervention of man on the stage of nature.[10] In other words, the ruin is the place where history is "naturalized." And while in ruins history is consecrated as nature, nationality becomes, consequently, part of nature itself.

There is a political dimension to Romanian romanticism also, present even from the first "ruin poems," imitated after La Harpe or Dellile,[11] by Vasile Cârlova, then Ion Heliade Rădulescu and Grigore Alexandrescu. Romanian romantics see the ruin as the privileged place where national destiny becomes manifest, through a direct contact with the figures of old. Ruin poetry had a rather strict scenario, fully present only in Heliade Rădulescu's *O noapte pe ruinele Târgoviştii (A Night on the Ruins of Târgovişte)* and in Alexandrescu's *Umbra lui Mircea. La Cozia (Mircea's Shadow. At Cozia)*. This scenario includes a night vigil on the ruins, during which the poet is witness to a resuscitation of nature, of the elements and of the shadows of national heroes long gone. The shadows either transmit a message to the poet or they keep still, but their simple presence next to him is proof enough of the persistence of the national spirit and an indication of a glorious future. The contemporaries are free to learn the lesson of bravery from the dead heroes or to pursue their own political programs, but the meeting mediated by the poet's visionary capacities has fulfilled its goal: it has built a bridge between present and past and has revived the conscience of the nation's continuity and endurance. Ruins are a place where the past lives on and can be conjured by a visionary poet. The Romanian ruin poetry of the 1848 generation operates a classic case of naturalization of national history, postulating the common cause of the past and the present and unifying the national community, both dead and alive. It is true that these poets are overly optimistic in what regards the paradoxes of communicating with the dead, and exceedingly confident in the powers of poetic language and its representations. For them, the power of poetic imagination is guaranteed by its ability to provide a link with the unseen world, but at the same time this unseen world is validated by the political pertinence of these apparitions. In Eminescu's poetry, the problem of the powers of poetry and that of linking the present to the past provides, however, a more complex field of discussion.

A community for the solitary

THIS ROMANTIC prelude is thoroughly reworked in the poems of M. Eminescu (1850–1889), where ruin poetry reaches its full complexity. A lover of the past and a confessed melancholic, Eminescu did not adhere to the scenario of the ruin poetry in the 1848 generation. His ruins are rarely recognizable by name and almost never local or national. This must be understood as a consequence of Eminescu's decline of the outward, pathetic and politicised declarations of patriotism in poetry, due to the fact that he belonged to the "critical and ironical age of romanticism," which may be termed postromanticism.[12] For Eminescu, poetry can speak about the homeland and patriotism is one of its legitimate themes, but he refrains from putting poetry in the service of active politics and obstinately cultivates its autonomy.

Eminescu's ample poem *Memento mori* (1872) is designed as a vast panorama of civilizations, brought to the fore in their moment of glory and then decadence. The sequence of events seems didactic and limited in its purpose, which might be, in an intentionally simplified reading, to illustrate the vacuity of existence through a tedious review of various failures in world history. In fact, Eminescu poses in his poem not only the problem of the meaning of history, but also the problem of a transcendental foundation of existence and the question of the powers of poetry itself. In the vast and complex scenario of this poem, poetry is the force which illuminates history and attempts to rob its secret from God. The frame of this historical overview is just as important as its core.

The scenario in the poem is quite different from the 1848 generation's "ruin poem"; the poetic persona is not made to climb such historic sites as the Acropolis or the Egyptian pyramids, and the poet makes sure to question his visionary means first and give them a specific accreditation. *Memento mori* opens with the proclamation of a divide between "the real world" and "the world of fantasy," with poetry dwelling in the second one and extracting its powers from it. The images that express this divide are that of falling asleep, of closing one's eyes to the quotidian world, of listening to the voice of one's thoughts, and also that of a fantastic initiation ritual performed by travelling down the river of dreams to the island of death, entering the gate to the temple of the past, where the "somber tale" is keeper, and turning back the wheel of time at leisure, "leafing" through centuries as if re-reading a book. Poetry has a world, a set of functions that govern it, and a mandate.

But the bold proclamation of confidence in his own art is quickly overcast with doubt. In the opening lines of the sequence on Greece, the poet emphatically expresses his trust in the continuity of all poetry from the times of old to the present day by declaring that he will begin his account by symbolically sinking the poetic instrument in the sea: "O, let me dip my lyre in oceanic waters!."[13] This is an allusion to the fact that Greek waters have been "baptized" with the genius of poetry, as the end of the sequence will show, by Orpheus, the Greek mythical poet who, troubled by the incongruence between the poetic word and nature and overcome by pessimism, threw his lyre in the sea.[14] But the modern poet's adhesion to Orpheus' mission of changing the world through verse is actually an early admission of defeat. In *Memento mori*, Orpheus sees his once

powerful art become irrelevant in a world that rejects it, and therefore gives up poetry; the modern poet makes an error if he truly thinks that his allegiance to the mythical figure of Orpheus will protect his enterprise. The fragment points out that, while poetry is born of itself, it is also born in crisis, as a result of the awareness that it fails to find a place of its own in the "real" world. Between the task of making visible the revelation and expressing the predicament of the modern mind, the poem *Memento mori* tries to find a place for poetry in the world. This will help him open a connection between present and past, to find out how the past can be revisited, and what is to be gained from this incursion into the "waves of time," apart from the cautious but sterile warning *memento mori*. It seems that poetry functions concomitantly on two levels: one, as a visionary power which makes the impossible possible; and two, as a signal of the crisis of the contemporary spirit, isolated from the past, forgetting its own roots and unable to grow, paralized by not knowing its own historical destiny.[15]

The past is brought to life in *Memento mori* in a series of accounts of ancient civilizations. The major difference between the romantic way of "naturalizing history" and Eminescu's historical review is that, in *Memento mori*, the ruin of every civilization provokes a forgetting of its meaning, and not an enhanced awareness of its destiny. But at the same time, every civilization is brought to life by the very gesture of the poet to tell its story. The representation of the past is, again, twofold: on one hand, the poet is capable to give voice to the ruins of old; on the other, he is a witness to the total lack of echo left behind by these civilizations. It seems that the two manifestations of the "inspired" and the "skeptical" poet generate two divergent ways to relate to the past. But neither of these two is similar to the "naturalized ruin" in Gr. Alexandrescu.

The difference is most evident in the part of the poem where nature and civilization are brought together at the same time, in the episode dedicated to Romanian ancestry, "Dacia." Dacia (in its pre-Roman state) is a paradise, a realm of happiness, nature untouched by humans, growing at a giant scale, self-sufficient, with no need for development and therefore probably meant to last forever, if left to itself. The self-sufficient nature of the Dacian paradise is symbolized by a metaphor borrowed from folk tales and resemantized: nature is a citadel that was transformed into a forest by a benevolent spell and arrested in a state of bliss and beauty: "The forest, before the spell, was a beautiful citadel / Whose arches are today branches, whose pillars are today thick trunks, / And whose ceilings are now leafy canopies throwing dark shadows overhead."[16] The massive geological forms reveal a secret architecture, butterflies as big as flying ships and mountains that have doors. The dialectics of nature and spirit that Georg Simmel found in his reading of the romantic ruin is ingeniously manipulated by Eminescu's visionary metaphors. Dacia is a "living ruin," a civilization where splendor meets wisdom. When a former citadel actually *is* a part of nature, history has reached its final stage. This is why Dacia's end will come from outside, at the hands at Rome, and its nature-civilization will be completely annihilated by the Roman army.[17] The Romanian people is born as a punishment brought upon the once proud Romans by the curse of the defeated king Decebal: "Woe to you, almighty Romans! Only shadow, dust and ashes / Will come of your greatness! Your tongue will die on your lips, / And there will be a time

when your nephews will fail to comprehend their parents – / The higher you will have risen, the deeper you shall fall."[18] This denouement illustrates the peculiarities of Eminescu's manner of "imagining the community" and, furthermore, of imagining a possible relationship between the living present and the dead past. The Romanians, descendants of the Romans, are a people whose decadence serves as punishment for the cruelty of their forefathers. They will forget the ideals of their ancestors and serve as evidence of their deserved decadence. But isn't this the predictable future of all the descendants of the great civilizations in *Memento mori*? One need not invoke the xenophobic remarks about Greeks or Jews in Eminescu's later political articles; it is enough to recall the image of the caravan leaders passing by Ninive without being able to point to the city's former whereabouts, or the Bedouins looking in awe at the dead city of Memphis levitating above the desert sands. The living forget the dead, and the mysteries and wisdom of times is periodically lost; ruins survive as mere indications of rituals long gone, whose meaning cannot be recuperated. What, then, can one do to restore the link between the present and the past, to make the living hear the dead speak?

The answer is provided in at the end of the Dacian-Roman sequence, where the poet evokes the decadence of present-day Romanians as originating from their "foreign thinking" which "shattered the old chain of life" in centuries of "widowhood" away from the "great spirit of Rome." Thinking, then, must be re-rooted in the autochtonous soil and the spirit of Rome rekindled. But how can this be done when the past has no voice and history only teaches the vanity of existence? One has only to think of the past, and then the "seeds of greatness" buried into one's soul and forgotten there might blossom: "When you think of them, your thought renders your soul divine. / We travel in the past, like the gods travel in the sky on paths of light. / We are lifted by rainbows above century-long abysses; / We pass over them as a people of gods would, for through these eternal eons / We can hear the holy city with its thousand harmonies... / And we feel great and strong only when we think of them."[19] Thinking about the past is both empowering and inspiring; its effect is a miraculous contemporariness of Romanians and Romans, which bridges century-long gaps of forgetfulness. In the lines quoted above, one can identify the markers of visionary poetry.[20] It seems that time can be suspended and the modern predicament reversed by appealing to the virtues of fantasy, of imagination, by "thinking the past" with one's heart, which holds "seeds of greatness" planted there by the ancestors. It is a solution to be applied by each individual in solitude, even as it is presented in a collective move towards the redemption of a people. One person may perform this rite of summoning the past to life in the same way the poet has started his poetic journey by "listening to the profound voice of my own thoughts." The poet sets an example, but he does not function as mediator of this experience. He simply reminds his reader that the communion with the ancestors is an act of belief, a bet made in honesty and against all odds. Although the great Roman example has been lost, the Romanian descendants may still reach their moral altitude through ethical heroism.

The duality of poetic imagination in Eminescu is again invoked in describing, this time, the poem itself. The civilizations were resuscitated by poetic imagination in their

moment of bloom, but as accounts of history, ending in skepticism, they were the work of the intellect. Nature, which was the force behind the poet's visions, is constantly censored by spirit (a direct reversal of the "ruin logic" as described by Simmel). *Memento mori* began as a proclamation of the rights of fantasy, but it ends with an acknowledgement of the limits of the intellect. The poem itself is revealed as a grandiose ruin, a Tower of Babel brought down by immeasurable ambition and pride: „To explain your being, I commanded hordes of thoughts / To stack idea upon idea and reach for the sun, / As once, on Asian land, ancient peoples / Have built rock upon rock and wall upon wall as high as the skies."[21] Its composition made of visionarism and skepticism, romantic thrust and modern belatedness is what makes it crumble: the direct cause for the ruin of the poem is not divine adversity, but the poet's own doubt surfacing at the wrong time: "It suffices one grain of doubt in a pile of truth / And my hordes of thoughts blow instantly in the wind."[22] It might seem somewhat hypocritical to say that the most ample poem by Eminescu is a ruin, since the composition is fluid, without clear signs of incompletion. Eminescu is, especially in this poem, a poetic virtuoso, with all the formal defects that some analyses evidenced.[23] The fact that not *all* civilizations of the world are indexed in *Memento mori*, or that some episodes include a rhetorical interruption cannot erase the idea that the poem is thoroughly articulate and a wonderful poetic achievement for its author, therefore, the ruin metaphor here might be inadequate. Still, the incongruities detected between the two poetic moods and the two manners of relating to the past are real and they might be the cause of the imminent collapse of the poetic architecture that the poet announces. Eminescu places himself at the point of crisis in language, and because of that the feeling of uncertainty, of building upon sand, might be accurate.

What is, then, the solution to the communitary problem that the poem seemed to address? How does Eminescu represent collective anxiety or feelings of togetherness in his time? The collective solidarity that the early romantics justified by the "divine right" of poetry is, for our poet, compromised. All attempts to establish an "official" collective memory is condemned in this poem as falsification of a past it cannot claim to understand. Since the mouth of the past is mute, anyone trying to speak on its behalf can be called a liar. This is the reason for the sarcasm so many times directed at demagogy in Eminescu's satires: demagogy is not only false and ill-meaning, but morally repulsive, since it is usurping the voice of the past, a sacred memory which cannot be heard anymore. The poet's piety towards the past may be likened to the increased sensitivity of persons who have lost someone dear, and will not accept anyone making light of their loss. On the other hand, the poem still identifies ways of putting oneself in direct connection to the past through the means of intuition, of "thinking of the ancestors" with the heart. In Caius Dobrescu's words, there is still a "nostalgia for an ideal political community of equal and free persons," in connection with the one for "a republic of letters with a considerable range."[24] This community is, however, immaterial, unbound in time or space (but limited by the shared national values and language), constituted incessantly by each individual's decision to participate to the common identity by directing his thinking towards the national past. In *Memento mori*, Eminescu argues in

favour of a patriotism of the solitary, trying to discredit the nationalist rhetoric of the collective, which had used up its resources in the political battles. Poetry, with its mechanisms of reader selection by affinity, seems to be the perfect site of manifestation for this new nationalist expression. With its avowed skepticism and intellectualism, the poem *Memento mori* is a good example for it.

Postcommunist ruins

FOR JEAN Starobinski, there are at least some ruins which may not give the viewer any satisfaction: the "new ruins," those "still smelling of the massacre" that produced them.[25] This is the condition of the modern ruin, engendered by war, terrorism or social and natural disaster, still too present in the mind of the onlooker to allow any feeling of delight at the passing of time. But is it ethical to admire such a ruin from an aesthetical point of view? This question is echoed in Ioana Bradea's novel *Scotch* (2010), a book on the devastated urban landscapes at the margin of some contemporary Romanian cities, a poem more than a novel. For the workers in the struggling factories that populate the once busy industrial quarters, who everyday pass by the former socialist huge plants designed for the needs of another economy, very similar in aspect to their own workplace, there is no question of finding aesthetic pleasure in the signs of decay. Why should anyone gaze at the ruins of a collapsed industry, looking for delectation? Of course, this happens only insomuch as one does not simply admire ruins, but seeks to identify in them a conflict, a drama, a problem that are pertinent for them and for the world they live in.

In his book *The Origin of the German Tragic Drama*, Walter Benjamin offers a classic interpretation of the modern ruin as a "symptom of epistemological uncertainty and the collapse of time."[26] The German philosopher identified in the baroque drama the origins of a modern crisis in human conscience produced by the intervention of history and made visible in ruins. He argued that ruins expose the partial and provisory character of all existing things, man-made and "natural." Benjamin employs the metaphor of writing to express the lack of an "organic" continuity between past and present, a temporal rupture materialized in ruins: "history makes its appearance on stage in baroque drama in the form of writing. 'History' is inscribed on the face of nature in the sign language of the ephemeral past. The allegorical physiognomy of the history-nature, brought to the stage in baroque drama, is actually presented as ruin."[27] The ruin is, accordingly, a written message which announces the failure of language, made of signs which cannot fully convey this meaning; it is an allegory which simply points to the impossibility to mean anything of substance. Benjamin's ruins refuse the reduction of spirit to nature in the interpretative model that was theorized by Georg Simmel and illustrated in early romantic literature. They do not accept the integration of spirit into nature; on the contrary, they are a sign "inscribed by history on the face of nature." Such ruins are those that cannot erase the abrupt and violent degradation that has befallen them and they are the kind of ruins that are discussed in Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle's *Ruins*

of Modernity: the rubble of postwar Berlin (in the so-called *Trümmerfilm*), the abandoned industrial parks of Europe, the degraded colonial architecture of Namibia, and so on.

I chose Ioana Bradea's novel *Scotch* not necessarily as a literary counterpart for Eminescu, but for having appropriated the ruin motif in an innovative manner, which may be considered characteristic for a contemporary vision. The persistence of the motif in itself is a reason for considering the ongoing social reflection of literature from the eve of modernity, in Eminescu's poetry, to the advent of postmodernism in the "late stage" of modernity, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 21st century. A further justification is given by the fact that Bradea's novel deals with characteristic social and identity problems of contemporary Romania, a country which has seen the demise of socialism and is now forced to come to terms with its industrial legacy. The Romanian postcommunist society grapples with its identity problems, as the former officially-endorsed ways of coagulating a political community have collapsed and new communities have difficulties in being accepted by their constituents.

Scotch is a lyrical inventory of life in the industrialized suburbs of a Romanian city, where only some parts of the old plants are still functioning, while large halls and deposits, machines and yards are abandoned to their unecological fate by the collapse of communist economy. On the site of a former Plant for Wood Manufacture opened in the 1970s, other smaller factories open in the unnamed present of the book: The Factory of Special Alloys, The Enterprise for Mechanical Manufacture, The Tooling Factory, The Glass Factory, and so on. Workers enter their daily shifts and, at the exit, pass by one of the numerous pubs that await them, an engineer muses at the petty corruption and the lack of perspectives of the factory he works in, a secretary reads Marcus Aurelius as she slides between desks on her roller-skates, guardians patrol melancholically through ample and devastated yards. There are no proper characters in this novel and very few individuals; most people are invoked collectively, and only one or two receive a name. The focus of this lyrical prose seems to be the factory as a spectre, turning all the others who inhabit it into specters.

I shall pursue two objectives in my account of Ioana Bradea's novel: the type of community that the postcommunist ruins are producing and the language in which literature talks about this community.

Although Ioana Bradea writes her novel in a non-narrative manner and avoids putting too much emphasis on character or plot, there is still a possibility to see in it a failed romance between two inhabitants of the industrial suburb, working and living in and near factories and becoming fascinated by their unorthodox charm. The young secretary is fascinated by the urban ruins represented, among other, by a district heating tower which dominates the surroundings but receives none of the attention given to the (probably less spectacular, but culturally sanctioned) church tower from the historic city center. She takes long walks through the devastated streets, among working men who fail to understand her curiosity, she visits the graveyard nearby and tends to an unknown grave, and she generally devotes herself to causes which are not her own. She is also very interested in the forgotten communist emblems on the walls of factories, wonders about the chances of spiritual survival in the former political prisons, she

even has a near-encounter with the dissident Doina Cornea. Her obsession with ideology is actually an expression of her desire to belong to a community, a thing made clear by her envious look at people who have friends and by her longing for a deep communion with someone: she wishes for "a fantastic minute with abrupt, unyielding friends, as fanatic as mountains and waters."[28] The young secretary is a solitary spirit in search of equals and, in this respect, her attitude is no different from the one in Eminescu's poetry.

The character's desire for communion with others is also reflected in her incessant search for a lost ethnic community, symbolized by the fugitive peasant figures of Ilă and Vasile, two workers from the same village who are only brought to light to enact a death scene echoing a romantic nationalist idyll: Ilă dies in his bed (presumably in an alcoholic coma), while his companion, unaware of this, sings to him on his bellharp. The musical death of Ilă is a reminiscence from folk poetry, canonized by the romantics, not least by Mihai Eminescu in his *Mai am un singur dor*, and usually associated with the comforting thought of a "reintegration" of the individual by the elements of nature, of which he is a part. The young secretary is in search of a possible new communion with others and identifies herself to stoicism, as it is shown by her attachment (clumsily pointed in the novel) to Marcus Aurelius' book *Meditations*.

The other, less distinct characters in the novel do not feel the same unease as to their place in society. Workers strive to meet the norms and appeal to petty theft when their salaries are delayed; their sense of community is recuperated not at the workplace, but in pubs and on the football field. Peasants are on their way to proletarization and their old villages are deserted. The symbol of their change is the brief image of a woman on a village street carrying a tyre "like a collar around her neck," barely seeing where she is walking while talking loudly on a mobile phone.

But the true description of the community is made in the numerous pages in the novel where characters and narrative are left aside and objects are described at length. This is where Bradea's literary ingenuity may be observed, as her book becomes more poetic and its composition more complex. The deserted buildings, unplugged electrical mechanisms, condemned windows and torn-down walls constitute not only an eerie landscape, but a discourse on postcommunist industry and on the social community. Bizarre relics that were once a part of the technological process and were actively contributing to the national narrative of progress through "popular" power have become obsolete, useless, inadequate. Former machines that produced energy or bread lost their function when the factory went bankrupt. They hang about, devoid of any function or responsibility, putting to the observer enigmatic questions as to their previous meaning and use:

> *A white cube with an orange iron belly band.*
> *A Turkish installation weighing dozens of tons.*
> *They suspended it from the metallic frame on the ceiling with four steel staples.*
> *It hangs quietly alone, fifteen centimetres above the floor.*[29]

Even more interesting is the insistence to present inanimate things in anthropomorphic postures. Objects are personified on a scale reminding once again of the romantics' belief in "giving life" through literary description, although Yury Tynyanov's concept of *"ostranenie,"* estrangement of the object through description, may be here better suited. In fact, the change in the status of objects is a warning that they must be seen as symbols, and since the only common characteristic is their anthropomorphism, one must conclude that they must be read as symbols of the lonely, generic (human) individual. The result is a mass of images, of phantomatic presences that repopulate the vast empty space of the factory yard or of the dismantled assembly lines: a cement fence "leans into" a tree for support, a feminine-sounding abandoned hall of production mourns the lack of its "make-up," its "neon teeth" and the fact that it remained "barechested," a concrete ditch looks "blue-eyed from either barbarian or revolutionary blows," a roll of toilet paper on a roof "waves his hand and asks for help," while the district heating tower "looks protectively" over everything. Through these naive personifications Bradea makes a bold statement about the symbolic meaning of the abandoned industrial sites: at the same time as they identify an economical problem, they define a problem of identity. Unplugged, dirty, unattended, these once functional mechanisms and buildings have retreated to being mere objects. Similarly, one might infer, the community that was forged in communism on the basis of a bankrupt ideology must now discover its humanity and its loneliness in a postideological world.

Indeed, the destiny of the industrial ruin in the book is not easily predicted. On the one hand, some people dream to have its disaffected empty spaces turned into wide spaces for artistic events: "concert halls, contemporary art exhibitions or multimedia shows," but such an evolution seems improbable, first of all because those who dream of such a solution "have no idea what a multimedia show is." On the other hand, there is a reference to the desirable destruction of the ruins of communism, to hide their ugliness and forget the memories they carry. But this quickly turns into an imaginary mock-burial, with traditional wailing done by hired professionals:

> *Why do you live us, o mother factory*
> *In which hell are you leaving like this, barefoot*
> *Why do you abandon us, homeless, with no bread for our children*
> *Rats come out of your hollow orbits, o dear mother factory.*[30]

This tongue-in-cheek funeral contains the dilemma of burying the past once and for all. Behind the trivial humor in the tone of this lamentation, it does transmit that the factory is "our mother" and that "we" are to blame for its ugliness: "They work surrounded by all these dead bodies. / In the middle of a funeral. / But nobody looks long and hard at the hallucinating space around. / They may even be working inside a dead body. Like the rat in the hospital morgue."[31]

The industrial ruin thus poses a problem for the postcommunist identity, as implied in this novel. The ruin embodies a trauma, but this trauma may not be simply put aside, for its effects on public life have already been assimilated. The problem is not to

define the collectivity with the exclusion of the unpleasant history that helped in shaping it, but to find an expression that acknowledges the existence of trauma and incorporates it in the community.

The literary technique used by Bradea is that of the detailed description and focalization on objects to the point of personificating the inanimate. One cannot ignore the resemblance with the photographic and cinematographic techniques described by Walter Benjamin in his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproduction*, which studied the new ways to represent the world in modernity.[32] These new methods were helping to isolate objects from the utilitarian human gaze. Studied in the unfamiliar frames permitted by these mechanisms, objects become characters in their own right who act and evolve on different levels of existence, neglected by human attention. The inert existence of garbage in a ditch or the useless grandeur of the metallic skeletons in industrial quarters appear to have produced new and strange life forms, participating to an innovative kind of beauty.

Scotch is written in short sentences fragmenting the page like biblical verses. There is a lyrical quality to this way of writing, favoring the detail more than the ensemble. At the same time, given the very disorganized, shattered aspect of the postcommunist ruin, made of items lying around in disarray, the text seems to mirror this lack of order. The novel (written, however, in a way that would discredit a purely narrative reading) assimilates the shattered aspect of the ruin it explores. One must also take into account the intimate dimension of this book,[33] the experience of loss that it conveys not only on an abstract, but also on a personal level. The experience of living among ruins, indeed, cannot be reduced to aesthetic delight.

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Notes

1. Salvatore Settis, "Roma, eternità delle rovine," *Eutropia* 3 (2003): 135.
2. Jean Starobinski, *L'invention de la liberté, 1700–1789* (Genève: Skira, 1994), 179–181.
3. Ibid., 181.
4. Anne Jannowitz, *England's Ruins. Poetic Purpose and the National Landscape* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 14.
5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 7–15.
6. Jannowitz, *England's Ruins*, 3.
7. Ibid., 12.
8. Ibid., 4.
9. Georg Simmel, *Cultura filosofică* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998), 125.
10. Simmel's interpretation of ruins may be questioned from an epistemological point of view, seeing that his theory is formulated not from the point of view of human reason, but from a presumed "neutral" and "objective" position, by imagining what might be nature's "thoughts" on the morality of human buildings made of stone.
11. See G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1982), 128.

12. Ioana Bot, *Eminescu explicat fratelui meu* (Bucharest: Art, 2012), 208.
13. "O, lăsaţi să moi în ape oceanici a mea liră!". All quotes are from Mihai Eminescu, *Opere I* (Bucharest: Univers enciclopedic, 1999), 391–434.
14. For the intellectual background that Eminescu alludes to here, see Tudor Vianu, *Imaginea Greciei antice în "Memento mori" de Mihai Emineseu*, in *Opere 11* (Bucharest: Minerva, 1983), 283 sqq.
15. See Ioana Em. Petrescu, *Eminescu: poet tragic* (Iaşi: Junimea, 2001), 49.
16. "Codrul, înaintea vrajei, o cetate fu frumoasă, / A ei arcuri azi îs ramuri, a ei stâlpi sunt trunchiuri groase, / A ei bolţi streşini de frunze arcuite-ntunecat." Eminescu, *Opere I*, 409.
17. It seems that Eminescu was an adept of the theory of the ethnic descendence of Romanians exclusively from Romans, after the total annihilation of the conquered Dacians, following the ideas of the Transylvanian "Latinist" scholars at the beginning of the 19th century. This is why the idea, widely accepted today, that the Romanian ethnogenesis is primarily a result of the Dacians' and Romans' genetic mix may lead to misrepresentations of Eminescu's description of the event in his poem, which has other intellectual sources. See Caius Dobrescu, *Mihai Eminescu: Imaginarul spaţiului public. Imaginarul spaţiului privat* (Braşov: Aula, 2004), 231.
18. "– Vai vouă, romani puternici! – Umbră, pulbere şi spuză / Din mărirea-vă s-alege! Limba va muri pe buză, / Vremi veni-vor când nepoţii n-or pricepe pe părinţi – / Cât de naltă vi-i mărirea tot aşa de-adânc' căderea." Eminescu, *Opere I*, 422.
19. "Când îi cugeţi, cugetarea sufletu-ţi divinizează. / În trecut mergem, cum zeii trec în cer pe căi de raze. / Peste adâncimi de secoli ne ridică curcubei; / Un popor de zei le trecem, căci prin evi de vecinicie / Auzim cetatea sfântă cu-nmiita-i armonie... / Şi ne simţim mari, puternici, numai de-i gândim pe ei." Eminescu, *Opere I*, 425.
20. The image of the "holy city" towards which a people of dreamers streams in procession must be related to the images of the "divine city" that attest the existence of a romantic "apocalyptic imaginary" in Eminescu. See Radu Vancu, *Eminescu: Trei eseuri* (Sibiu: Info Art, 2011), 87–91.
21. "Ca s-eplic a ta fiinţă, de gândiri am pus popoare, / Ca idee pe idee să clădească până-n soare, / Cum popoarele antice în al Asiei pământ / Au unit stâncă pe stâncă, mur pe mur s-ajungă-n ceruri." Eminescu, *Opere I*, 432.
22. "Un grăunte de-ndoială mestecat în adevăruri / Şi popoarele-mi de gânduri risipescu-se în vânt." Ibid., 432.
23. See G. Călinescu, *Opera lui Mihai Eminescu*, II (Bucharest: Minerva, 1976), 245.
24. Dobrescu, *Eminescu: Imaginarul spaţiului public*, 155.
25. Starobinski, *L'invention de la liberté*, 180.
26. Kerstin Barndt, *"Memory Traces of an Abandoned Set of Futures:" Industrial Ruins in the Postindustrial Landscapes of Germany*, in *Ruins of Modernity*, eds. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 271.
27. Walter Benjamin, *Originea dramei baroce germane* (Cluj-Napoca: Tact, 2010), 193.
28. "un minut fantastic cu prieteni abrupţi, nestăviliţi, fanatici ca munţii şi apele." Ioana Bradea, *Scotch* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2010), 95. All following quotes refer to the same edition.
29. "Un cub alb cu un brâu de fier portocaliu. / Un utilaj turcesc de câteva zeci de tone. / L-au agăţat în scheletul metalic din tavan cu patru fire de oţel. / Tace suspendat la vreo cincisprezece centimetri de podea." Ibid., 113.
30. "Cui ne laşi uzina mamii uzină / În care iad te duci tu aşa desculă, fără rochie de mireasă / De ce ne laşi pe drumuri fără casă fără pâine la micuţi / Cum îţi ies şobolanii prin orbitele ochilor fabrica mamii dragă." Ibid., 132.

31. "Muncesc cu toate cadavrele astea la lumină. / În miezul unei înmormântări. / Dar nimeni nu contemplă în toată splendoarea spaţiul halucinant din jur. / Ba poate că muncesc chiar înăuntrul unui cadavru. Parcă ar fi şobolanul din morga spitalului." Ibid., 131.
32. Walter Benjamin, *Iluminări* (Cluj-Napoca: Idea, 2002), 122. On the specificity of photography as an art of image, see Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'image précaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), 171.
33. The dedication of the novel reads: "to my mother, who promised me she'd get well after I finish this book."

Abstract

The Ruin as Milestone:
Negociating National Identity in 19th and 21st century Romanian Literature

The ruin motif in literature is often the site of a fierce negotiation of identity, whereby a writer tries to recapture from the past an aspect of national character that seems lost or forgotten. But while internalizing collective anxiety, the writer also enacts his/her own anxiety towards death, personal loss or failure. In 19th century Romantic literature, and even more in countries like Romania (The Danubian Principalities) that were barely awakening to national statehood, the poetry of ruins was an important way to define and promote national character. But the real complexity of the motif was only reached by Mihai Eminescu, who in his ample poem *Memento mori* (1872) added to these a personal meditation on the failure of history, on poetry as ruin and on the individual soul. Almost 150 years later, the identity question has changed, but the anxiety towards the past is still there. The novelist Ioana Bradea writes, in her book *Scotch* (2010), about the devastated monuments of the Communist regime, abandoned plants and warehouses turned into vast graveyards of a past that people either want to forget, or desperately cling to. It is also a reflection on individual identity and the powers of literature in a time defined by belatedness: post-communism, post-industrialism, post-modernism.

Keywords