

The Romanian Gulag As Reflected in the Novels of the “Obsessive Decade”

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“Duplicitous all along, the ‘revelationism’ of the 1970s created yet another dubious product: the image of prolet-cultism as seen from the positions of neoproletcultism.”

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THE NOVEL of the “obsessive decade” (meaning the harsh Stalinist period in Romania, 1950–1960) alternates, in fact, between dissent from the communist regime and imposture. The phrase “the novel of the obsessive decade” has become commonplace in literary criticism, but it is somewhat inappropriate, a more accurate description being “the novel about the obsessive decade” (however, for the reader’s convenience, I will use the consecrated formula). These are writings belonging to authors who did not experience the Gulag directly (except for Alexandru Ivasiuc) and made thematic compromises lest they should irritate Ceauşescu’s regime, which sanctioned their publication. I will not deny the impact these writings had in their time, but as the critical reassessment of Romanian literature conducted after 1989 has shown, this impact has lost its consistency. The fact that the novel of the obsessive decade no longer holds sway today is also due to the massive wave of depositional literature, represented by detention memoirs and confessions (almost two

hundred such books were published between 1990 and 2010), which constitute a real “document of the Apocalypse.”²¹ Compared to this, the novel of the obsessive decade is but a minor presence as regards the theme of the Gulag and its treatment. Again, compared to those texts marked by a strand of atrocious realism that were published after 1989, the novel of the obsessive decade reflects the world of the Gulag through a fogged mirror. Without delving into an allegorical register, it adopts an Aesopian, allusive writing, which places it halfway between document-novels and antiutopias.

In 1990, Cristian Moraru and Mircea Țicudean made two determined interventions against the novel of the obsessive decade. The former commentator defused the very *raison d'être* of this type of novel, voiding it of meaning: “The plethora of novels of ‘exposure’ were, in their overwhelming majority, the fruit of ‘outrageousness’ on command, as well as indirect justifications of a present that attempted to legitimize itself by scathingly dismantling the immediate past . . . the so-called anatomy of horror did not radically question . . . the system in its entirety, despite its having sanctioned aberration, deception, and murder; on the other hand, dissection did not exhaust the resources of a realism that was bleaker than any dark utopia . . . In short, the tactics of half-measures . . . compromised the chances of literature to gain full access to testimonial validity.”²² The latter commentator introduced a caustic concept for the novel of the obsessive decade: *neoproletcultism*. “Duplicitous all along,” Mircea Țicudean states, “the ‘revelationism’ of the 1970s created yet another dubious product: the image of proletcultism as seen from the positions of neoproletcultism.”²³

The phrase “obsessive decade” was widely used in an era in which it was allowed to do that; disavowing the years of repressive fury, meliorism was a profitable solution for the alleged reformers of communism. First of all, the novel of the obsessive decade only rarely describes an infernal space (which is merely intimated), but one of purgatory, of expiation and transition. The meliorism implied by the space of purgatory is solely theoretical, because it is practically nonexistent. If we attempted now to fit the novel of the obsessive decade into the new classifications proposed after 1990 (for instance, the one advanced by Ion Simuț),⁴ this type of novel would be subsumable partly to subversive literature, partly to opportunistic literature. What are necessary are several common reference points for this novel: 1. power and libido are obsessively entwined; 2. the Faustian pact is in vogue; 3. solutions of resistance to terror may be different, depending on the spiritual structure of the characters (mortification, revolt, excessive will, illumination); 4. almost all the authors adopt the logic of necessary victims, of an internalized and assumed evil, hence, of *phármakos*; 5. attempts are made to legitimize a dual narrative perspective, expressing the point of view of both victim and executioner; 6. symbols are the specific tropes

in these writings (cancer, an invasion of locusts, rats, crabs, a sanatorium, birds, water); 7. all the authors who are representative of this type of novel engage in fallacies and thematic compromises.

THE PROTAGONIST of the novel *A Gallery of Wild Vine* by Constantin Țoiu is Chiril Merișor, a kind of Camusian “stranger” projected in Stalinist Romania, the *excluded* one (the exclusion meeting features the typical Stalinist exposure mechanisms, the character being accused that he is a Platonist and a detractor of Marxists through subversive aphorisms); here is the truly outlandish definition given to communism: “man . . . entirely released from servitude and even from the painful obsession of his own freedom.”⁵ On the front page of Chiril Merișor’s lost diary (which includes commentaries and reports about political prisoners, reflections on freedom, etc.) is the conclusion *Un exclu pensif pour la patrie*, that is, an exiled man meditating on his own country, the excluded one who has doubts about the future of the homeland, occasioning a “thought crime” that borders on *lèse-majesté*! The other characters around Chiril Merișor are “heretics” of sorts: Aurică and Axente prove to be eccentric communists, Cavadia is a hypocritical Faustian, who supports the theory that evil works towards a broader understanding of good and asks Chiril to choose philosophical evil, Harry Brummer is a skeptical advisor, because, he says, it is not believers who will be saved, but the great rascals (torturers, opportunists, denouncers). Finally, the most ambiguous character is the allegorical Gallery, which may be History, Memory and, in any case, a kind of political confessional of the times. In three places, the author makes risky compromises: first, as regards Chiril Merișor’s obstinacy of deeming himself a communist as a kind of life duty, although he is excluded from among the communists; then the episode in which Ceaușescu himself makes an appearance as a “progressive” communist leader; and Chiril’s questioning by Major Roadevin, whose techniques are enveloping and sophisticated, but improbable for the year 1958, when the second wave of terror (after the 1956 Revolution in Hungary) had seized Romania.

Arrested and prosecuted for a “hostile manuscript,” his diary, Chiril Merișor is interrogated by Major Roadevin. Years before his arrest, Chiril had been zealously exposed, at a time when denuncements abounded and denouncers were encouraged, since, as a slogan of the period went, an informer who was loyal to the Party was not considered a snitch. The Securitate officer Roadevin is a “philosopher-policeman,” as he calls himself, “a contradiction in the flesh”: on the one hand, he is an agent of repression, while, on the other, he is a refined and highbrow polemicist, with a philosophical background. Earlier in his career, Roadevin had been the aide of a female commissioner, an iron lady with an aristocratic style, albeit ferociously ideological. Later on, Roadevin turns into

a deceptively seraphic investigator, subjecting Chiril Merișor to an interrogation strewn with philological, philosophical debates and quotation interpretations, sounding more like a piecemeal lecture rather than an inquest. Roadevin is adamant about distinguishing himself from amorphous Securitate men or from the brutes, regarding himself as an intellectual who has certain doubts, just like his victim. Still, his doubts are just bait, for his bonhomie and intelligence are backed by dogmatism, demagoguery and ideological fanaticism. Roadevin knows that in the basement, his bullying colleagues, the brutes, are conducting altogether different kinds of interrogations. He considers the victim, Chiril, to be an interesting solitary man and is fascinated by the strangeness and uniqueness of his “game.” That is why he subjects him to another type of questioning than the usual one, an interrogation that does not entail physical violence. He regrets Chiril’s suicide, which was, in fact, triggered by his miring interrogation, unfolding like a spider’s sticky web and forcing the victim to acknowledge that he was a mere “fly.” During the “thaw,” that is, after 1964, Roadevin gives Chiril’s “hostile manuscript” of yesteryear, a political-moral journal, as an offering to the Gallery of wild vine (understood as a political confessional of the times). At the time when Constantin Țoiu published this novel, in 1976, several years after Nicolae Ceaușescu’s July 1971 Theses, this perspective no longer tallied with reality. Having the Securitate represented by Major Roadevin, who passed for a refined-decadent character rather than for a technician and practitioner of terror, sounded like an artificial contrivance.

MARIN PREDĂ’S novel, *The Most Beloved of Earthlings*, was conceived as an effigial writing for the situation of hounded intellectuals under communism, but Predă’s cocktail of ideas proved to be satisfactory mostly for the average reader, with an avid taste for secondary, processed information.

“You writers, you are uninformed, that’s why your books are no good, but unfortunately we can’t yet provide you with certain documents and materials that might inspire you. What can we do? We can’t do anything! History is still too raw and things might be misconstrued. But the day will come when many archives are opened and I don’t think this day is very far away.”⁶ Whether real or not, these words belong to Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej and they seem essential, as they mark the official birth of the novel of the obsessive decade. Still, Marin Predă wrote this novel in a period when history was no longer excessively raw, and things could or could not be misconstrued! That is why the author could afford to reproduce a summary of the trenchant discussion (whether fictional or not is inconsequential, after all) between Gheorghiu-Dej and Stalin, which outlined three far-reaching repressive measures: the punishment of peasants

through the monetary reform, the liquidation of deviationists (communist heretics) and the digging of the Danube–Black Sea Canal. Marin Preda’s novel portrays both the comical stage of the communist revolution, and its tragic-grotesque phase, whose emblematic definition, “The Age of Villains,” is provided by the main character, Victor Petrini: people think they are masters of their own destiny, but they are not, and villainy is turned into a spectacle. Victor Petrini’s “hostile” manuscript seems to be informed by an inherent philosophical skepticism; had Marin Preda seized upon this and introduced the manuscript as such in the novel, it would have been the strength of his narrative.

The pact with the Power is another dilemma afflicting the characters in the novel. Ion Micu, a lucid thinker who is nonetheless an admirer of Stalin (the character actually embodies the hybrid new man) speaks about accepting the pact subversively: this is but equivocal demagoguery, because Ion Micu pleads for a “time of [ideological] compromise.” By claiming that, because he is a communist, Ion Micu would not bear to be tortured by the communists themselves, Marin Preda provides an irrelevant explanation for the character’s moral downfall.

Petrini’s situation, however, is entirely different. Arrested on suspicion that he is part of a subversive organization, and not for the “hostile-deviationist” manuscript entitled “The Age of Villains,” Victor Petrini adopts a moralizing stance towards his own investigator, again a deceptively seraphic one, who does not apply physical torture. Petrini’s intransigence increases as he accepts mortification, which puts an end to the investigation, and yet the danger looming over his head does not come from the refined investigators, but from the brutes. During his incarceration, the character encounters Balkanized buffoons, as well as primitives. His classification of the members of the repressive apparatus is as follows: the berserker, harboring explosive frustrations (the captain who arrested Petrini would fall into this category); the buffoon, bordering on imbecility (this is the case of the Securitate colonel who considers himself “racially” superior to a policeman); the Securitate general with the attitude of a boorish, demagogical sergeant; and the illiterate and devious guard, who is allergic to intellectuals. The Securitate officers are seen as viruses and anomalies, generally recruited from among the ordinary people, so that they resemble their victims. “They were not automatons, as one might think. They felt they lived naturally by torturing me and put on a superior sneer whenever I protested.”⁷ In general, the Securitate officers are young, they possess no particular technique, but they have it in their blood and instinct how to be members of the repressive apparatus, parts of an “evidence-producing machine.” During the inquiry, Victor Petrini is alternately interrogated by a gentle investigator—a brutish investigator—a cynical investigator. They know that they are masters of the world, because for

them the reality and the people who inhabit it are malleable and manipulable, depending on whether they are inside or outside the system.

The most interesting fragment in the novel is the episode of Victor Petrini's detention, because he makes a concise portrait of the correctional environment and of the prisoner as a category: "A toothless wreck, with baggy eyes, craving a bowl with some dirt in it, which made him ravenous."⁸ What is also interestingly treated is the relationship between victim and guard, the two reaching a sort of communion before the victim punitively kills the executioner (this reversal of power was very rare inside the Gulag). The illiterate guardian believes that Petrini's being is opposed to his simple being as a guardian, which is why he wants to kill him. For his executioner, Petrini is a (thinking) enemy who must be tacitly executed, but, in a sort of Darwinian selection, it is the victim who succeeds in annihilating the executioner. The fragment concerning Petrini's investigation and detention (a case study, in fact) represents an essential piece about the Gulag, unfortunately submerged in the heterogeneous material of the novel.

THE MOST exciting novel of obsessive decade was, at its time, Augustin Buzura *Faces of Silence*, even though I seriously object to the concessions the author made on the subject (the deflation of the phenomenon of resistance in the mountains, one of the most active in Eastern Europe, prior to Romania accepting Sovietization). At stake are two testimonies, of the executioner and of the victim, but the most striking one is the executioner's, especially since he is a fallen executioner, who continues to wage a mental war against his victim, who, in turn, harasses him ruthlessly. It was not the endless digressions about freedom, Power, truth, courage and cowardice that rendered Buzura's novel as an unusual text at the time it was published, but the projection of anti-communist resistance in the mountains through the agency of an activist-executor.

Dan Toma, the protagonist, vacillates between good and evil, between victim and executioner, each claiming their own truth (objective truth is impossible) and demanding justice for themselves, the executioners being the ones who make history, the victims being those who suffer it. The problem of Gheorghe Radu (the executioner) is not only his harassment of the victim, extended in time, but also his avowed condition as a victim of his own theoretical masters, the eminences grises of repression in communist Romania. As an agent of cooperativization and as a persecutor of the anti-communist resistance in the mountains, he wants to account for the turbulent first years of communism, casting the blame on the theorists of terror, from the times when good and evil were seen as mere conventions. In a first version, Radu's testimony is relatively credible, as is his victim's (Carol Măgureanu, the only survivor of a family persecuted and exterminated by Gheorghe Radu), but it is deceitfully based on

the logic of false and necessary victims. Only the second time around does the executioner make a confession that is closer to the truth, forced by his victim's decisive testimony and by Dan Toma's role as a moral balance. In fact, the problem the novelist foregrounds, albeit indirectly, concerns the manner in which the younger generations react to the aberrations of the obsessive decade, acting as both confessors and judge-arbitrators between victim and executioner. The testimonies of the executioner and of the victim are equal in terms of scope and length, the problem raised by the author being that of culpability.

In what follows, I will discuss in more detail the figure of Gheorghe Radu. He is a Securitate officer who participated in the mountain fights against anti-communist partisans; hence, his entire recollection aims to relate how he was initiated into the law of hatred and how he became a practitioner of terror and a harasser of people. Radu does not hesitate, moreover, to classify his former colleagues, above all, at a generational level: thus, those who acted and held the power during the first stage were the primitives, the barbarians, of a violent and passionate disposition; during the second stage, there came to power colder individuals, rational and even ironic intellectuals. Next to Radu, there are three more "tough" men in the novel: Coza (the chief political officer), Brainea (the devious, fanatical Securitate officer) and Lupșe (the mercenary). Augustin Buzura presents the abuses perpetrated by the Securitate in the rural environment: frantic arsonists setting fire to forbidden books, in a sort of "tribal ceremony"; the torture of peasant women so that they would betray the anti-communist fighters in the mountains; the Securitate officers' "boxing" and "football" matches against the brothers of Carol Măgureanu; the torturing of Carol Măgureanu's mother, ritualistically led into the woods where she would lure her anti-communist sons, terrorized by her screams; the defilement of the captured partisans' corpses. Gheorghe Radu confesses that he has become more savage as an agent of terror and because of the fear that he might also become an "enemy of the people"; however, even after his retirement, he considers himself a vigilant Securitate eye. In his youth as a persecutor, he was offended by the contempt shown by his victims; then, the fact that he was humiliated by Sterian (the leader of the partisans), who forced him to eat his party membership card, made him choose terror as a means of revenge. Although old, he is a Securitate officer who hates his former victims: he believes that all the troubles he has experienced since his political decay have been caused by those he had once hounded; he believes that he is also a victim. Obviously, he is a false victim: he is, in fact, an old executioner who experiences remorse, but who does not know how or does not want, in any case, to repent.

In *Pride*, the interesting figure is that of the executioner rather than that of the victim. Here there are also two testimonies: the one provided by Constantin

Redman, the executioner (Redman actually has two versions of the “truth”: an adulcorated one, for those who are unaware of the years of terror, and another, real one, for his victim), and the one offered by Ion Cristian, the victim, a forced confession, in effect intended to counteract the executioner’s version. The relationship victim-executioner is more spectacular than in *Faces of Silence* because the victim and the executioner will not forgive one another, each of them remaining what they already are. Ion Cristian will not forgive Redman; Cristian can forgive the brute (the Securitate officer Varlaam), but not Judas (his former friend Redman). The relationship between Cristian and Redman is also tense from another point of view, for these are two friends, one of whom chooses to become an executioner, while the other chooses to be a victim: theoretically, this is reminiscent of the Pitești experiment (which took place between 1949 and 1951 and the victims, mostly students, were forced to torture one another). Moreover, Varlaam attempts, at one point, to force the two into reenacting the Pitești experiment; Cristian refuses, however, the role of executioner, so this experiment is not possible. At first, Redman hits Cristian shyly, then, catalyzed and incited by Varlaam, he consents to become an ephemeral executioner; when Cristian, in his turn, is asked to strike Redman, the victim obstinately refuses to do so, realizing the danger of moral decay and dehumanization entailed by the Pitești phenomenon.

Augustin Buzura presents several types of Securitate officers-executioners. The first and most important is Varlaam, since he turns out to be a Janus Bifrons: both a brute and a Machiavellian investigator. At first, Varlaam expresses his condition as a fanatical mercenary; he is an “animal,” a primitive biped, consumed by his hatred and suffering from a superiority complex due to the fact that he is an executioner. Varlaam was once a butcher and an amateur boxer, but given his zeal in enforcing terror he has become an ambitious executioner (a more appropriate term would perhaps be that of “diligent” executioner), the tool of a deceitfully seraphic investigator, who would not get his hands dirty by torturing the victims. At first, therefore, Varlaam is one of the thugs, the primitive brutes. He stops beating Cristian when he senses that hitting him would irrevocably sanction the latter’s condition as a victim of the tortures he applies. What Varlaam is interested in is defeating Cristian, not just anyway, but by destroying his pride as a victim. The confrontation between victim and executioner, as both partners perceive it, becomes a battle of wits and a game of wills. Throughout his experience as Cristian’s investigator and torturer, Varlaam turns into something other than what he had been at first: he is no longer primitive and brutal, but has become a refined executioner, who absolutizes his omnipotence. That the time of his decay will also come is undeniable, but this is just history that keeps moving forward and may reverse the roles.

Redman represents something altogether different. He admits to being a coward and refuses to be a victim; hence, he accepts any compromise and betrays his friend, not just anyway, but by resorting to the very dehumanizing techniques experimented in the Pitești prison. He explains, moreover, the catalysts that drive someone towards becoming a traitor: fear, envy, the desire to make it in life. Sick with cancer and burdened with the guilt of betrayal, the former informer and witness for the prosecution tracks down his former victim (Cristian, who, many years after his political detention, is a renowned physician) and asks for forgiveness. However, his repentance is formal, it has no substance, and even becomes accusatory at a certain point. Gradually, though fallen, Redman gets back into the skin of a Judas and accuses his former friend of being an arrogant victim. Then Redman resumes his delatorian ways, contributing fabricated information to the reports that the character Canaris makes in writing about Cristian and addresses them to the Securitate. The delations that are contrapuntally spread throughout Augustin Buzura's novel plead in favor of the idea that the Romanian society of the 1980s was controlled through the agency of mercenary informers.

The gallery of executioners also includes the guard Fasole, who harasses political prisoners, and master sergeant Olteanu, the latter representing a special case. Olteanu is, on the one hand, a brute, but he is also the one who helps Cristian (it should be noted here that the author outlines the typology of a hybrid Securitate officer, half monster, half human). Olteanu is a robot only to his superiors: he zealously beats Cristian up in order not to be suspected of helping him; on the other hand, he is also the one who feeds Cristian clandestinely, also passing on political information to him. If I were to classify him somehow, I would say Olteanu is a "self-reeducated" character. It may be inferred that through this gallery of executioners, Augustin Buzura intended to draw nuanced portrayals of the repressive apparatus members, to create verisimilar, not schematic types. Unlike Constantin Țoiu and perhaps Ivasiuc, too, Buzura does not exaggerate the role of the deceitfully seraphic investigator, granting a special place, if not to the exceptional torturer, then to the partly moderate torturer, which was probably the most common type of Romanian Securitate officers.

ALEXANDRU IVASIUC is a novelist who, throughout his work, was marked most strongly by the obsessive decade and who had experienced the Gulag directly; unfortunately, he was not a radical critic of the Gulag, as his former condition as a political prisoner might have encouraged him to become; instead, to use a formula that has been critically applied to him, he was "eyeless in the Gulag."⁹ I will present his novels that tackle the period of the obsessive decade, under consideration here (including an exception, the novel *The Crab*,

which depicts the beginning of a far-right dictatorship that can and ought to be understood as a far-left dictatorship), in a linear thematic progression and not in the chronological order of their appearance. Alexandru Ivasiuc's *Interval*, *Night Knowledge* and *Illuminations* are novels dealing with the subject of exclusion and the communist exposure trials, in which, besides victims, the typical characters include collaborationists and paid informants.

Interval is the relived story of an exclusion, corresponding to the obsession harbored by the Camusian excluded character in Constantin Țoiu's novel, Chiril Merișor; with the exception, that is, that here the perspective belongs to one of the accusers, not to the victim. It is strange that Ivasiuc portrays Ilie Kindriș as a split character, in an attempt to save him by this very duality of self: on the one hand, Kindriș is ancestrally tied to one of the Memorandum fighters and savors the taste of freedom, while on the other hand, his status is that of a new man, a reeducated communist. In *Interval*, the exclusion moment becomes a kind of excruciating Proustian core, but is resumed like a poisoned albeit necessary madeleine. Exclusion has a manifestly psychoanalytical character in this novel: Olga is excluded precisely because, unconsciously, she is coveted by Sebișan (the main accuser), who exorcises his own guilt and aggression through the meeting transfigured into a nefarious nocturnal ritual. In his speech, during the exclusion, Kindriș turns from a defender into an accuser of his own girlfriend, Olga: he is not a brutish, psychoanalyzable accuser like Sebișan, but one who brings logical and well-reasoned arguments, prefiguring the type of refined executioner (that is why Olga's exclusion has the symbolic value of incarceration). This exclusion is recollected more than ten years later, in order for both the victim and the moral executioner to exorcize the unwholesome experience of yore, which, all in all, is an interesting end from a psychological point of view, but a failed one from an ethical standpoint.

In *Night Knowledge* the theme of the obsessive decade is sieved through the alluvial reminiscences of Ion Marina. The novel has a nomenklaturist touch, for the flashes about Power are shot from "above," adopting the stance of the mighty, and the approach is risky. Ion Marina is a communist leader who questions the exclusion of another "true" communist. The answer of the authorities is paradoxical: Dumitru G. is not guilty of anything, but he is a possible rebel, and his sacrifice is required as an example. In any case, Ion Marina's compromise consists of having accepted this explanation, hence his passive attendance of the trial staged to his friend (he does not become an accuser, but neither does he stand by Dumitru G.). Moreover, he is blamed for having himself organized exclusion meetings, albeit less aggressive ones. At the end of the novel, through an emphatic nightmare, the author projects the image of Ion Marina as a giant Conqueror, the archetype of the winner who brings order to chaos, a civilizing

hero, who nonetheless turns into a nightmarish batrachian; hence, the conclusion: you may be initiated into Power, but that does not mean that you can hold it hierarchically or that you can be the puppet master of destinies.

The institute in *Illuminations* is a microcosm with its own laws, a closed state, where the pact with Power and ambition are the only vital signs. Here, the obsessive decade is analyzed through the lens of two political generations: one conservative and dogmatic (Ghibănescu and Donoiu), the other seemingly progressive and liberal, but in fact neo-Stalinist (Paul Achim and Nicolaie Gheorghe). Paul Achim is conceived as a hybrid: neither communist, nor anti-communist, he is but a mercenary who sacrifices the innocent. Ivasiuc takes some risks in depicting the characters in this novel as treacherous moralists, vaunting a philosophy that ignores the boundaries between Good and Evil! The novel is focused on dismantling the mechanism of meetings held for the indictment of researchers (“the nights in June”), who were sacrificed during practical lessons in exposure. In opposition to the hybrid Paul Achim, the figure standing out as an epitomic political prisoner is Stroescu, who experiences enlightenment in detention, through solidarity and truth (he is a victim who forgives his executioner). Another reprehensible character is Ionescu, the man with the files; once an employee of the Securitate, he is now displeased with the new political context (the alleged “thaw”) because *fear no longer exists* (of prison, death, exclusion). The lack of fear annoys and indisposes Ionescu, who has been demoted from his former position as the “brains” of repression. In the view of the former Securitate officer, who is currently the head of human resources at the institute, every researcher should have a file full of secret, informative notes, as Ionescu is in charge of the network of informants and monitors, like a totalitarian spider, the entire institute. He investigates delation cases among friends, taking advantage, according to his own confession, of human flaws and weaknesses. As a “totalitarian abbot,” he is perfectly camouflaged as a grim official, a power-craving mercenary lurking underneath this façade. Another character who belongs to the sphere of repression is Bobeică, the cyberneticist informant. Paranoically, he wishes to excel as a specialist in compiling genealogies of “enemies” of the institute, advocating the encapsulation of humans in files. Paul Achim’s enlightenment occurs on a rather different level than Stroescu’s, at the end of the novel. It is a tardy enlightenment, because morally, it can no longer save the character: “Power and authority are necessary, but they should have a limit. And the means should not become ends in themselves.”¹⁰

In *The Birds*, the episodes relating to the obsessive decade are fragmentary, but explicit: Liviu Dunca is initiated into the microcosm of a site which is invaded by the agents of a suspicious and exterminating authority: drivers who pose as re-educators and Stalinist secretaries, who allow for the insinuation of a

gloomy, concentration camp atmosphere (a dull secretary turns, within the span of a few days, into a taciturn “she-commissar”). The site is metamorphosed into an ever expandable concentration camp (work is no longer carried out here, since investigations take place around the clock), as the syndrome of history’s aberrant mechanisms. Although Dunca’s arrest occurs decades after that of Kafka’s Joseph K., it is somewhat similar to it: Dunca is also clueless as to the reason why he is arrested, the point being that the very mechanism and motive underlying his incarceration are absurd. The author arrests (conserves) Dunca in a pure moral state, having him guide himself after the vestigial remnants of a firm and upright Decalogue (this is, perhaps, the best element of the novel).

Liviu Dunca is arrested by two complementary Securitate officers (one is courteous, the other is a rascal), on charges of complicity in a staged trial of sabotage, the sole explanation given to him being that he is just a cog in the system. Since Dunca refuses to be a witness for the prosecution, he is indicted. His friend, engineer Mateescu, who will betray him, believes that self-sacrifice is pointless in a trial of exposure, for the strategy of the repression apparatus is as follows: “First, a few potential adversaries are liquidated, then other potential adversaries are deterred and inhibited.”¹¹ The Securitate is, in Mateescu’s view, a “strict parent,” entitled to inspire respect and fear, to encourage or to punish; the model is that of the patriarchal family, and the revolted “sons” ought to be tamed and disciplined through violence: “Paternal authority is being restored, we are turning into a new family, with new ‘founders.’”¹² The “myth” of the Securitate is explained through the idea of a foundational gesture, for the “founding fathers” are entitled to do anything: “There is an air of mythology about it all, even of exorcism, the washing away of burdens, of sins and shortcomings, through the victims.”¹³ In this world of victims, accusing witnesses and executioners, the sole, albeit reprehensible savior is the pact with Power and, hence, with the Securitate and the Party, as the collaborationist voices in the novel avow: the distinction between *us* (potential and actual victims) and *them*—a word pronounced with deferential respect to those in Power (here are included the Securitate officers and the nomenklatura)—is necessary, so as to allow the malleable victims to accede to the “higher” political rank of executioners.

The second character who lectures Dunca on the “beneficial” role of the Securitate is Colonel Cheresteșiu.¹⁴ In his search for the latter, Dunca wanders around a building filled with mazes and dark corridors, with guards, secretaries and political prisoners. Cheresteșiu explains to his former friend that the idea of innocence has been eliminated and replaced with that of the necessary quest for victims. Although he is a Securitate officer, Cheresteșiu deems himself to be just a pawn in a hierarchy and a vast network of other pawns, in which abuses and injustice have a purpose of their own. That is why the victims’ only solution is surrender. Still, Cheresteșiu has his doubts, confessing pathetically that he can-

not afford to doubt “his own” (the communists): once he has chosen to be a Securitate officer, he must tread this path even if he has witnessed the torture of victims and even though he has never practiced such a thing (note should be made here of the complete lack of veracity of the “romantic” views that might have been espoused by a Securitate colonel during the years of the obsessive decade). Unable to convince Dunca of the need for collaboration and surrender, Cheresteşiu moves his former friend directly into the basement, where he will be subjected to brutal questionings (by another Securitate officer). Dunca’s detention is succinctly narrated by Ivasiuc.¹⁵ The victim is afraid, but holds on and discovers, in prison, the idea of a postponed destiny, and it is ultimately this idea that will actually save him.

The Crab could be just a representation of the Gulag, for although Don Athanasios is a right-wing dictator, what is essential is his structural mold as an engineer of terror. What is also apparent here is the novelist’s propensity for the theme of anarchy and for hybrid psychological structures: Don Athanasios, for instance, shatters the concepts of innocence and guilt, for such a removal of boundaries highlights how reprehensible and, at the same time, how stringent the principle of extermination is perceived to be. Unable to write a Solzhenitsynian novel about the Romanian Gulag, Ivasiuc gives a reply that squares with the series of South American dictators portrayed by Miguel Ángel Asturias, Augusto Roa Bastos, Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez, even though the model of his dictator is, obviously, Stalin, rendered as the fictional figure of Don Athanasios. The mental dictator (Stalin) invoked by the concrete dictator (Don Athanasios) recalls a similar sequence from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *First Circle*, namely the famous dialogue between Stalin and his Minister of the Interior on the logic of the staged trials involving the communist leaders. If Don Athanasios is the “creator of the new fear, the perfect technician not of mechanical terror, exerted brutally and virilely by an almighty father, but of systematic, cold-blooded terror,”¹⁶ Miguel is the commentator and passive disciple of terror, himself threatened to be swept away by the wave of terror, as a possible victim, but also as a possible executioner. Don Athanasios’s logic is contagious: anyone can become a victim, even those who are already dead, for the status of a victim is perfectible. The purpose of the coup initiated by Don Athanasios is to reduce the individual to a dull, gray person, with a mere skeletal conscience. Thus, to give a decisive lesson, multiple parallel executions are carried out on a hallucinatory “South American” St. Bartholomew’s Eve. The world of terror is a reversed world, in a mirror, like the Orwellian dystopias. To be a perfect executioner, Miguel the disciple must pass through the stage of victim, at least theoretically: he becomes the guinea pig of Don Athanasios, who initiates him into the secrets of fear. The final image is that of a world dominated by carnivorous crabs, devouring crustaceans, led by the Grand Crab (Don Athanasios), a world in which

a virtual “crab” (Miguel) becomes the random victim of terror. The fact that Miguel does not get to be officially instantiated as a “crab,” perhaps as the very successor of the Grand Crab Dictator, is a mere mishap.

HAVING SUCCINCTLY analyzed these writings, it should be noted that I did not set out to exhaust the series of novels of the obsessive decade, but merely to mention the most important ones, choosing the least subversive or relatively subversive authors (I deliberately did not approach the novels signed by Petre Țăucudeanu, Dumitru Popescu and Ion Lăncrăjan, as these texts are not only devoid of aesthetic value, but also devoid of an ethical compass, being written by authors who were propagandistically acquiescent to the communist regime). The novels I have analyzed do not chart the central core of the Gulag except in certain stretches of the narrative, focusing rather on the totalitarian atmosphere and the political context, etc. The novel of the obsessive decade is thus a lame forerunner of the future demystifying writings about the Gulag (prison memoirs), its role being that of obscuring the refined terror of the Ceaușescu era by pointing an accusing finger at the brutal terror of the Gheorghiu-Dej era, but without engaging in a deep analysis of the Romanian repressive system. The collective tensions from the period of the Ceaușescu regime were neutralized by displacement onto a previous stage. The success of this strategy is attested by the wide readership that the theme of the obsessive decade enjoyed among all categories of readers: from refined connoisseurs to amateurs, from intellectuals to workers. The plan worked all the better since it gave the impression of genuine dissidence, aptly speculated by the eminences grises who approved the publication of this type of novel.

□

(Translated by CARMEN-VERONICA BORBÉLY)

Notes

1. Florin Manolescu, “Literatura închisorilor,” *Luceafărul* (Bucharest), n.s., 2, 4 (1991).
2. Cristian Moraru, “Literatura testimonială,” *Contrapunct* (Bucharest) 1, 28 (1990).
3. Mircea Țăucudean, “Vârstele minciunii,” *Apostrof* (Cluj-Napoca) 1, 3–4 (1990).
4. Ion Simuș, *Incursiuni în literatura actuală* (Oradea: Cogito, 1994), 11–14.
5. Constantin Țoiu, *Galeria cu vișă sălbatică*, 2nd edition (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1979), 123.
6. Marin Preda, *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1980), 197.
7. *Ibid.*, 2: 22.
8. *Ibid.*, 2: 26.

9. Ioan Buduca, "Orbul în Gulag: Cazul Alexandru Ivasiuc," *Cuvîntul* (Bucharest) 7, 9 (1996).
10. Alexandru Ivasiuc, *Iluminări* (Bucharest: Eminescu, 1977), 398.
11. Alexandru Ivasiuc, *Păsările* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1970), 259.
12. *Ibid.*, 261.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 273–280.
15. *Ibid.*, 281–290.
16. Alexandru Ivasiuc, *Racul* (Bucharest: Albatros, 1976), 129.

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Abstract

The Romanian Gulag As Reflected in the Novels of the "Obsessive Decade"

This study examines the novel of the "obsessive decade" published in communist Romania (especially during the period 1970–1985) and the manner in which this type of novel approached the theme of the Gulag, alternating between genuine dissidence and imposture. The phrase "novel of the obsessive decade" has become commonplace in literary criticism, but it is rather inadequate, a more accurate description being "the novel about the obsessive decade." These writings belong to authors who did not experience the Gulag (prisons, labor camps, deportation, colonies) directly (with few exceptions); these authors resorted to thematic compromises so as not to aggravate the Ceaușescu regime, which sanctioned their publication. At the time of their publication, the novels of the "obsessive decade" had a real impact. After the Revolution of 1989, this impact faded away, due to the critical reassessment of Romanian literature after the collapse of the communist regime and to the disconcerting emergence of prison memoirs, related to the communist period.

Keywords

the novel of the "obsessive decade," Romania, communism, Constantin Țoiu, Marin Preda, Augustin Buzura, Alexandru Ivasiuc