

“Securitate” in Romanian Contemporary Narrative: A Communist Dystopia

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THE OPERATORS of the communist repression are reflected in the Romanian literature after December 1989—either by portrayals of “iron” commissaries, or by those of various communist leaders who steered the harsh repression. In the literature published in Romania prior to 1989, the dominating image is that of the falsely seraphic investigator or of the Balkanised buffoon; the torturer’s figure is less present. For example, the novel of the obsessive decade¹ excels in focusing on the falsely seraphic investigator, when, in fact, the Romanian Securitate agent’s prominent illustration, for this period, was that of the “boxer,” as the torturer is often labelled, because the deceptively seraphic investigator was always doubled by a torturer. The inadequacy also relates to the fact that the Securitate representatives, in the first stage of communism (1949–1964) were not intellectuals (they appear only in the years of the so-called “melt down,” i.e. after 1964); instead, they were notorious brutes, mercenaries with “healthy” origins.² We note, however, that, in the literature before 1989, the manner in which the information system worked is painted in true colours: the novels of the obsessive decade are rich in reports of a real informants’ siege on the Romanian society. In dystopias, parables and allegories, the agents and the Securitate are described as an occult ensemble, built on the model of the mafia octopus, which is invested, nonetheless, with “missionary” or monastic-disciplinary values.³ In the post-1989 literature, the members of the repressive apparatus are depicted in all three stances (falsely seraphic investigator, torturer, Balkanised buffoon), alike in portraits being both the falsely seraphic investigator and the brutal torturer (the latter’s image haunts the authors born in the so-called liberalization period of communist Romania).⁴

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I will describe below the image of the Securitate, as retrieved from several important novels, published during the Romanian Post-communism.

The novel *Sertarul cu aplauze* [*The Drawer Full of Applause*] by Ana Blandiana could be partially listed under the series of dystopias, parables and allegories, but I’d rather place

it in the list of the realistic novels that approached the final period of Ceaușism, depicting the re-education of dissidents in a psychiatric asylum. In a different train of thought, the novel is occasionally flanked by insertions of one of the author's real diaries, from and about the period she was not allowed to publish, in the last, literally demolishing stage of the Romanian communism. The agents in the novel, who invade Alexandru Șerban's house, harassing him, are a group of devils (three "technicians on duty") as if borrowed from Mikhail Bulgakov novel *The Master and Margarita*, more precisely evoking Woland, Koroviev and Azazello (Behemoth is contained within the last two). The one leading them, "the boss," is a relatively civilized, but deceitful intellectual, equipped with a *raisonneur's* pipe; the other two are a heavy and Grobian redhead (who speaks distortedly and crudely and who has "hooves," metaphorical as they are, which hint at the devil in him) and an individual who has the appearance of a policeman in the movies, a rude, caustic one, opposing the former by his slenderness. All three have a tinge of the argotic (particularly the last two), as invaders who intimidate by eccentric gestures: they occupy houses, they sleep in their victims' houses, they list their underwear, they initiate lascivious rituals, they generate scenes of grotesque and absurd farce. They are limping, but sly, extravagant devils who act the ape, make grimaces, Ana Blandiana writes, because one of the terror techniques is to mock and humiliate the victims in order to destroy their defence system. At the end of the novel, the three reappear and burn Alexandru Șerban's "hostile" manuscripts.

But before coming to this end, the author describes the way the Securitate directed an entire architecture of concentric circles of information, while even the most reliable friends of an individual became occasional informants, out of opportunism, fear or weakness. The main character, the dissident Alexandru Șerban, is lured for admission in a "re-education unit," i.e. in a psychiatric asylum (penitentiary hospital) inside a former monastery. Here, we must recall that, in post-Stalinism, after the theoretical abolition of the Gulag, all the communist regimes in Europe, under Moscow's influence, promoted the dissidents' admission in psychiatric asylums, attempting a modern form of "brain-washing"; protesting intellectuals (writers and men of science) were submitted to methods of brain washing (usually by pharmaceutical drugs or electric shocks, but other methods were also used), the opposition against the communist regime being declared mental illness or schizo-mysticism. The prisoners of conscience admitted in psychiatric asylums were put under abusive treatments, on account of the illness that was fabricated for them and called "atypical schizophrenia." No longer acknowledging the term of political prisoner, communist states preferred to admit opponents and dissidents in psychiatric asylums, justifying the "madmen" ("socially dangerous individuals," as indicated in their medical reports) had to be subsided and re-educated!

As object of the virtual re-education, Alexandru Șerban is tested psychologically to detect the roots of his antisocial behaviour, and later he is submitted to an intensive acoustic therapy and to facial exercises of enthusiasm. The re-education centre is led by a woman-commissary, comrade Mardare, whose subordinates are a series of guardian-physicians, again evoking devils, however not extravagant and sly, but re-educating ones (such as doctor Bentan, the one assigned to Alexandru Șerban). The purpose of this re-education centre is to teach the antisocial and dissident to applaud happily, like robots (applause are different: reticent, enthusiastic, acclaiming, cheering, tired, spas-

modic, lingering and so on and so forth), which carries out the acoustic “brain wash.” The classic agent was exceeded by the re-educating physician. Evading from the psychiatric asylum where his re-education had failed, Alexandru Șerban finds that free people are all (with some exceptions) already outstandingly re-educated.

In the novel *Playback*, Stelian Tănase follows, along an extensive gallery of portraits, different types of Securitate agents, inserting stories on career agents and mercenaries, case studies, focusing in parallel on the branches of information in the Romanian society before the liberalization period, i.e. at the end of the obsessive decade. The immediate and concrete reality, notes a member of the repressive apparatus in the novel, is a “gold mine,” where the informants should be disseminated, in order to squeeze the “interesting” out of the apparently ordinary people who, in fact, are not ordinary. The agents perceive the act of informing as a natural physiological act, with an entire well-established hierarchy of small, medium and prominent informants relying on it. Stelian Tănase describes the agents as “devils without horns and hooves,” but who propose the irrevocable pact of collaboration between the victim and the executioner. In other words, the Securitate agents are fallen, but obstinate and intelligent devils: in order to refine their victims’ betrayal and the pact, they propose to the latter the condition of “confessors” of the people supervised. The agent Copilu, an insidious strategist, promotes the act of informing to the rank of theological act; the pact means, as stated by a potential informant, surrendering one’s soul in exchange for a few empty words. It is not in vain that Chichikov, the main character in Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, appears: the agents want to be harvesters of living souls which, under the pact, they change into dead souls. The author’s symbolic reference is also made to a pre-apocalyptic time, when the Devil is the manipulator and the mind behind the repressive apparatus; but he is a petty manipulator (“a prowler” and a charlatan), a fallen Devil, who, at times, can play even congenial roles, captivating the victims’ good will; Stelian Tănase considers him a negotiator in keeping with the law of the demand and offer. Trifu, the one on whom an attempt is made to recruit as informant, admits that the proposal to inform had instilled in him “the joy of doing harm” and the “freedom of turning and rending someone,” since freedom, here, can become an “instrument of torture.” In the end, however, Trifu will give himself up, in order to be relieved from the burden of becoming an informant.

As already stated, the gallery of agents is extensive. First there are the zealous investigators, fully perverted by the taste of power, the power which verifies and supervises even the members of the system. Then there are the radical, rigid agents, those set in their rough pomposity, who infiltrate in every circle an informant on duty and who are inclined to their victims’ humiliation. There are the plain jaded, and also the cold blood analysts, who hold their subjects’ psychological descriptions, scanning their traits, vices and choosing their weaknesses in order to attack and to propose the collaboration. There are the “hedonists,” who take pleasure in tasting the victim’s fear and playing with it. These are the theorists who want to institute an informing hierarchy (snitching can be done out of the joy of doing harm, out of fear, on blackmail, out of opportunism), thinking they are masters who do and undo the mortals’ fates (they raise or sink socio-politically an individual); the subtext of their domination is that evil maintains the psycho-

logical symmetry. There are the “boxers,” rowdy-practitioners and, with them, the brains behind the torture, who devise the physical shock abuse followed by harassment, until the victim gives up. And then there are the former torturers, who have become potential victims, who ally the agent’s image with that of a dustman, being aware of the (morally) scatological nature of the members of the repressive apparatus. Human peculiarities can also occur among the agency’s staff: one such case is the radiophonist who listens to and records the telephone calls of the alleged “enemies of the people” and who, had he been faithful to his vocation, would have been a musician, because his hearing is exceptional. To him, the phones supervised are a Tower of Babel, i.e. the World itself, which makes him feel more than a master; he is an authority.

At the level of repression generations, the members of the “golden age” of the Securitate complain the new generation no longer holds the founders’ refinement and histrionism, the new generation being represented by exacting and affectless individuals, illustrating, in all likeliness, “the silver age.” The new generation does not have a nose for repression; it merely holds advanced technical training. This is why, divining an end of the “elders” period, such a veteran drafts blackmail files of the present day’s superiors, so that he should be retired honourably, instead of being accused for his abuses in the repression emerging with the installation of communism in Romania.

Mircea Cărtărescu situates the secondary character of the agent Ion Stănilă in the novel *Blinding. The Left Wing* in the liberalization period—although, generally, the novel is oniric-hallucinatory, in a special chapter (Cărtărescu 1996, 281-300) the author illustrates the conspiratorial operation of the repressive apparatus in the Ceaușescu regime. Prior to portraying Stănilă, the author identifies two types of Securitate agents and two anti-thetic generations. On the one hand, there are the “vulgar oppressors,” the “old” Stalinists who had practiced torture ignobly in the first years of Romanian communism and who were “peasants not at all suited by their uniforms.” On the other hand, there are the “popinjay youth,” as they are called by the veterans, so-called intellectuals, impeccably suited, having as prototype a successful Poirot-James Bond hybrid. They are technicians who believe in their messianic role and want to change Romania in a communist miracle. As high-performance technicians, they carried out general industrial espionage, but they also managed, for instance, a laboratory-clinic where citizens physically resembling Ceaușescu would become, by plastic surgery, the dictator’s lookalikes, vanishing from real life; the same technicians had the authorised task to supervise odd constructions—tunnels or bunkers—, for the dictator’s strategic retreat, in case of danger.

Ion Stănilă is an agent familiarised, via his family, with the abuses of the communist regime: a brother mutilated during the collectivisation, peasant parents whose property had been confiscated; nevertheless, he feels fortunate as member of the repressive apparatus, becoming successful also via his wife, a mercenary propagandist of the communist dogmatic rituals. Stănilă’s main structural strong point is the peasant’s cunning: it keeps him safe from the other agents’ rivalries, as well as from dirty business (for example, torture) which would mark permanently a member of the repressive apparatus, making him easy to blackmail. His usual work is to recruit informants and to lay the panorama of their information, most of it relying on political jokes (which,

as admitted by the character, are created by the Securitate itself and disseminated, in variable tones, in all the communist countries). Stănilă finds himself off the beaten track when he gets involved in the unmasking of a conspiracy by the circus performers who, at funfairs, markets and fairs (throughout the territory of the countries in the Soviet camp) had carried out a subversive activity. The character is assigned to such a fair, where he believes he discovers an alien conspiracy against communism. Admitted in a psychiatric asylum, Stănilă undergoes stages of partial brainwashing like the victims of the new generation of technician-agents, his colleagues, being administered even the famous “truth serum,” which had modernized the interrogation methods without torture. Even if he comes back to reality and is reintegrated in the structures of the Securitate, Ion Stănilă becomes a schismatic, split agent. Although the author does not explain morally the character’s change, on the side we could say Stănilă was punished for his mercenary actions, because, in fact, his role should have been the one of the victim.

The Securitate is depicted in further detail in the texts that describe its structure both before and after 1989. A case study can be provided by Mihai Sin’s novel *Quo Vadis, Domine?* The character Dominic Vanga, atomic physics researcher and occasional journalist, is investigated, tested and recruited by the 1988 Securitate, which prepares the December 1989 event. Vanga’s trainers are various agents. The first one is major Murza, who oscillates between physical aggressiveness against the victim and simulated bonhomie. Murza is neither rudimentary, nor is he refined, labouring at the maintenance of the Securitate myth that relies on a pyramid of informants whose numbers are unknown even to the institution. He declares to his victim and, allegedly, to the future political homunculus that he will be obtained in the vial of the so-called 1989 revolution, that the Securitate can manipulate and control even Ceaușescu (by fabricated information and elaborated truths), the reforming wing of the repressive apparatus opting for a path different from that of the classic and rigid dictatorship. Murza’s lesson is envisaged as easy to learn: there a zealous agents, Ceaușist at heart, and there are agents on standby (like Murza); but all of them are actors and histrions. Now, the institution practices only beating, instead of torture; and beating is varied: there are brutes, “the boxers,” there are the prudent and there are the refined ones. Some of them are decent, others are arrogant and immeasurably discretionary in the application of power. In fact, the Securitate is a sect exceeding the dictator’s power, given that it holds specialists in various “parishes.” The technique of the repressive apparatus is to compromise all the Romanians by branching out the informing practice; moreover, the patriotic blackmail technique is also applied, on account of which a strictly Romanian dictatorship is preferable to another Soviet invasion. The companions of the refined investigators and of the repression’s minds are the obedient robots and the passionate robots (who bear a beastly hatred against their victims). Generally, “the boys” (the Securitate agents prefer this juvenile nickname, which would suggest permanence, the eternal youth of the repressive apparatus) picture themselves as members of a sect of supervising athletes and disseminators of suspicion. But under Dominic Vanga’s scrutiny, the agents do not seem to belong to any nation, being stateless individuals who recognise only one authority, i.e. the supreme repressive institution.

Dominic Vanga's second "trainer" is colonel Coldea, a ceremonious agent who admits he is chameleonic, adjusting to the situation depending on his victims. Coldea says that the Securitate is a secretive institution, who renews the secrets on a permanent basis; thus, each member only knows his corresponding department and the next pawn in the repressive hierarchy, being a mere link in the chain. Coldea confesses to Vanga that the various acts of dissent courage against the dictatorship were allowed in order to enable the adequate and professional observation of the opponents' discontent and mind-set. The same colonel explain the necessity of the pact between the aggressors and the victim: Vanga will not be tortured and will not undergo extended detention, because he can be blackmailed and, hence, refashioned; through the pact, Vanga will become the Securitate's man not as an informant, but as a developed leader, trained in case the generation changes in the structure of dictatorship. The character is warned that the Securitate punishes two things: betrayal and irresponsibility. The main control technique of the repressive apparatus is the pyramidal system of information, which turned into a living method (even the pub has become an institution recruited for the population's supervision and control).

Gradually, Dominic Vanga is studied like a guinea pig by various by different Securitate echelons; in disguise, he is brought to a conspiratorial location of the reforming wing that intends to overthrow the Ceaușescu regime. The conspirators are apparently the dictator's loyal agents. The architecture of their building is mystifying; the rooms are tripled, they hold secret hiding places and an evacuation tunnel. Here, Vanga is revealed the solution of the anti-Ceaușist putsch, the conspirators' network (their own label is members of the resistance group—mimicking, terminologically, the anti-communist resistance in the Romanian mountains—and they only know each other partially) being led by a General. As compared to the traditional Securitate, the conspirators militate for a modernisation of the institution which could be reformed, but will never disappear, being necessary at any time. This is why the conspiracy involves also immaculate individuals, exterior to the Securitate, who could become leaders of future Romania, sustained by the progressive wing of the repressive apparatus. For the putsch, the agents do not recruit and do not train well-known anti-communists. They wouldn't have accepted any kind of collaboration with the Securitate and any potential division of the agents in "good" and "evil." They only recruit from among those ranking second or third, such as Dominic Vanga. In the end, Vanga accepts the pact with the devil, as pawn in reserve and later promoted to power, after Ceaușescu's fall. With other anti-Ceaușists, he will live in a conspiracy house, where each human guinea pig is an individual extracted from a specific socio-political and cultural field. After their moulding in the laboratory, each guinea pig will play his political role in the bluff after the installation of the new regime.

In the novel *Viața pe fugă* [*Life on the Run*], Mirela Roznoveanu focuses on the plot of the Secret Police at the time of the December 1989 events (the revolution and, at the same time, the masked putsch), then, after 1989, on the reactivation of the Securitate, during the phenomenon Piața Universității 1990 (the largest protest meeting in post-communist Romania), during the June 1990 Mineriad (miners' intervention, with the assault and abuse of protesters by the Valea Jiului miners, seconded by policemen and

former Securitate agents), in discrediting the political opposition that protested against the power abuses of the first post-1989 president, Ion Iliescu, and in monitoring re-infiltrations with agents within the Opposition. The system of information remained valid after 1989, this is what this novel concludes, the anonymous letters, the threats, the black-mail being methods once used by the Securitate, even if this institution was disguised. Furthermore, the author speculates on the role the Securitate had in the assassination of Ioan Petru Culianu. Ion Mihai Pacepa (former head of the Securitate, who remained in the Occident, betraying Ceaușescu) is also an ambiguous character, to whom the author assigns a new type of recruitment in the sect of the Securitate, a super-state one. The characters' names are not those in the historic reality, but their identity is transparent.

Mirela Roznoveanu describes the Securitate's structure near December 1989; in addition to its repressive nature, it behaves like an occult society, sequestering people and owning symbolic objects. There are three such aspects: the secret police holds the magician and visionary Dokia, whose predictions had irritated "Piticu" (the Dwarf)—Ceaușescu, therefore, arrested and tortured, the magician had been forced to share with the dictator the mysteries of immortality; again under supervision and arrest in his own monastery we find the Great Hermit, an anti-communist monk and prophet; the Securitate owns a Forbidden Library, an underground warehouse of anti-communist books, communist heresies or simply books the communists did not allow (this library cannot be burnt down, because it is a living organism, who defends itself, by making the aggressors get lost in the undergrounds and suppressing them obscurely). In the last phase of Ceaușism, the Securitate no longer tortured and no longer killed brutally, but erased the non-conformists and the dissidents, by "clean" executions (in certain cases, the Securitate had the victims commit "suicide," by throwing them from buildings). Erasure showed, states a "progressive" agent in the novel, that the victim was valuable game. Prior to December 1989, dissidents no longer wrote texts related to the novel of the obsessive decade ("Pale truths, dramas whispered in order not to be censored," which made a "culture of implications, provincialized by the esotericism of the allusions"—Roznoveanu 1998, 155); instead, they wrote texts on the repression as such. Such a "hostile" manuscript (diary) narrates the repressive and demolishing circumstances triggered by the design of the mammoth architectonic ensemble of the People's House, and also discusses the issue of the Pitești phenomenon (even if it is not called as such), in the vicious relation between the victim and the torturer: "the torturer who was shedding tears asking his victim to understand he must kill or the victim who let himself killed while understanding and accepting the torturer's explanations?" (Roznoveanu 1998, 154).

But the main demonstration of the novel *Viața pe fugă* is the analysis of Ioan Petru Culianu's assassination, instrumented by a conspiratorial society, which intended to put a stop to Culianu's prophetic political visions, a society guided by the Securitate, which wanted to be more than a power hub manipulating the World; it wanted to be a mystic-occult centre, whose omphalos is in Romania. We may say there is a certain relation of Mirela Roznoveanu's novel with the theory rendered in Mircea Eliade's micro-novel *Nineteen Roses*. At Eliade, too, the Securitate is designed like a Church with specific

laws and hierarchies, being, on the other hand, obsessed with a series of occult, para-human conspiracies, which, nonetheless, are mere excuses for the clearing of scores between various members of the system that want to seize the power.

ONE BRIEF conclusion is inescapable. First, the image of the secret police has been a concern and, in some cases, an obsession of the Romanian writer, with the latter unable to move away from the myth the repressive apparatus itself disseminated among the people: the Securitate as occult, almighty ensemble, manipulator of the collective and individual conscience. Nearly all the writers analysed here have illustrated in their texts an architecture of the informing act spread at the level of the entire population. In fact, this was the organizational constant of the Securitate: the administration of a pyramidal system of fear, by which they could control and supervise prophylactically an entire nation.



Notes

1. The label to the novel (narratively) focused on the repression of the 1950s, deemed the most brutal years at the socio-political level.
2. For a pertinent analysis of the control exercised by Securitate on the Romanian people and society, through files and informers, see the study signed by Lavinia Stan, "Access to Securitate Files: The Trials and Tribulations of a Romanian Law," *EEPS – East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 1 (Feb. 2002): 145-181.
3. See, for example, the novels *Biserica neagră* [*The Black Church*] by A. E. Baconsky and *Al doilea mesager* [*The Second Messenger*] by Bujor Nedelcovici.
4. For a brief perspective and synthesis of the repressive system in Romania during the twentieth century, see my study, Ruxandra Cesereanu, "The Final Report on Holocaust and the Final Report on Communist Dictatorship in Romania," *EEPS – East European Politics and Societies* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 270-281.

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Abstract

“Securitate” in Romanian Contemporary Narrative: A Communist Dystopia

This essay analyses the image of the department of state security (Securitate) as illustrated in the post-communist Romanian literature, respectively in five novels with impact among readers, one of which stirred polemic reactions. The image of the Securitate was a concern and an obsession, in some cases, of the Romanian writer, who found it impossible to separate from the myth disseminated among the people by the repressive apparatus itself: the secret police as occult, almighty ensemble, manipulating the collective and the individual mentality.

Keywords

Romania, Securitate, communism, novel, post-communism, Ana Blandiana, Stelian Tănase, Mircea Cărtărescu, Mihai Sin, Mirela Roznoveanu.