A NEWFOUND SOCIAL RELEVANCE FOR LITERATURE? THE CASE OF ROMANIAN POSTCOMMUNIST FICTION

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Abstract:
Having in mind the recent debates on literary legitimacy, my aim is a brief discussion of the social relevance of literature before and after the fall of communism in Romania. The first part of the paper offers a survey of the critical role of literary fiction in the communist societies from Eastern Europe, with a particular look at the Romanian case. The second part aims to investigate if and by which means post-communist Romanian literature regains its social relevance. A brief look at novels written in the 2000s by a young generation of writers highlights their concern with the transition period or the 1989 revolution, offering a polemical, though fictional point of view on post-communist society and recent history. The conclusion states that these authors deconstruct collective narratives and clichés drawing attention to the way in which they are embedded in the discourses which define the public sphere.
Keywords:
Literary legitimacy, social relevance, post-communism, Romanian fiction.

Introduction

In the last decade, the social relevance of literature was put into question by researchers both from inside and outside this field of study. If the cultural relevance of literature is based on its symbolic prestige in all times and cultures, its social relevance depends of many factors, which are variable across space and time. This assertion was recently proved by the so-called crisis of literature in contemporary French, in 2007, when ex-president Nicolas Sarkozy launched a tricky question in the public arena: do classical studies develop or help to improve one's social skills? In other words, is literature a valuable resource in our societies? Despite the fact that

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well-known theorists such as Tzvetan Todorov or Jean-Marie Schaeffer posited that the crisis of literature is in fact a crisis of this field of study, numerous books and articles debating the relevance of literature in today's societies were published since then[1]. Although the literary field gains its autonomy through a radical aesthetical engagement, as Pierre Bourdieu suggests in one of his seminal works[2], the social legitimacy is not connatural with literature. It must be gained, and this happens as a result of the consensus of the actors outside the literary field.

Starting from these premises, I shall briefly investigate the issue of the social relevance of literature before and after the fall of communism in an East European country such as Romania. My aim is to show if and by which means contemporary Romanian literature, more precisely the "young literature" of the mid-2000s reclaims the social prestige of this art. I use the terms *relevant, relevance* in discussing literary social recognition because these notions are quite frequent in the contemporary academic discourse regarding literature's place in ex-communist European states. One example is given by Andrew Baruch Wachtel's study *Remaining Relevant after Communism*, which sets a brief history of the rise and fall in prestige of literature in several East European countries. Even though I won't follow closely Wachtel, which, in my opinion, overestimates the public prestige of literature in Eastern Europe, I find his definition of literary relevance adequate to the purposes of my study.

Before 1989

Like legitimacy, relevance is an ambiguous term, especially when it applies to literature. Does the literary field postulates itself as relevant in a given society? Or is its relevance merely a reception effect? Is relevance measured by sales, by the public's trust in literature and its „truths" or by the representativeness of literary discourse?

Wachtel's definition of literary relevance implies, in various degrees, all the meanings quoted above: „By 'relevance' I have in mind a shared belief on the part of writers and at least a reasonable sized portion of society that what writers have to say in their literary work, or, more broadly,

[1] See Tzvetan Todorov, *Littérature en péril,* 2007 and **Jean-Marie Schaeffer,** *Petite écologie des études littéraires. Pourquoi et comment étudier la littérature,* 2011.

[2] Pierre Bordieu, 1992, *Les règles de l'art : genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

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in their self-presentations expresses truths to which society as a whole should attend"[3]. Wachtel's ideas may be questioned, if one thinks that his definition neglects the autonomy of the literary field, as outlined by Pierre Bourdieu: literature should be *art pour l' art*, not *art social*. Following this statement, it comes out that literature can be neither "a self-presentation of the author", nor a vehicle for truths "to which society as a whole should attend". However, one must not forget that literature, although an artistic individual creation, is produced and read within social frames. Moreover, giving the expectations of the Eastern audience in both communist and post-communist times, Wachtel's definition is usable, especially for the case of the novel. The author uses two different types of arguments in „measuring" literature's social relevance: quantitative and qualitative. I shall briefly summarize them in what follows, starting with the first one, which is less questionable.

The quantitative arguments are based on statistical data collected from several East European countries, including Romania. Wachtel appeals to national statistics regarding the amount of titles published per year and the number of copies per book before and after 1989, in order to attest the decline of book markets in the 90s, especially in the literary sector. With the rise of capitalism, the book market is no longer monolithic, nor safe. The diversification of the book offer leads to a fragmentation of the public. On the other hand, the public is less willing to buy books than it was before. As a consequence, the editors become reluctant to publish contemporary national authors. Wachtel's quantitative argument is highly suggestive and certifies common tendencies across this area, despite local differences[4]. In Romania's case, it is commonly accepted that the larger readership became interested in contemporary autochthonous literature during the second half of the 2000s, due to a marketing campaign entitled „Vote for the Young Literature", and launched in 2004 by one of the main publishing houses.

But the thesis of Wachtel's book rests on what I call qualitative arguments. The author argues that literature and its producers have had a crucial role in the societies and cultures from Eastern Europe since their national awakening and state-building until the fall of the communist regimes in 1989. Indeed, in Romania and other ex-communist European countries, literature fulfilled both a political and a cultural function: the

[3] A.B. Wachtel, 2006, p. 8.
[4] See A.B. Wachtel 2006, pp. 44-72.

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foundation of these states rests on "a shared national language and a literary corpus". The author correctly argues that during national socialism (which in Romania emerged in the mid-sixties), the canonical figures became "protocomunist", which brings him to the assumption that between the "founding literary fathers" and the socially-engaged communist writers a transfer of symbolic prestige took place. In my regard, one general objection can be brought to this thesis. To assess that, in this part of the world, literature is overvalued due to historical "objective conditions", Wachtel brings together arguments from different areas, which are not necessarily interrelated, as he implies. The symbolical power of literature (sanctioned by the educational system in Eastern Europe, which is literaturocentric) plays itself on a different field than the idea that writers, through their social representativity, enjoyed a certain amount of political power.

As the different biographies of Eastern authors show, it is an extremely difficult task to discern if writers have held privileged social and cultural roles during communist regimes or not. It may be argued, as Wachtel does, that in Romania and other East-European countries literature and its producers were expected to participate in the construction of national socialism and that this „privileged" position has produced certain benefits. But it is also true that the Party, its engaged writers and the censorship apparatus have had a specific ideological way of understanding literary legitimacy as implying an active, revolutionary role in society. As a consequence, apart from dissident literature, a huge amount of artistic fiction came to be seen as illegitimate from the political regime's point of view. Moreover, in many cases, the larger public didn't pay great attention to writers and books that lacked the aura of political subversion. For instance, the half-fake interviews with proletarians published by Alexandru Monciu-Sudinski in 1973-1974 were barely noticed by literary critics, despite their strong anti-socialist message.

Still, the critical role of literary fiction in Eastern societies during communist regimes is largely accepted by researchers and can be used to explain the social relevance of literature. In Romania, both the socialist realism of the 50s and neo-modernist literature had a major role in creating and reinforcing a new idea of social solidarity. On the one hand, socialist realism was promoting a class-conscious literature, especially through novels written by well-known and even respected authors such as Zaharia Stancu (*Desculț/ Barefoot*), Eugen Barbu (*Groapa/ The Pit* and *Șoseaua*

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Nordului/ The Highway of the North), Titus Popovici (*Străinul/ The Stranger* and *Setea/ The Thirst*). On the other hand, the emergent neo-modernism of the sixties was undermining these fictional representations of class struggle and class solidarity by activating a secret complicity, based on "double language" and shrewd dissident allusions. *Animale bolnave*/ *Sickly Animals* and *Bunavestire*/ *The Annunciation* by Nicolae Breban, *Îngerul a strigat*/ *The Angel Cried* by Fănuș Neagu, *Vânătoarea regală/ The Royal Hunt* by D.R. Popescu, *Racul/ The Crab* by Alexandru Ivasiuc, *Delirul*/ *The Delirium* and *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*/ *The Most Beloved Man on Earth* by Marin Preda are not just masterpieces of the time, but also very popular works – and, supposedly, largely read. However, one must note that this type of literary solidarity, although subversive, relies as well on the political message encapsulated in these novels. Actually, Monica Lovinescu has repeatedly argued that the aesthetic dissidence, manifested through "winks" and double-entendres slipped between the lines, had led eventually to the failure of the civil society both in communist and post-communist Romania[5]. For Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca, who introduced the concept of *East-ethics* in Romanian literary studies, the political complicity between the writer and his readers is in fact a false solidarity, since it annihilates the possibility of a real revolt against totalitarianism. It is also important to quote here Eugen Negrici's opinion that this type of literary communication sets up very particular expectations from literature for the audience, both in the communist period and even after 1989[6]. Due to the artistic use of a "double language", which was often associated with aesthetics itself, literature let the impression that it was its privilege to „tell the truth about reality", as a great part of the public actually thought. Totalitarian monolithic societies, on the other hand, saw the function of literature as that of depicting their own social reality, especially through ample and coherent narratives. After 1989, the turmoil in society will lead to

[5] Here is a relevant paragraph: „We are familiar with the thesis of resistance through literature. What does that mean in the Romanian context? That writers didn't develop relations of slidarity with their readers, but merely relations of complicity, through'winking'. And this complicity cannot create a civil society". Magda Cârneci, „Scriitorul trebuie să vegheze la mersul lucrurilor în cetate. Un interviu cu Monica Lovinescu și Virgil Ierunca" [The Writer Must Watch over the course of things in society. An interview with Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca], apud E. Simion (coord.), 2014, vol. III, p. 388.

[6] E. Negrici, 1999, ch. *The End of Propaganda.*

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new and provocative ways of understanding literature in Romania – ways that had already been prefigured by the 1980s generation and their „textualist" program, in the final stage of the communist regime[7].

After 1989

Considering the crises of the book market in the 90s, one might argue that the question of remaining alive (be it relevant or irrelevant) became critical both for consecrated writers and for literature itself. Actually, in post-revolutionary Romania and in other ex-communist countries, the writer didn't lose his/her social prestige, as Wachtel suggests. In the early nineties, after a quick restructuring process, the cultural magazines became one of the most important poles of intellectual and civic debate in Romania. This made writers and literary critics the main actors of social dialogue in the process of repositioning towards the recent past. Bianca Burță-Cernat observes that, right after 1989, the political dimension prevails over the literary one in the critical debates regarding „revisions, hierarchies, canon, cultural and identity crises"[8]. For instance, the novelist Nicolae Breban, which had gained literary success in the sixties, argued in the opening number of „Contemporanul" magazine that politics, in its non-ideological meaning, should remain a constant theme of Romanian postcommunist literature[9]. Such a trust in the political relevance of literature is quite common during the 90s and even in the 2000s; a proof of that is the persistence of talks about the necessity of a novel of Romanian communism[10]. One must notice, however, that these expectations coexist with some kind of disillusionment regarding literary production after 1989.

In the 90s, Romanian fictional prose was confronted with strong competition through the so-called memorialistic turn: the silenced victims of the communist repression stated their right to speak through memoires, diaries, autobiographies and other forms of public confession. On the other hand, the free mass-media also competes with literature, undermining its

[7] A valuable resource for a comparative view on the novel during the end of Communism is Rajendra A. Chitnis, 2005, pp. 3-24.

[8] B. Burța-Cernat, 2015, http://www.observatorcultural.ro/Cronologia-vietii-literare-romanesti-1990-1992*articleID_31539-articles_details.html, access date 01.04.15.

[9] Apud. E. Simion (coord.), 2014, vol. I, p. 190.

[10] For instance, in 1990, Eugen Simion argued that the great literature of tomorrow will undoubtedly arise in the Eastern Europe. Apud. E. Simion (coord.), 2014, vol. I, p. 173. See also, in the 2000s, Paul Cernat, „Cum se ascunde literatura sub fustele murdare ale istoriei" [How Literarture Hies under the Dirty Skirts of History], in *Observator cultural*, nr. 387/ 2007, http://www.observatorcultural.ro/Cum-se-ascunde-literatura-sub-fustele-murdare-ale-istoriei*articleID_18220-articles_details.html, access date 01.04.15.

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prerogative to give immediate social reality an authoritative interpretation. This is why, at the beginning of the 2000s, when a new generation of novelists is promoted by editors, Romanian critics proclaim a revival of fiction. However, this generation should not be understood biologically, because it brings together debutants and experienced writers, linked by their artistic interest in recent history and the distinctive ways of narrating it. Authors such as Petru Cimpoeșu, Bogdan Suceavă, Petre Barbu, Dan Lungu, Filip Florian, Florin Lăzărescu, Florina Ilis[11] and others present in their works „a multi-faceted image of the world: of our postcommunist, consumist, make-believe world", as Paul Cernat states[12]. Also, in a valuable study on the theme, Sanda Cordoș argues that these authors are re-inventing narratively a „contemporary Romania, confused, terrifying, in many ways unbearable", and, through artistic transfiguration, are making it „intelligible and accessible"[13]. At this level, the transition novels are producing fictional versions of the national collectivity, as it happens in Florina Ilis' *Cruciada copiilor* [*Children's Crusade*]. Her novel is a polyphony of dissonant voices: duly pupils and though street kids, pedagogues, politicians, representatives of the state authority, journalists, pop-stars, men and women participate, some of them without knowing it, to the making of history. Trapped in a train hijacked by children, the characters eventually come to speak about Romania and romanianness. Their talk is only apparently non-sensical; actually their identity discourses question non only collective self-representations, but also the belief system which makes the world as we know it go round.

Although the metafictional character of these writings was sometimes remarked, it was often overlooked by critics, who instead concentrated on their sociological implications, analysing them either positively or negatively. But this type of social mimesis is not the main characteristic of the 2000s' novels. These writings use the negative categories of satire and parody in order to undermine collective beliefs which put their mark on the transition period. For instance, Bogdan Suceavă, who published in 2004 one of his best novels, *Venea din timpul diez* [*Coming from an Off-Key Time*], pleads for a satirical way of representing the social movements after 1989. His fictionalized chronicle of Bucharest presents the main political and social events of the early nineties

[11] I'm referring to the following books: *Simion Liftnicul/ Simion the Ascenseurite*, 2001; 2007; *Venea din timpul diez/ Coming from an Off-Key Time*, 2004; *Blazare/ Taedious Vitae*, 2005; *Sînt o babă comunistă/ I'm an Old Communist Hag!*, 2007; Filip Florian, *Degete mici/ Little Fingers*, 2005; *Trimisul nostru special/ Our Special Envoy*, 2005; *Cruciada copiilor/ Children's Crussade*, 2007.

[12] See the introductory note to Florin Lăzărescu's novel, in F. Lăzărescu, L2005.

[13] S. Cordoș, 2012, p. 133.

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by means of an allegorical narration, in which the political leaders of the period are ironically portrayed as prophets. This is why Suceavă's work deconstructs some of the period's instances of collective memory. The author himself emphasizes the critical dimension of his narrative, stating that ultimately its aim was to underline the failure to establish a new social solidarity: "How can we say 'us' again if the socialist republic no longer exists?"[14].

In a visionary article published in 2001, the poet and academic Andrei Bodiu outlined the ethical implications of the prose which is to come:

Somehow, literature is now called to help people remember communism, and this is important for two reasons: firstly, because this is how we keep our memory alive, and secondly, because it facilitates a better understanding of what is happening to us in the present.[15]

Andrei Bodiu argues that coming to terms with the communist past is a difficult task, since the media idols of Romanian intellectuality, some of them being privileged writers during the communist regime, are sometimes concealing a troubled personal past. Also the discourses of the young democracy may become prey to extremism, as it actually often happened during the 90s. In such cases – Bodiu says – literature is once again called to expose these discourses as false. Although Bodiu's analysis starts with three novels published by 80s generation writers, his idea remains valuable for the conclusion of my study. I suggest that, in the 2000s, literature and its producers were aiming to de-naturalize the discourses and representations promoted in the mass-media during the first decade of the transition period. A prominent example is Florin Lăzărescu's novel *Trimisul nostru special* [*Our Special Envoy*]. For his characters, the Romanian society in the 90s is a decaying world, which literature can no longer reflect, as one of the narrative voice states: „people don't have time for stories anymore, the ordinary buffalo needs news"[16]. But in Lăzărescu's novel the stories are hidden in plain sight in everyday life, and mass-media produce literature themselves, as is happens in one episode, where a Romanian version of Hamlet reads in the daily paper not only his own words, but also a sensational article summarizing, unknowingly, the plot of *Crime and Punishment* by Fiodor Dostoevsky[17]. By transforming reputed cultural texts in media-news, the author aims to expose the fake, self-repeating character of the media discourse. At the same time, he challenges the literary intertextuality of high literature. This meta-narratorial perspective, which

[14] A. Simuț, 2010, http://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/9010/Andrei-Simut-Bogdan-Suceava/Despre-romanul-Venea-din-timpul-diez.html access date 01.04.15.

[15] A. Bodiu, 2002, http://www.observatorcultural.ro/Inapoi/inainte-la-fictiune*articleID_364-articles_details.html access date 01.04.15.

[16] F. Lăzărescu, 2005, p. 102.

[17] For more on the intertextuality in the Romanian novels of transition see A. Mironescu, 2015.

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shows that all communication is merely words, namely literature, is to be found in most of the 2000s' novels [18]. The authors mentioned above may not always succeed in their project, but this critical engagement is always implied by the *intentio operis*.

Conclusions

Romanian literature develops an explicitly social dimension both during the communist regime and after 1989. During the communist period, the social relevance of literature is being sanctioned by the Party for ideological purposes. But not only engaged literature is socially active. Reading the great novels of the period, the audience experiences a sense of solidarity, based on these works' use of a subversive code of reference to realities at hand. Literature is also seen as a political force, as is the case with politically engaged texts or, in the opposite direction, dissident texts. After 1989, literature's essence and its social role became an open subject of discussion. After a period in which "aesthetic" literature prevailed, there was a call for a new, socially responsible, ethical literature. The young prose of the 2000s does not fit this profile at first look, as its social engagement does not seem consistent: for instance, the narrators are marginal figures, and the narration makes use of the negative means of satire. In spite of their minimalist aspect, these novels often propose a subtle hermeneutics of collective representations, drawing attention to the way in which they are embedded in the discourses which define the public sphere. In doing so, they implicitly assert the social engagement of art, but also its aesthetic autonomy.

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[18] A similar observation is made by R.A. Chitnis for East-European "fiction of the Changes", in: Chitnis, 2005, p. 8.

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