DIANA PRESADĂ
"Petroleum-Gas" University of Ploieşti

LUCIAN BLAGA AND THE CHRONICLE OF STALINIST ROMANIA

Abstract: The article aims at analysing Lucian Blaga's novel "Caron's Boat", which could be published only after the fall of the communist regime, more exactly in 1990. The book is both a moving autobiography and a detailed account of the social and political changes of the Romanian society in the aftermath of the Second World War, culminating in the Sovietization of the country and the installment of the communist dictatorship. It is a work of narrative fiction that impresses the reader due to its ability to portray with extraordinary vividness the ruin of individual destinies and the ruin of an entire nation.

Keywords: artistic consciousness, autobiography, Romania, Sovietization, Communism.

Caron's Boat, the only novel written by Lucian Blaga, is a complex work which encompasses several types of prose fiction forming an organic whole through the central hero's perspective on the story. Tending to a comprehensive narrative formula, it can be simultaneously viewed as an autobiographical, historical or social novel which blends memories, reality and historical facts with fiction. Thus, critical realism mingles with mythical, fantastic and symbolic elements allowing various readings which demonstrate the complexity and richness of the meanings of the book. We should also note the wide variety of its styles that range from irony to satire, and from digressions to essays on moral, social and philosophical issues.

In our view, a great merit of the book consists in the fact that it captures in a touching manner the dramatic historical changes undergone by the Romanian nation during the period that followed the Second World War. Impressing the reader by its immense power of evocation, the novel unfolds the story of a superior artistic consciousness that bears witness not only to the horrors of war but also to the general degradation of values in a time when Romania became a Communist dictatorship. If we take into consideration Fukuyama's definition of the totalitarian state, we could state that the novel reflects the mechanism by which the newly installed political power "attempted to abolish the entire civil society and subordinate the remaining atomized individuals to its own political purposes." (Fukuyama, 2004: 11) Shifting the emphasis from the particular to the general, from the personal experience to the destiny of an entire nation, the writer competes with the historian due to his remarkable capacity to understand and analyse the significance of events in their proper historical context. The depiction of Romania's Sovietization process which culminated in the establishment of the communist regime is noteworthy as the author portrays the spirit of the age in the amplitude of its manifestations in a fresco-novel that exposes the disastrous effects of communism on the individual and on the collective conscience.

Although the novel centres on the narrator's consciousness and on his relation with the world, a fact which entails the use of the first person narrative with its internal focus, he has a double quality, being both a critical observer of the facts and an expressive commentator emotionally involved in the story he is telling. If in the first case he adopts the role of an objective historian who is concerned about not altering the historical facts that he is recording, in the second case he conveys his feelings and thoughts, and expresses his attitude to the realities that he observes. In both instances, the narrator is Axente Creangă whose experiences

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correspond more or less with the ones of the author. In general, the discourse meets the characteristics of autobiographical prose which requires the identity among the author, the narrator and the character. Sometimes the narrative self embodied by the protagonist of the story turns into a witness to the vicissitudes of the other characters of the novel. Whatever the objective may be, the narrative voice always spotlights the relationship between the individual and history.

In the tradition of the realistic novel, the incipit of the narrative provides information about the context of the story in point of time and place ("15th April 1944", "we were living on the outskirts of the Sibiu Grove"). But what draws the reader's attention is that Axente Creangă, the author's alter ego, adds several details that have an anticipatory function. Thus, "the beginning of spring" is considered to be the onset of "chaos," or the hard times of the ongoing war are seen as "a prelude" to another kind of disaster The hint at an imminent danger reappears when the narrator refers to the approaching eastern front which is compared with "a fire roller flattening the surface of the earth", and when, against the background of the people's general panic, he decides to leave for a secure mountain village.

After the surrender of the Romanian army, the Soviet occupation of the country on the pretext of liberating its territories constitutes the subject matter of a damning exposé of that historical period. Axente Creangă gives a vivid description of a nightmarish existence showing that people had to live in constant fear of falling prey to the invaders' aggression and primitive violence: "Scattered or in groups, 'liberating' soldiers swarmed all over the town and its outskirts [...] From nightfall to dawn, one could not walk the streets of the town, not to mention the Alder alleys leading to the Grove, without the risk of being robbed, forcefully undressed, mutilated or killed." (Blaga, 1990: 81)[1]

Axente's severe reflections are also directed against some of his fellow countrymen, as he disagrees with the naivety of some "utopian minds" that "hoped for a better world" in spite of the cruel reality surrounding them, and expresses his righteous indignation at people's noninvolvement when confronted with the horrors committed by the soldiers. The following passage is particularly suggestive in this regard because the narrator raises the question of the moral culpability of those who do not react to reprehensible conduct:

"Burglaries, rapes and killings were common. Once I myself saw, and this in broad daylight, how a 'liberating' soldier forced a country girl to stop and dragged her towards a gate with a brick vault. Although it was a fair day, the victim's screams did not help her at all. The people, peasants and townsfolk, went ahead and hid themselves behind the mask of their activities, pretending that they did not see anything as if they had been wearing glasses for some time." (1990: 81)

A scathing satire on the brutish force is felt in the allusions to the Russian soldiers' permanent state of drunkenness. A good example of this is Axente's metaphorical statement that "liberation reeked of alcohol," or the ironic remark of the peasants who compared the drunken soldiers' walk with "the piss of the ox." It should also be noted that, in all the narrative sequences describing the blamable acts of the Soviet army, it is its so-called "liberating" role that is pilloried.

The narrator's virulent criticism of the Soviet propaganda, which made systematic use of manipulative lies in obvious contradiction with the truth, appears in the narrative sequence focusing on Simion Bardă, Axente's former teaching assistant who, being now a supporter of communism, is ironically called "John the New." The fact that Simion works as a journalist for a local newspaper with the mission to spread the communist propaganda is an opportunity for the narrator to offer the reader a perfect example of such a ridiculous manipulation:

[1] The translations of the excerpts from *Caron's Boat* into English belong to the author of the present article.

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"[...] about the liberating Soviet army one can write only laudatory words and nothing else [...] the heroic red army cannot be 'excused' for wrongdoings because it has never been guilty of anything anywhere, as is proved by the indescribable enthusiasm with which it is welcomed everywhere by the peoples that 'are being liberated.'" (1990: 82-83)

Axente continues his reflections on Romania's political changes which he perceives as a real threat to the country's stability. His comments on the communists' political strategy are worthy of note as they reveal a keen sense of understanding and interpreting the events of his time. Predicting what will happen in the future, he is of the opinion that the Communist Party "will make its way by occupying all the key positions" in the government and everywhere in the state apparatus, and by appointing timeserving people, subservient to the Soviet Union, to these functions. At this point, we should also mention his subtle remark about the derogatory implications of the epithet "historical" attributed to the bourgeois parties by the communists. In his view, the epithet prefigures the communists' intention to remove the historical parties from power on the pretext of being outdated and "belonging to the past." (1990: 83) His fears will be confirmed in a further conversation with Simion Bardă who states that the most important members of the bourgeois parties "will die of unnatural death in the battle of extermination." (1990: 108)

In these narrative sequences, we can notice that, although the narrator's comments rest on observations and facts which he attempts to represent as accurately as possible, his tone differs from the impersonal neutrality of a historian. The discourse often reveals his indignation and outrage at what he witnesses as in the following excerpt where the communists are tagged as "beasts."

"The Communist Party tried to obtain the historical parties' collaboration, but this collaboration became the communists' perpetual offensive against the bourgeois who fell into the trap of cooperation. Any opposing attempt of the bourgeois collaborators led to a new government reshuffle; what was happening offended the citizens' sense of human dignity, but filled the ruling beasts with pride." (1990: 88)

Nevertheless, the narrator's subjective outbursts are not prevailing, the general expression of his thoughts being characterized by a "specific tone" which may be defined as "an agreeable distance that makes it differ from spontaneous effusion." (Ricardou, 1988: 371)[2] This kind of distance enables the reader to draw his own conclusions on a dramatic chapter of Romania's history.

Later in the narrative, Axente Creangă explains that the communists conquered full political power in the state due to the intervention and support of the Soviet Union, this being suggested by the image of "the palace doors slammed in the years of the young king by the henchmen of Moscow's tyrants." (1990: 93) The narrative sequence deserves special mention as it hints at the abdication of King Michael on 30th December 1947 under the pressure of Moscow's emissary, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Vyshinski. The subsequent events – namely the establishment of a government in vassalage to the Soviet Union, headed by Petru Groza (whose name is Peter Grosu in the novel), the Sovietization of the country and its economic exploitation under the new communist-led regime on the pretext of paying for "war damages" – are discussed in various narrative contexts and in relation with different characters.

Musing on the country's political aftermath, the narrator considers that the communists' ultimate goal was to demolish the bourgeois-liberal society with all its values. He makes comments on the imposition of the Stalinist model on the Romanian society using an enumeration of sentences in the future tense that suggests a kind of "end time" of our national being. The nationalization decree in 1948 and all the other expropriation measures

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are seen as having irreversible consequences on all the categories of people of a perishing established society:

"The one who will manage to keep his job will be happy, although working will be similar to being under house arrest or to moaning in slavery. People will grope through the country everywhere without protesting and silent as the dead. There will be landowners without lands, industrialists without factories, officers expelled from the army, teachers fired from schools, epurated lawyers and former officials found no longer worthy of occupying any official job in the state apparatus. Parallel to this disintegration of a social system and of the classes considered 'privileged' up to now, an unprecedented grinding of man's consciousness will occur." (1990: 174)

This gloomy vision also appears as a leitmotif in the discourse of the other characters who often talk about an apocalyptic future not only of society but also of human consciousness. For example, Alex Păcurariu, who is Axente's friend, prophesies in terror that "destruction is coming soon" and that the events "will inexorably lead to the collapse of our consciousness and existence." (1990: 75) His prediction, totally shared by Alexe, becomes reality, all characters being equally actors in and spectators of a general tragedy. The narrative describes the grim picture of a world turned upside down, where the freedom of thought is completely forbidden, human dignity is despised and life loses all its stable coordinates.

A detailed account of the "multiform terror of the police state" (1990: 156) and of the repressive methods used by the much feared political police against people represents a large part of the narrator's indictment on communism. As the author's own experiences constitute the source of inspiration of these pages, his memories have a great impact on the reader. The narrator's criticism reaches its peak particularly when he reveals the tragicomic situation of the people found guilty but without having any guilt. As Vladimir Tismăneanu has noted, they were a category of people „who, due to their social environment" were considered to be "capable of conspiring against the communist regime". (1997: 58)[3] As a result, the undesirables were victims of various political abuses. One example is Axente's political file based on pure inventions and exaggerations to the point of ridicule. The simple fact that he held the rank of "minister plenipotentiary in Portugal" under the former regime was enough for the communist authorities to accuse him of complicity in the escape of King Carol and the preparation of his exile in Spain. Similarly, the philosopher Leonte Pătrașcu, another double of the author, was accused of being "an enemy of the people" only on the basis of the lies of the informants recruited by the communist security agents. As the narrator shows with impassioned irony and indignation, "Leonte's file was being fabricated and thickened with the contribution of various informants partly recruited from his colleagues at the university. The comradely informative notes particularly emphasized the incompatibility between Leonte's philosophy and the unique and flawless philosophy which was about to make its entry into the universities." (1990: 143) The absurdity of the situation is enhanced when Leonte is charged with having links with an idealistic poet (allusion to Axente) and to top it all with being responsible for Nicolae Iorga's assassination.

The narrator describes life under the communist dictatorship as a permanent harassment and attack of the free conscience, which he perceives as a deep humiliation of the human being. A good example of this is the episode presenting Axente's house search conducted by authorities to seek "alleged evidence showing his complicity in the fact that Bardă took the amazing decision to resign from the position of adviser to the Romanian Legation in England and ask for political asylum." (1990: 153) The terror that is portrayed is intensified by the humorous way the narrator adopts to depict it. Besides the fact that he was completely unaware of Bardă's defection, the boxes filled with the tiles (already broken) that

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Axente bought when he was a diplomat become incriminatory evidence described as "boxes crammed with gold."

In a lucid supple prose, Axente shifts the focus from his misfortunes to the tribulations of other characters to reveal the large scale of persecution in Romanian society. As the purpose of the analysis is to expose the dramatic impact of history on the individual and social conscience, the narrator conveys the experiences of many secondary characters whose destinies are projected against the general ordeal of the country. The passage dedicated to Marga Mureşanu, "the famous head of the patronage board" is relevant as it shows people's futile attempts to resist the mechanisms of an oppressive regime. Although she tried to avoid arrest by travelling disguised as a peasant woman, she ended up "being thrown in a dark slammer." (1990: 91) The denunciation of all abuses against those labelled as "reactionary bourgeois" or "class enemies" becomes corrosive when Axente describes almost naturalistically the terror, humiliations and tortures endured by innocent people in the communist prisons, revealing the brutal violation of human rights and the disappearance of the rule of law:

"More and more people, particularly 'ex-nationalists,' of a certain intellectual level, but also those who played roles, no matter how minor, in the political life of the country, were massively gathered from their homes during one night to be thrown in prison or deported to forced labour camps, and this on the basis of some simple and superficial administrative decisions. No one bothered to save any legal appearances. [....] Almost all those who in one way or another once represented the bourgeoisie or the kulaks were sent in waves to serve their prison 'sentence' in the worst detention and forced labour conditions. In the cellars, prisoners are forced to eat the guards' excrement and drink their urine instead of water" (1990: 206-207).

Changing the perspectives again in order to concentrate his attention on a character, Axente depicts the tragic end of Alexe Păcurariu, a survivor of the Russian camps, but exterminated in the Romanian camps of Ghencea, Aiud, Caransebeş and Pitesti, which the narrator enumerates to complete the picture of the detention phenomenon in Stalinist Romania. The precise detail and the realistic account of the tortures that the character had to suffer reproduce the most dehumanizing aspects of a coercive political system:

"[...] he had been dragged to all prisons and camps. A couple of weeks ago, he was released to die at home. He was nothing but skin and bones, having traces of tortures all over the body. They had beaten and trampled him, with horseshoe heel boots, on his chest and face. They had broken his shin-bones." (1990: 447)

The narrator's meditation on Alex's fate should also be taken into consideration as he reaches the bitter conclusion that this kind of treatment is applied to "the one who wishes to be first a Romanian and then a socialist." (1990: 448)

Some of the most impressive narrative sequences are the ones that present the hopeless condition of the intellectual in the police state that considered nonalignment with Stalinist ideology to be a serious crime and a danger to the new social order. The author, who was also victim of the communist persecution on the grounds that his work was "mystical," "metaphysical" and "idealistic," combines the authentic fact with his personal experience. Proving to be a keen observer and interpreter of the world around him, the narrator unmasks the communists' reason for persecuting the intellectuals by giving the word to one of his characters who states that the "new communist elite" regards "genuine intellectuals as its number one enemy." Highlighting the essence of communist dictatorship, he adds that "The so-called alignment with the party will replace the freedom of conscience, the slogan will replace conscience and the party will take the place of God." (1990: 73) Being tagged as representatives of the "putrid bourgeoisie," Axente and Leonte are removed from their university departments and become targets of the central newspapers' propaganda that

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demands their urgent imprisonment. Moreover, the fact that Axente was proposed for the Nobel Prize for literature does not impress the communist authorities at all (the episode alludes to the author himself). The narrator's comment is moving because it shows how he managed to overcome his personal disappointment considering that the proposal itself was an important event with which his friends and many other unknown people identified seeing it as salvation of the entire nation.

For the narrator, the new existence means a kind of inner death because, in such a coercive regime hostile to freedom of thought and creation, he can only say "farewell to his creative existence." (1990: 110) Unlike Leonte who resorts to the radical gesture of suicide, Axente accepts his condition with stoicism. Pondering over his life, he concludes that, despite his forced isolation and the imposed cessation of the publication of his works, his condition is not as tragic as the one of the detainees, former professors, students or army generals, all arrested and incarcerated for non-existent crimes: "Compared with the suffering of those who were subjected to the methods invented by the most sadistic technicians of suffering, I felt like a spoiled child." (1990: 214)

Axente shows that the only option left for intellectuals and artists was to emigrate from the communist bloc to the free world. The narrative sequences referring to painter Alina Stere deals with the drama of the artist who did not accept the proletarian aesthetic of the time. Wishing to pursue her artistic vocation, she manages to obtain a passport which, in the eyes of her friends, becomes an object of worship symbolizing the impossible dream of freedom. As the narrator remarkably states, "it was infinitely more difficult for the living people to pass through the customs of the communist state than it is for the dead to pass through the customs of the air." (1990: 131) As the narrator further explains, Romania was a giant prison from which people could escape only at the cost of their lives:

"None of the yesterday's people, and less those who managed to make a name for themselves in the bourgeois society, could not dream of an exodus from this country, which was under the influence of the East and surrounded by barbed wire and mine fields. More and more of those who tried to escape clandestinely were shot in the back or at least caught, tried and sentenced to years of hard labour." (1990: 130-131)

Another aspect that the narrator discusses in the novel is the politicization of universities which had to become instruments of indoctrination and formation of the "new man". Portraying academic education as a concentrationary universe, the narrator, indentified with the author, provides detailed descriptions of the "measures of alignment" with the communist ideology, using various styles that range from a neutral tone to a biting one. Thus, Axente enlarges on the phenomenon of "epuration" of the teachers who were considered ideologically unfit, or he ridicules the scientific claim of indoctrination courses, especially in the episode "Judas-Tito". One of the narrative sequences that excels in satire and humour is the aesthetics seminar during which Axente mocks at the communist propaganda by explaining the concept of beauty from the perspective of the Marxist-Leninist doctrine. To the amusement of the students, he resorts to the logic of the absurd concluding that the two famous female supporters of the party ideology, Ana Pauker and Dolores Harababura-Passionaria, are the most beautiful women because they embody what we mean by beauty on a material plane, namely the perfect blend of form and substance. The comic effect increases when a political police informant, who was sarcastically nicknamed Dalai Lama, writes down: "Professor Axente Creangă seems to be aligning with the demands of our doctrine." (1990: 145)

But Axente's tone becomes serious when he refers to the unseen face of dictatorship, to the unknown surveillance methods and to the systematic humiliation that teachers had to suffer. We thus learn that the one in charge with the "unnoticeable control" of the people is the mediocre individual (like Dalai Lama) or the students recruited by the political police to

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write informative reports on their teachers. On this occasion, the author portrays the "new man" who, in his opinion, is the simple semiliterate man produced by the communist policy on the proletarization of society and by ideological indoctrination. The figure of the "carpenter" appointed to an academic position is his epitome: "The new man will be the one who has done physical worked. Thus, the carpenter with prehistoric jaws of the Cluj University Library will become the rector with the rank of professor of this institution." (1990: 174)

The mockery directed to the language style promoted by the communist ideology takes the form of an acid analysis of the "new spirit" that dominated the press and literature of the time. Talking about an "invasion of bad taste," Axente remarks the dramatic decline in the quality of the prolecult writings. He mostly criticizes their thematic orientation, the form without substance, the exaggerated proliferation of meaningless sentences, and the disappearance of expressiveness through the use of slogans and clichés. But, most of all, the target of his stinging satire is Stalin's worship, particularly when he shows that the word „genius" was attributed to him „almost theologically". Revealing in the same critical light that both the cult of personality and the absolutization of an allegedly unique truth form the basis of communist fanaticism, Leonte characterizes the "Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist doctrine" as follows: "Revelation and divinity have disappeared, but the organ of the Truth has remained. And the organ of the Truth is the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party, or rather its exponent: Stalin the Genius." (1990: 129) As the narrator has noted, such mythicization of the political leader and of the single party permeates the "new culture" which produces revolutionary "leaflets" propagating ideas of a "terrifying platitude". For the narrator, the meaningless "pretentiousness" of the linguistic expression reduced to a propagandist function means the death of language and literature.

By attempting to reconstruct the life experience of the writer who observes and judges the absurd mechanisms of history, the novel engages both our mind and emotions. Moreover, in order to capture the impact of history on the individual, society and history, the narrative offers us a comprehensive and poignant chronicle of the communist dictatorship in Romania leaving the reader the freedom to judge the dramatic past of the country. As stated by Ernst Casirer, "art and history are the most powerful instruments for exploring human nature"[4]. (1990: 285) In this novel the two branches of human culture collaborate perfectly.

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