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The memory crisis, the intuition game and the fictionalization of the document, in the paradigm of Post-Truth

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The purpose of this paper is to analyze one of the practical aspects of changing the paradigm with the introduction of the operative concept of post-truth. It is about the mechanism of the functioning of a relative truth in the case of rewriting history and also in the literary writing on historical themes. As an application domain, we have chosen the Phanariot period, a core of interest after 2010, on the editorial market. In this context, we will punctually refer to the social micro-history essays of Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, and to the historical novels of Doina Ruști.

Keywords: *archives, documents, funds, history and literature, memory, "Post-Truth Era", reality and fiction, Romanian writings about Phanariots and their time*

1. Introductioon

One of the main characteristics of the editorial world in the 1990s in Romania is the increasing value attributed to documents. The interest has grown progressively with the political opening to freedom of expression, generating the impulses to know the secret content of funds, public or private archives, the so called 'restricted shelves' during the communist period. No further than the middle of the next decade, the situation has considerably changed in the direction of a more and more relative perception of the concept of truth. In the new context, what was considered *absolute* is undergoing a defragmentation process; the truth is subjectively influenced and involves the intervention of a considerable load of fiction.

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Becoming a current discursive reference in the last few years, the "Post-Truth Era" was enunciated in the formulation of the "Post-Truth World", as early as 1992, and firstly used in the American journalism of critical attitude. It is noteworthy that both the first user of the new formulation of interpretation of reality, Steve Tesich, and the proponent of the concept in 2004, Ralph Keyes are writers, coming in the media from dramaturgy – a genre that implies tangency with the interpretation of facts through emotions and subjective feelings[2].

In a world of plausible scenarios, where thinking follows the connections of a network model, and knowledge is made up of a succession of arguments whose validity depends only on adapting to a personal logic, the authentic documents intertwine to understand the past with imagination support, and the documents fictionally written are used as remedies to memory crises by participating in lost or forgotten history recuperations. In this way, the gaps of knowledge are filled; the lack of documents is circumscribed by ornamental 'pockets'. In search of a truth that, according to the British philosopher Timothy Williamson, Professor at Oxford, 'people do not care'[3], and to whom they show 'lack of respect and lack of interest'[4], we can find the manifestations of a pessimistic discourse that accompanies the Post-Truth from its establishment as an operational concept.

What happens to a discipline attracted to the investigation of truth, such as history? How is it obligated to sign a pact with a discipline that had been complementary to it, as literature? It should be remembered that, with positivism, history was delineated by literature, because of its scientific claims.

Noticing the editorial appearances in the bookstores, we found that in Romania, especially after 2010, the restitutions about the 'silent history' of the interwar period and the years of communism, very popular and successful for two decades, either have exhausted most of the documentary sources capable of impact, visibility, sales, or they are in a problematical area of interest for readers. It is about the symptoms of a thematic saturation, or even indifference to species and subspecies of the category of subjective literature (journals, memoirs in prisons, confessions, etc.), to the 'forbidden' writings of dissidents and other victims of the dictatorial regime. Even the point of view of the authors once credited as 'elites' no

[2] See Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*, St. Martin's Press, New-York, 2004.

[3] The conference 'About truth and post-truth. Why does critical thinking really matter?' – a conversation with Timothy Williamson moderated by Mircea Dumitru, at the Romanian Athenaeum, on May 30, 2017.

[4] *Ibidem*.

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longer impresses contemporaries, being in a generalized tendency to lose symbolic value in society. It is the case of those considered 'collaborators', 'compromised', and who are said to be the protagonists of a new 'treason of intellectuals'[5]).

If for reasons of censorship, history was bound to keep silence, but memory consistently recorded the reality forms of a past mystified by the present, in today's reference system immersed in the imaginary of the crisis, an already pandemic term, history is more voluble than ever. On the one hand, the development of technology has increased the speed of knowledge dissemination, has generated support for document digitization, archiving and building databases. On the other hand, an ultra-charged memory gives signs of exhaustion, proving incapacity of storage, and leading to partial amnesia. It thus comes out of the mechanism of establishing the truth with certainty on a rational basis and falls under the incidence of truth which includes personal notes, a considerable dose of fictional, relative, and plausible.

As we have been able to notice in recent years, it is quite evident the thematic interest for the Phanariote Era, especially the last chronological segment from the reign of Nicholas Mavrogheni (1786-1790) to that of John George Caradja (1812-1818), with an extension to the Russian occupation of Wallachia and Moldavia between the years 1828-1834. It is even possible to identify a competition with the background represented by the period of modernization of Romania, during the reign of Carol I.

We can mention the recent books about or with Phanariots, the essays on their everyday life, ideas and mentalities, a social micro-history in several parts written by Constanţa Vintilă-Ghiţulescu, researcher at "Nicolae Iorga" Institute of History (the Romanian Academy): *În șalvari și cu işlic*, *Evgheniți, ciocoi, mojici*, *Patimă și desfătare*[6]. In the category of fiction, the novels *Manuscrisul fanariot* and *Mâța Vinerii* by the prose writer Doina Rusti are to be mentioned[7].

Without deepening the value-related discourse that we are interested in is the explanation of the actualization of the historical period and the way in which the two disciplines, history and literature, are trying to come closer to the truth, or to the reality of the past.

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[5] See *Some truths about post-truth*, in the dialogue between the liberal theorist Bogdan Călinescu and the journalist Cristian Pătrășconiu, "Orizont", nr. 9, September 2017, p. 4-5.

[6] *În șalvari și cu işlic*, Humanitas, 2004, 2011 (*From işlic to top hat: fashion and luxury at the gate of the Orient*); *Evgheniți, ciocoi, mojici*, Humanitas, 2013 (*Nobles, Boyars, and Poor People*); *Patimă și desfătare*, Humanitas, 2015 (*Passion and Delight*).

[7] *Manuscrisul fanariot*, Polirom, Iași, 2015, 2016 (*The Phanariot Manuscript*); *Mâța Vinerii*, Polirom, Iași, 2017 (*The Witch "Friday's Cat"*).

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How do we explain the replacement of topics on interwar and communism with subjects about the Phanariots? We think that the main reason derives from a significant change in the local geopolitical context, the daily preoccupations moving from the ideological opposition fascism/vs./communism, characteristic of the Cold War years, to a discreet, but attentive survey of neighborhood in which the protagonists are once again Germany, Russia and Turkey. The new negotiation of areas of influence serves as a very attractive reason for the writings that relate to the issues "between East and West". Being a more distant historical time, the memory effort is considerably growing. The research of documents with authentic value is blocked by (a.) missing items – incomplete funds, or lost, stolen archives, (b.) linguistic problems – the difficulty, even the impossibility to deciphering accurately the content of the manuscripts, (c.) amnesia of many important details, and, consequently, the superficiality of interpretations that provide an overall intuition-based picture than a rigorous reconstruction.

In accordance with the transdisciplinary model described by the French sociologist Bernard Lahire in '*La culture des individus. Dissonances culturelles et distinction de soi'* (2004), characterized by "more fluid frontiers", "blending of legitimate and illegitimate genres", "social writing"[8] etc. novelists borrow the documents of historians, making fiction with specialized scientific bibliography. They reshape worlds of the past by invoking the expressed or implied convention of authenticity. In this way, the "memory places" are recovered, not with scientific rigor, but with the easiness of entertainment. As for historians, they see themselves in the situation to use imagination and literary extraction strategies, such as the theory of Proust's madeleine about involuntary memory. Rewriting history becomes a form of literature, and literature is also a form of rewriting history.

Unlike history – deployed in time and dependent on stratified memory, geography – deployed in space uses memory remains. In drawing itineraries, maps on the territory of other disciplines (literature, history, etc.), it does not create hybrids, but brings concrete data and an amount of information in validating the authenticity of documentary sources. Not accidentally, the methodological metaphor used by Franco Moretti to define the rewriting of history is put under the sign of an odyssey[9].

[8] Bernard Lahire, *La culture des individus. Dissonances culturelles et distinction de soi,* La Découverte, Paris, 2006.

[9] "Literature, the old territory; but within it, a shift from the close reading of individual texts to the construction of abstract models. The models are drawn from three disciplines – quantitative history,

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In the case of the historian Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, whose scientific books compete with literature by the pleasure of telling, the "local color" is recreated with the help of the fashionable language in the epoch, in a cohabitation of archaic terms with plenty of Greek or French neologisms.

The author arranges documents in an easy-to-read narrative, a light history, but very rich as content put into circulation. In *Argument* to the book *Patimă și desfătare. Despre lucrurile mărunte ale vieții cotidiene în societatea românească. 1750-1860* (*Passion and Delight. About the Little Things of Everyday Life in Romanian Society. 1750-1860*), the historian deplores the difficulty of knowing the past realities as close as possible to the truth, indicating some obstacles – lack of real perception, lack of understanding, etc. – encountered during the act of research:

> The passage of time takes us away from the world of the past. So, we scarcely perceive rites, rituals, culinary habits or behaviors, and we can hardly get the meaning of that world. The quick ways of thinking and interpreting things make us today unable to understand the world of the past[10].

In compensation, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu speaks of a combined work strategy, consisting in re-writing history, a discipline requesting objectivity, using a subjective, even interactive input. In this manner, the working methodology in the paradigm of a potential, relative, negotiable truth is established from the beginning:

> the construction from my imagination (and maybe from the reader), after reading so many documents'; 'the documents in archives must find possible interpretation, useful imagination, and accessible writing'; 'discovering and reading a whole library of original sources is not enough to introduce them into a coherent and pleasant analysis[11].

geography and evolutionary theory: graphs, maps and trees –with which literary criticism has had little or no interaction; but which have many things to teach us, and may change the way we work", in Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees. Abstract Models for Literary History*, "New Left Review", no. 24, Nov.- Dec. 2003, p. 67.

[10] Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, *Patimă și desfătare. Despre lucrurile mărunte ale vieții cotidiene în societatea românească. 1750-1860*, Humanitas, București, p. 13.

[11] C. Vintilă-Ghițulescu, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

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Following Marcel Proust's method to recover the residual memory of the things from the past, she invites in the rewriting process to an anamnesis using the emotive-sensorial faculties:

> […] to rebuild that world by testing smells, scents, flavors, sounds, music, colors, landscapes, gestures and situations, associating them a vocabulary inspired by the oriental perfumes. This is what I propose in my book, intending to recompose everyday life scenes as they happened around the year 1800, and how I imagined them after multiple readings through the labyrinth of the past[12].

Doina Ruști's books also thrive on reminiscences in memory, more precisely from the words whose melodic sounds or stridencies determine the development of the story. She is another writer, but an author of literature, with interests avowed in the history of Bucharest in the 18th century. The archeology of the city's symbols is pursued by recourse to the conventions of the form and style of literature, but beyond this, it is obvious that a series of documents from the historical archives are valued. The fiction registry allows the writer to have greater freedom in the act of re-writing the past. In the absence of sources, empty spaces are open to both the plausible and imagination tricks. The results show that, paradoxically, "literary fiction may be truer than the truth itself"[13], the simulated authenticity going to the confusion of reality with fiction.

First of all, these novels are provided with maps as pre-established framework for the fictional paths. Doina Rusti's Bucharest is one of perception, not of certain knowledge, illusory and allusive at the same time. This does not mean that the scaffold is not made up of documentary material extracted from archive funds. On the contrary, we have a lot of places, people, conflicts, intrigues and descriptions that we can identify in the content of the existent 18th century manuscripts, because the purpose of the writer is to simulate the authentic historical appearance. The process is of intertextual nature, by the intermingling of ancient sources.

Going further, what is taken into account are the parameters that generate the fictional mechanism. In the *Prologue* of *Manuscrisul fanariot* (*The Phanariot Manuscript*), a narrative voice from the background tells the story of sultan Selim who discovers one day the score of a song about a terrestrial paradise, a city where

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 14.

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there is no sadness, only happiness and joy: Bucharest. Spread all over the city of Istanbul, the rumor draws particular attention to the Greek community in the Fanar district, as an invitation to get easily the natural impossibility to own the reign, or important political and military functions. The young Vlach Ioanis Milikopu, son of a fisherman, the main character of the novel, comes to Bucharest conquered by the welfare stories in circulation, to follow his adventure of life. As the narrator describes, "a word is a small worm, meant to multiply beyond measure. It goes into the labyrinth of your ear with a map in the pocket, and makes no stop, no alliance […]"[14]. This kind of fake news transmitted by voice, on the basis of unverified stories, puts Ioanis in touch with a reality where he loses the identity becoming Leun, the French servant of the consul of Rusia in the Wallachian capital.

In the form of a Bildungsroman including also the plot of a love story, Ruşti chooses to talk about the history of phanariot Bucharest manipulating documents in the sense of a fictional truth *which could be*. Compared to the method practiced by the historian Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu who, in establishing the 'possibilities of truth' settled in collective memory, uses elements of subjective, sensory knowledge, the novelist's strategy starts from remaining signs in writing. The graphic vestiges like maps, texts and scores govern the "possibilities of fiction"[15] that, in a serious register, so beyond the romance, reshape by rewriting as authentic documents the identity and specificity of a world from the historical past[16].

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[13] An eloquent demonstration of the confusion between reality and fiction in the chapter *Naivitate și identificare*, in Umberto Eco, *Cronicile unei societăți lichide* (*the Chronicals of a Liquid Society*), Polirom, Iași, 2016, pp. 288-290.

[14] Doina Ruști, *Manuscrisul fanariot*, Polirom: Iași, 2016, p. 9.

[15] About the "possibilities of literature to rewrite the past by embodying memory (subjective) and history (objective)", see Ivan Jablonka, *L'Histoire est une littérature contemporaine. Manifeste pour les sciences sociales*, Seuil, Paris, 2014.

[16] In a review, Reynald Lahanque, « Fiction historique & vérité romanesque », *Acta fabula*, vol. 18, n° 8, Essais critiques, Octobre 2017, URL: http://www.fabula.org/revue/document10524.php, page consulted at 28 Octobre 2017, signals the emergence of a new direction in humanities: the *historiocriticism* («La tâche nouvelle, « historiocritique », des chercheurs en littérature consisterait donc à analyser les modes d'appropriation, et donc d'altération, des discours et des récits historiens pratiqués par les écrivains (comme le fait la sociocritique à l'égard des discours sociaux). Les contributeurs du présent volume montrent la voie, en s'intéressant également aux modes d'appropriation littéraires des méthodes historiques elles-mêmes, en matière d'archives et d'enquête à partir de sources documentaires »).

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