# *THE COMMUNIST IMAGINARY IN STELIAN ŢURLEA'S NOVEL* ÎN ABSENŢA TATĂLUI

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***Abstract:*** *As widely known, literature plays an important part in the cultural dynamics, many postcommunist novels reflecting the recent past as a form of remembrance. Literature fulfills a critical function in the cultural memory. Literature represents a background/environment of the culture of memory in the post-communist age in both the Eastern European and Romanian space. Stelian Ţurlea's novel* În absența tatălui (Father Absence), *published in Bucharest in 2009, explores the memory of childhood in the period of Dej's communism and can be classified in the same category as* Băiuţeii (Little Boys) *novels by Filip and Matei Florian, or* Noapte bună, copii! (Good Night, Kids!) *by Radu Pavel Gheo, the latter novels evoking childhood during the communist twilight. Stelian Ţurlea avoids to transform the novel into a moralizing book and an anti-communist political manifesto, having a completely different stake.* Father Absence *aims to go midway between the substance of a marked childhood and an adult world traumatized by the cruel history. Stelian Ţurlea's novel captures "the great history" through the individual history and redesigns it on the background of childhood. The horrors of communism and its injustices are somewhat "tamed" since they are viewed with childhood innocence and charm. Based on these assumptions, this paper aims to monitor how the communist imaginary is built in Stelian Ţurlea's novel, its interweaving timelines, the individual's relation with history developed within the narrative fabric.*

***Keywords****: remembrance, childhood, communism.*

The condition of the modern man is characterized by his struggle with memory; the modern man fights against memory to take it over again, and it is here where his greatness lies. In the absence of memory, suffering would lose necessity and arbitrariness would increase. Preserving or regaining memory calls on the process of remembering, then the process of story-telling.

As widely known, literature plays an important part in the cultural dynamics, many postcommunist novels reflecting the recent past as a form of remembrance. Literature fulfills a critical function in the cultural memory.

As Andreea Mironescu demonstrates, literature represents a background/environment of the culture of memory in the post-communist age in both the Eastern European and Romanian space. (http://www.cesindcultura.acad.ro/images/fisiere/rezultate/postdoc/rapoarte%20finale%20de%20cercetare%20stiintifica%20ale%20cercetatorilor%20postdoctorat/lucrari/Mironescu_Andreea.pdf, accessed on May 10, 2018, p. 6).

Stelian Ţurlea's novel *În absenţa tatălui (Father Absence)*, published in Bucharest in 2009, explores the memory of childhood in the period of Dej's communism and can be classified in the same category as *Băiuţeii (Little Boys)* novels by Filip and Matei Florian, or *Noapte bună, copii! (Good Night, Kids!)* by Radu Pavel Gheo, the latter novels evoking

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childhood during the communist twilight. But, as Daniel Cristea-Enache notes, "with his good artistic instinct, Stelian Ţurlea avoids to transform the novel into a moralizing book and an anti-communist political manifesto, having a completely different stake" (Daniel Cristea-Enache, 2009, p. 191). *Father Absence* aims to go midway between the substance of a marked childhood and an adult world traumatized by the cruel history" (Dan C. Mihailescu, 2009, p. 7). Stelian Ţurlea's novel captures "the great history" through the individual history and redesigns it on the background of childhood. The horrors of communism and its injustices are somewhat "tamed" since they are viewed with childhood innocence and charm.

By following the story of Andrei, the narrative discloses the tentacular nature of the communist regime. So this novel reveals the tension of the era that it evokes. And this tension influences the lives of all the characters. As a matter of fact, the novel confirms Andreea Mironescu's view that "the individual or collective memories are produced and performed even within the works of art that do not explicitly raise the problem of history and of its aesthetic codification" (Andreea Mironescu, *op. cit*., p. 104).

The narrative, whose impression of authenticity is so striking, is made in the first person, the character-narrator is Andrei, a child living "the fatal initiation of innocence into injustice and non-resignation" (Dan C. Mihailescu, *op. cit*., p. 10), in full Dej's communism in the early 50s. So *Father Absence* is a Bildungsroman. Andrei, a twelve year-old pre-teen, finds himself with a great responsibility on his shoulders, namely to become "the man of the house" because his father was arrested. Being involved in a truck accident, his father was unjustly arrested, while the guilt belonged to another driver who, unlike him, was a "party member", as said the child's aunt, "his father's sister". However, as shown by Dan C. Mihailescu, "Andrei is not a prematurely aged child, but a bittered one, strained into responsibilities" (*Ibidem*, p. 8).

Stelian Ţurlea proves himself a very fine connoisseur of child psychology, because the child's family drama is presented through the child's own eyes, filtered by his sensitivity and ability to understand. "Childhood games are intertwined with the revelation of the first betrayals, with the first erotic impulses, with the pain caused by the injustice that adults do not understand and with the cruelties of adults who fear each other. Hope remains – one day his father will return to reset the natural order of the world" (back cover). Indeed, the novel ends by turning hope into reality: the father, in his clothes "which smelled of forest and soap, the most wonderful smell in the world", returns home one evening causing great excitement:

> ce mare te-ai făcut, a zis,
> şi m-a cuprins o moleşeală cumplită, în vreme ce apăruse şi fratele meu mai mic, care s-a repezit şi el să-l îmbrăţişeze şi tot ce-am ştiut să spun a fost, în timp ce-mi înfundam nasul în hainele lui,
> să nu mai pleci (p. 188)
> (Oh, you've grown so tall, he said,
> and a terrible lassitude overwhelmed me, while my younger brother
> showed up too, rushing to hug him, and everything I could say, while I was
> sticking my nose into his clothes, was



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don't ever go away again)[1].

This seems to be the warning of a child who will never allow history to repeat its injustices because he has learned how to fight them and he also knows how to keep hope.

The novel is characterized by its interweaving timelines. The switch from one timeline to another is achieved in a very subtle, Proustian manner. For example, when Andrei is waiting excitedly in a large queue, in a bitter cold, for the truck that will bring the Christmas trees, fearing that it may never arrive because it comes from a mountain area on a dangerous road, a memory is triggered into his mind about a trip to the mountains taken with his father, a truck driver:

> ...numai să vină odată maşina aia, de unde-o veni, de la munte, desigur, doar acolo cresc brazii, mi-am amintit cum trecusem munţii cu tata, era vară, [...], de-acolo i-o fi aducând camionul ăla pe care îl tot aşteptăm, dar n-aveam pe cine să întreb, ar fi trebuit să spun cum se chema locul cu căprioare şi habar n-aveam (p. 15).
>
> (... if only that truck came, from wherever it comes, from the mountains, of course, since that's where the fir-trees grow, I remember how I passed through the mountains with my father, it was summer, [...] it's from there that the truck may be carrying them, that truck we are all waiting for, but I had no one to ask about it, I should have told him what was that place with deer called but I had no idea).

Through such slides in the plane of memory is constructed the image of his father and we find out why he was arrested. Father overturned with his truck, with a few people he was giving a lift to the next village, because the driver of the other truck that drove in front of him had drunk several beers at the last stop, then lost control, hitting father's truck and killing several people "a few people died, I don't know how many" (p. 17). His father's trial took place in the specific communist manner. Life during Dej's communism meant primarily the fear of being "picked up" if one dared to tell the truth. The only person that seemed to be unaware of it was Andrei's aunt, "his father's sister", who began to speak up during the trial, sitting on the bench, telling about the driver who had been drinking and was not called in because "he was a member of the Party". But Andrei, the child who had lived eversince that age the fear of being "picked up" noticed and understood the reaction of the others: "...There was a terrible silence, I could hear everybody around us breathing, no one had ever seen such a thing, they looked at her sideways, for fear they might be accused of looking at her and approving her" (p. 45). Through a skilful narrative strategy, the dramatic situation is immediately softened due to the child's perspective: "... and I watched the militia men in the room to see if they were preparing to pick her up, 'cause I thought this would be very hard for them, my aunt was double their size and there should have been at least four of them to pick her up" (p. 45).

[1] All quotations from the novel that will appear in the paper are taken from the edition cited in References.



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Because everything is presented from Andrei's and his playmates' point of view, who are not yet aware of the risk of being "picked up", of the harshness of the dictatorial regime, sometimes things get a different aura, one of innocence, of crazy bravery, of humor. However, the writer's bitter irony and critical attitude are transmitted through several characters. For example, the process of Russification that communist Romania went through is highlighted several times, but the collective drama is masked by the children's "performance", including their verbal "performance". So when Gore, the bad boy of the neighborhood, comes together with his "squires" and asks Andrei and his friends what they are talking about, and finds out that Fane was telling them how he had watched a Soviet film, Gore replies in a vulgar, dirty language: " 'lad', cried Gore, 'you're making fun of me, that's not a film, that's Soviet shit' " (p. 38). Gore mirrors the difference in attitude between two generations. The children's parents represent the resigned Romanians who accept the communist utopia, pretending not to notice how absurd and non-compliant with reality such a regime is. So when Fane says he went with his parents to watch that film, Gore replies: "'Oh', said Gore, 'if you went there with your old ones, that's a different story, these old swallow all the shit, but believe me, that's not a film." (p. 38).

A novel that re-creates part of the atmosphere of the 50s can not but refer to the problem of political prisons too. Child Andrei finds out about them from his mother, after a classmate told him that the place where his father was imprisoned is the same place where friend Florin's father was imprisoned, but the latter had been a legionnaire (member of the Romanian Iron Guard, a far-right movement and political party) and they had been imprisoned "until their bones rot". Terrified that his father might end up like this, too, he goes home and asks his mother questions about this, but she proves him that the two parents were jailed for different reasons. In her reply to Andrei can be noticed the image that the communist authorities were trying to create in the collective mentality about these prisoners, but also the people's suspicions about the allegations against them and the fear caused by the terrible conditions in which they were imprisoned:

> ascultă, Andrei, tatăl lui Florin a făcut nişte lucruri rele, sau poate n-a făcut şi vorbesc cu păcat şi mă bate Dumnezeu, dar aşa zice lumea şi aşa au zis şi judecătorii când l-au închis, au fost mulţi ca el şi mulţi au sfârşit la puşcăria aia sau în altele, dar tata n-are nicio legătură cu ei, niciuna, înţelegi, n-a făcut în viaţa lui politică nicio clipă, nici măcar nu e închis în celulele alea cumplite, umede şi din piatră (p. 108-109).
> (listen, Andrei, Florin's father did some bad things, or maybe he didn't and my words are sinful and beat me God, but they say so and so said the judges when they jailed him, and there were many of them and many ended up in that prison or in others, but my father has nothing to do with them, nothing, you know, he had never done politics in his whole life, and what's more, he is not even jailed in those terrible dark, damp stone cells).

Another aspect highlighted by the novel is the injustice done to children on account of their parents' allegations. Thus, although they are among the best students in their class, Andrei and Florin do not get the pioneer tie at the same time as their classmates, which hurts



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them as Andrei confesses: “I felt excluded, I swallowed my tears, so that nobody might see me cry” (p. 146). It is again his mother who reassures him telling him that “it’s not a big deal”, but what matters is that he studies, but it’s good for him to get the red tie, too, so as not to meet other obstacles later on. Mother has in mind the situation of his father, who is not a party member and therefore is accused unjustly, being the only one who pays for that accident. So the tie becomes a kind of shield, an emblem of communist membership.

Besides speech, the society was manipulated by pseudo-shows of theatre, recitation, folk dance as well as by the literature which had become the object of political propaganda. In Andrei’s memories are inserted fragments of the school language rhetoric which restores the totalitarian, dogmatic, fundamentally false speech, a tragi-comic show which hides the collective drama. Thus, on the Saturday when all the students of the school are taken to the theater, they attend a play about a “kulak who wanted to harm, as all kulaks do, and conspired against the establishment of collective farming in a village and two other peasants refused to give the food quotas for the workers (...) because, in the new order, peasants and workers must be like brothers and must help each other in the fight against the common enemy that lurks everywhere to hinder their achievements” (p. 147). Also, actors recite proletcultist poems to the students, of which Andrei recognizes a few written by A. Toma and Victor Tulbure, which could also be found in the school textbooks. The others he did not know, but they resembled each other because they contained slogans, fragments of wooden language, such as “the party – body of the country, hydropower station and wheat, Stakhanovite workers who were following the shining example of the Soviet worker and one about the blizzard that should be destroyed” (p. 149). Here comes again the ironic and comical note, as child Andrei is not capable of decoding the metaphor of the “blizzard”, actually thinking about the storm during the previous year, when the city had been covered by huge snowdrifts.

Stelian Ţurlea novel mentions the problem of collective farming, but again from child Andrei’s perspective, who understands things very well when compared to situations/events in his own life. Thus, the child finds out from his mother that the wedding “without a priest” of those which the State had accommodated in their house ended in a scandal, three of them being “picked up” by the police, because a young man came to call to account for his cousin who had forced the whole village to join the collective farm. Asking his mother what ‘collective farm’ means, Andrei learns that people give their land and whatever they have, but they are still the ones who work the land, yet they don’t do it themselves, but for the state, no longer having anything personal, but receiving only products at the end of the year. The analogy made by the child is illuminating: “I started thinking well how’s that, so I take my bow and arrows and sling to school and everybody plays with them all until they get broken and I don’t even get the chance to play with them” (p. 183). With his mother’s approval and understanding the situation, Andrei protests against this injustice, but his mother’s reply sadly captures the condition of the individual before the swirl of history: “ ‘you don’t judge this, these are the times’, mother said” (p. 183).

So, the novel creates and circulates fictional representations and “possible worlds” of the past, thus influencing its representations on an individual and collective level. For the generation born after 1990, the novel provides an alternative image of communism to the



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historical information present in school textbooks and for the previous generations, the novel becomes a medium of collective memory, betting on a participatory reception, which not necessarily involves nostalgia for the old regime, but identifying (fictionalized) experiences and everyday life forms of socialism (Bogdan Suceava, „Când discutăm despre ficţiunea politică?" ("When do we speak of political fiction?"), in *Observator cultural*, nr. 256, http://www.observatorcultural.ro/Cind-discutam -about-fiction-policy * articleID_12557-articles_details.html, accessed 01/08/16). Through Andrei, who knows and explores the world, the novel re-creates the communist imaginary, with its rather empty shopwindows, filled with cans and tins, with the famous queue for the Christmas trees, with the cinemas bearing new, Russified names which ran Soviet movies, with the adults' permanent fear of being "picked up" if they dared to speak about injustices, with sharing a house with a person from Securitate who was forcibly accommodated in your own house, with the horrible political prisons, with the children who do not get the red pioneer tie once with the others for political reasons, with proletcultist poetry and the poets of the time, as A. Toma and Victor Tulbure, with students' and workers' parades, "some of which had flags, others posters with all kinds of slogans, others portraits of the leaders in Bucharest and of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin" (p. 158), with the wedding without a priest of the "communist heathen", with "joining the collective farm".

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