BENDMARKS OF ROMANIAN PROSE IN THE OBSESSIVE DECADE

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Abstract: *This article proposes a mirror reflexion of a period dominated by the straps of dogmatism and during which there were writers who adhered through their works to the "resistance through culture". Thus, the novel of the obsessive decade, even if not having recorded a historic victory, still produced writings torn apart from the old dogmatism. Impregnated with mythical memory, the writings of the obsessive decade are thus invested with the function of a more or less distorted mirror of the contemporary world.*

Key words: *obsessive decade, dogmatism, "resistance through culture".*

The modern prose created in the context of a social upheaval era is marked, like a real *fatum,* by politics.

The focus of several – mainly young - prose writers on the "obsessive decade" [a syntagm used by Marin Preda without any intention of strict circumscription, in *Imposibila întoarcere* (1971) – *The impossible return*" (POPA, 2009: 626)] was undoubtedly the "consequence of the liberation of the political conscience from the fetters of dogmatism" (ULICI, 1983: 3) and had as a result the reflection of the political dimension in the literary one, the novels of the 70's and the prose in general, "was selected so as to provide the necessary favours and to mirror, at the price of lowering the aesthetic level, the wishes of the party. The relationship, formerly signalled by Sartre, between prose and ideology is fully confirmed now" (NEGRICI, 2003: 47).

"Resistance through culture/ writing" signifies the resistance of genuine art, of literature actually, against ideological pressure. A huge disillusion would reign in the "writers' barracks" and along with it, a sort of culpability which could be repressed by nothing but a substitution operation, by placing "little compromises" under the umbrella of the resistance through the aesthetic principle before the political roller: "However nice the attitude of those who pretended to be fond of culture might have seemed towards the writers, after 1964, however sincere their comrade tapping on the shoulder (...), we never stopped for a moment at least, being considered the instruments of a ceaseless ideological offensive. (...) We were assessed, classified and valued as such, and literature continued to be a new «small wheel», a «screw» even when, sweating with happiness, we were sure that up, somewhere, after so many errors and wanderings, in the proletarian spirit, it was finally understood that art needed a certain autonomy, even a relative one, in order to be viable" (Idem).

The authority of the literary imposes itself, and the evolution of the novel, marked by the new conditions, tries to truly absorb reality: "In new beginning of the 7th decade, the Romanian prose writers continued, with more and more determination, to reconquer step by step, the much dreamt of realm of great literature, of a literature which is subject to the laws of fiction. (...) The occurrence of the tendency to transfer «reality» into prose after 1964 represents the major event of this new stage. The reading of the events in a scheme other than the «objective» one, that of appropriateness, of

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«rendering» reality, its flooding into magical, mythological, fantastic elements, represents another vision on life, different from the one imposed by the official literary doctrine, which had rejected any manifestation of the irrational." (NEGRICI, 2003: 216-217). Thus, within the novel structures, one can notice a strong preoccupation for the sphere of social relations, obvious in novels with another view: *Intrusul (The Intruder)* (1968), *Păsările (The Birds)* (1970), *Lumea în două zile (The World in Two Days)* (1975), *Vânătoarea regală (The Royal Hunt)* (1976), *Galeria cu viță sălbatică (The wild vine gallery)* (1976), etc.

This less fettering liberty is overbid, the novel reaching a level of convention, reiteration and mediocrity shortly after. The novel gets into a prolonged deadlock, as a substitute for journalism and assuming a large consumption courage, the innovating procedures being mere recipes. If in the 7th decade, the writers are left to build the ideal fortress in a relatively peaceful atmosphere (one which will haunt the fictional universes, in the novels of the generation), in the following decades, the "little compromises" would determine, in the negotiation between the intellectual elite and the power, the quantity of aesthetic freedom indispensable for the survival of genuine art in the context of massive relaunching of dogmatism.

The novel of the "obsessive decade", despite any memorable victory, produced some writings detached from the old dogmatism. The "Aesopic" literature becomes the instrument of symbolic recognition of the writer, of the power, and no matter how paradoxical it may seem, of the whole segment of the collectivity which has access to it. At the basis of the pact among writers, society and power lies a phenomenon of occult influence upon truth which generates the writers' obsession for recovery and truth "revelation" even by "Aesopic" means, within fiction: "It was natural that truth become an obsession (not only for writers) in a regime of generalized lies. The more propaganda, the more longing for truth (...) This aspiration for truth (historical, political, social etc.) led to a justiciary literature after 1966, reconsidering the altered truth and revealing the diseases of the socialist society. (...) The literature published by such writers [with a "civic spirit"] at that time, was undertaking part of the functions of the really free press, of a historiography which was not able, under the circumstances, to go on with the revealing, of a sociology and politology that were almost absent" (NEGRICI, 2003: 167).

Eugen Negrici, the author of the above mentioned observation, places the prose on "the obsessive decade" within this category of the "tolerated literature" obsessed with truth. He emphasizes its vocation, if not the "allegorical" construction (without using the term), where a privileged space is granted to M. Preda, but also to I. Lăncrănjan and Al. Ivasiuc. In their essence, the novels of "tolerated literature" are far from authentic realism: they follow a pattern and are not psychologically credible, they miss the concrete approach to which they prefer the digressing essay-writing, the empty abstraction of the debates on themes such as "the conflict between liberty and necessity"; under such conditions, neither the characters nor the conflicts have individuality and few of the epical situations become memorable. The novel of the "obsessive decade" is thus separated from the tradition of genuine realism, fertile and viable from a literary standpoint with all the metamorphoses that the "mutation of aesthetic values" implies. The formula *novel of the obsessive decade* becomes inappropriate according to Ruxandra Cesereanu, the right term being that of *novel about the obsessive decade,* since, as opposed to realistic texts they "reflect the world of the Gulag through a mirror that is intentionally steamed. Without reaching an allegorical register, it adopts an Aesopic, allusive writing, which situates it at half distance between

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the document-novels and anti-utopias" (CESEREANU, 2005: 307). The rigidity of the terms *the novel of the obsessive decade* falls within a natural decoding under the pen of the same above mentioned author, who cuts them out of that infernal space where all of us would have placed them, in a Dantesque space of "purgatory, of expiation and passing to a virtual «paradise», that I would simply call «paradise lost», since it always remains suspended." (CESEREANU, 2005: 307).

In the 70's and 80's, the novel tries to meditate upon its ethics according to the dictum of Paler: "if truth is not a criterion of the literary, it is not a lie either." Adrian Marino admits, nonetheless, that the "epoch was (…) full of ambiguities", cultivating "duplicity, double language, ambiguity in either benign or malign forms" (*Al treilea discurs*, 2001: 20). Thus, "by using parables, allegories, historical subjects with key, the Romanian novel invents its last defensive strategy in its long ideological war in the communist era (ŞERBAN, 2001: 34), in this sense writings such as the following being of great importance: *Însoțitorul – The companion*, *Biserica neagră – The black church*, *Viața pe un peron – Life on a platform*, *Un om norocos – A lucky man*, *Bunavestire (The Annunciation)*, etc. These are all novels in which ideology does not seem to have won by "an obvious diversification of modalities, a revolution of writings, all grounded on a doubtless tension of placing" (Idem).

The surpassing of the narrow understanding of the socialist realism made possible the constant expansion of creativity in all directions. The rehabilitation of the psychological was followed by the inclusion, little by little, into realism of all artistic means. "The censorship begins to withdraw its scope by applying to directly and politically inconvenient literature." (MINCU, 2000: 546). Following "the atrophy of social prose of classical and realistic nature, a direct reflection of contemporary society, starting with the last years of the 7th decade, one can notice a proliferation of psychological raving, symbolic, parabolic, allegoric, fantastic prose" (Idem).

The political novel about the horrors of the past would assume the recovery of the historical truth, floating in the occult with the mythography of the party, masking, by means of allegory, symbol, myth, subversive allusions with regard to a present of disillusion. Full of mythical memory, the fiction of the "obsessive decade" is invested with the position of a more or less distorting mirror of the contemporary world. In the novels of D. R. Popescu, C. Țoiu, G. Bălăiță, S. Titel, they uncover the hidden springs of the power in action, concurrently assuming the critical exploration of "sacred history" (BALLANDIER, 2000: 28). The parables about the "misery of utopia" which latently mask the need of the "artist" to exorcize his own demons bring about the image about self of the totalitarian world at the level of these "mirror pieces". The figures of the power in the imaginary of the 60's will be always related to this function with which the dogma invested the party as a symbolic messenger of the proletariat: that of depositor of universe and history ultimate truth.

At a surface level, the political novel seems to put in an equation the relation between the truth of individuals and the truth of the power, projecting it in an antagonism embracing the form of a scenario which opposes the victims to the executors. The former will always integrate themselves into a category of memory keepers, figures that could be related to the Don Quixote model (ideal seekers in a world in which the old values have fallen down, just like Chiril Merişor in *Galeria cu viță sălbatică – The wild vine gallery*, Tică Dunărințu in the *F* cycle, Petre Curta in *Biblioteca din Alexandria – The library in Alexandria*, the characters in the novels of Augustin Buzura, the "exiles" of Octavian Paler or the "strangers" of Al. Ivasiuc, but also the "wise old men", projections of the "resistance by culture", like Hary Brummer,

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August Pălărierul, Mega and Iuliu Ortopan in *Însoțitorul – The Companion*, Francisc and Eftimie in *Ploile de dincolo de vreme - The rains beyond time*, "the lunatics" Noe and Don Iliuță in *F* etc.). The others, prophets of the "new religion", self-proclaimed holders of the unique truth, universal truth, these are the mediators of the image that a collectivity touched by illness, a "rhinoceros" community builds about history. Figures of the absolute power, "executors" of the mechanism of history, are also the characters in the novels of Al. Ivasiuc (Don Athanasios in *Racul – The crayfish*, but also Sebişan in *Păsările – The birds*), of Constantin Țoiu (Take Bunghez, the chief of the "school office devils", of the "dwarfs" gang in *Galeria cu viță sălbatică – The wild vine gallery*), Octavian Paler (The old man in *Un om norocos – A lucky man*) etc.

The destinies of the "executors", annihilated by the mechanism that they themselves, the self-proclaimed "creators" of history, moved, correspond to a similar experience of the "victims' fascinated by the game of power. This dream of power that the self-exiled in the personal utopia build as a space of comfort before the terror of history marks the destinies of all the heroes in the novels of Octavian Paler: *Viața pe un peron – Life on a platform*, *Un om norocos – A lucky man*, *Apărarea lui Galilei – The defence of Galilei*. The professor in *Viața pe un peron*, retired in the cave-railway station at the end of a series of existential failures, the one who wants himself a judge of a history whose mechanisms are regulated by the cobra tamers and dog trainers, finds himself, towards the end of this devious *questa,* in the figure of the defendant Robbespierre. The double initiating experience – that of the boar-stag hunt (an exorcizing act having as a purpose the exculpation) and the "ageing" in the Mirror Hall, leads the failure sculptor in *Un om norocos – A lucky man,* to a similar revelation: "The drunkenness of power is not an invention" (PALER, 1984: 264). The victim, Daniel Petric is, at the same time, the Great Trainer, the Old Man whose destiny doubles that of the Archivist. The author of the long confession by two voices in the "dialogue about prudence and love" is naturally integrated into the same profile: Galilei, the one who had abjured in the name of love (by masking, in a perpetual performance for himself, a form of narcissism) experiences, in the space of nightmare, the destiny of the inquisitor. Also present in the two above-mentioned novels, the dream insertions which give epical substance to the "dialogue" allow the condensation and symbolic projection of the "real" emerged in the occult at the level of the discourse of the Utopian: in the empire of darkness, history takes revenge over the compensatory fiction. *Apărarea lui Galilei – The defence of Galilei* proposes a history – reflected, just like the one in *Viața pe un peron – Life on a platform*, into several mirrors - about the destiny of the Artist between compromise and resistance and about the fight against the angel that any descent into the Inferno implies. The totalitarian dystopia which is founded on the political allegory seems to find its opposite in the utopia of art; the latter actually becomes itself, more or less latently, the object of deconstruction: "the dialogue about prudence and love" comes into being out of a calling of torture in the effigy, common to all ideal seekers in the novels of the 60's. The experiences of the heroes in the novels of the 60's always end with the painful revelation of the executor's existence hidden within himself.

Thus, in full period of ideologies and dogmatic landmarks, intolerance started to melt throughout the writings of such writers as: Laurențiu Fulga, Alice Botez, Valeriu Anania, some of them "shaped" in the socialist epoch: Ștefan Bănulescu, Constantin Țoiu, Octavian Paler, D. R. Popescu, George Bălăiță, Sorin Titel, subscribing to the canons of "borderless realism", an expression of the critic Dumitru Micu.

The transposition of human reality into epical fiction is more than before achieved in the spirit of historical and ideological reality of modern man, the reading of

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"subversive" literature becoming, for the intellectual world, the main refuge. As the critic Ion Simuț rightly noticed: "Literature arises like a counter-power by the strategies of subversion, but it does not become a real counter-power unless it goes beyond vagueness and Aesopic language, forms of refuge and conservation of the aesthetic. One can only reply efficiently to an excessive, sham politicization, by a reverse politicization, the dissidence, capable of offering an alternative, a counter-offensive reply. Literature, an aesthetic field by excellence, is changed by dictatorship into a political battlefield. (SIMUȚ, 2008: 13). The result is the attainment of that illusory liberty that Tzvetan Todorov had detected at the "totalitarian subjects" (TODOROV, 1996: 168) and whose price was, in the terms of C. Milosz, the practice of *ketman.* It is the freedom of the Utopist who rejects present reality, choosing the assumed exile in "an ideal city" of one's own production, refusing to see in this compensatory construction the germs of self-extinction, the golden cages which still remain cages.

A revelation of the mechanisms of power by the appeal to allusion, allegory, parable, analogy is attempted in the 70's and 80's: "To the «techniques» of amalgamation, ambiguation, allusion, temporization of conflicts and of their ambiguous settling, one could add another defensive formula: the debilitation of conflicts of a political and social nature by pinning them on the aesthetic garment of allegory and parable, with their harmonious and monotonous flow." (NEGRICI, 2003: 260). In the sector of prose with subversive political valences, obviously inclined to allegory and parable, one can situate the writings of Eugen Barbu, *Princepele – The Prince* and *Săptămâna nebunilor – The Week of Lunatics*, Constantin Țoiu with *Galeria cu viță sălbatică – The Wild Vine Gallery*, Al. Ivasiuc with *Racul – The Crayfish*, Petre Sălcudeanu with *Biblioteca din Alexandria – The Library in Alexandria*, A. E. Baconski with *Biserica neagră – The Black Church*, Octavian Paler with his parabolic novels: *Viața pe un peron – Life on a Platform* and *Un om norocos – A Lucky Man*, etc. The political parables published in the 8th and 9th decades of the last century by novel writers such as D .R. Popescu, Constantin Țoiu, Octavian Paler, Al. Ivasiuc, Augustin Buzura, Petre Sălcudeanu, etc (some of them considered as compromised and, as a consequence, stigmatized by a good deal of contemporary critics) build their meanings at the interference of the artist's mythology with pseudo-mythology created by the power as an instrument of symbolic self-identification.

In the case of the intellectual elite, the traumas of the times are even more poignant: it is enough to deeply explore the fictional universes of the novels of the "obsessive decade" epoch which are part of the identity construction of the "resistant" intellectual, to discover, beyond the heroic scenario, the vocation of the "abjuration". The retirement in a "construction that exculpates itself", common, in the terms of J.-J. Wunenburger (WUNENBURGER, 2001: 221-112) to the schizophrenic and utopia creator, is mediated by a sacrifice ritual, *torture in effigy* which haunts the imaginary of the dictatorship novels and which "reveals"/ encodes, in accordance with the symbolic logics, the profound dimension of the intellectuals' "resistance". The latency of the texts talks about what the Utopist tries to hide by evading in his golden cage: it is the real face of any utopia and, unfortunately, the "crack" in the wall of the ideal city of the Artist, which he contemplates sometimes in fear, when he steps in the space of nightmare, that is on the real history stage (as, for instance, the double hero in *Apărarea lui Galilei – The Defence of Galilei*). The invocation of the memory of literature in parables which project the legitimating mythology of "resistance through culture" is one of the structural features of the novels of Octavian Paler. Built like some "sapiental" books, where the exemplary histories engaging archetypal characters are doubled by the

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revealing comments, subordinating the same "parable of literature" to the human condition novel. In the symbolic universe impregnated with mythical memory in *Viața pe un peron – Life on a Platform*, for instance, the labyrinthical route of the Professor, a hermeneut of history and of human condition, retraces the great destinies of literature in archetypal configurations which cross the cultural imaginary from *Gospels* to the theatre of the absurd. The confession in *Viața pe un peron - Life on a Platform* is a genuine confession, and a plea as well; the history in a symbolic formula contemplates itself in a series of "literary" mirrors that confer legitimacy to it.

We find quite often, especially in the period of the 70's and 80's, novels preoccupied to establish a more intense communication, an emotional aesthetical one with the reader: "At the end of the 70's and throughout the last decade of Ceaușescu's governance, prose writers of all types seemed to be preoccupied with giving the readers, by their books, a small sign of rejection or only of non adherence to the errors, accumulated in time, of the regime. A real psychosis had come into being, a psychosis of introducing the anti-political hints at any cost, the parable was flourishing, and the Aesopic language (or taken for an allusion) was at home. (...) Under the cover of fiction, under the pretext of artistic innovation, the writers pushed knowledge beyond the borders fixed by censorship to researchers and specialists, thus forcing the gradual revision of the official standpoints." (NEGRICI, 2003: 278-279). It is the time when texts emerge too, almost forcing the ways of penetration in the space of the novel and being a sort of "experimental materialism" to which belong Paul Georgescu, Radu Petrescu, Costache Olăreanu, etc.

The specifics of the 8th decade, of normality, were represented by the very harmonious, balanced existence of various artistic objectives and of different intentions with regard to the novel: "The prose writers, the poets, the essay writers of the 80's wrote and created, after a while, a strong opinion trend – as if they had felt the signs of the worn paradigm of modernism and had heard the noise of some rusty mechanisms. (...) From the perspective of an atypical literature which skipped stages too often and left great chapters uncovered, of a history which barely fitted, in the 70s, its natural shape, one can say that this generation managed to force, as under a malefic spell, the sudden ageing of Romanian literature." (NEGRICI, 2003: 402-407). Thus, the realistic, objective novel fulfils its aspirations by aiming at the political zone, the satire and the social and moral observation so that metarealism will frame the historical novel, the science-fiction novel, the detective story, the sensational and exotic novel.

It is interesting to notice that "metarealism experiments the condition of literature and of the novel itself", by the *diary-novel* or the "indirect novel", the *essay-novel* and *the metanovel,* some of these revolute forms being proposed to the modern period, some others being inherited from interwar literature." (COSMA, 1988: 88). Experimental metarealism attempts a radical renewal of metarealism and of the novel. The texts of the writings that could be categorized as "experimental novels" (*apud* Anton Cosma) can be placed at the border of the genre, "on this side" or "on the other side" of the novel. This type of experimental novel is actually the novel that deals with itself and only by this self does it deal with man as well. The *essay-novel,* belonging to the genre from this side of the novel, is situated at its border with an existing and well-known species – the *essay.* In its essence, "the *essay-novel* is the result of a regression of fiction and artistic insight in favour of the categorial and of abstract idea." (COSMA, 1988: 101). It is here that Anton Cosma places Octavian Paler, together with Mircea Opriță, Vasile Andru or Mircea Nedelciu. Paler's novels, despite political implications, are "obvious essays", "(...) the moving direction is from the traditional novel towards

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the essay, by intensifying fiction with a theoretical load or by illustrating the idea with fiction" (Idem).

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