Literature

TO WRITE OR NOT TO WRITE: CENSORSHIP IN *THE WOMAN IN THE PHOTO* BY TIA ȘERBĂNESCU AND *A CENSOR'S NOTEBOOK* BY LILIANA COROBCA

Monica MANOLACHI
University of Bucharest, Romania

e-mail: monicamanolachi@yahoo.com

Abstract: *Censorship as a literary subject has sometimes been necessary in times of change, as it may show how power imbalances influence, often very dramatically, the production of and the access to knowledge. The woman in the photo: a diary, 1987-1989 by Tia Șerbănescu and A censor's notebook by Liliana Corobca are two books that deal with the issue of censorship in the 1980s (the former) and the 1970s (the latter). Both writers tackle the problem from inside the ruling system, aiming at authenticity in different ways. On the one hand, instead of writing a novel, Tia Șerbănescu kept a diary in which she contemplated the oppression and the corruption of the time and their consequences on the freedom of thought, of expression and of speech. She thoroughly described what she felt and thought about her family, friends and other people she met, about books and their authors, in a time when keeping a diary was hard and often perilous. On the other hand, using the technique of the mise en abyme, Liliana Corobca begins from a fictitious exchange of emails to eventually enter and explore the mind of a censor and reveal what she thought and felt about the system, her co-workers, her boss, the books she proofread and edited, their authors and the boundaries of her own identity. Detailed examinations and performances of the relationship between writing and censorship, the two books provide engaging, often tragi-comical, insights into the psychological process of producing literary texts. The intention of this article is to compare and contrast the two author's perspectives on the act of writing and some of its functions from four points of view: literary, cultural, social and political.*
Key words: contemporary Romanian prose; censorship; life writing; Tia Șerbănescu; Liliana Corobca.

The *Online Etymology Dictionary* explains that *censor* comes from Latin: "a severe judge, a rigid moralist, a censurer", from *censere* "to assess, appraise, value, judge, consider, recommend", from PIE root **kens-* "speak solemnly, proclaim". If a censor is someone who decides the way knowledge circulates, a series of delicate questions appear, especially today when the

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

internet has radically changed our approach to knowledge: Who can be a censor and what qualities are needed? How objective or subjective is censorship and what purposes does it serve?

Post-1989 research on the regime of censorship during Communism in Romania has covered a series of its characteristics. The initiators Marian Petcu and Adrian Marino were followed by a new generation of researchers such as Mihaela Teodor, Liliana Corobca, Emilia Șercan, as well as others who approach the existing vast archives from various perspectives. For example, in his history of Romanian propaganda and censorship, Tiberiu Troncotă offers a concise chronology and a historical analysis of the mechanisms that restricted basic freedoms between 1944 and 1989:

> „All these historical intervals had in common the same methods of imposing the communist ideology: censorship, propaganda, the manipulation of public opinion with the purpose of creating feelings of culpability, repression and terror through the unique party and the security services". (Troncotă 2006: 208)

Drawing on previous research published in Romanian, but also in English or French, the historian explains the legal, administrative and the political tools, including the 1965 Constitution, that deeply affected the freedom of speech, freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

However, although the corpus related to the Romanian history of communist censorship is quite large, little research has been published on how women experienced censorship from within the system. Even though there are several notable cases of women writers' resistance and female intellectuals' opposition to the system, such as Ana Blandiana or Doina Cornea or Nobel Prize winner Herta Müller, they represent rather exceptions than parts of an open discussion. In an online interview given to writer Laurențiu Ungureanu, novelist Gabriela Adamesteanu confirms the general silence about how books used to be accepted for publication before 1989, when she was both a writer and an editor:

> „Authors often complain that authors used to be censored, but not many have talked about the pressure editors felt at the time. […] They moan about having pages and paragraphs edited out, but never approach the stress of those who made the publication of the book, however slashed, possible". (Ungureanu 2013: para 23)

Her broad point of view reminds us that the relationship between writers and editors is not always perfect, and that the phenomenon is not specific to the epoch of 1945-1989 Romania.

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

The goal of this article is to familiarize the Anglophone readers with literary topics connected with censorship, covered by two contemporary women writers who write only in Romanian. The two works deal mainly with the censorship of literature and have not been available in other languages so far. Quoting, translating and commenting on fragments of these books is part of the larger attempt to connect a national literature to the body of world literature, because, "in order to become a true literature *for* the world, Romanian literature should first learn to see itself as a literature *of* the world" (Terian 2015: 11). Moreover, on the background of post-communist literature, my proposal is part of what can be called an *avant-garde translational critique*: literary criticism and literary history that partially translates a corpus which has not yet been fully published in widely spoken languages, with the purpose of presenting it to a wider audience.

From a historical point of view, the two decades invoked by Tia Șerbănescu's and Liliana Corobca's books represent the most totalitarian parts of the communist regime, characterized by generalized state censorship and intense propaganda. Although the institution of censorship, DGPT (the General Directorate for Press and Prints), set up in 1949 and transformed into the Committee for Press and Prints in 1975, was officially closed down by Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1977, the practice of control seemingly worsened because its specialists continued to be active in other institutions: what used to be administrative censorship performed by publishing houses became invisible political suppression supervised by the leaders of the time through CCES (the Council for Socialist Culture and Education), where many censors had been transferred.

Writers experienced the phenomenon first-hand. For example, in an interview given to Lidia Vianu, poet Maria Banuș shared her impressions about the moment when censorship was "closed down": "The heads of the dragon multiplied. The monster grew out of all proportion, diffuse, hard to detect." (Vianu 1998: 9) Two decades later, poet Ana Blandiana confirmed it once again: "censorship was no longer an institution, it was a definition of the epoch, unavoidable and hard to spot" (Blandiana 2017: 80). According to mass media researcher Ilie Rad, "[Ceaușescu] became popular abroad, as he dissolved the institution of censorship, whereas every single written line, every single film and every single radio program were actually rigorously controlled." (Rad 2005: 271) Undoubtedly, such measures had considerable effects on the freedom of expression and, therefore, on the creative process, with international consequences, as Ilie Rad (2005) further explains:

> „The production of cryptic and Aesopic literature led to the isolation of the Romanian literature. The Western reader did not have the time and the patience to beat their brains about deciphering the Aesopic

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

> language and the parables of the East, and the practice of reading between the lines was not an exercise they could manage." (277)

Moreover, Troncotă (2006) called attention to the fact that censorship under Ceaușescu had a "social filter" (183) which significantly worsened the literary language itself, turning it into a language that did not and could not take risks. In such conditions, writers apparently had two choices: to collaborate or not to collaborate. However, as Lidia Vianu (1998) mentioned in the introduction to her collection of interviews on literary censorship, some writers were able to find the third path, ways out of the trapping labyrinth: "And yet, slowly but surely, creative minds found ways to outwit censorship. It required unusual energy, acquaintances in the right places, and *savoir faire*." (viii) Therefore, good literature of and about the epoch exists, and it is the responsibility of the future generations of literary critics and historians to revisit these authors who refrained from making compromises, struggling to maintain that sheer authenticity, essential for any artistic activity, or who approached the subject from new interesting angles. *The woman in the photo* and *A censor's notebook* are remarkable examples for these two perspectives. Whereas the former was written before 1989 and published only in 2002, offering the perspective of a woman journalist and writer who experienced the restrictions of the regime first-hand, the latter is mainly a work of fiction, based on extensive documentation and research, made possible after the DGPT archive was declassified in the 2000s.

*

* *

Tia Șerbănescu has been a journalist for most of her life. Her column entitled *Bref* has become one of the most read pieces of news, in whichever central paper it has been issued. Before 1989, she published four novels, *Balada celor rău iubiți* (1973), *Mai multe inele* (1979), *Muntele de pietate* (1983) and *Cumpărătorii* (1985). After 1989, her autobiographical writings came out as *The woman in the photo: a diary, 1987-1989* (2002) and *Slamming the door* (2016), a dialogue with journalist Cristian Pătrășconiu. *The woman in the photo* offers a glimpse into a married woman writer's struggle for projecting her own worldview, conceived at the border between a native communicative inborn subjectivity and an oppressive socio-political life.

When her diary was published, more than a decade after it had been written, Tia Șerbănescu (the pseudonym of Ecaterina Iftimie) wrote a half-page introduction entitled "Instead of a novel", in which she expressed her constant wish of having published another novel – "the novel of an elderly woman, who has died in a hotel room, in front of her roommates that came for treatment too" (Șerbănescu 2002: 29) – and some of the reasons why it

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

had not happened. In fact, her endeavour resulted in a type of writing that better reflects some of the problems of the time. Instead of fictionalizing aspects that were already over-fictionalized by the state propaganda, her book offers a type of autofiction that is more authentic because it dares to expose uncomfortable truths.

The original book cover includes a blurred photo with the writer in the foreground and a truck in a winter background. The truck, produced by the ROMAN factory in Brașov, suggestively bears the brand name on its front grill – a moniker which means 'novel' in Romanian. The picture illustrates the journalist's crisp sense of humour, which contrasts with the depth of the accounts she chronicles: it is a subtle intersemiotic pun, based on the double meaning of the word "industry" – on the one hand, a writer's energy and hard work, needed to create a new piece of writing; on the other hand, a type of material production, car manufacturing in this case. The displacement implied by the collage renders problematic the type of writing that *The woman in the photo* is. Is it a diary, as the subtitle reads? Is it a novel, as a detail on the cover photo indicates?

Some critics noticed "its common sense" and the fact that it is "an alternative" (Cristea-Enache, 2002: 5). Others argued that Șerbănescu's diary is "literature based on the declared impossibility of believing in literature" (Luță 2002: 8). Moreover, instead of reading Șerbănescu's diary as such, other critics considered it:

> „a very special novel, in which the author gives up dissimulation, to appear on the stage and give clear directions, and to use the art of the fragment, of the apparently disordered mosaic, hazardous as life itself, which serves her as a very useful instrument." (Petraș 2002: 6)

Other reasons for which *The woman in the photo* has been appreciated are the absence of resentment, the abundance of epiphanies, its black humour, discretion and modesty, the portraits of numerous family members, writers and critics, leaders and people of the time, and, last but not least, subtle reflections on literature and the act of writing. Published at the insistence of its editor, Adina Kenereș, Șerbănescu's diary made critics ask: "Where does the seduction of this book, in which her writer does not believe, come from?" (Marcu 2002: 7) Marcu suggests it is important to differentiate between a diary and a non-fictional novel, because this is a sign that marks the maturity of a literature. Although the critic prefers to call it a "non-fictional novel", Șerbănescu's constant play upon the difference between writing a novel and writing a diary flags a shifting realm where the rapport between reality and fiction is permanently and closely examined. The sign of maturity Marcu identifies resides in the fact that Șerbănescu proposes a

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

literary category that better suits her spiritual and personal needs and is also a broken mirror of the society. The writer's reflective approach echoes the introspective interwar literature, which she was familiar with, but goes beyond it, given that she adapts it to the new social, cultural, political and economic context, marked by total censorship and grinding poverty, and later, when she publishes it, to the metamorphic decade of transition.

The *volta* of the book is the story of a "big error" she made during her visit to East Germany in 1988, when she accompanied her son on a school trip. In her bag she took one of her notebooks in which she had made notes for a future novel, but which also contained commentaries about Ceaușescu and life under the communist regime. Obviously, she could not write patriotic poetry as others did and could hardly go on with writing novels in the same way as she used to. Her "big error" cost her the fact that the airport security officers confiscated her agenda. After she returned to Bucharest, she was accused of attempting to betray the country and was soon relocated to the Documentation Department, which meant she could no longer publish anything. The last section of the book, "Life as proofreading" – a nod to the novel *Viața ca o pradă / Life as a prey* by Marin Preda, one of her favourite writers – describes her job as a proofreader for the 13 Decembrie printing house, where she was relocated once again, because she had been disclosed as being part of a group of journalists who wanted to print an illegal newspaper, which actually was not true. Her diary ends with the grim setting of the printing house, where she, however, finds inner strength to portray many of her colleagues and describe their working conditions. Employed as a proofreader among others, most of them apparently not really interested in the books they proofread, she acted as an undercover writer, even though Șerbănescu keeps mentioning that she is not able to write "literature". Doubting about the kind of writing she does functions both as a form of resistance, in a time when one could lose their job for using certain words or for tackling subjects forbidden by the regime, and as a quest for other possibilities, new forms of writing that can legitimate a suppressed subjectivity.

After she describes the hard life of the family in which she was born, compassionately portraying every family member in a realistic light, Șerbănescu makes a series of reflections on the mix of reality and fiction: "These impure biographies my biography mingles with, on and off paper, constitute an uncomfortable baggage. I have tried to get rid of it, but my writing has inflated it so that it has become impossible to carry across the pages." (Șerbănescu 2002: 29). Although the author confesses she has been working on a novel that she has given up writing, she does not renounce fiction when she states with a bit of irony: I would like to see a life free from any lie in our contemporary world." (30). What initially appears as modesty

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

– since she admits she will probably not write a novel in the fashion novels were written at the time – turns into an astute move that is closer to autofiction. She is writing a diary when diaries are not allowed to be published. She is aware that publishing it will not be possible. Therefore, it is the result of an assumed marginality where authenticity, opinions of all kinds, free thought, criticism and even self-reproach or self-mockery are possible without severe consequences. For example, in November 1987, she writes: "In fact, we are now going through the absence of literature." (47) or: "Everything is so strange that literature itself seems to have lost its tongue. It is almost as if you don't have anything to read in magazines and in books." (61). However, writing in solitude can still be freely performed, to test not only the margins and the substance of the self, but also aesthetic boundaries and what one can do with words. For a graduate of the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest, and a professional journalist, such musings and aspirations come naturally in a world that cultivates the freedom of thought and speech, but 1987-1989 was a time when these were heavily regulated by the state.

Keeping a diary, which she initially does not want to publish, allows Tia Șerbănescu to reflect without restrictions on the meaning of writing, on the oppressive phenomenon of censorship and its effects, while still being part of the system:

> „There isn't only one form of censorship, but more: firstly, the inner one, which forbids me to have access to my own intimacy; the second forces me to keep silent about the others' intimacy; eventually, the third doesn't give me a free hand to speak about what is happening around us. If these repressive layers miraculously disappeared, everybody would describe only atrocities." (73).

She prefers to deal with censorship as a phenomenon, instead of explaining what precisely is censored. Although she gives examples of forbidden words, what makes her reflections appealing is how she tackles such a sensitive subject. She is not among those who believe that censorship is simply an undesirable condition that any writer abhors. Her reaction is not to protest furiously, but to explore many other paths that others cannot see, an attitude she clearly explains in the following fragment:

> „I still believe that a genius, no matter how capricious or vicious, performs a necessary intellectual censorship, which will almost always keep vulgarity at bay or ignore it altogether. A genius – or at least a real personality – will be expressive in their 'falls', but never thoroughly mediocre, vulgar or ridiculous." (138).

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

Her point of view is very much in line with the metaphysical theory of the "transcendent censorship" that Romanian philosopher and writer Lucian Blaga published before the Second World War. According to Blaga (whose work was censored in the 1950s), what he calls the "Great Anonymous" – a metaphor of the creator of the world – accepts the act of censorship not simply as an aspect of confidentiality, but as an act that occurs because of "the unfathomable concern for the existential balance and growth" (Blaga 2003: 89). Blaga's approach points out the necessary sense of responsibility concerning the modality in which knowledge – he calls it "existential mystery" – circulates on the relationship between the Great Anonymous and the cognitive subject. The socio-political and editorial conditions in which Tia Șerbănescu wrote and published her diary determined this sense of responsibility. The wisdom of her position resides in a leap of faith, in the belief that language can still save the world, despite that the majority is blind to its power:

> „Words possess a purity which absorbs coarse meanings and they become rather touching, as touching as the naked bodies of toddlers who run freely on the beach, as naturally – and it is indeed natural – as possible. […] These naked toddlers are the words themselves." (Șerbănescu 2002: 106-107)

She often explores self-censorship and its influence on how she represents reality. She is especially concerned with the level of authenticity:

> „I notice how many things I don't deal with here, I feel my hesitations when other aspects are at stake, I am trying to avoid all types of 'troublesome' stuff, although I know very well that this prevents any confession from being true." (63).

This is one of her recurrent concerns, which eventually leads her to probe more deeply, to identify some of its underlying reasons:

> „While writing these lines, I figure out how many things I shy away from writing about. I am always careful to avoid certain subjects, certain episodes and even certain words. I know that the phenomenon has been analysed and psychoanalysed, and I don't feel like lending my name to it at all. As far as I am concerned, there are things I don't write about because I feel ashamed or superstitious; and there is another category I don't write about because I am afraid. Too many times, I find out – sometimes from my own experience, sometimes from others' experience – that 'you reap what you sow' more often than not." (52)

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

Therefore, writing a diary functions as a personal psychological strategy of dealing with negative emotions brought about by surrounding repressive factors. It is known that the 1980s was a time when public debates and the voices of the civil society, as we understand them today, were almost absent. Most intentions towards this aim, whenever they existed, were part of the underground cultural movements. Taking a stand in public was equivalent to social exclusion. One of the safest forms of literary expression described as "drawer literature", a diary was a solution that worked for Tia Șerbănescu, whose maternal instinct motivated her to stay away from conflictual situations. She admits that showing heroism and adopting a stance are far from the traits that describe her character:

> „I don't feel the slightest prompt to become a martyr, all the more because I have noticed that nothing is more prone to oblivion than martyrs and that almost always there are lots of people who consider them stupid. That's why I have all the reasons to beware of anything related to what is called attitude. I'm afraid there is nobody to appreciate something like that." (78)

In these circumstances, self-censorship operates as a way of escaping oblivion and of contributing to a type of cultural memory that germinates in small autonomous private circles, rather than in the public space (already overwhelmed by the state propaganda of the time). Although this process occurred unofficially and was not even tolerated as an alternative, it ultimately proved to be remarkable and substantial over the subsequent decades.

Șerbănescu sometimes wonders about the scope of her thoughts, exploring dilemmas that open new windows:

> „I suddenly ask myself what's the meaning of these jottings. Is it only a year in a woman's life? But do all women live this way? I don't know anything about them except several things that we all know, but this is not enough. Everyone has her own way of suffering. What for one is vital means nothing for ten others." (128)

The result is an increased consciousness of performing an important act of hope and faith, an act that is out of the ordinary, exceptional, as is the case with scapegoats. She questions the unilateral meanings of writing and life, addressing thus the condition of women writers among other women during Communism. Although the memoirist is not a declared feminist, her attitude could be circumscribed to the second-wave feminism, preoccupied with gender equality, as implied in the following fragment, in which the publication of a book is associated with giving birth:

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

> „Nobody listens to a young mother's stories about the pains of giving birth. Everybody wants to see if babies are alive, healthy and who they take after. Everybody kisses the baby! Long live the baby! A mother should keep quiet. Let the pains be and remain her secret. It's no big deal she had them. If it were up to her, she would have said no, of course. Readers are curious neither about how you wrote the book nor about how many years and what you sacrificed for that; at best, they are interested only in the book. Birth stories are fascinating to other writers in the same way as, in a maternity hospital, only mothers are keen on knowing how other mothers gave birth. Out of solidarity, not to gain experience, because, as there are no two births the same, there are no all-purpose recipes for writing." (176)

With this view, ground-breaking in Romania at the time, Șerbănescu makes a difference in how literature is produced, as she appropriates the function of censorship as a strategy to *protect* her own worldview and literary style. Her position on censorship is a far cry from the 2012 debate on censorship between Nobel Prize winners Mo Yan and Herta Müller. The former argued for the necessity of censorship, by comparing it with the checks at airport security, whereas Herta Müller found his view "extremely upsetting". On the one hand, as we have seen, the check at airport security in Bucharest was disastrous for Șerbănescu, as she was downgraded soon after she returned from Berlin, but it *is* also a key element of her diary. On the other hand, her healthy sense of humour saves her in the bleakest situations. "My capacity to enjoy what happens around me has reduced" (200), she writes soon after she starts working as a documentarist in her new office, but she begins the next paragraph with fabulous poetic black humour that prefaces the description of the Kafkaesque atmosphere of 1988 Bucharest: "I'm spending hours in an icy décor, like a packet of butter – 'keep in a dark cold place'…" (201) Therefore, administrative censorship at the airport is one thing, which has to do with international affairs and migration, whereas systemic censorship that makes one hate their mother tongue, their work colleagues or the culture they are born into is something else. Whereas Herta Müller wrote about such issues as an exile, drawing on her own experience of being censored, Șerbănescu and others have had the ability to deal with them from within the system, by diligently practising the exercise of introspection inherited from the interwar Romanian writers such as Camil Petrescu or Cella Serghi. Moreover, her reticence regarding a writer's success qualifies her as an intellectual oriented towards long-term inter-generational cultural survival, subtly indicated by the dedication "to my mother": born in the countryside, she was adopted at the age of four, therefore, she had two mothers. This ambivalence is essential to her book,

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

which draws both on social realities and intellectual concerns, dealing both with the thicket of politics and the healing force of literature.

*
* *

Published 30 years after Șerbănescu wrote the first draft of her diary, Liliana Corobca's novel offers the other perspective: Filofteia Moldovean, a woman censor who worked for DGPT in the 1970s. We are told that her notebook is the only one that has survived, because the person responsible for burning all these notebooks (considered classified information), Emilia Codrescu, left for Germany in 1974 and managed to take it with her. Apparently, the latter has the initiative of donating it more than two decades later to the future Museum of Communism that is to be established somewhere in Romania. For this goal, she exchanges several emails with Liliana Corobca, who has turned into a character just for the metaliterary beginning of the book. The subsequent chapters constitute Filofteia Moldoveanu's notebook: a reader's notebook.

Liliana Corobca, a Romanian novelist born in the Republic of Moldova, has previously published several studies about the communist censorship, such as *The book control: literary censorship during communist Romania* (2014), *The institution of censorship in Romania (1949-1977)* (2014) and *The expurgation of books in Romania. Documents (1944-1964)* (2011). All titles draw mainly on local archives, but also on international research, aiming to place a national phenomenon in a larger context and to reveal its depth, gravity and forms of manifestation in a comparative fashion.

In parallel with her research work, *A censor's notebook* emerged as a way to break new ground in addressing the difficult and sensitive subject of brainwashing from a woman's point of view. In an interview with Constantin Pișteа published on his blog, the author explains:

> „After all, with *A censor's notebook* I wanted to fictionalize my desire (obsession) to find such a real historical document. Such notebooks existed, but they were destroyed. I hoped that not all of them had been destroyed and that I would find at least one. The first reports about the destruction of these notebooks date back from the 1960s. I went through documents published over a span of 17 years, until 1977, looking for something that could resemble a censor's notebook, but I couldn't find anything of the sort. It is then when I decided to turn my quest into fiction." (Pișteа 2017 : para 7)

Indeed, her novel is mainly a work of fiction from the beginning to the end, although the text refers to some real names and historical events. Adrian G. Romilă (2017) describes it as "a story about the communist institution of

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

censorship, during 1970s Romania, but it is also a novel about the mechanisms that make literature possible, literature as a public discourse, when free speech is impossible." (7) Musing over the balance between fiction and reality, critic Tudorel Urian (2017) invokes a series of real notes and reports made by DGPT employees in the 1960s and 1970s, collected and edited by researcher Dumitru Radu Mocanu, an aspect which, in fact, supports the fictional character of Corobca's novel: these notes and reports are very dry, whereas the novelist offers significant insights into the psychology of those who worked in the field. Undoubtedly, as Oana Purice suggests,

> „what Liliana Corobca does is to humanize an institution and to tone down the way in which it functioned and which the archive documents could only represent in broad strokes, without showing the people behind them, those who eventually created the epoch that ended not long ago." (Purice 2017: 20)

Purice's approach is in line with the view that censors became "symbolic scarecrows" (Corobca 2014b: 17), an observation about the roles of censors and editors in the system: sometimes editors and proofreaders played more important roles for the final content of a book, but they were not as responsible as the censors in case of errors.

Corobca's imaginative and often ironic perspective is a step forward on the path of seeing beyond the opacity of what many historians have been entitled to call an oppressive system. In a culture that has demonized any form of censorship over the past decades, her intra-diegetic narrative with a homo-diegetic narrator – to follow the theory proposed by Gérard Genette (1993) – is meant to cast light on the circulation of knowledge between authors and censors and vice versa. With the choice of telling the story from a censor's point of view, Corobca charts "the strange progress of an indoctrinated reader" (Romilă 2017: 7), a view that is subtly dismantled throughout the novel, given the combination of tongue-in-cheek wooden and hybrid language, behaviorist descriptions, caricatural portrayals, metaphors of writing, dramatic episodes, significant biographical details or extensive monologues, which eventually reveals the interpretable fluidity of human consciousness.

When the protagonist, Filofteia Moldovean, was an orphan student in the third year at the Faculty of Philology in Bucharest, she was recruited to work as a censor. Although everybody calls her Dina or Diana, her boss likes to call her Filofteia, the name from her ID. She mocks at her given name by turning it into a verb or by pluralizing it: "A symbolic name for a censor. All our women censors should filofty. What kind of censors are these: Dorina,

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

Ioana, Cristina, Stela, Carmen? No! We want only Filofteias!" (Corobca 2017: 108) The name choice is not arbitrary, as it has at least two opposing meanings for the Romanian reader. On the one hand, Saint Filofteia, celebrated by the Orthodox Church, lived in the thirteenth century on what is now the territory of Bulgaria, died when she was only 12 years old and was buried at the Royal Court in Curtea de Argeș, Romania. Her name comes from the Greek words φιλία (*philia*, 'love') and θεός (*theos*, 'God'), the same as Theophilus. On the other hand, the name (Saint) Filofteia has been used pejoratively before and after 1989 to designate someone that has too idealistic and purist moral standards. Her family name, Moldovean, may be an allusion to the writer's country of origin. Therefore, the protagonist's name is intended to inform on moral dilemmas, to spur debates about cultural purity and hybridity among those who are involved in the process of knowledge production, but also to subtly parody the act of writing and editing literature.

At first, as shown in the chapter "Justified interventions", Filofteia makes notes related more or less to her specific job: forbidden words, themes, motifs and attitudes; whole fragments she needs to correct and is not sure how; anecdotes about people who work in the system; hesitations, angry commentaries, humorous irony, disgust; reflections on the roles of censors, political censors, proofreaders, authors, writers, critics and their tense relationships; her two colleagues (one sexier, the other shyer) and Zuki (from Zukermann), her boss etc. At some point, she concludes: "I feel I can express myself better and better." (47) Thus, the author reminds us that working with texts extensively is a condition to become a better writer. However, the author and the narrator may have different opinions regarding, for example, the legitimacy of the narrative subject, as Filofteia's reflection shows: "Writers as characters should be forbidden. When the great novelist does not have what (who) to write about, he fills his book with writers. The working people do not need writers." (67) The radical disjunction between author and narrator/character, which goes together with the opposition between writer and worker, points out the ideological mindset of the time related to what and who was allowed to be represented in literature and the arts, when the political directives exaggerated the role of the working class.

In contrast with Filofteia, Rosa is the sexy censor who works on poets' manuscripts and is the shrewd courtesan of the institution. In fact, she represents what censorship is not: excessive freedom, permission and encouragement. Bawdy and up to all the fiddles, she explains what good and bad poets mean to her:

> „The best writers don't need the best censors (she pronounces it softly, using flattery, like a fox that wants to get the raven's cheese). Good

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

> poets are as good as – if not better than – us (sometimes); otherwise they wouldn't be where they are, and they wouldn't enjoy what they enjoy. The party offers a chance to the stupid, because it's generous with the literates. Censors are needed only in the latter's case, to save parts of their works..." (116)

On the one hand, what is significant here is that the narrator sees in censorship an essential skill which both censors and poets share "(sometimes)", that both poetry and morality are shaped by rules and laws, and that those who fail to perceive them or are not strong enough to be the ones who set them might fall under the censoring pressure. In this sense, Lidia Vianu reached a similar conclusion:

> „Censorship brought one good thing to literature: as Paul Valéry used to say, any obstacle in front of creation is a true sun. Not being able to say what you think was an excellent school of poetic indirectness, creating its devious writers and its eager readers who were always ready to probe between the lines." (Vianu 1998: x)

Unfortunately, not all those whose work was published at the time were real creative spirits. On the other hand, Filofteia's sly counterpart symbolizes the exclusivist approach to censorship that eventually resulted in anomalous self-censorship (uninspired authors who wanted to publish books at any cost) and Aesopic language (which meant both the courage to say it, but also the fear of saying it).

At the end of chapter "Office Number Two: Literature", Zuki gives Filofteia an informal lecture about the history of censorship in Europe, while she is making notes. When he illustrates it with the cases of Flaubert and Baudelaire, he notices she has misspelled their names: "Is this how you spell them? Flober and Bodler? And you told me you studied French. I was sure, comrade Moldovean, that you couldn't spell them correctly. F-l-a-u-b-e-r-t and B-a-u-d-e-l-a-i-r-e…" (Corobca 2017: 141) At this point in the novel, the gap between author and narrator is huge and only a comic and dangerously narrow suspension bridge, concealed in the clouds of imagination, can connect them. The episode incriminates linguistic hybridization, while siding with a type of cultural purity that Filofteia finds foreign. The novice censor has her own understanding of purity, backed by an ideology that defends work and rejects destruction: "Of course, it's easier to burn the book and its author than correct its mistakes and impurities! Savage!" (142) However, her ironic outlook aims at nuancing the meaning of work and its purpose. The work-life balance is further inflected with the concept of gender, when the narrator makes a comparison between the situation of male and female censors, in terms of marital status:

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

> „For many, our institution is a kind of hell, a criminal and despicable activity. Lots of men hate our institution and are afraid of us. As a matter of fact, they are educated men, graduates with a job, good men in general, but they hate us for the sake of principle, without really knowing what we do, as they are not curious about it at all. It's hard to find engineers or physicians who wouldn't know or care about it, when we tell them that we work at the Directorate for Press. In general, we don't meet suitable men because we don't have the time to go farther than *Casa Scânteii*, where our offices are. Whereas we are dying of solitude, being more than 25 years old and getting tragically closer to 30, our men find women in a second, I mean, very quickly. Even though their darlings find out who their husbands are and where they work, they don't run away from our colleagues, they don't leave them, they are not afraid that they are censors. It's not fair…" (159)

Filofteia's complaint, meant to remain unspoken, might resemble *Bridget Jones's Diary*, given that she often fantasizes about her boss and worries about being single. However, Corobca's book is not chick lit, because it has more social, economic, political and historical implications. Filofteia may also be seen as a Rosie the Riveter of the publishing industry during Communism, considering that she takes a job usually performed by men, in a field that becomes more productive than before, and more and more important for the state propaganda. She is a cultural riveter, who performs her tasks following a political ideology intended to cultivate a working-class audience. She is so much engrossed in the manuscripts, that she cannot figure out to what extent she is partly responsible for the gender imbalance she mentions in her notebook.

After years of initiation, training and assiduous work, she becomes an expert in censoring novels and is moved to the import-export department. Although her horizon widens, she has also access to a list of themes that are not recommended to be imported. One of her new colleagues informs her about the rules applied in the new department: "In fact, no book corresponds to our socialist standard." (199). She writes extensive reports about imported titles, which she invariably does not recommend. "Who is this Solzhenitsyn?" (221) she wonders in despair. The import-export department is where she learns how censorship functions in African countries and in Latin America, and where she reads obscene literature that she always rejects. Her international experience of reading foreign books that are to be translated – she has improved her knowledge of foreign languages meanwhile – makes her call her boss from Zaharescu and Zucherescu to Zaharov, Zukerberg and Zukerstern, ethnic variations that allude to the sugar daddies of any political regime. It also functions as a psychological threshold

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

and a form of resistance, a way to "remain dignified, all your values intact" (228), after reading literature emerged in societies with another matrix. When Zuki moves to the Council for Socialist Culture and Education and promises to promote her as the boss of the department, her perception of censorship reaches another level. She views it not merely as a duty, but as a transformative process of purification:

> „At first, censorship smells bad, it stinks, if your stomach is too sensitive, you may get into trouble, then the miasmas calm down, the niff fades away, disappears slowly, censorship becomes inodorous, as it goes higher and farther, becomes more seraphic and aerial, subtle, ethereal, almost transparent, until its twinkling shadow starts to smell of roses. It's a long way down the road. Wild rose." (245)

Nonetheless, what exactly the object of purification is becomes concealed, mysterious: besides being the shadow of a text, censorship can also be a purpose in itself. Censorship for the sake of censorship unusually competes with art for the sake of art. The metaphor of the wild rose recalls the old controversial relationship between beauty, morality and freedom, with the consequence that beauty requires some sort of censorship. "We are the biggest secret. A secret in a secret in a secret in a secret, like matryoshkas, one hidden within the other…" (245). Such reflections are interpretable in many ways, they do not simply refer to political or literary censorship, as a first reading would suggest. In this way, the author gradually intervenes and changes the protagonist's destiny, until she becomes aware that, when censoring others, she also censors herself. Eventually, she imposes restrictions not only on her freedom of speech and expression, but also on her own existence.

The moment when she begins to contemplate the condition of gifted people – "Geniuses are unhappy by definition. That's how we can bear them. Gifted, but an alcoholic. Beautiful, but not married. A talented girl, but ugly and hunched. Then, yes, we can love them!" (171) – or when she becomes aware of the restrictions censors must cope with – "officially, we are not allowed to publish anything, not even under a pen name, not even a book review" (192) – or when she explores the condition of writing – "The intention to write a novel already contains in itself a certain subversive potential." (202) – the narrator finds herself on the path of becoming an author. "I cannot find any book that resembles my life, I cannot find any poem that expresses my feelings. Why then so much literature?" (278) – this is the dilemma that motivates her to switch to writing about her rural family background and the circumstances that caused her to become an orphan and eventually a divorced woman and a mother that had to give up her child to

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

complete her education and have a job in the city. Loss is so heavy that it haunts her life in different forms. She dreams she is reading a book about her life, written by her ex-husband's second wife, a hint about the loss of a normal, traditional social existence. She dreams that her dead mother embraces her, one of the most troubling experiences of loss most people may feel. She enters an empty church where all saints, tearing pages from holy books, look like censors, an allusion to the totalitarian character of the communist regime that meant the decline of the religious faith and the rise of political manipulation. She even has a vision about the future of her notebook: "the only reader of this notebook will be the fire from the paper factory or the shredder" (320). With these examples, loss operates throughout the novel as a function that shows what a censor *is not* rather than what a censor *is*, a strategy that seems to have absorbed the demonization of the censoring subject. After gradually exorcizing the censoring subject, the narrator explores the boundaries of her consciousness and her own madness, to eventually put forward statements that reveal a powerful position: "What is censorship? What does censorship mean? A privileged reading, when you can change whatever you don't like. [...] I, the censor, am the referee of all battles, sentimental or ideological, strategic or contextual." (337). In this point, author and narrator are very close to each other, but they are, of course, not identical, generating a tension that is one of the keys to Corobca's novel.

Ultimately, Filofteia seems to be a tragi-comic character, a victim of the regime. She writes a notebook that nobody will read. She is an unusual writer, whose will is totally dominated by the institution she works for, a narrator who must not become an author. She conforms to the rules of the regime, but she also defies them or tries to escape them by making digressions in her notebook. Self-censorship is maximum. However, the fact that Corobca presents her intellectual adventures in an ironic key is in line with the view put forward by researcher Ioana Macrea-Toma (2009) in *Privilighentsia…*, a study which demonstrates the Romanian writers' tendency to adapt to the Communist regime rather than to become its victims, especially due to economic reasons, a piece of truth that might be hard to accept. Corobca's carnivalesque approach is meant to smash the binomial *to collaborate* versus *to rebel*, as the author is always on the narrator's shoulder, now empathizing with her, now mocking at her condition. After all, the mysterious international perspective she proposes at the beginning is more suitable to the contemporary readership, marked by migration and diasporic subjectivities. Corobca's metaliterary experiment is based on her previous research collected in *The character of the Romanian interwar novel* (2003), in which she focused on topics such as: character and language, what characters read, and what characters write. Her novel

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

combines the introspective nature of the interwar literature with the internalization of interdictions specific to the post-war decades, to reveal the transgressive energy of a censor's consciousness and suppressed creativity.

In conclusion, although the two books are grounded in the same phenomenon, they offer stories from different historical decades of the communist era. The two protagonists propose first-person accounts of similar chronotopes: both work in Bucharest, one as a journalist and writer, the other as a literary censor, and their career paths are marked by dramatic changes. Their personal stories see the public light of day decades after they wrote their first impressions in their notebooks. However, whereas Tia Șerbănescu's diary still had some remote chances to be published in an indefinite future, Filofteia Moldovean's notebook was practically meant to be burnt. In both cases, the temporal factor plays significant roles: the content of each book refers to past events and reflections, with indirect implications for the present. Their retrospective character facilitates the contemporary dialogue on a timeless topic, given that the conflictual charge of their contents is softer in the present than it would have been when they were laid down on paper. Whereas Șerbănescu offers a slightly rewritten account of her experience, in which the author, the narrator and the protagonist coincide, using a style that aims at authenticity, Corobca puppeteers these categories, using contrapuntal techniques, to create interest in and balance about a sensitive topic. Both writers remind readers that censorship is inherent to any form of written composition, to art in general, that there are rules, which yet may change from one epoch to another, so that they can better express its ethos, conflicts and resolutions. They also show how censorship risks to become oppressive when political rulers fail to serve the society, in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Each book represents a woman's postmodern perspective on the surrounding world, on the Romanian communist society in particular, and on women's role in producing knowledge, in mediating between centres of power and the civil society, in an epoch when the economy and culture were strictly regulated by the state. Moreover, the use of the first-person singular narrative – "The truth is what I am creating and in which I believe, here and now" (301) – functions both as a reaction to the uniform state policy of the time and as a reminder to the future readers that the reconfiguration of key individual subjectivities is necessary in times of massive manipulation.

The essential aspect of this article has been to convey the idea that there should be a balance as to how literary censorship is conceived. Neither abusing it nor abolishing it works. On the one hand, if writers complain about it, the causes might be more complex than it seems: political, economic, social, religious, educational, aesthetic etc. Censors are human beings and they work following established rules, which depend on certain

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

criteria selected by a limited number of individuals. On the other hand, we have seen that censorship can function as an incentive, it can be a source of motivation. Instead of fearing it altogether, a better approach would be to study it from different perspectives and in different contexts. For example, Corobca (2014a) lists a series of possible approaches such as legal, ecclesiastic, historical, political, linguistic, sociologic, literary and psychoanalytical. If the two selected women writers have found the way to the reader's heart with such a topic, then censorship, like freedom, may not be such a deadly instrument if used wisely.

References

Blaga, L. (2003) *Trilogia cunoașterii: cenzura transcendentă / The trilogy of knowledge: transcendent censorship*. București: Humanitas. (Original work published 1934)

-----. "Censor." *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Retrieved April 15, 2018, from https://www.etymonline.com/word/censor

Blandiana, A. (2017) *Istoria ca viitor și alte conferințe și pagini / History as future and other conferences and pages.* București: Humanitas.

Corobca, L. (2017) *Caiet de censor / A censor's notebook.* Iași: Polirom.

-----. (2014a) *Controlul cărții. Cenzura literaturii în regimul comunist din România / Literary censorship during the communist Romania*. Iași: Polirom.

-----. (2014b) *Instituția cenzurii comuniste în România (1949-1977) / The institution of censorship in Romania (1949-1977)*. Oradea: Ratio et Revelation.

-----. (2010) *Epurarea cărților în România. Documente (1944-1964)/ The expurgation of books in Romania. Documents (1944-1964).* București: Tritonic.

-----. (2003) *Personajul în romanul românesc interbelic / The Character in the Romanian interwar novel.* București: Editura Universității din București.

Cristea-Enache, D. (2002, June 4) Femeia din fotografie. / The Woman in the Photo. *Adevărul literar și artistic / The Literary and Artistic Truth*, Vol. 11(619), p. 5.

Genette, G. (1993) *Fiction and diction* (Catherine Porter, Trans.) Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. (Original work published 1991)

Luță, V. (2002, May 6) Despre viață și scris. / On life and writing. *Observator cultural / The Cultural Observer*, Vol. 114(30), p. 18.

Macrea-Toma, I. (2009) *Privilighenția. Instituții literare în comunismul românesc. / Priviligentsia. Literary institutions during the Romanian Communism.* Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință.

Marcu, L. (2002, May 1-7) Un jurnal ca un spectacol literar. / A diary like a literary show. *România literară / The Literary Romania*, Vol. 35(17), p. 6-7.

Petraș, I. (2002, September) Viața ca o corectură. / Life as proofreading. *Apostrof / Apostrophe*, Vol. 13(9), p. 6-7.

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)

Pișteа, C. (2017, April 7) Liliana Corobca: Mi-am propus să intru în pielea unui cenzor și să simt ce a simțit el. / Liliana Corobca: I set myself on getting into the part of a censor and feeling what he felt. [Blog post] Retrieved from https://constantinpistea.ro/liliana-corobca-interviu-cenzor/

Purice, O. (2017, May 4) Jurnal de cenzor. / A censor's diary. *Cultura / The Culture*, 3rd series, No. 17, p. 20.

Rad, I. (2005) Aspecte ale cenzurii literare. / Aspects of the literary censorship. *Cenzura în spațiul cultural românesc / Censorship and the Romanian culture*, Marian Petcu (ed.). București: Comunicare.ro.

Șerbănescu, T. (2002) *Femeia din fotografie: jurnal 1987-1989. / The woman in the photo: a diary 1987-1989*. București: Compania.

Romilă, A. G. (2017, April 7) Cenzorul și conștiința de sine a literaturii. / The censor and the self-consciousness of literature. *România literară / The Literary Romania*, Vol. 49(15), p. 7.

Terian, A. (2015) Romanian literature for the world: a matter of property. *World Literature Studies*, Vol. 7(2), p. 3-14.

Troncotă, T. (2006) *România comunistă: propagandă și cenzură / The Communist Romania: propaganda and censorship*. Bucharest: Tritonic.

Ungureanu, L. (2013, March 2) Interviu – Gabriela Adameșteanu, scriitoare, despre rezistența pentru cultură: 'Nu poți fi obligat să fii erou' / Interview with writer Gabriela Adameșteanu about the resistance for culture: 'You cannot be forced to be a hero'. *Adevărul*. Retrieved from http://adevarul.ro/cultura/carti/interviu-gabriela-adamesteanu-scriitoare-despre-rezistenta-cultura-nu-poti-obligat-erou-1_5130aaba00f5182b85b91f10/index.html

Urian, T. (2017, May 23) Viață de cenzor în comunism. / A censor's life during Communism. *Viața românească / The Romanian Life*, Vol. 5, p. 95-98.

Vianu, L. (1998) *Censorship in Romania.* Budapest: Central European University Press.

BDD-A28868 © 2018 Centre for Languages and Literature, Lund University
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 21:41:04 UTC)