

A POSSIBLE POETICS OF THE SUBVERSIVE PROSE UNDER COMMUNIST REGIMES*

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ABSTRACT • The breakdown of the epic wholeness specific to the Thaw novel enables writers to undermine the politics of Stalinism. Influenced by Vincent Jouve’s analysis of the *mise-en-texte* of values, the paper emphasizes on undermining rhetorical strategies such as ellipsis, narrative focus or sympathy towards certain characters. One of the first occurrences of the ephemeral genre known as “the novel of the obsessive decade”, Marin Preda’s *Risipitorii* (1962) is used as a case study for defending a poetics of subversion.

KEYWORDS • Thaw, Subversive Literature, Narrative Strategies, System of Values, Polyphonic Novel.

Literary phenomena under communist totalitarianism give account on some of the most interesting and most illustrative cases of the short life span of literature. Literature’s conditioning by ideology prompted immediate changes within the norms of text production. With each revision of the functioning rules of the political regime, literature – seen as an appendix to political propaganda – undergoes important transformations. Accordingly, the several decades of culture under communism witness the emergence and extinction of a considerable number of literary formulas, each with its manifestations and variations. With the sudden shift of the political context after 1989, a large part of this literature becomes obsolete. The fundamental prerequisite of the study is that, exiled from the living circuit of literary production, literature in the Soviet space can be studied as a privileged symptom of the short life span of literature. Literary works published in Poland, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic or Slovakia in this period share some common features stemming from a set of rules of production imposed by the Stalinist and post-Stalinist regimes.

The poetics of subversive literature is more compelling than the poetics of socialist realism, relatively elucidated by innovative approaches in the last decades¹. Recent researches have convincingly proved that the phenomena of subversive literature can be traced back to ancient times, stating that “literature and censorship have been dialectical forms of culture” (Moore 2015: 3). However, the subversive literature under communist regimes surfaces at the beginning of the 1960s, when the uniformity of socialist realism gradually gives way to various literary phenomena, such as “village prose”, “camp literature”, Young Prose (the Soviet Union), “the

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¹ The most relevant books dedicated to socialist realism belong to Régine Robin, who insists on the contradiction between its clear ideological message and its ambiguous rhetoric (in *Le Réalisme socialiste. Une esthétique impossible*, Paris, Payot, 1986) and Evgeny Dobrenko, who sees socialist realism as a general cultural process of legitimizing the Soviet state (in *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2007).

novel of the obsessive decade” (Romania). Each of these literary formulae was an attempt to undermine the schematic poetics of socialist realism. As the readers’ horizon of expectation changes, these literary forms become obsolete. Rather than a set of norms or devices universally acknowledged, subversiveness can be defined as “an attempt to push against the boundaries of permissible language, character and narrative possibilities”. (Komaromi 2015: 11). Thaw literature is as tributary to the political context as literature in the phase of socialist realism. Therefore, aspects that the reader saw as undermining in the 1960s-1970s works cease to be perceived as such after the fall of communism. Retrospectively, opposite labels such as “subversive literature” and “committed literature” were often applied to the same text.

The event that set in motion the subversive discourse in the 1960s-1980s (known as “the period of stagnation” in Soviet culture) was the decline of socialist realism, with its harsh ideological demands, in favour of a “plurality of voices and styles” (Cornwell 2001: 223). The specialists in Soviet literature already noted the presence of successive waves of Thaws, which led to the publication of works that helped expand the writers’ stylistic options: in prose writing, important Party conventions such as the September 1953 Central Committee plenum, Khrushchev’ 1956 “secret speech” or the Twenty-Second Party Congress in 1962 triggered the publication of novels such as *The Thaw* by Ilya Ehrenburg (1954), *Not by Bread Alone* by Vladimir Dudintsev (1956) or *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1962). Each of these works represented important junctures in the exposure of the immediate past and in “the concern for the right of individuals to a full and unhindered private life” (Clark 1981: 216). Without ever opposing Marxist-Leninist ideology or confronting the structural principles of socialist realism, these works were attempts to replace the Aristotelian aesthetics of socialist realism, “based on the search for ideological unity” (Brandist 1996: 88) with an open aesthetics, in which techniques of fragmentation became dominant. The aspect that allowed the infiltration of subversive messages was the breakdown of the epic wholeness (implicit in the phase of the socialist realism), in which the author’s perspective was expected to fully coincide with the reader’s poetics and, obviously, with that of the officials. The congruence between the perspective of the author and that of his heroes, between the message of the work and its interpretation is the first premise of socialist realism, obtained by administrative resolutions.

If the socialist realist novel was shaped upon the convention of an omniscient voice that clearly indicated the direction of interpretation, the decentering of this authority in the Thaw prose is meant to obscure the message of the text. Ideologists’ fear of losing the ruling account on reality, diagnosed as a crisis of power in modernist fiction, is best expressed by Ov. S. Crohmălniceanu, one of the artisans of Romanian socialist realism: “Under the pretense of giving voice to unprivileged ways of reflecting reality in its day to day continuum lies, in fact, the strategy of giving way to reactionary perspectives (...) The position of the omniscient witness of an epoch, acknowledged by Balzac’s fictions, is replaced by desperate worm-like creatures, expressing themselves through the disarticulate language of Samuel Beckett” (Crohmălniceanu 1963: 7).

Consequently, the first symptoms of the Thaw saw the rediscovery of the polyphonic novel. Consecrated by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Art* (1929), it represents “the most advanced articulation of ‘fellow traveller’ aesthetics of the 1920s” (Brandist 1996: 23)². The

² Bakhtin’s significance for the intellectuals’ negotiation of freedom under Soviet rule is expressed in the words of the journalist Maia Kaganskaia: “Our relation to Bakhtin was not disinterested; his texts, already so packed, were overloaded with a subtext, and the criticism of the monologic form of artistic expression we took as the negation of monolithic ideology in general, and of the one that occupied us in particular (or, more exactly, that occupied itself with us); we read *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* like a novel: in

ideology of the polyphonic novel presumes that reality is replaced by a multitude of perspectives that favour the free play of interpretation: “Instead of speaking for his or herself, the author merely pieces together the words of others, refusing to take any responsibility for his or her own discourse and the ideology present therein.” (Brandist 1996: 93). Without being political in itself, this technique of narration represented an important device for the corrosion of the ideological wholeness of the socialist realist novel. This lack of ideological commitment on the part of the author creates the premises for the infiltration of the subversive content. The fact that in the period of stagnation the narrator no longer sided with the viewpoint of the officials represents an ideological revolution whose effects on the diversification of prose writing under communism have not been studied thoroughly.

The emergence of the polyphonic novel, in which the omniscient voice meant to control the direction of interpretation has given way to a set of pluralistic strategies is best exemplified by the Romanian „novel of the obsessive decade”. The phrase was coined by Marin Preda, the most important novelist of the post-war period in Romania, although it only timidly alluded to the „emergence of dogmatism in the literary phenomena” (Preda 1970: 13). However, the phrase gained critical recognition and referred to a genre frequented by most of the prose writers active in the 1960s and 1970s, from Preda himself to Constantin Țoiu, Alexandru Ivasiuc, Augustin Buzura, D. R. Popescu, George Bălăiță, and many others: “The truth is that (...) the writing of a novel about the ‘obsessive decade’ had become some sort of moral obligation for every writer” (Ștefănescu 2002: 11). The popularity of the genre, which sought to criticise the abuses of the Stalinist decade, can be related to the absence of samizdat literature in the Romanian context. Unlike in Soviet Union, Poland, Czechoslovakia, or Hungary, there was no informal circuit of dissident works which could openly oppose the totalitarian regime. The harshness of the repressive regime together with the Romanian writers’ urge to publish by all means – explain the birth of this “prose of half-truths”³, where gestures of ideological audacity intermingle with conformist and dogmatic fragments. The relevance of this type of enciphered literature that puts to use a complex series of coding and decoding processes, while employing a special relationship between the author, the censor and the reader, can only be understood by taking into account the uncommon prominence of prose in totalitarian societies: “Not by design but by necessity the novel greatly expanded its area of influence and took over the role which in other countries, especially in the West, would be considered more properly the domain of journalism, history, and other forms of expository prose writing” (Impey 1992 :61).

Therefore, a closer analysis of the subversive strategies this type of novel has engaged is required. The first literary convention specific to all these ‘justice-seeking novels’ (Negrici 2006: 169) refers to the extended criticism of the gestures or actions of the Stalinist regime. The denunciation, by Khrushchev, of the severe repressive measures enforced by Stalin is speculated by the use of what can be called a *metonymic* strategy. By signalling a number of wrongs of Stalinist society (hence, of a specific phase of socialist rule), prose writers often criticised the functioning of communism as a whole. This strategy established a thin line between texts considered by official critics subversive and those committed to the Party ideology as it was often

L. N. Tolstoy, for example, we divined an allegory of Soviet power (which, speaking honestly, is not such a strained interpretation, if one keeps in view a structure whose basic categories, not political but aesthetic, are ‘the people’, ‘simplicity’, and ‘moral benefit’). Dostoevsky was our positive hero (a symbol of spiritual freedom), and a personage by the name of ‘Polyphony’ stepped forward as an allegory for ‘pluralism’ and ‘democracy’. Ridiculous? – Well, ridiculous. Painful? – Yes, painful.” (Apud. Joseph Frank, *Through the Russian Prism: Essays on Russian Literature and Culture*, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 32).

³ In a book that analyzes the Romanian prose under communism, Eugen Negrici observes the balance between the audacity of the writers, who unmask the terror mechanisms of the Stalinist period, while employing at the same time complex strategies of self-censorship. (*Literatura română sub comunism*, București, Editura Fundația Pro, 2006).

hard to discern whether the writer criticized communist order *per se* or only its Stalinist undertakings: „Bad features of Soviet life may be depicted, but only if they are set in a context which makes it quite clear that the writer is a supporter of the Soviet regime and is convinced that the general trend of developments in Russia is outward and upward” (Gibian 1960: 23). Almost impossible to detect at the level of the content, the difference between a literary work indebted to dogmatic principles and a corrosive one depends on complex narrative strategies that the writers tried to refine in order to conceal the unorthodox message from the censors’ watchful eye. In the following lines I will describe the elaboration of a poetics of the subversive novel by using the case study of Marin Preda’s novel *Risipitorii*.

The breakdown of the epic wholeness and the dispersal of the regulatory narrative voice that spoke in favour of the Party lead to the ambiguity of the novel’s system of values. Subversive writers made the most of the Party’s allowance of innovative techniques such as the fragmentary nature of the plot or the shift of perspectives. However, more often than not the subversive message was hidden in the multiple layers of the text due to the precautions in front of censorship. The crucial dilemma formulated by the ‘novel of the obsessive decade’ regards the decoding of the implicit values employed by such complex narrative techniques. To answer it, a model of analysis that ensures access to “l’inconscient social du texte”/ “the literary unconscious of the text” (Claude Duchet) is required. While in the didactic novels of the socialist realism this ideology is discernible at the surface of the text, in more complex narratives it requires close scrutiny. The most efficient model of analysis meant to decode the work’s inherent value system can be found in Vincent Jouve’s semiologic approach. Based on the assumption that “on parlera de « polyphonie » lorsqu’il est impossible de ramener les différents « points-valeurs » du texte à une orientation unique”/ “one can speak of polyphony when it is impossible to reduce different perspectives on values to an exclusive orientation” (Jouve 2001: 118), the French critic is interested in the *mise-en-texte* of values. He explores both the narrative techniques such as “le silence du narrateur”/ “the silence of the narrator”, “le brouillage de l’intrigue”/ “the complication of the plot”, “les ambiguïtés de l’énonciation”/ “the ambiguities of discourse” or the ironic stance, as well as aspects of content: Vincent Jouve’s semiologic analysis holds the literary character at the core. Thus, the narrator-character relationship and the character’s status become relevant in accordance with a number of criteria: agent, action, motif, mobile, role. In short, Jouve’s study interrogates the values defended by the character in relation to its position in society.

Obviously, the study of such relationships is likely to clarify the value system of the texts during the ideological Thaw, when literary formulae are diversified and the ideological message becomes ambiguous. One of Romanian literature’s most representative novels in this respect is Marin Preda’s *Risipitorii* [*The Prodigals*], published for the first time in 1962 and revised in 1965 and 1969. As the first novel in the series of the so-called fictions of the obsessive decade, it is an attempt to subvert the socialist realist prescriptions. The novel looks at the life of the Sterian family at the beginning of the 1950s, immediately after the Sovietization of the Romanian society. Conceived as an assemblage of episodes, *Risipitorii* obviously undermines the homogenous poetics of the novel in the previous decade. First of all, it no longer sides with the manicheism of the fictions of the socialist realism, wherein the relationship between the positive and negative characters was clearly assigned: positive heroes would always support the socialist Revolution, while the dissidents were invariably portrayed in negative tones. The antithesis of the two categories became so pervasive, that no dimension of these characters’ personality was innocent. Marin Preda’s 1952 short story, *Desfășurarea* [*The Unfolding*], was conceived under this black and white logic. The portrait of the opponent to collectivization is abominable even physically (“his mouth was small, his lips thin, a kind of moustache grew under his nose and wiggled

disgustingly, rat-like” – Preda 1952: 49), while the communist activist’s profile is flawless: “Such a kind man Nicolae Burcea was that he would even greet peasant women” (Preda 1952: 23).

However, in *Risipitorii*, one cannot state such a clear-cut assignment of roles, as reality itself can no longer be divided in contrasting colours. With the exception of Vale, one of the Sterians’ sons, a worker at the steel factory who constantly overachieves quotas while fighting against bureaucracy and corruption, the other characters are far from being models of enthusiastic commitment to the construction of socialist reality. On the contrary: when they are not downright negative models (like Anghel, Secretary of the District People’s Council, who mistreats his inferiors), these people abandon their active role in the society: doctor Sârbu hesitates to join the Communist Party, Petre Sterian waives inexplicably the position of President of Trade Union in his factory, Constanța faces a nervous breakdown while enrolled in the high mission of educating workers in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism. Every character in *Risipitorii* faces some kind of weariness or “moral trauma” which contrasts heavily with the optimism required from the socialist realist heroes. Although the narrator avoids the blaming of the political system for the moral crises of its heroes, there are sufficient suggestions that they are not caused only by inner disquiet.

In fact, in *Risipitorii*, the most important strategy of subversion is the *ellipsis*: the Party’s brutal intrusion in the everyday life is suppressed narratively, despite the fact that the consequences of this intrusion are described exhaustively. There is no character in *Risipitorii* who has not faced abuse or arbitrary decisions of the 1950s Stalinist government: doctor Munteanu is suddenly removed from the position of Council at the Romanian Embassy in Rome, Constanța’s excellent teaching results are “rewarded” by her assignment to fieldwork, while the diligent Vale, who is at the peak of his activity in the steel mill, is transferred to another section. The causes of these “fractures” in the professional and existential fate of its heroes are very significant gaps in Marin Preda’s novel. In this first phase of the subversive novel, the narrator decides to conceal many aspects of the life of his characters, while pointing at the abusive and arbitrary nature of the regime installed in Romania after 1948.

The complex system of ellipses would not be so significant if it were not backed up by a system of hints at repressive mechanisms. Due to the fear of repression, they never occupy the narrative foreground. Instead, they can be disclosed in a number of peripheral episodes. The most interesting of these episodes relates to the case of the Arvanitache family: former bourgeois, its members suffer because of the seizure of private property in the aftermath of the Soviet changes. The family’s real drama centers on the youngest son, of whom we learn in a narrative parenthesis that, despite his intellectual merits, was expelled from University because of his “flawed origins”. The selection of young people on the criterion of their social origins was one of the most traumatizing practices of the 1950s intellectual life. However, one can easily note that the narrator’s subversive gesture is diminished by a number of strategies of protection. On the one hand, the narrative focus turns this aspect into a seemingly marginal one: Dănuț Arvanitache is an episodic character, who lacks an obvious functionality in the narrative economy. Reduced to just a couple of lines, his drama is quickly dismissed by the narrator who transfers it to the viewpoint of its character: young Gabi Sterian makes the acquaintance of Dănuț Arvanitache, his lover’s brother, during a short visit at the family’s home. There, he finds out that “Dănuț was expelled from the faculty two months ago”. The authorial commentary does not provide additional clarifications, and when Gabi asks his girlfriend about the reason of her brother’s exclusion from the faculty, he is met with impenetrable silence: “- She’s nice, your mother! said the young man. But why was your brother expelled, Mimi? Did he do anything? She did not answer, stopped and, looking away, she said: - Gabi, I need to go back. I’ll see you tomorrow. Goodbye, I am very tired, I couldn’t sleep all night long” (Preda 2011: 214). It is only after 1965 that the “victim”

becomes a leading character (the best examples are to be found in Constantin Țoiu's or Alexandru Ivăsiuc's fiction). Consequently, the intensity of Dănuț's drama is misrepresented: the young man's anguish and death are reflected in a distant style that lacks empathy, as if his experience had been met on a daily basis under communist circumstances.

Apart from the complex system of ellipses or from the different degrees of narrative focus, a poetics of the subversive novel should also consider "le système de sympathie du texte"/ "the system of sympathy of the text" (Jouve 2001: 121), discernable in the narrator's attitude towards his own characters. This lack of ideological commitment of the narrative voice, allowed by the Soviet authorities in the wake of the successive waves of Thaw, does not equate with the ideological neutrality of the text, but it requires a careful decoding of the hidden message. The fact that in a polyphonic novel all the characters express themselves without being disciplined by the central narrative voice does not mean that their discourses weigh equally:

Certains personnages « ont toujours raison » - leurs commentaires (prévisions, analyses, jugements) sont toujours confirmés par les événements. Un tel personnage fonctionne comme interprète véridique, voire comme porte-parole des valeurs de l'œuvre. Une fois qu'un tel personnage est constitué, tous ces commentaires tendront à fonctionner comme des commentaires autorisés"/ "Some characters "are always right" – their observations (guesses, analyses, opinions) are always confirmed by the events. Such a character operates like a real interpreter, or even as a spokesman for the values of the work. As soon as such a character is established, all these observations will tend to operate like authorized commentaries. (Suleiman 1983: 201).

Marin Preda's novel, like any "debate–novel" written in the period of the Thaw, is built on the antagonistic relationship of two characters. Doctors Munteanu and Sârbu are obviously representatives of two contradictory ways of relating to the communist ideology: the former incarnates Stalinist dogma, on behalf of which he enforces a repressive system. In the hospital under his command, Munteanu goes as far as to report his fiancée to Party authorities for lack of ideological commitment. On the contrary, the other character hesitates to join the Communist Party, while recognizing that "his desire to build a new world had been indoctrinated rather than born in his heart" (Preda 2011: 141). Moreover, his presence at the political meetings of the hospital's management illustrate an ideologically awkward conduct, as Sârbu is unable to adapt his speech to the political clichés of the age. The fact that the narrator insists on the character's ideological inabilities denotes a secret sympathy:

Doctor Sârbu also tried to embrace this style, by which slogans written on the walls or in the newspapers had to be grasped and spoken in such a voice that they should leave one with the feeling that they were the speaker's own thoughts. He noted, however, that the hospital's door keeper was more successful in this regard and then remembered that he was an intellectual and that he had to express himself accordingly; when he managed to do it he was truly appreciated, but this only happened once a year. Most of the times, when he'd want to speak while listening to what those in the presidium or those preceding him had to say, he'd come to understand that his opinion had neither rhyme nor reason with the progress of the meeting (Preda 2011: 346).

Crucial for the elucidation of the inherent value system of the text are the two characters' confrontations, wherein the opposition between political commitment and professional autonomy comes forth. While doctor Munteanu argues in favor of the fact that no profession "can be practiced independently of the economic and political laws of the society" (Preda 2011: 303), Sârbu condemns "the boosting of one's profession" by political gestures: "You run the risk of becoming the toy of social forces which are not interested in the integrity of our profession in or its ambition to earn independence in the social struggle" (Preda 2011: 302). At stake here is not

only an issue of professional ethics, limited to the field of academic or medical life, but the very problem of the intellectual's compromise with an illegitimate and abusive political regime. Although the narrator avoids the direct defense of one or another of the actants, their entire conduct assigns quite noticeably the ideological emphases of the text. This "portrait intentionnel"/ "intentional portrait" of the character (Jouve 2001: 73), which includes the relation between his general actions and the values that he stands for, indicates an outright disproportion between the two characters: Sârbu is an impeccable professional, while Munteanu is a man of the system, morally flawed: he climbs the social ladder by accepting political positions, he leaves his first wife and embraces a marriage of convenience with the daughter (whom he also abuses physically) of a high-ranking communist official. His evolution is marked by a psychological decline that ends with a suicide attempt. Although the narrator never interferes in the plot with moralizing comments, his "sympathy" for doctor Sârbu's autonomy towards ideology becomes visible in the series of narrative techniques employed in his "portrait intentionnel": Munteanu's moments of downfall (the ideological meeting during which his colleagues orchestrate an ideological trial against him; the suicide attempt) are described through Ilie Sârbu's narrative viewpoint, who comments upon them with empathy and sorrow. The fact that at the end of the novel the narrator decides to authorize one character while taking distance from the other represents an ideological option that cannot be neglected: the spokesman of *Risipitorii* is Ilie Sârbu, who, without dissenting the Stalinist order, avoids to adopt its ideological requirements. The advocacy of the intellectual's professional and moral autonomy in a society where everything is contaminated by ideology is the novel's fundamental message. Such a message is subversive *par excellence*, since at the beginning of the 1960s the hard Party-line still required full commitment to the revolutionary policies of Marxism-Leninism.

To conclude, Marin Preda's novel is representative of the subversion strategies underway in all the cultures under the influence of Soviet ideology: the *subversion by fictional mandate*, according to which the narrator's protest substituted the protest of the writer as a citizen. Ion Simuț has best described the process:

Unlike the previous phase, in the Ceaușescu era the distinction between the real critical discourse (which belonged to the writer as a public person) and the public discourse in terms of fiction (delegated to the narrator and thus diminished in its political impact, although not entirely: after all, it is not the writer who speaks, but his character, in fictional circumstances; the reader, however, could perceive perfectly the message sent through an agent who could outplay or safeguard the appearance of "correctness" and conformism). Subversive literature fulfilled its aim of sending a secret message because the writer and the reader shared a code residing in the same social experience (Simuț 2017: 51).

The complex nature of these novels – the large number of characters and storylines, as well as the sudden shifts in the techniques of narration – stems from the obvious attempt to avoid censorship. The only possibility of a text to transfer the subversive message to the reader was to veil it in a set of literary mechanisms that would constitute what Lev Lossef calls the "noise effect": "The author's one chance is to construct the text in such a way that the objectionable material will reach the Reader but be perceived by the Censor as an aesthetic imperfection, irrelevant material, empty filler" (Lossef 1983: 45). The novels written during the Thaw use such a significant number of literary devices because of the need to protect and encrypt the message. Consequently, a poetics of subversion does not involve only the investigation of the ideological dimension of these messages. It also engages the analysis of rhetorical techniques highly significant for establishing the value-system of the text: the narrative focus, the sympathy awarded to certain characters to the disadvantage of the others or the sudden shifts of the viewpoints. The poetics of subversion involves a series of complex strategies that oscillate between ellipsis, as modality of signaling the ideological content by absence, and periphrasis as excess of narrative techniques meant to conceal the polemic attitude from the censors' reading.

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