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The Year 1968 in Romania and Two Literary Aftershocks

ABSTRACT

“One should avoid the trap of regarding Romanian foreign policy up to March 1968 through the lens of the Prague Spring: Ceausescu was by no means a hero before he got the unique opportunity to defy the other WP allies by siding with ‘the Czech’. The Prague Spring may have come as a godsend for the Romanian leadership, as it enabled them to turn their isolation once again into independence” – says Laurien Crump in her book entitled *The Warsaw Pact Reconsidered. International Relations in Eastern-Europe, 1955-1969*. On the other hand, there is an almost fashionable urge among today’s Romanian journalists and historians to underrate the domestic participation in the 1968 events and, generally, to look down upon the “Romanian Counterculture”, regarding it as a tepid epiphenomenon, marked by mimicry and inconsistency. This lecture undertakes a vivid analytical recollection of those years and transformations, seen from the vantage point of one who has not only studied those events as a professor, but experienced them directly, during his youth, spent in different multicultural milieus in Transylvania.

KEYWORDS

1968; The Sixties; Communist Romania; Counterculture; Cold War; Zone; Imaginary Places.

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In the summer of the year 1968 I was 14 going on 15. I was still living in my native town Făgăraș, which lies in the southern region of Transylvania, between Brașov and Sibiu, if you look on a map, and my mother decided to reward my good performance in the entrance exam which marked my transition from secondary school to high school – it was a hard task to pass that exam, with 8-9 students competing for one available place. So my mother signed me up for a strenuous hiking tour up in the Bucegi Mountains, along the beautiful Prahova Valley. A peculiar feeling of fear mixed with hope accompanied our steps from peak to peak, from one chalet to another. People were talking about the political Spring in Prague, about Moscow’s delayed retaliation, as well about the Romanian party leader Nicolae Ceaușescu’s defiant gesture: he had just paid a several days’ ostentatious visit to Prague, where he had met Dubcek, and had returned to Bucharest with reassuring words of equilibrium and peace.

We reached the highest chalet in Bucegi, called Omu, when rumor spread that the “Warsaw Five” had entered Prague and that Europe was on the brink of war. All of a sudden, hundreds of people hastened to go down the mountain, in order to reach one of



the railway stations in the region. I remember that the tracks were exceedingly crowded when we finally got down. There was nothing to eat or to drink as the shops and markets had been already emptied, and we had to wait for several hours to find a vacant seat on a train heading to Brașov, in order to continue our journey home. I also remember that the next day, on the 21st of August, I was leaning against an electricity pole in the center of my city and listening to Ceaușescu's speech coming from the megaphone above, which condemned the joint intervention as a huge political mistake and expressed Romania's reluctance to endorse it. I was a pacifist deep down, as I still am, so I was proud because Romania kept apart; and nothing but pride could you see around on all the faces of everybody who happened to be passing by was firmly convinced that we would stay safe and protected. And that Ceaușescu was the hero of the day.

In the years following the bloody Romanian Revolution of December 1989 – I stubbornly call it “revolution”, honoring the people who died then, in opposition to many whistleblowers who label it as a “coup d'état” or, even worse, as a rude political manipulation – underplaying Ceaușescu's courage from August 1968 proved to be a lucrative business for many historians, politicians and press tycoons, as part of a general mechanism of painting the Devil darker and more monstrous than he really is. People in Romania are still radically biased when it comes to issues belonging to their immediate, socialist past. The almost general tendency is to demonize everything related to the Communist “derailment” of the country, which I personally interpret as an ambiguous self-cleansing attempt to get rid of individual shame and of collective pollution. Happy voices remember that Romania was not invited to the secret discussions preparing the intervention and to the military

action itself¹, because Romania had already become an isolated, tolerated entity within the Warsaw Pact. This is structurally true, because the very functioning of the pact came to a critical point with Romania's refusal to join the Prague intervention, with Moscow knowing that it was not Romania's first attempt to play the dissident within the game, as it happened in the COMECON dispute (April 1962 – December 1964; COMECON means Council for Mutual Economic Assistance), when “Romania successfully blocked the Soviet attempt at economic integration”², as Stephen D. Roper puts it.

The best analysis we can find is in Laurien Crump's seminal book entitled *The Warsaw Pact Reconsidered. International Relations in Eastern-Europe, 1955-1969*³. Hovering between East and West within the pact – by establishing diplomatic relationships with West Germany in 1967, despite the reluctance of the pact to do so until West Germany recognized East Germany, and by “playing the Chinese card” and becoming friends with Mao –, Romania had been punished and isolated within the Warsaw Pact prior to 1968. In order to explain what happened, Laurien Crump advances a very subtle and challenging idea, asserting that in order to heal the dissident wounds acquired between 1965 and 1968, six Warsaw Pact members projected a sort of hyper-choreography within the pact, as if they enjoyed the privilege of acting outside the treaty, as independent states. As a consequence – Laurien Crump says, contradicting historical and common logic related to the topic –, the August 1968 military intervention into Czechoslovakia and Prague was not formally deployed *by the Warsaw Pact* itself (!), but by a joint force of *separate* national armies, which had come together in order to defend socialism.

The institutional trick – she suggests – was triggered by Romania's repeated



behavior as a “maverick”, legitimized by the 1964 “declaration of independence” uttered against Moscow and against its will to alter the economic and political independence of the satellite socialist countries through the super-national octopus of the COMECON. Moscow’s first retaliation came in December 1967 (14 – 21), by founding a joint committee to deal with China and its leader Mao, the so-called China International (INTERKIT in Russian). Romania was not invited to take part in it. “*Through the foundation of the Interkit, the Romanian isolation within the Warsaw Pact has been institutionalized.*”⁴ Further punishments were inflicted: Romania was left out of the Dresden meeting held on March 23, 1968, dedicated to the Prague Spring and to its menaces. This meeting— Laurien Crump asserts – took part “*outside the institutional confines of the WP, which made it possible to bypass Romania*”⁵. The Moscow summit followed (May 4-5), and then the invasion, in August, preceded by a secret meeting near the Czech border – all these without Romania’s consent and participation.

Ceaușescu was furious, scholars insist on mentioning his frustration and anger, but the Western world and historical truth were on his side, allowing him to come out as a hero from the skirmish. “*Romania’s foreign policy during the Czechoslovak crisis was praised in Washington, London and Paris*” – Laurien Crump says.⁶ His reluctance to join the invasion served as ‘*the founding myth of the Ceausescu regime*’. One must remember that never in its socialist and communist existence had Romania reached such high esteem and appreciation than in those years. On the 19th September 1967 the Romanian Foreign Minister, Corneliu Mănescu, was elected President of the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York, being the first Communist politician to reach that position. Romania’s slaloming between East and West on everything but

red skis was hailed by the Western World as an attempt to sprinkle pepper underneath the nose of the self-sufficient dignitaries behind the closed doors in the Kremlin. On the other side of the map, Romania kept good relations with both the Arabs and their Israeli counterparts, despite the Six-Day War in June 1967. Unlike many socialist countries, Romania did not block the *aliya*, officially supporting the desire of the Jews to congregate in the newly founded state of Israel. Romania was – Yosef Govrin says – the “*main source of emigration*”⁷ towards Israel at that time, even higher in number than Poland.

Laurien Crump again: “*One should avoid the trap of regarding Romanian foreign policy up to March 1968 through the lens of the Prague Spring: Ceausescu was by no means a hero before he got the unique opportunity to defy the other WP allies by siding with ‘the Czech’.* *The Prague Spring may have come as a godsend for the Romanian leadership, as it enabled them to turn their isolation once again into independence.*”⁸ Don’t take it so dramatically, because – if you see it with the eyes of the Western World – it was the isolation of a victor, not that of an outlaw. French President Charles de Gaulle rushed to Bucharest in May 1968, suggesting a normality which wasn’t at all normal, if you consider the fact that the Parisian students were on the barricades in those days, asking for radical reforms. Vice-President Richard Nixon came to Bucharest in the hot days of August 1969, finding here an audience mesmerized by America: Romania was on the rise on the international chess table at the time and ready to put into barns the rich harvest of a generous endeavor.

At the time I was hastily leaving the peaks of my dear mountain I didn’t know anything about all these details. The



Communist press had taught us to read beneath the lines, to secretly enjoy the hermetic of suspicion, but there was no place to learn what had actually happened with Romania's isolation behind the closed doors of high policy making. So we were left to live the euphoric half of the business, which presented Romania as the maverick hero of the Communist regime. Politics was not the only source of this euphoria, but obviously contributed to it. The other sources were effervescence and activity: Romania passed through several fundamental structural changes from 1965 – when Ceaușescu came to power after Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's death in March that year – to 1971, when the same Ceaușescu launched his irrational and “sultanistic” dictatorship (sultanism is Max Weber's label), based on nationalism and food shortages.

People were kept busy by a great deal of projects, turnovers and transformations at that time. No one had time to stop and meditate: both outside the country and inside it, life proved to be exceedingly challenging, preventing people from taking the time to think things over. Romania's counterculture – if we are to use Theodore Roszak's classical term – was not militant, rebellious, anti-Establishment or anarchical, but only euphoric. It reached us on a tortuous, but rather short passageway which united two doors. One of them was opened when Dej died in '65, and his regime was more or less replaced with a younger, more liberalized ruling generation. The second door started to close in July 1971, with an “enlightened” dictator coming back from China and North Korea in order to launch *his personal* cultural revolution. Ceaușescu was an acclaimed hero in 1968 and he became a tiny Mao a mere three years later.

The best Romanian book dedicated to August 1968 is a collective work coordinated by historian Lavinia Betea, entitled *21*

*August 1968. Apoteoza lui Ceaușescu [August 21st 1968. Ceaușescu's Apotheosis]*⁹. It is a rather complex work, consisting of party documents, letter exchanges (for instance: between Ceaușescu and Brezhnev, following the invasion), memos (the most important of them is the script that covers the Ceaușescu-Tito hasty meeting in Vârșet, outlining a bilateral strategy of defense in case of an expected anti-Romania military intervention), as well as different press transcripts and excerpts from spontaneous, politically unguided letters sent in those days to Ceaușescu by workers living all over the country. They sounded proud and bellicose, assuring him that everybody was excited to take up arms and defend the integrity of the “nation”.

A radio journalist, Eugen Ionescu, happened to be the *Agerpres*¹⁰ correspondent to Prague at the time of the intervention. In a vivid interview included in the book, he talks about how happy the people in the streets of Prague were when they discovered that he came from the country of “the hero”¹¹. Rather cynical and always ambiguous, the novelist Dumitru Popescu (ironically nicknamed “Dumnezeu”, which means “God”, by his “fellow” writers) was an esteemed member of the highest circle of the party hierarchy in 1968. His memoirs, published in 2006, include a rather odd recollection of the morning of August 21st 1968, when Ceaușescu gathered the highest committee of the party in order to condemn the Prague intervention as “*a great error and a serious danger*” and to prepare the huge mass meeting of that afternoon. Let's listen to Dumitru Popescu's words: “*I felt quietly purling in me, without knowing where it spring came from, the early stream of a childish joy, similar to the one felt at Christmas or Easter time, when we are surrounded by supernatural beings...*”¹²

The feeling of “childish joy” similar to the Christmas and Easter euphoria might be



inappropriate if you think that it was experienced amidst the tension of opting between peace and war, but Dumitru Popescu's words were part of the *Zeitgeist* at that time. Romania experienced the years 1965-71 as the happy festival of a collective rebirth, associated with resurrection. It started with a more or less dramatic death – Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's death on the 19th of March 1965 –, and continued with the hail of a surprisingly elected young leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, who proved to be the “nasty child” of the Warsaw Pact in August 1968, when he defied the Russians, an attitude that everybody assumed in a frenzy of identification.

Writers who were not members of the party at that time (Paul Goma, Alexandru Ivăsiuc, Adrian Păunescu etc.) rushed to join. Others signed happy articles of endorsement. Thousands of workers sent letters of support to Bucharest, to the cherished “child of the nation”. If you read those texts you can detect pride, care and solidarity, but also the tendency to singularize Ceaușescu as a historically predetermined leader, to detach him from the otherwise collective ruling body of the party. This is a phenomenon which hasn't been analyzed sufficiently. Many scholars wonder how we can understand Ceaușescu's abrupt U-turn in 1971, when, coming back from an “enlightening” trip paid to China and North-Korea, he brutally dropped the reforms and launched his mini cultural revolution, which eventually led to his “sultanistic” regime of the 80s (to use Max Weber's word). A response lies – I believe – in Ceaușescu's intuition, reached in August 1968, that people were ready to accept that a charismatic leader was more convenient to the country than the traditional collective guidance of a centralized committee. On the global scene the August 1968 events turned Ceaușescu into an internationally hailed hero. On the domestic scene however, these were the days which made him a dictator.

I think therefore that a complex analysis might lead us to the conclusion that the “childish purl” of those years permeated a much deeper social tissue than skeptic scholars tend to accept. I have already mentioned that the tendency to underrate the Romanian reaction towards the August 1968 Prague intervention is dominant among Romanian journalists and scholars. Even former protagonists rely on this. In his much acclaimed *Red Horizons*, former Securitate General Ioan Păcepa said that Ceaușescu was “frightened to death” when he learned about the Prague invasion, the assertion being contradicted by eyewitnesses and by the unfolding of the events. In a much cited essay dedicated to *1968 Today*¹³, historian Gabriel Ivan summarizes the common belief related to 1968 as follows: “*If there was indeed a swing towards democratization around the year 1968, it reached only the surface of the Romanian society – education, culture and external politics – without affecting the structural core represented by the economy or the relations of power. The so-called relaxation trained into motion almost exclusively the superficial strata of the intellectuals and of the former political detainees, without affecting or even interesting the profound layers of the real country.*”¹⁴

The author is so psychologically biased – I am sorry to say this –, that he is simply wrong. A deconstruction of his sentences might be necessary therefore, in order to reestablish the truth, which is far more nuanced than he seems ready to accept. To start with, it is difficult to understand what the phrase “real country” stays for. Does it mean – as it was the case in the interwar period– the ploughmen, the peasantry? The attribute remains nevertheless blurry, because the archives made accessible after 1989 show a different perspective. Let's take, for instance, the most sensitive aspect of



Gabriel Ivan's statement, the "relations of power". Indeed, 1968 did not mark a shift

from socialism to Western democracy in Romania¹⁵, but the key issue of the period was indeed the deep reformation of the power system, made possible by the territorial reorganization of the country. Romania has inherited from the ancient socialist regime a socio-industrial map structured into 16 regions (*regiuni*), ready to recognize peculiar ethnic local feelings, by grouping the Hungarians from Central and S-E Transylvania into an autonomous territorial entity, Regiunea Mureș Autonomă Maghiară. A new decree (no 2, issued on February 16, 1968) proposed a new territorial and political scheme, structured into 39 or 40 counties (*județe*): made public, the new map got into a wide, national debate, suffered slight – in many cases: rational – alterations, and it was voted in a version which is still functional today.

Ceaușescu needed the reform in order to strengthen his power by paradoxically disseminating it. Conceived as a "generous" concession to localism, the new territorial reorganization multiplied the centers of decision, which meant, first of all, that thousands and thousands of new functionaries and political activists got positions they hadn't dared to dream of several months before. Imagine the rush from the narrow perspective of a student like me, who happened to be writing for several literary reviews and was preparing to graduate. In our discipline – language and literature – the former professional expectancy was narrowed down to a position of grammar or high school professor, in various towns and villages grouped by us into two main categories: places directly serviced by a train or a bus, and places where people had merely heard about these things. All of a sudden, the new law created new local literary magazines and journals, new cultural councils, hundreds

of available positions and jobs. Our elder colleagues, who preceded us as students, happily took advantage of this unexpected offer. The dream lasted for a couple of years only; when we reached graduation in 1976, the gates had been already sealed by new restrictive laws and decrees.

Let me provide you with a further example. If you were lucky enough, you could become a doctoral student immediately after graduation in 1968; all you had to do was to "pay your debt" for three years in a place you were sent to and to keep your interest in studying and books. Ten years later, PhD studies would turn into a distant and tricky dream for somebody who was an outsider: if you heard about somebody who had penetrated the system, he was bound to have been secretly "selected" by the party or by the Securitate. [The Secret Police]

The territorial reorganization shook the country because it also brought about a new generation to power. A huge army of local ambitious scramblers took over the helm. Technically, this meant new interpersonal relations, new family connections, new strategies of self-assertion, sophisticated corruption. Above all, we could also speak about a new collective identity complex among these power vampires: they were young and merciless, ready to exterminate the previous ruling generation and to step over corpses. An almost generalized feeling of generational solidarity must be added to the unleashed vigor: these people did not openly challenge Ceaușescu's power or the political hierarchy of the party – it would have been suicidal for them –, but subtly heralded some sort of consensual dichotomy, concentrated in the discrete belief that they enjoy a specific, generational protection, exercised by Ceaușescu's youngest son, Nicu. It was a novelty: paradoxically, Ceaușescu and his wife Elena enjoyed the idea, as they were already thinking of their successors in dynastic terms.



The 1968 territorial reorganization of the country brought about a new, more flexible economic structure. I will limit myself to a sole example: car manufacturing. No cars were produced in Romania until 1966, when the Dacia Factory was founded near Pitești, in a village called Colibași (today: Mioveni). You can find photos on the Internet with Ceaușescu driving the first 1100 model in 1968. The 1300 model followed a couple of years later, and so on. I remember the reaction of my parents, who had a minimal income as a worker (my father) and a photographer (my mom) at that time: suddenly, they started to dream about buying a car and about driving it across the country. Eventually, they did it, sharing the joy of a whole generation whose creed naively included the belief that the new epoch favored honest work as the epitome of liberty. When the poet Adrian Păunescu founded the Flacăra Movement in 1973¹⁶, in order to shape and contain the cultural and musical ideology of the so-called “blue jeans generation”, he proudly announced that the participants had to internalize the sole obligation that there were no obligations at all. It was nicer than reality, but many people of those years shared the euphoria.

New times, new people: they needed an ideology, which was more consistent than the boring lectures heard at the party sittings. Many analysts still say that the hybrid state of mind which used to be mistakenly called “Romanian counterculture” was not an anti-Establishment revolt, but a sort of cautious complicity with the system. They also say that it had a regressive, rather conservatory tendency, because it was somehow past- and not future-oriented. This might be true: the Communist regime which came to power immediately after the end of the WWII had distorted so many values related to history and civilization, that to recapture the “true past” seemed to be more attractive to the new generation than the

shaping of a blurry future. Romanian society has always been past-oriented, because of the heavy ethics of its prominent rural burden.

Commenting on General De Gaulle’s visit to Romania in a period when the streets of Paris were literally in flames because of the students’ revolt (May 14-18 1968), historian Catherine Durandin finds a resemblance between the two leaders, Ceaușescu and De Gaulle: what she labels to be an “archaic patriotism” (*patriotisme archaïque*¹⁷). It might be too elegant to formulate it like this, but the phrase is a good guess. Later on, Romania’s evasive post-Communist start following the bloody December 1989 events did nothing but confirm the rule. In the years 1964-68, linking with the “true past” also meant the social reintegration of the former political detainees, released from the prison in 1964 and afterwards. Let me suggest a reenactment of the events from an everyday life perspective. Cautiousness censored people from speaking freely about the interwar past before these relatives and acquaintances were released. By coming home, they brought with them some sort of hyper-real normality: memories were unleashed, rare, old books were taken out from previously sealed cupboards. Having no money, many former detainees – even famous artists or writers – started to sell out old items on the flea markets. The regime had but two alternatives: to turn the screw or to integrate the new type of rhetoric, mixing it up with Communist ideology. Ceaușescu’s horrid nationalist regression in the 80s would dip back its roots into this odd mixture. The youngsters of that time were also pleased, but for different reasons, as previously censored intellectuals (E. Cioran, M. Eliade, M. Vulcănescu, C. Noica etc.) reentered the public debate, several of them with thoroughly purged reprints.



A former student of our faculty, Adrian Matus, has devoted a huge amount of research to completing several theses and dissertations dedicated to the comparative aspects of Counterculture in Central and Eastern Europe. He is one of the best Romanian specialists in the field. Unfortunately, he is an idealist; that is: he's not interested, for the moment, in gathering his research into a book. I am forced therefore to quote his 2015 M.A. dissertation¹⁸ and a recent study he included in a collective volume edited by ICMER (the institute which studies the crimes perpetrated during communism and the memory of the Romanian diaspora), specifically dedicated to *Insubordination and Dissent in Communist Romania*¹⁹. Adrian Matus's key phrases in analyzing the Romanian dissenting events of the 60s are "rebel with a cause" and hybridization. The first one defines the traces of a soft – not hard! – collective revolt inside the system. A dissent which did not target the Establishment, but tried to find a marginalized *modus vivendi* inside the system, by articulating a behavioral syntax, a language and a set of symbols proper to an evasive subculture.

The second one refers to a rather lax tissue of popular Marxism, nationalism, countercultural rhetoric and –I may add now – a diffuse, extremely cautious religious ideology. The Sixties were the period when many young Romanian people turned their interest towards the Church and towards Orthodoxy, as a mild protest against the secular ideology of the system. The words were usually combined with a corporeal, Christ-like symbolism. The essence was to look like a prophet: long hair, long, peasant shirt (*cămeșoi* – a little shorter than a *sari*), illuminated, bright eyes and the belief in an immemorial wisdom, eventually equaled with Mircea Eliade's myths. Labeled as "completely unclassifiable", "nearly mythical figure", the musician Dorin Liviu Zaharia

(1944 – 1987), nicknamed Chubby, epitomized the image²⁰. He is also the author of a lost rock opera entitled *Decameronul focului alb* (The Decameron of the White Fire). The "white fire" was, of course, a code name for the spiritualized force of the faith, as opposed to the "red fire" of the Apocalypse. It might be interesting to note that the Romanian counterculture had almost nothing to do with eschatology. Oswald Spengler's idea that Western civilization is "exhausted" and "dying" had few echoes in Romania, and the reason is, once again, the content of the political dissent. Youngsters were fed up with the Marxist idea that Capitalism as a technological nightmare is dehumanizing and contrary to progress. And that the Communists are the "diggers" of Capitalism. As a consequence, they hailed simplicity and organic rebirth, which you could find only in the countryside, through a rural feeling deeply permeated by nature and morality.

On the other hand, the subculture dissent widely articulated a *communitas* in Victor Turner's terms (as opposed to *societas*), a feeling of belonging, especially focused on what you should *not do* and why. For instance, you should wear *blue jeans*, but do not dare to go to a party rally with them. So wear them precisely because they indicate an anti-mainstream attitude. Sing or play *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds* (the famous LSD acronym of the Beatles), precisely because the censors had prohibited it. A little bit later in time, in 1982, four young poets from Bucharest, Mircea Cărtărescu, Traian T. Coșovei, Florin Iaru and Ion Stratan, issued a generational poetry manifesto entitled *Aer cu diamante* (Air with Diamonds). Almost everybody knew what the title stood for – but the censors seemingly didn't.

"From the mid-1960s through the mid-1970s, young Romanians combined elements of Western youth culture with local



cultural and political traditions to create a unique counterculture and dissident community”, Madigan Fichter says²¹. Adrian Matus and other scholars note that the most striking element of the youth subculture was – as I have already suggested – the dress code. It actually meant a sophisticated combination of stylish Indian reminiscences – as seen on the TV – and the artistically altered traditional, domestic peasant outfit. The main issue was oppositional creativity, as defined by Irina Costache: „*the avenue of personal fulfillment for intellectually motivated youth, irrespective of their class background, had more to do with finding creative outlets in milieus at odds with state/party influence*”²². You could attain it by visiting your relatives’ long forgotten dowry trunks in the countryside. I remember that when I was a student in Cluj everybody wore stylish rural garments and put their notebooks in peculiar peasant bags (*straițe*), bought in Maramureș and in other regions famous for their manufacture. Cluj was especially sensitive to the rural fashion, because it encouraged Hungarian young intellectuals and artists to put on specific, Medieval Hungarian decorations. They were strikingly colorful, but the Securitate put a tremendous effort in chasing them down. Gypsy garments were favored by the girls. Marcela Saftiuc, the “Romanian Joan Baez”, now living in France, remembers that long skirts were mandatory among the young ladies if you wanted to be plausible, but when she was invited to sing for the Romanian TV, they forced her to drop the “duster” outfit and mount the stage in a “regular”, down to the knees skirt.

A striking example of marginal dissent was nudism. Not only the party, but many middle class people considered it outrageous. Nevertheless, the condemned cult of shameful “Adamism” took its exuberant toll in Vama Veche-2 Mai, two small and rather isolated villages by the Black Sea, visited

by athletic writers, artists and musicians²³. As usual, irony played its tribute here too:

just across the fence there lies Costinești, the official seaside resort of Communist Youth’s Union (UTC), visited by the decent members of the rising political *nomenklatura*. They weren’t allowed to undress.

Important time drifts and purged textual references marked the rise of the Romanian counterculture in a period when English had hardly started to be studied in the domestic school system. Gradually, English replaced French, becoming the learning tool of a new, Western-oriented generation. When translating the first fragments of Allan Ginsberg’s *Howl*, Romanian scholars cautiously eliminated all the lines which suggested homoeroticism or revolt. Nevertheless, by listening to Western music, by secretly reading “forbidden” press and literature imported from the West, Romanian youngsters managed to create a subculture of dissent whose essence laid in the reluctance to behave the way the system wanted them to behave. Acting outside politics by refusing to be brainwashed was the main slogan of this subculture. The Romanian countercultural movement did not raise barricades and it wasn’t engaged in open political opposition. It favored a creative marginality, with discrete rural and religious – mainly Orthodox – imprints. As it always happened in Communist Romania, the “repressive tolerance” (Herbert Marcuse’s words) exercised by the Establishment made huge efforts to contain the dissent by integrating it, by suppressing it in a way that distorted its genuine message, by pouring it into molds which were compatible with the official ideology. In 1973 poet Adrian Păunescu launched his famous *Cenaclul Flacăra* (The Flacăra Literary Circle = *Flacăra* was the title of the literary journal run by Păunescu), which lasted until 1985,



when it was suppressed because of an uncontrollable stampede in the stadium of Ploiești, which killed at least five people. The movement consisted in endless literary and musical litanies and shows, which drove to hysteria mass audiences consisting of many thousands of people at a time. Those who hail it as an experience of liberty within a system which became more and more dictatorial are obviously mystified. The only reason why the party allowed *Cenaclul Flacăra* to exist was to contain the countercultural vestiges still existing among the youth and to channel them into a faith compatible with the official desires of the system.

Before shifting to the literary after-shocks of the Romanian counterculture, I should remind readers of a remark made previously in this paper, precisely that the Romanian countercultural “dissent did not target the Establishment, but tried to find a marginalized *modus vivendi* inside the system, by articulating a behavioral syntax, a language and a set of symbols proper to an evasive subculture” (see *supra*). In his seminal *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale explored, among other topics, the literary geography of the closed or marginalized imaginary “zones,” also specific to the new, experimental postmodern fiction. If we think of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha, the mythmaking of the imaginary geography can be conceived as a pattern which links modernity to postmodernism. *Science fiction* writing also relies on this device, being focused on the experimental creation of an autonomous, close world, whose space and time syntax functions differently than in common reality.

In the Communist world – which was the case of Romania – the stereotype of creating an imaginary province or a marginal closed land also offered the writers the

challenging privilege of working outside the ideological restrictions of the political system. The imaginary geography has its own rules and rituals, being closer to myth than to reality. The freedom of “mythmaking” was invoked by novelist Ștefan Bănuțescu in 1977, when he published the first volume, entitled *Cartea de la Metopolis* (*The Book of Metopolis*), of a projected, but never completed tetralogy called *Cartea Milionarului* (*The Millionaire’s Book*). The first volume presents a never seen-never met archaic plain, Dicomestia, circling around a rather prosperous city, Metopolis. Both Dicomestia and Metopolis are – the writer tells us – “mysterious places” inhabited by people having “mysterious” habits. Several of them, for instance, are famous for collecting things with no rational utility, as if they wanted to transform the whole region into an odd flea market or – even better – into a museum, housing dissimilar and disorderly objects.

There is no need to expect that these objects will be sold and transformed into money in order to fuel subsistence. On the contrary, the flea market syndrome expresses some sort of profit free existential aesthetics, which also includes the propensity of the inhabitants to aesthetically recuperate the past instead of getting rid of it. The paradox of floating beyond mercantile values also explains the main protagonist’s name: *Milionarul* (*The Millionaire*) has got his nickname in a distant past not because of his innumerable goods or because of his impressive bank accounts – to tell the truth: he is actually penniless –, but as an appreciation of his prolific and versatile mind, which helps him to penetrate everybody’s soul. This is a really rare gift in Metopolis: discerning fiction from reality. The inhabitants incessantly forge legends and myths, in order to mystify their past, present and future. If you listen to them – and to the writer as well, who allegedly has visited the



region – you’ll never be able to tell if Dicomesia really exists or if it is a mere lie, presented with childish ingenuity and mythmaking imagination.

According to one of its commentators, the novel *Vladia*, published by Eugen Uricaru in 1982, presents “the island Utopia in a period of decline.”²⁴ The plot of the novel revolves around a freshly graduated intellectual from Bucharest, Vicol Antim, who is appointed to teach history in a grammar school located in an obscure and rather bizarre town named Vladia, which is so marginal to the “real world and time,” that beyond its limits “there is nothing,” but the void. Dominated by a curly and aggressive vineyard, which suffocates everything and mesmerizes the inhabitants with a peculiar “drogue” emanated by the leaves, Vladia harbors a few strange and even eccentric people, whose main story tells details about the mystery of a hidden aerodrome previously owned by a famous prince, Șerban Pangratty, although its location has never been discovered in the region. Other oddities include an old lady, K.F., owner of the fabulous – but rather empty – Villa Katerina, a rather strange, but self-sufficient and manipulating engineer, Bașaliga (assimilated by several commentators to the Devil) and one of Vicol Antim’s school colleagues, the biology teacher Croicu, who has dedicated his entire life to identify an extremely rare local butterfly, *Vanessa Ligata*, which allegedly emerges at special occasions in the region, although no one has captured it so far. Croicu says that he owns a rather big collection of butterflies *looking like* Vanessa Ligata, which are not, actually, the wanted species. Indeed, the mysterious butterfly allegedly has the ability to generate multiple avatars and simulacra, in order to deceive the hunters and remain evasive.

Vicol Antim’s school *might be* a real learning institution. There are no students

over there; at least, the writer is not interested in presenting them to the reader. Except

Vicol Antim, who is the owner of an official appointment issued by the authorities, the other teachers are substitutes or even simulacra. The reader will never tell for sure whether the school has got a headmaster or not: Vicol is told that the headmaster has the strange habit of leaving the town unexpectedly, and no one could tell for sure that he would return and when. His absence does not cause, nevertheless, any distress, because there is another teacher who replaces him.

Vicol is nevertheless “real” because he is the only person who acknowledges and communicates with the world existing outside Vladia, by sending letters to his girlfriend. In another letter, written immediately after his arrival in Vladia, he invites his good friend Gelu Ravac to visit him. Ravac finally arrives when the novel is almost completed, only to find out that Vicol Antim had already left Vladia, by accepting a teaching position in... Africa!

Gelu Ravac is not an ordinary being, as he has always been obsessed by the idea that what we see and perceive is not “the real world,” but an imaginary, illusory construction generated by our mind, very similar to the Tibetan “tulpa.” In a Kafka-like retrospection (the plot partially resembles here to the *Verdict*, although its other parts lead us directly to *The Castle*), no reader can tell for sure whether Ravac is a real being or a *tulpa*. The legend which includes Prince Șerban Pangratty is also ambivalent. No one has ever seen its aerodrome, but it is presented as a landmark which must be visited. Legends assert that the Prince regularly used to arrive in spring, and always left by autumn: if we add that his arrival pushed the locals in an induced frenzy and euphoria, we easily understand that the prince’s epiphany reproduced the yearly cycle of vegetation, with the



newcomer in the role of Dionysus.

The ambiguous secret of the place is finally revealed to Vicol Antim by a rather mysterious local girl, Antuza, who has – we are told – magical powers. Antuza lives outside the suffocating vineyard, because her father had built his farm in a way which stays immune to the ever advancing green narcotics. Mesmerizing Antim with an erotic incandescence proper to a “witch,” Antuza eventually takes him to an insect farm, only to show him that the famous Vanessa Ligata is actually a butterfly raised and liberated by the engineer Bașaliga in order to please Croicu and to fulfill his highest wishes. As odd it may look, Antuza adds, Vladia is the Paradise for everybody who happens to enter the region, because the town is capable of generating endless series of healing simulacra, or illusions (*tulpa*). Indeed, Vicol Antim recalls, no inhabitant of Vladia has ever complained about pain, distress, fear or other similar negative feelings.

In 1982, when Eugen Uricaru published the first edition of his novel, *simulacrum* was a rather new term within the domestic literary discussions. Accustomed to the good old habits, several literary critics spoke about an ingenious mixture of realistic and fantastic elements existing in *Vladia*. The novel was written, obviously, ahead of its time, longing for a future perception, only favored by the new, postmodern era.

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Notes

¹ Robin Alison Remington, *Winter in Prague Spring: Documents on Czechoslovak Communism in Crisis*, Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1969, p. 58.

² Stephen D. Roper, *Romania: The Unfinished Revolution*, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000, p. 38.

³ Routledge, London and New York, 2015. See part II, “The Dynamics of Dissent, 1965-68”, especially subch. “Gaullism in the Warsaw Pact. Ceausescu’s Challenge”, as well as part III, “Crisis and Consolidation”, 1968-69, pp. 132-287.

⁴ Laurien Crump, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁷ Yosef Govrin: *Israeli-Soviet Relations, 1953-1967. From Confrontation to Disruption*, Routledge, New York and London, 1998. See chapter “Aliya from Romania”, pp. 128-139.

⁸ Laurien Crump, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

⁹ Editura Polirom, Iasi, 2009. The editor’s co-worker are Cristina Deac, Florin-Răzvan Mihai and Ilarion Țiu.

¹⁰ Agenția Română de Presă = The Romanian Press Agency.

¹¹ *21 August 1968. Apoteoza...*, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 130. The original version: “Susura în mine încet, fără să-i detectez izvoarele, un început de bucurie copilărească, de genul celei trăite la Crăciun sau la Paște, când prin preajmă foșnesc personaje supranaturale...”.

¹³ *1968 azi. Sfera Politicii*, no 8, July-August 1993, pp. 8-9.

¹⁴ Romanian version: „Dacă a existat într-adevăr o mișcare de democratizare în preajma anului 1968, aceasta s-a derulat la suprafața societății românești – în învățământ, cultură și politică externă –, fără să afecteze structura de rezistență pe care o reprezintă economicul sau relațiile de putere. Așa-numita relație de destindere a antrenat în mod



aproape exclusiv straturile superficiale ale intelectualității și foștilor deținuți politici, fără să afecteze sau să intereseze straturile mai profunde care alcătuiesc țara reală.”

¹⁵ See also Mihai Retegan: *1968 – din primăvară până în toamnă. Schiță de politică externă românească* [1968 – from Spring to Autumn. A Short Survey of the Romanian Foreign Policy], RAO, Bucharest, 1998. The second edition was published in 2014, also by RAO, with a slightly different subtitle: *Schiță de politică externă și politică militară românească* [A Short Survey of the Romanian Foreign and Military Policy].

¹⁶ Its official title was *Cenaclul Flacăra* = The Flacăra [Flame] Literary Circle.

¹⁷ „*De Gaulle et les Français font preuve d'un patriotisme archaïque, mais il est passionnant de se servir d'eux.*” In Catherine Durandin: *Nicolae Ceaușescu – vérités et mensonges*, Ed. Albin Michel, Paris, 1990.

¹⁸ *Contracultura în Europa de Est* [The Counterculture in Eastern Europe].

¹⁹ Adrian Matus, “Rebeli cu o cauză: elemente ale contraculturii americane în literatura generației optzeciste” [Rebels With a Cause: Traces of the American Counterculture

in the Literature of the Generation 80s], in *Nesupunere și contestare în România comunistă* [Insubordination and Dissent in Communist Romania]. Anuarul Institutului de Investigare a Crimelor Comunismului și Memoria Exilului Românesc [ICMER], vol. X, Polirom, Iași, 2015, pp. 337-362.

²⁰ See Andrei Oișteanu, “Dorin Liviu (Chubby) Zaharia. După douăzeci de ani”, [DLCZ. 20 Years Later], *Revista* 22, Dec. 12, 2007.

²¹ “Rock’n’roll Nation: Counterculture and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1975”, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 39, No.4, July 2011, p. 568.

²² *From the Party to the Beach Party. Nudism and Artistic Expression in the People’s Republic of Romania*, apud Matus, *Counterculture in Eastern Europe*, p. 82.

²³ Cristian Papino has dedicated a vivid and nostalgic book to its long forgotten splendors: *Cartea de la Vama Veche* [The Book of Vama Veche], Humanitas Publ., Bucharest, 2015.

²⁴ Nicolae Oprea: *Provinciile imaginare* [The Imaginary Provinces], Ed. Calende, Pitești, 1993, p. 36.