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The frontier as Illusion in and after Communism

ABSTRACT

In a manner symptomatic of communism in general, in its attempt to impose an illusory utopian society, the Romanian Communism meant above all a continuous mutilation of identity. Such a paradigm generated a series of complexes and frustrations and reactivated myths of resistance, all exacerbated in the post-communist era, after 1989. Building on this thesis, the present paper aims at analysing the myth of the frontier as it appears in post-communist literature. Salman Rushdie famously states: "In our deepest natures, we are frontier-crossing beings" (*Step Across This Line*). The question arises, what happens when an oppressive system makes the frontier become insurmountable?

KEYWORDS

Romania; Communism; Frontier/ Border/ Limit; Collective Mentality; Iron Curtain.

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1. The Frontier as Trauma

What does the frontier mean for the Romanians? With how much fascination would they have regarded it during Communism? The frontier acquires new meanings in a world thrown by its own political system in marginality, and this happens because, as Alain Brossat notices: "the frontier is a territory of variable dimensions and depths, and whose property is less topological (a separation line) but rather political: a space governed by special rules – themselves variable – and whose relations with the territory are susceptible to alter according to circumstances¹".

At the level of collective mentality, frontiers preserve the myth of the fortress in a siege; they function starting from the idea of an unsecure space which needs to be continually defended. Together with them, the myth of the rescuing hero comes into being; the individuals inside the frontier, cut from what is happening across, as a compensation, develop the need to transfer, to delegate their own desire to know. Eugen Negrici, in an analysis upon the book as object of the collective cult in Communism, makes the observation that many of the collective frustrations and misfortunes were channelled



to the desire to read². According to the same paradigm, the impossibility to go across the frontier can be translated through the avidity with which one reads books about exotic spaces. In Post-Communism, the appetence of the consumer of culture for eroticism and exoticism to the same extent, (because exoticism is ultimately the expression of transgressing a border) represents nothing but the exhibition of a latent need to escape.

First of all, the frontier is a limit, both physical and imaginary; “The frontier is the physical proof of the human race’s divided self³”. And this happens because, as it is already a well-known fact, the more secured the frontier is, the more mythical what lies within becomes. When looking over the fence – so specific for Romanians – becomes impossible, the frustration increases and, together with it, a whole range of mythical elements and symbols. This range has two functions: on the one hand, it generates the fascination towards the *foreigner*, and on the other, it contributes to stirring a sometimes morbid curiosity for anything that is related to *intimacy*. This is the key to reading the literature written by the young writers of the Romanian Post-Communism. In Vakulovski’s texts⁴, beyond protest and “le terribilisme”, we can easily notice the pleasure of peeping through the key-hole so well described by him. In the same way we can read the literature of the *panspermia* (the term is used by Dan C. Mihăilescu⁵) so well illustrated by Ioana Băețica. In *Fișă de înregistrare*⁶ (“Registry Entry”); we find an incoherent epic formula, disabused characters, without substance, all compensated by a pure, unjustified eroticism. Here we deal with the same invasive intention to force the taboo-borders between the intimate (the private) and the public. If such texts, functioning as excitants disguised by cultural acts, are of any value or not from an aesthetic point of view is another discussion. Nevertheless, they respond to the need to exhibit

an intimacy refused in Communism. In Nora Iuga’s novel, *Săpunul lui Leopold Bloom* (“The Soap of Leopold Bloom”), there is a feminine character who resumes this attitude very well. Harassed by a neighbour who always shows up in the most inconvenient moments, the heroine finds herself in the position to have to make a tacit pact with her. So we have a spontaneous coalition against a state which is perceived as a total expression of aggression:

Caught you, you had your light on, right? – No, only the lamp, I was just writing something and... – Come on, why are you so embarrassed, I ain’t turn you in, as you, when I asked you for something, you didn’t say no. –Yea, but I got scared and I feel, hmm, as a criminal caught in the act. I heard they gave huge fines⁷. [The English version of all the quotations is made by the author of the article]

For Romanians, as a consequence, freedom is a synonym, in Post-Communism, of the freedom of movement, i.e. the movement of ideas and the mobility of individuals. The signals received from beyond the border in Communism (letters from abroad, football games watched on the Bulgarian channels, listening to the Radio Free Europe, etc.) acquire the significances of a miracle in miniature. These represent the almost mystical joy of a secluded person who, all of a sudden and for a short time, feels himself part of a world he only presumes, of which he dreams and which he infuses with his or her own hopes.

We might say then, rightfully, that Romanians have never had a special desire to travel. “We should not forget that, at the beginning of the 19th century, for 90% of the Romanians, the world ended at the margin of the village or town they lived in. The



horizon was where stories started⁸”. Nevertheless, as Salman Rushdie noticed (he himself an authority in what regards limits and frontiers), “in our deepest natures, we are frontier-crossing beings⁹”.

Mihail Sadoveanu spoke in his story *Negustor lipscan* (“The Merchant of Leipzig”) about the fascination a character has upon his listeners when he is telling about his adventures in Europe. Even if without desires as *homo viator*, the Romanians, at least through their elites, have always had frequent contacts with the civilised world; in certain border regions (Dobrodgea or Banat) the space has always been a cosmopolite one, and in Communism, the desire to go across the borders was fuelled by the radio programmes of Free Europe and the Voice of America, as well by the samizdat (as much as it was) which familiarised the reader with spaces a lot closer to reality than the Romanian one.

Ultimately, the Romanians’ prostration in front of the foreigners, specific for the first years after 1990, arises also from this frustration. *They* come from beyond the frontier, from a new forbidden world. We do not know them but we have envisaged them all in the nights when the Romanian Communists left us in the dark in order to cut the electricity expenses. And, in the dark, the border becomes even more mysterious.

The Communists are no pioneers here either. The fear of foreigners and the need to protect oneself through frontiers dates back to even the dawns of the Romanian state. On April 4th, 1881, when it turned out that Romania had become a refuge for the second rate foreigners, a new law was adopted, through which

the foreigner who through his or her behaviour might compromise the inner or outer security of the country could

be forced to leave the place he inhabited or to transfer in another region or simply thrown out of the country. An expelled foreigner, who entered Romania again would be arrested, and submitted to the correctional police, which would condemn him to prison from 5 days to 6 months, and after this period, he would be taken to the border without having the right to be shown the exit point¹⁰.

With such history, there is no question why our relations with the Others are defined by permanent suspicions.

The foreigners who come to Romania do not come from France, Germany, Italy or Spain, but from *beyond the border*. Consequently, we have here

a radical dissociation of two destinies: that of the cast of the worldly, who have the possibility to move around without any obstacle and thus live in time, and that of those who are prisoners within a certain space, who do not start moving unless they have to, unless they have no other choice and who face the inhospitality of the world.¹¹

Consequently, the border is also a qualitative delimitation, a fracture between two categories of citizens (the Romanian public discourse will frequently use the syntagm *a second rate European citizen*).

Romanians have always treated their neighbours with condescendence and irony (especially the Bulgarians and the Moldavians beyond the Prut) as well as everything that could have reminded them of their Oriental antecedents. The historian Marius Oprea notices that

the Turks entered history and football, the Bulgarians the jokes, as for the Serbs or the Russians, we hardly like to



mention them at all. Today we admire or despise the French, the Germans, the English or the Americans. The mentality and the behaviour have changed in the past two hundred years because then, more than two hundred years ago new models were produced¹².

The imaginary does not register any deep change of perspective after Romania's joining the European Union either (on the contrary). In an article published in the Romanian edition of the magazine *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Victor Negrescu states that: "the Romanian person goes through a deep feeling of complexity towards the other European citizens, for different reasons whose source lies in the acute lack of knowledge regarding the European matter and of the Romanian-centrism promoted by politicians¹³".

The complex Victor Negrescu speaks about (and not only he) is in itself the expression of a border. With Romanians, borders multiplied in an alarming way. Not only in Communism could people not cross the border, but also the simple trip from one county to another, from one city or town to another became an adventure. For economic reasons and not only, cars were allowed to circulate only according to a very precise timetable (according to the vehicle Registration plate which was either even or uneven) the citizens who happened to be out after a certain hour were asked their IDs, it was difficult to get residency in a city or town (it was so difficult to get residency in Bucharest that Romanians had to offer huge bribes or even to get married there). It is important to run back over all these limits whose proximity increased to such extent that the individual found himself or herself to lead his or her existence in almost claustrophobic spaces. Forced to live in ever more restrictive reservations, he or she felt acutely that

everything in Communism developed under the paradigm of frontier. Speaking about his leaving for the USA, Valeriu Anania describes the moment when the stairs of the plane were lifting indicating finally the taking-off to another space. The fragment is relevant for the way in which the collective mentality relates to the frontier: "The fascinating stairs of which a Romanian of today can make the first steps to freedom, the scary stairs which, at a simple sign of the finger, could turn you from the door of the plane to humiliation and fright¹⁴".

Beyond the village, beyond the city, beyond the area in which everything could be rigorously controlled, existence became an adventure. In a book of memoirs about the resistance in the mountains, Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu describes this world: "The entrance into the woods was guarded as a frontier. The people in the village were not allowed to leave the village in the evening¹⁵".

The discursive frontier could not be avoided either. Never before Communism had euphemism been so present in discourses. The allusion, the parable, the ambiguity – all of them represented supplementary frontiers, verbal disguises of ideas always repressed, always forced to adjust to an official discourse which (confusing indeed) modified itself. In Communism "everything urged towards interpretation, urged you to search for meanings carefully, and more and more courageously to give new meanings sprung from the world of your ideas¹⁶".

The effect was, on the one hand, the idealisation of literature, its consideration as a symbol of anti-communist resistance, and on the other hand, the freezing, the robotisation of the Romanian society. A true paradigm was created; any discourse was regarded, even after 1989, in the terms of a double language. Beyond the written or uttered

word there was a true delirium of interpretations going on. Censorship functioned as border in this case as well. Each supplementary frontier added a new frustration with generosity.

Not being exclusively a simple physical obstacle, the frontier could not simply disappear all of a sudden. The isolation produced by the imaginary barrier between us and the Others continues producing its effects. Vancea, a character in a short-story written by Cornel Ivanciuc, “for a second has the feeling that – the same one as in 1968 – over the frontier on which he was born, in Sighet, and now over the infinite market, a division of fighter aircrafts were dive bombing¹⁷”.

Life on the border is never easy. Similarly to any life fact at the identity level, it has its own symptoms. Which are these? First of all, the exacerbation of the myth of the Romanian conspiracies. The lack of real contact with the world across the border raises suspicions. Then, the excessive valorisation of Romanian spirituality or, on the contrary, the minimisation of the national identity... even though they are antagonistic processes, they are generated by the same identity isolation.

The frontier not only prevents us from accessing *the other side*, but with the Romanians, it also prevents the free circulation of culture. The lack of accordance with the spirit of contemporaneity also generates identity insecurity or, on the contrary, sufficiency. In compensation, any imprisoned person (whether we talk about the physical prison or not) develops an irresistible desire to travel. Valeriu Anania confesses in his *Memoirs* that “this longing became stronger along the years spent in prison, the reclusion itself making the starving dream only about food, and the enchained of journeys¹⁸”.

2. The Romanian Strawberry Picker. A Hybrid-Typology

The Romanian strawberry-pickers, an identity equivalent of the Polish plumbers, emigrate *en masse* to Europe. The term itself, maculated by a strong pejorative meaning, is defining today for an identity mark which has not said its last word yet. In an article published in the Romanian journal *Observator cultural*, Iulia Popovici seems to give this term a marginal meaning.

Invented by the media after the migration wave of the local workers to the strawberry farms in Spain and perceived as defamatory by many of those hinted at, the term strawberry-picker – used comfortably in informal language to designate those called by the Italians *stranieri*, will very likely disappear from common language in the next years, and the Romanian language does not show any signs to fabricate another.¹⁹.

Even if the Romanian language will exclude it from its linguistic corpus, the strawberry picker represents above all a typology which, no matter our revolt or opposition, will define the Romanian identity tract in these transition years. He will be a character (or maybe even a text author) in literature and from here slowly, he will make his way to the collective mentality. The approach of the Romanian strawberry picker was very often made from the very well-known traditionalist points of view. Mircea Vasilescu makes the following observation in an article entitled *Generația căpșunarilor (The Generation of the Strawberry-Pickers)*:

So the generation of the strawberry-pickers (no matter what domain they



work in, I take the liberty of calling them all this way to mark the phenomenon) represent nothing out of the ordinary. It seems to me that the insistence of the media on this subject, treated pathetically and pitifully and tagged by the old Romanian syntagm *difficult, my friend* does nothing but extend up to the 21st century the traditional Romanian exile *doina*, as well as maintain uselessly the tendency to lament that *we will never catch up with them*²⁰.

In societies sensitive to the myth of the invasive foreigner, people often talked about Europe's invasion by the Romanians. It was not a proper invasion because, no matter what one might say, they were never too numerous, but an invasion of a way of thinking, acting and reacting. Europe itself was little prepared to make contact with this type of vulgar-utilitarian, minimalist, sometimes even gregarious Eastern-European culture because the frontier played its role well. It was not just a limit for the Romanians, but also for the Europeans, who never knew exactly (at the level of collective mentality, because otherwise information circulated) what was beyond the Iron Curtain.

Uprooted after Communism had previously trained him to live in disabused communities (see the Communist blocks of flats), the Romanian strawberry picker transferred his little universe with all its frustrations and myths to Europe. He took with himself his customs and his way of relating to the others. He knew how to behave because that was the way he had behaved when Communism destroyed the Romanian villages, transferring the people into blocks of flats. Now as it happened then people took the benches in front of their houses and placed them in front of the blocks of flats as well as they started cultivating vegetables in their balconies, as well as they started raising

chickens at the back of the block, they transplanted their lifestyle over the border in the same manner.

Nevertheless the differences were huge. While in the first situation there were people who shared the same alienating Communist experience, now the strawberry pickers found themselves in front of a society built in a fundamentally different way. Hence the misunderstandings, the identity conflicts. Both there and here the frontier had created two contradictory visions upon *normality*.

Although the frontier started as an external limit which separated worlds, it ended up by functioning at an individual level. The communication habits altered by Communism transformed the strawberry picker in a taciturn, suspicious, deeply inward person. What could he communicate about his own culture which he did not know very well and which he was used to considering minor and consequently inferior? What could he bring to a world where he was only for economical reasons? The identity walls, easy to ignore inside the frontier, had become, now, outside the frontier, impossible to climb. Then the Romanian strawberry-picker does not have access to the deep culture of the country in which he works, but rather to its marginal parts full of bluntness. The frontier, the imaginary limit between worlds, is crossed abruptly, making a transgression from the superficiality of a former Communist Romania to the superficiality of a peripheral Europe (the Romanian strawberry-picker comes to know the periphery first with all its disadvantages). In a short essay entitled *Nici neoliticul nu mai e ce-a fost (Not even the Neolithic Age is any longer what it used to be)*, Marius Oprea speaks about this phenomenon: "The more brutal the changes and the shorter the period they happen in, the more the big memory blanks in which the nostalgia for old times

combines strangely with a new pragmatism of the present²¹”.

The Romanians went *abroad* after 1989, but it was not the elites who left, because they were still confused and incapable to find the right track which would have allowed them the access to the values of Western Europe, but the peripheral majority, those who were most affected by Communism. In its profound strata, the Romanian culture is still inaccessible to the common European. The preoccupations for a country brand did not manage to transmit a coherent message, they only wasted energy and financial resources. The reason for that is a simple one. The collective mentality does not form under the pressure of the official actions of promoting a country, but rather under the impact of the concrete cohabitation between individuals. The strawberry-pickers are thus the carriers of a perception about Romania against which it is impossible to fight by organising concerts or by exhibitions at tourism fairs. Day by day, the Romanian strawberry-picker poured his frustrations over the world he lived in, only that this time they were not perceived as *personal* frustrations but as *Romanian* frustrations. The strawberry-picker has never been preoccupied with his self-image, with the way in which his gestures will be taken as representative gestures for the territory he comes from. He came to Europe in order *to be better off* and not to pass on identity information. When speaking about a globe trotter of the 19th century (Ion Codru Drăgușanu), Marius Oprea makes the following observation: “both in the case of the Transylvanian pilgrim in 1840 and in that of the Romanian strawberry-pickers who met their death in the terrorist attacks in Spain, the journey represented a road, the only one, to fulfilment; the road and life itself are one²²”. Consequently, the strawberry picker first suffered the shock of seeing his own

certitudes disintegrate. How to adapt from a society whose mechanism was suspected to have everlasting engines to a society where the individual had to go through a qualification process several times in a life time in order to survive? Moreover, how could one stand a society where one’s own problems could not be transferred to other people? The myth which helped the Romanians survive in Communism was that of *the switchman Păun*²³. Guilt could easily be transferred. The frontier which still parts us from the Others is no longer an outer one, and that is the reason why the redefinition of our relationship with the Other can no longer be approached from a propagandistic point of view. The Romanian strawberry-picker has first to redefine himself, to find out who he is, where he comes from and what identity genes he carries. “The frontier is a wake-up call. At the frontier we can’t avoid the truth; the comforting layers of the quotidian, which insulate us against the world’s harsher realities, are stripped away, and, wide-eyed in the harsh fluorescent light of the frontier’s windowless halls, we see things as they are.²⁴” Only afterwards can relationships be rebuilt between those whom history placed on one side of the border or the other.

Living in a secure space can mean (if the borders are maintained for a longer time, as is our case now) to become dependent on everything that the border can offer. The limit, no matter which this might be, is a brutal bounding of an individual horizon, but is, at the same time, a comfortable area, and comfort inevitably leads to dependencies. In our case, the frontier which separated us from Europe during Communism also ensured the comfort of *the predictable abjection*. We can find this idea expressed in a novel published after December 1989: “Before – ugly or unjust – there was order; a certain security. [...] The income – small, was safe to come on a certain date. [...] It



was bad, but a lot better as some might say²⁵”.

We knew the electricity would be cut, we knew we were supposed to queue for salami or cheese, we knew we had to go to work and pretend we were working, we knew we would retire from the same single work place, we knew that the state would give us an insanitary apartment through whose walls we could hear our neighbours fighting, we knew only too well our gallery of saints that made everything possible (the party secretary, the director of the factory, the people from the Security Police)...all these certitudes created in time the premises for an indissoluble dependency. So much the more the identity degradation had altered us to such extent that it seemed that the situation would go on like this for ever.

That is why the customs officer is for the Romanian collective mentality perceived as being a privileged person exactly for his physical proximity to what is going on beyond the frontier. In an artificially spectacular novel published at Nemira Publishing House, Cosma Braşoveanu makes us witness the monologue of a character which gives expression to such perception: “In front of a box of American cigarettes, even the customs officers pretended to see nothing²⁶”. This excessively qualifier ‘even’ is emblematic. Max Solomon speaks in similar terms as well: life near the frontier definitely has other rules:

Prepare the box of cigarettes and two bottles of French perfumes in their original package so that you could take them out from the first suitcase [...] so that you could push them on the control table and put them apart from the rest of the things. The customs officer will know what he has to do and you will not have to open the other suitcases²⁷.

Once overcome, the frontier becomes a catalyser of a painful, subtle identity change, at first difficult to notice. This is what happened to the Romanians (and not only with them) all along their cultural history. The Transylvanian School started to become important once the young Romanians went across the frontiers to study in the great libraries of the empire, the revolutionaries in 1848 modified the Romanian cultural paradigm only after they crossed the Western frontiers, the members of Junimea²⁸ had great influence upon the cultural and political Romanian life only after they received their PhD titles in important Western European universities. Modern Romania was built only after its elite crossed the frontier in search for a king. Even Ceauşescu himself was finally to be devoured by the existence of a personality cult which reached its peak when he made his visit to North Korea and China. The conclusion would thus be that any massive crossing of borders made a huge contribution to the Romanian identity profile. Salman Rushdie thus makes notice of the following fact: “We become the frontiers we cross²⁹”.

Then there comes a natural question: what will bring to Romania the generation of strawberry-pickers, spread all over the civilised Europe? Put simply, we should doubt that a generation of people crushed from an identity point of view, a-cultural and with monolithic certitudes, lacking any personality, with a narrow horizon would be capable to redefine a rigid collective mentality. Nobody should expect spectacular changes. Yet the violent clash of values, the direct confrontation of different systems of thought cannot stay without consequences.



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Notes

¹ Alain Brossat, *Frontiera ca muzeu și laborator al excepției*, in *Teritorii (Scrieri, dez-scrieri)*. Coordinator: Octavian Groza, București: Paideia Publishing House, 2003, p. 101-102. The English versions belong to the author.

² Eugen Negrici, *Iluziile literaturii române*, București: Cartea Românească Publishing House, 2008.

³ Salman Rushdie, *Step Across this Line, Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002*, London: Vintage, 2003, p. 412.

⁴ Alexandru Vakulovski, *Pizdeț*, Brașov: Aula Publishing House, 2002 and Alexandru



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⁵ See Dan C. Mihăilescu, *Literatura română în postceașism*, (3 volumes), Iași: Polirom Printing House, 2006, vol. 2, p. 354 - 358.

⁶ Ioana Baetica, *Fișă de înregistrare*, Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2004.

⁷ Nora Iuga, *Săpunul lui Leopold Bloom*, Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2007, p. 103.

⁸ Marius Oprea, *Zorba și Catedrala. 59 de povestiri de la frontieră*, București: Humanitas Publishing House, 2006, p. 17.

⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Step Across this Line*, p. 408.

¹⁰ Apostol Stan, *Putere politică și democrație în România, 1859 – 1918*, București: Albatros Publishing House, 1995, p. 138.

¹¹ Alain Brossat, *Frontiera ca muzeu și laborator al excepției*, p. 107.

¹² Marius Oprea, *Zorba și Catedrala. 59 de povestiri de la frontieră*, p. 22-23.

¹³ Victor Negrescu, “Sunt românii cetățeni de categoria a doua?”, in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Romanian language edition, no. 4, April 2007.

¹⁴ Valeriu Anania, *Memorii*, Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2008, p. 345.

¹⁵ Ion Gavrilă Ogoranu, *Brazii se frâng, dar nu se îndoiesc*, vol. 2, Timișoara: Marineasa Publishing House, 1993, p. 108.

¹⁶ Eugen Negrici, *Iluziile literaturii române*, p. 30.

¹⁷ Cornel Ivanciuc, *Cartea cuceririlor*, București: LiterNet Publishing House, 2003, p. 81.

¹⁸ Valeriu Anania, *op. cit.*, p. 455.

¹⁹ Iulia Popovici, “Comunismul sau manualul

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²⁰ Mircea Vasilescu, “Generația căpșunariilor”, in *Dilema veche*, no. 2, 23-29 January 2004.

²¹ Marius Oprea, *Zorba și Catedrala. 59 de povestiri de la frontieră*, p. 59.

²² Marius Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

²³ The expression has its origin in a tragic train accident which happened in 1923 in Romania. The investigation revealed that very important people in the Romanian society had been involved, but the only person to be blamed and convicted was Ion Păun, a simple switchman. From then on, *the switchman Păun* became a well-known expression which means *scape-goat*.

²⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Step Across this Line*, p. 412.

²⁵ Alexandru Ecovoiu, *Ordinea*, Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2005, p. 51.

²⁶ Cosma Brașoveanu, *Fiara*, București: Editura Nemira, 2004, p. 19.

²⁷ Max Solomon, *La 90*, București, Editura LiterNet, 2004, p. 52.

²⁸ Junimea was one of the most influential cultural and political movements in the 19th century Romania. It was founded by representative Romanian intellectuals and brought together the most important Romanian writers. Its members were involved in the political and cultural life of the country until the very beginning of the 20th century.

²⁹ Salman Rushdie, *Step Across this Line*, p. 410.