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When (Lesbian) Women Will Rule Over Men: Visions of Future Gynecocracy in a Novel from Interwar Romania

Abstract: The growing assertiveness of the ‘New Woman’ inspired a number of speculative fictions on what the future would look like if women ruled over men. Future gynecocracy was also imagined in Romania in the interwar years. For example, Ion Talpă rewrote in his 1937 novel *Prin rotogoalele de fum* (Through Smoke Rings) the Hebrew story of humankind’s fall in order to narrate through myth how women will prevail over brutish men. The resulting order is based on all-female sociality, including sexual matters. Women treat degraded men as animals in the all-woman society of Talpă’s ambiguously dystopian narrative, which features lesbian sexuality as a matter of course. This work is innovative for its use of Modernist metafictional devices in order to suggest how subjectivity determines the alternate eutopian or dystopian possible endings of the novel, thus undermining its apparently masculinist message.

Keywords: Gynecocracy; Role Reversal; Lesbian Fiction; Masculinism; Utopian Fiction; Ion Talpă; *Prin rotogoalele de fum*.

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1. Introduction

Feminism has deeply influenced utopian studies. The extent of valuable scholarship devoted to the rediscovery and reappraisal of utopian fiction written by women or focusing on them, and in particular on its history in the British Isles and North America,¹ is now so wide-ranging that one would hardly dare to add yet a further paper on the topic. However, a consequence of the current status of English as the prevalent language of both business and scholarship is that utopian fiction related to feminism written in lesser known languages is rarely considered by international scholars in the field. This circumstance offers anyone able to read these languages the opportunity to show that feminism has inspired interesting and original literary utopias in areas such as Central and Eastern Europe.

Romania could be a good case in point. A significant vision of a feminist future where women rule over men was published there in 1937, namely the novel’s *Prin rotogoalele de fum* (*Through Smoke Rings*)² by Ion Talpă; it has been virtually ignored

until now, though, perhaps because of the author's obscurity.³ However, it is also likely that this novel has fallen into oblivion because it was too daring both for its contents and for its narrative form to be really understood in its time, and even after. We might be now in a better position to appreciate it, once (post)modernity has not only opened utopian fiction to innovative literary techniques and discourses, but has also opened the literary canon to genres such as science fiction. At the same time, thanks to latest societal developments, potentially problematic topics (for example, homosexuality) have become more widely accepted, at least in Western(ised) democratic countries. An attempt at a closer reading of this novel, including extensive plot spoilers due to its being so little known, might contribute to a better understanding of its originality both as an ambiguous dystopia and as an experimental work of modernist literary art. However, since this is a paper of purely basic historical research, only factual information will be presented here, hoping that it will be of interest for more specialised feminist scholars desiring to see what is beyond the limits of the literatures in English, and to hear other voices rarely listened to.

2. Gender Role Reversal Narratives From the Age of the "New Woman" to World War II

When Talpá's novel was published in 1937, the growing assertiveness and public agency of the "New Woman" from the age of the suffragettes onwards had already inspired a number of narratives exploring scenarios of gender role reversal⁴ in Europe. Both male and female authors

of literary utopias used (science) fiction to speculate on how a future society⁵ would be run if women were to rule over men, thus inverting the prevailing situation. They used, however, to uphold a binary and hierarchical concept of the respective roles. Instead of equality based on equal opportunities and agency in both the public and private spheres, gender role reversal was still underpinned by the common assumption in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that each sphere had to be the exclusive realm of one of the other of sexes. Men use to dominate all public matters (work, politics, etc.), whereas women were confined to home and family. Gender role reversal in utopian fiction tended to follow this encompassing societal dichotomy back then, instead of questioning it:

The hegemonic concept of the separation of spheres calls for a specialty contrary to the equality claimed by feminists. A function, whatever it is, must respond to this logic and be either feminine or masculine. Thus, if women assume a particular role, they must exclude men from it in order for the social balance to be maintained preserved. (...) The logic of the separation of the spheres, based on a rigorous balance, leads to role reversal.⁶

Although feminist practice used to follow other paths towards a gender-balanced idea of equality, the progressive fading out of the professions and activities, both public and private, considered proper of one or the other gender might have been little attractive for literary treatment. In contrast, full gender role reversal allowed for an enhanced sense of "defamiliarization"⁷

and, consequently, for better acknowledging, through hyperbole, the differences between the social order in the fictional, secondary world of utopia and the true state of affairs in the mundane, primary world, where both men and women had to negotiate their respective roles in the constant and confusing flux of history. Gender role reversal eschewed the nuances of reality and showed, as if it were an experiment, the extrapolated results of the progression in women's acquisition of agency until its last consequences, taking them to eutopian or dystopian extremes. Indeed, as it is often the case when it comes to imagining the triumph of certain ideologies and social movements able to dramatically change the shape of things to come, those often are either embraced or rejected in full, thus inspiring eutopian or dystopian⁸ visions according to the ideological stance of their authors. In fantasies of gender role reversal, this was often the case as well.

While women writers often imagined worlds where the exclusion of men from the public sphere allowed for the existence of the described eutopian order, male authors tended to see with some apprehension the increasing contemporary female agency in public matters, especially in politics. These opposite attitudes can be illustrated by two English novels. Walter Besant (1836-1901) and other writers among like-minded "old men"⁹ attacked the suffragette movement in his novel *The Revolt of Man* (1882). He describes there the unsavoury consequences of future female dominance in Britain such as the end of exclusively male initiative in matters of love courtship, until a successful revolt of men gives them back their former power, thus reasserting "the view of the anti-suffrage politicians that masculine

claims to 'natural' rule necessarily involved male force".¹⁰ On the other hand, Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett (1846-1930) eulogises in *New Amazonia* (1889) how the former isle of Ireland transforms in 2472 into a technologically advanced and eugenic social order led by women intended to be a eutopia. However, this novel can be read now rather as an involuntary dystopia, because "el rol totalitario del Estado, la censura en el mercado editorial, la misandria, las políticas eutanásicas y eugenésicas (...) han convertido a esta nueva sociedad en un espacio pesadillesco" (the totalitarian role of the State, the censorship in the publishing market, the misandry, the pro-euthanasia and eugenic policies (...) have turned this new society into a nightmarish space).¹¹

Gender role reversal was also the subject of utopian fiction written in Romance languages in times of growing feminist assertiveness, including Romania.¹² In French, a poignant French short story by André Maurois (Émile Herzog, 1885-1967) titled "La dernière histoire du monde" (The Last Story of the World, 1903) is worth mentioning. This is a tragic dystopia set in a future totalitarian phalanstery where women's rule has effectively erased individual (male) creativity for the sake of a hive-like kind of order. As a result, "Freiheit and Kultur bleiben auf der Strecke, wo Kollektivismus und Matriarchat bestimmend sind" (freedom and culture collapse where collectivism and matriarchy rule).¹³ In Romanian, female author Alice Gabrielescu (1893-1968) produced a story titled "O descoperire antifeministă" (An Anti-Feminist Discovery, 1928) describing a future where women rule over frivolous men, at least until a male scientist concocts a potion that gives back to women the physical

beauty that their work and many responsibilities as rulers had taken away from them. Unfortunately, that concoction only works for a couple of hours. Since women do not dare to appear in public to reveal their ugliness, men have plenty of time to seize back power and exclude them from government. Gabrielescu does not eschew her criticism of women themselves, who are blamed for men's return to power. However, "O descoperire antifeministă" cannot be read as a masculinist text since its author clearly believed that women's rule would be more beneficial to society, as feminist utopias by other women such as Corbett often posited. Gabrielescu's satiric use of the gender role reversal scenario to criticise both men and women's failings seems to have been an exceptional occurrence in its context. Her use of historiographic discourse in order to lend additional rhetorical weight to a text that presents itself as a report of historical facts of public interest, was also rare. Her (hi)story can be read, therefore, as a feminist "lección de historia preventiva" (preventive history lesson)¹⁴ to warn women against embracing their traditional presentation as the "fair sex", which would make them give up their conquests, including their prospective eutopian (and democratic!) rule. It is easy then to notice where Gabrielescu's sympathies lie: eutopian gynococracy would be a desirable goal if only human stupidity could allow for it.

3. Dystopian Gynococracy?:

Ion Talpă's *Prin rotogoalele de fum*

Whereas Gabrielescu uses the language of history to lend more rhetorical weight to her scenario of "reversed" gender role reversal, another Romanian

writer preferred to use the language of myth to explain how a future women's rule was anthropologically possible despite the still deeply engrained prejudices against women's intellectual capacities and ability to undertake "serious" pursuits, such as politics. In the 1930s, when women's suffrage was not yet widespread, the fact that a man posited superior female intelligence, even in a mythic context, was rather rare. This is precisely what obscure author Ion Talpă did in the long "Prolog" (Foreword) that precedes the main narrative in his 1937 novel *Prin rotogoalele de fum* (Through Smoke Rings).¹⁵ This foreword is actually an expanded narrative version of the Hebrew myth of creation, including its first human couple in the Garden of Eden and their expulsion from it following their seduction by the serpent in order to eat from the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Talpă widely follows the Biblical line of events, but he also introduces significant changes. God was going to share the fruit of the tree among all living beings in the future, but the Lord ("Domnul," in the masculine gender in the Romanian text) entrusts the serpent with the mission of guarding it for the time being. However, the serpent ate from the fruit and, as a result, it acquired both shrewdness and intelligence. Feeling alone in its new state of awareness, the serpent decided to invite the woman to eat from the fruit in order to have someone with whom to share its thoughts. Although it had to be their exclusive secret, she decided to initiate her male companion as well. After having eaten from the same fruit, he was unable to keep the secret from God. Consequently, both man and woman were expelled out of Eden to survive alone.

The man blamed the woman for their need to work and mistreated her, while she had to accept her subaltern role for her need to be protected by the stronger male during pregnancy and their children's upbringing. Time passed, technology and civilisation developed, and men began to give up the use of their superior physical force. Gender equality was eventually reached, but it did not appease Eve's desire for revenge since their expulsion from paradise. When the use of violence is uprooted thanks to technological progress and the decline of warfare, intelligence and reason prevail at last, and woman's superiority in this regard prevails as well. Men are increasingly replaced by women in all endeavours requiring an active mind and their intelligence declines. As soon as women find technological means to enable them to escape their role in sexual reproduction, men are allowed to continue their regression into neglected animals under women's rule. The woman and the serpent undo thus their mistake in sharing the fruit of intelligence with men.

This powerful mythopoetic narrative radically subverts, without actually seeming to do so, the mythic justification for the gendered subordination of women. Eve's alleged responsibility for the fall of man, as Adam's temptress, provided Jewish and Christian clerics with a powerful symbolic base for their conception of women as morally weak beings to be guided and governed by men. In Talpă's version of this episode of *Genesis*, woman's weakness is only physical, whereas her generosity in wanting to share her intelligence—also unjustly kept by God out of reach of his creatures—is unjustly punished by her man, who is shown as unfairly acting from the very beginning. Her revenge comes

across as poetic justice, as well as a natural consequence of woman's stronger will and shrewdness, whereas man's rule is shown to depend on brute force. In a peaceful, non-violent world, "oriunde se prezinta omul, găsea în fața lui pe femeie, care i-era cu mult superioară" (wherever the man presented himself, he found in front of him the woman, who was far superior to him).¹⁶ Talpă's myth fully endorses women's mental superiority. If woman's rule is questioned at all, this is done in the name of the implied morals. Her quest for revenge and her active acceptance of the debasement of men after humankind reaches gender equality might appear to be ethically defective. However, Talpă's foreword is not intended to deliver moral lessons, but rather to add a wide-ranging mythic dimension, from the past to the future, to his utopian novel, thus connecting the mythical way to knowledge implied in the etiological narrative to the scientific one implied in the kind of futuristic narrative that follows and constitutes the core of the book.

The modified ancient Hebrew myth offers a poetical, transcendent explanation for the deep anthropologic mutation described. Future gynocracy is, therefore, tacitly endowed with a similar authoritative weight as the biblical hypotext that mythically founded and divinely endorsed the inferior status for women in Abrahamic religions. This is contradicted, however, by the heterodiegetic narrator in the science fictional and utopian part of the novel. In fact, gynocracy is heavily criticised by the heterodiegetic narrative voice, which insists on actively promoting a very conservative concept of woman as the one responsible for domestic happiness in the family. She should devote her energies to

raising her children, instead of disputing men their posts in the labour market. Men at work and women at home, this would be the “rânduială naturală și temeinică” (natural and fundamental order)¹⁷ dictated by nature itself, according to the narrator’s statement in the conclusive pages of the book. Other conservative assertions abound in it, but virtually never in the mythic foreword.

Lacking any other text that would enlighten us about Talpă’s own views on the matter, that conservative narrative voice should not be considered more authoritative than the one expressing the symbolic meaning of the book through myth. Its blatant, emphatic conservatism might be in fact a defensive procedure not to scare off most contemporary readers, who could have been appalled by the portrayal in the novel of a future where women’s rule is conflated with virtually universal lesbianism. Daringly, this future is narrated in the novel on its own terms, and using a realistic literary technique that enhances its plausibility. As it is the case in contemporary scientific romances, rational explanations and realistic detail when presenting the imagined future are literary procedures widely used in Talpă’s novel to generate a convincing effect of reality. This realistic approach suggests then that the shocking new order is not a product of extravagant fancy in a fabulous, far-away secondary world akin to those of mythic narratives, but a plausible product of social and historic evolution. Therefore, the novel appears to support the idea that both women’s rule and lesbianism can be natural developments.

There is no need to recall how problematic such an apparently serious public endorsement of lesbianism in literature

must have been in 1937, especially in a novel where the male gaze frequent in erotic literature about lesbians written by men is usually avoided. In the context of his native Romania, where homosexuality has rarely been freely and sympathetically portrayed in fiction anyway,¹⁸ adopting a narrative voice that vocally upheld traditional morality and prejudices might look like a sensible strategy to get away with the daring feat of showing a properly working society under lesbian female rule. This conservative, even reactionary stance of that voice is likely to be disturbing for later Western readers in the wake of the wide acknowledgment of women’s public equality and acceptance of diverse sexual orientations. Nevertheless, it might be rewarding to go beyond the narrator’s own comments and, following the hints offered by the mythic foreword to the main narrative, to try to see if the text could allow for alternative, more liberal readings.

(Lesbian) women’s rule in the imagined future is the result of a complete upheaval. Even geology helps to explain how millennia of male rule could be completely erased and forgotten. Following the flooding of entire continents and the raising of a new single one, all traces of ancient male rule were erased. This eliminated the need for controlling the knowledge of history as a precondition for securing women’s rule, as Katharine Burdekin shows in her novel *The End of This Day’s Business*, which appeared only in 1990, but it was written before the end of 1937, according to internal evidence.¹⁹ For that British novelist, who “spotlights the fallacious arguments of both the patriarchal and the matriarchal rules”,²⁰ the latter endures because women risk the death penalty if they break their oath never

to reveal men that the latter were in charge once. Women keep men ignorant and exclude them from any intellectual pursuits, limiting their prospects to physical labour and favouring their entrapment in a state of protracted dependent boyhood. Otherwise, women's rule appears to be quite eutopian: it is stable, peaceful and able to satisfy people's material needs, although it is also technologically stagnant. Politically, government is highly decentralised and seems to work quite well as a sort of professional administrative body, rather than as an arena where different political ideologies and personal ambitions clash. This system, perhaps inspired by contemporary technocratic ideals, is very similar to the one described in Talpă's future story. Here as well, there are no nations or borders anymore, and no political parties. Its basis is the *caza*, a cell of ten women linked by purely professional interests. Each *caza* sends representatives to larger bodies up to world level. Socially, *cazas* have also effectively replaced family following a revolution in human reproduction. No woman is subjected to pregnancy anymore. A sort of in vitro fertilisation is universal, with the human embryo growing within a modified species of mammal. After birth and a period of common upbringing, children are segregated. Females are educated in order to assume their future posts, while males grow up with and are raised as cattle, to be exploited as beasts of burden and mere donors of sperm. There is no meaningful interaction between men and women as it exists in Burdekin's story of gender reversal. In this context, given that no other past system is known, there seems to be no prospect of change in Talpă's imagined female-ruled society, described using the

objective style of a sociological treatise as a properly working society. It is, moreover, technologically advanced as well, in particular with regard to air transportation and biology. The picture is rather eutopian, as noted, but the narrative voice recall the fact that no human society in history has endured forever. Gynecocracy has no rivals. Men could hardly oppose it. Its downfall may only stem from a change in women's views.

In the time when the story takes place, there are some signs that gynecocracy is not as robust as it was. In the countryside, some men working in farms are treated as human beings. Archaeologists are beginning to unearth vestiges of the ancient times when men and women had families. Some progressive women even support improving men's education in order to lift them above animal level and to take better advantage of them as a workforce. However, the crisis of gynecocracy is rather linked to its failing to control women's sex drive. Whereas chastity was universally imposed on all women at the beginning of their rule, laws punishing the practice of sex were later hardly enforced. Women had begun to have sexual and love relationships among each other, men being obviously excluded from them given their perceived animal status. This sexual orientation and its erotic practices are considered by the narrator as a natural result of human nature, since they are "legate așa de strânse de ființa omenească" (so closely linked to the human being).²¹

However, not all manifestations of lesbian sexuality are so readily endorsed. The story of the main character of the novel, Floria Stranga, suggests that some lesbian behaviours are morally and socially more

acceptable than others. Floria is a renowned lawyer and stateswoman in Ginsara, one of the main cities of gynecocratic Earth. She lives with her lover, the delicate and home-loving Lara, in a relationship akin to that of a heterosexual married couple. The narrator presents this arrangement as a happy, positive one. Their expressions of affection are also presented with manifest sympathy, as well as Lara's suffering when she suspects her partner of not being entirely faithful to her. Floria has not only an extremely sensual nature, but also the financial means to indulge it in nightclubs that serve as cover for brothels offering beautiful women to affluent female patrons such as Floria herself. Amzuna Pinta, the old millionaire who owns most of these places, wishes to take advantage of Floria's taste for extra-marital sex to initiate her in more serious perversions and bind her influential client to her business, despite the fact that Floria is one of the most outspoken and influential voices against "androidists", as the defenders of men's advancement are called. The businesswoman succeeds at last to bring Floria to a secret venue where she and other women can enjoy the supreme forbidden perversion of having sex with animals such as the male of the human species are considered. Indeed, not all of them have been raised as cattle. Some of them have been secretly bred and educated to be sexy stallions and perfect lovers, entirely devoted to women's erotic pleasure. The issue with this kind of intercourse is that, in a society where contraception is unknown for lack of need, pregnancy can occur. This happens to the unsuspecting Floria, who is not even aware of her condition. To conceal an accident that could bring down Amzuna's illegal business,

Floria is tricked into travelling to a hospital in a secluded valley still unknown by the Earth government. Floria delivers there a male child, whom she accepts as hers before joining the small agricultural colony where she and other mothers are to pass the rest of their lives with their children and a man of their choice, if they wish so. In this pastoral community, family is slowly recreated, but it is a non-patriarchal one where men are still subordinated. Equality is not yet possible, due to men's lack of education, but Floria works to improve the constraining situation.

The education of men could be the seed for a future fairer gender order. However, the old world of female rule reasserts itself. Floria's disappearance is widely commented upon. Many other missing women are also reported. Thanks to a persistent admirer of Floria who finally reaches the colony where she now resides, all the inhabitants of the reformed community are brought to gynecocratic jurisdiction. Amzuna's business collapses. Many women are arrested, including many wealthy and powerful patrons of male brothels. Floria decides then to look for support from "androidists" to save the lives of all accused, who are to be judged and likely sentenced to death.

This is a turning point. If the prosecutor convinces the judges, the execution of those who oppose gynecocracy through their acts, or even their mere existence, will entail an aggravated return of female totalitarianism, a repression of women and their natural sexual drives, lesbian or not. Women's rule will be dystopian for all, not only for men, who would have been virtually killed off, anyway. If Floria wins the day instead, the heterosexual family and a better

status for men would be allowed, and this will bring about a different kind of society in the long term since “androidist” ideas would become mainstream. As a result, men would enjoy more rights and assume more responsibilities, while the formerly secluded colony would offer an alternate model of society that could prevail, not only because it appears as eutopian, but also because heterosexual couples form a large majority among human beings and, therefore, some might consider them most natural, as the narrator indeed does. Unfortunately, the narrator abusively extends the concept of heterosexual reproduction to an essentialist view of both sexes, according to which both sexes would have been determined by nature to play opposite social roles. Women would have to be confined to the private sphere of home and family, while men would work and assume public responsibilities. This nineteenth century “old men” concept of the family is extended to homosexual couples, since the unequal relationship between Floria, the public figure, and Lara, her patient wife at home, works as a kind of model in their context, whereas sexual promiscuity in general is clearly frowned upon.

However, all this conservatism in family and gender role matters is not necessarily in agreement with the implied author’s position, since Talpă’s novel relativises through metaliterary devices the statements by the narrator. When the gynecocratic regime is nearing its tipping point, the course of the narrative is abruptly interrupted. All of a sudden, readers are transported from a court of law of the future to a picturesque room in contemporaneous 1930s Bucharest. The room is described with naturalistic detail as the abode

of two female friends from the same provincial city who lead now a bohemian life as students in the Romanian capital. One of them devotes most of her time writing for the feminist press, because “(i)dealul ei este o societate condusă numai de femei” (her ideal is a society ruled only by women).²² She is writing a novel where women actually rule, and this novel is precisely the futuristic one already presented. She is unable, however, to continue. Her friend suggests to her that she leaves the novel unfinished for readers to imagine their own outcome of the gynecocratic crisis according to their own taste, and to their own ideas about the desirability or not of both the actual and potential utopian orders described. The unnamed writer, who is a heavy smoker as well (hence the novel’s title), is not happy with an open ending, however. Her first choice is to reject the prospect of equality. Although she believes that man and woman were created as equals, she also considers that men have abused their rule, obtained and maintained by brute force. Therefore, there should be justice in a full gender reversal. Women will also make the laws and apply capital punishment, as men used to do. She has then found the right ending: the court will sentence fifty thousand women and virtually all males to death. This bloodbath will suppress all opposition to female rule, present and future. Separatist gynecocracy would thus become monogender, as it is the case in separatist feminist utopias such as *Herland* (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). However, the young woman experiences then a crisis of remorse. She imagines that her mother tries to persuade she and her friend to renounce their professional careers, because

men can work whereas only mothers can properly raise children at home. These words convince the young author to write an alternative ending. According to this, Floria and her powerful political allies succeed in allowing their gynecocracy to evolve towards gender equality and the comeback of the heterosexual family unto the world. Moreover, conservatism ends by prevailing in her own narrative voice and propagates back to the rest of the futuristic narrative. It matches then the conservatism of the anonymous second voice responsible for the metaliterary part of the novel, “împunându-și viziunea vădit anti-feministă în discursul interior al romancierei, funcționând ca o *ventrilocie* perfidă” (embedding its overtly anti-feminist vision in the novelist’s inner speech, as a treacherous *ventriloquist*).²³ These two antifeminist narrative voices differ in turn from the one narrating the myth in the foreword, which is far more discreet when it comes to uttering moral judgments.

This plurality of narrative voices, each of them offering its own perspective and pulling the novel towards both misandrist and misogynist readings, sometimes towards feminism and sometimes towards masculinism, is a testament to the author’s ability to cater for different sensibilities and ideological leanings. Beyond the strategic triumph of patriarchal masculinism at the end, a triumph that would support a certain idea of this novel as antifeminist dystopia, gynecocracy is shown in practice as a plausible eutopia. It actually seems to work significantly better, at least for the members of the privileged sex and sexual orientation, than the contemporaneous social order lead by men and subjected to continuous political tensions and violence.

At the end of the day, it all depends on the intentions of who is describing it. Utopian fiction appears as a product of subjectivity. Both eutopias and dystopias are shown to be the product of certain ideological stances, which in turn are defined by personal experiences rather than by a rational process. As Talpă implies through his bohemian female narrator, we consider eutopian what we like, and dystopian what we dislike at any given moment. Any potential message from the novel must be relativised accordingly.

Furthermore, his literary technique also suggests that we should carefully consider who tells the utopian story before putting political labels on the implied author. Fiction has its own laws, which are not the same as those of a political tract. Plausible character development in a credible environment, even if the fictional world is utopian and speculative, requires a certain degree of ambiguity, because human nature is never completely evil or good, and neither should be its reflection in literature. Talpă’s novel demonstrates this despite probable authorial intentions. Indeed, if those intentions really existed, we have seen that they are properly undermined by the narrative itself, both with regard to its feminist contents, with female rule appearing as operative, and to its modern form, which eschews both a single focus and a single narrative authority. These features make of *Prin rotogoalele de fum* an interesting example of Modernist novel in Romanian interwar literature. It is also a rather unusual book within the tradition of contemporary role reversal narratives, in particular for its clearly featuring lesbianism among ruling women before its increasingly visibility in speculative and

science fiction related to gender role reversal after World War II.²⁴ In contrast, Burdekin's otherwise poignant novel *The End of This Day's Business* refrains from clearly showing that sexual orientation, while it appears as being literarily quite traditional if we compare it with Talpă's narrative.

However, the latter reads as a less balanced work than Burdekin's. In fact, a renowned contemporary critic, Ovidiu Papadima (1909-1996), disliked "balastul inutil" (the useless ballast)²⁵ of a mythic foreword in a futuristic narrative, whereas he praised the book as an example of "romanul de idei și de fantezie" (the novel of ideas and fantasy)²⁶ common back then in Western. Others might prefer it for its more markedly uniform style and for its original approach to gender. In any case, it seems unfair to deem this Romanian novel as aesthetically poor, or even to condemn it "ca sublitteratură" (as sublitterature) as Adriana Babeți does.²⁷ This Romanian scholar was probably influenced by her obvious bias against speculative fiction: she even demeans in her book on the topic of the Amazons the literary value of two narratives on gender role reversal written in the form of modern Gulliveriana that are now considered classics of their genre and have been translated into several languages, namely *Capillária* (*Capillaria*, 1921) by Hungarian Frigyes Karinthy (1887-1938) and *El paraíso de las mujeres* (*Women's Paradise*, 1922) by Spanish Vicente Blasco Ibañez (1867-1928). Moreover, many other speculative and utopian fictions have undeservedly fallen into oblivion as well, because they were rather unfit for the taste and prejudices of their intended contemporary public, whereas they might be better appreciated by later readers and

scholars under different historical circumstances. Burdekin's later (re)discovery is a case in point. If this is also the case of Talpă's modernist stories of gender role reversal, future readers and scholars will tell, but here it is a possible conclusion.

4. Conclusion

Independently of its potential literary merits, Talpă's *Prin rotogoalele de fum* is a narrative that can be considered exceptional in its time. Indeed, this novel daringly features unapologetically lesbian relationships as a natural occurrence in a society where women rule and men are treated as inferior animals. While the most conspicuous narrator apparently supports a very patriarchal concept of the family, the lesbian monogamous married couple is shown under a clearly positive light. This seems to tacitly support the idea of same-sex marriage as equivalent to traditional marriage long before it became widely accepted, at least in a large part of the Western area of civilisation. At any case, this attitude was still unheard of in utopian fiction, in particular among depictions of women's rule written by male and even female writers. Moreover, the conservative narrative voice is shown to be that of a young woman who is writing a novel on gender role reversal in order to advance her extreme feminist views, until an emotional crisis alters her worldview. She ends by upholding the traditional role of woman as housewife and mother as a better alternative to her earlier idea of women decreeing men's slaughter ahead of a fully totalitarian gynecocracy. This metaliterary explanation of the origins and tendency of the narrative until its double, opposite conclusion relativises all ideological stances by

showing their dependence on subjectivity. It also highlights the fictional dimension of utopia, subjecting it here to literary, rather than political requirements.

In spite of its heavy moralising, Talpă's novel is above all a Modernist piece of narrative art, as its pluralistic focus and plurality of discourses suggest. It is, indeed, more than a novel, since it comprises a mythographic foreword that rewrites the Hebrew myth of Adam and Eve from a rather feminist perspective in order to explain and even justify the gender role reversal to come. This literary dimension enriches the novel and makes it far quite ambiguous and varied in its approach to the scenario of women ruling over men. Its apparent conservatism is undermined,

even denied by its openness to modernity, both in literature and manners. This modernity is international in outlook and nature. As it also the case in Gabrielescu's "O descoperire feministă", the women's rule that Talpă imagines is global rather than national, thus avoiding the localism rather common in English utopias such as those by Burdekin. Later Romanian stories also featuring gender reversal²⁸ are also rather cosmopolitan in outlook. Unfortunately, Romanian utopian fiction is little known abroad. We can only hope that we will be really aware one day that feminism and utopian fiction have existed for long in countries that were not political and economic great powers, as well as in languages other than English.

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NOTES

1. Nan Bowman Albinski, *Women's Utopias in British and American Fiction*, London & New York, Routledge, 2019.
2. All translations are by the author of this paper. Titles in italics are those of existing English translations of the mentioned works.
3. The biography of this writer is hardly known. His true name was Titu Ionescu, and he was a medical doctor. He was active in the 1930s, when he published, further to *Prin rotogoalele de fum*, a collection of realistic short stories titled *Fiorii sfârșitului* (The End's Chills, 1936), as well as two books of verse, namely *Versuri* (Poems, 1935), which includes some fairy tales in verse and an interesting short cosmogonic poem titled "Ex nihilo", and *Sub lună* (Under the Moon, 1938), where the author proposed new strophic forms for the sonnet.
4. The term 'sex role reversal' would perhaps be more accurate, because it is only about men and women's role in society in most of the scenarios of this kind, in particular in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, since 'gender' has now virtually replaced 'sex' in English in texts not related to reproductive matters, 'gender' will also be used here.
5. Unlike most stories of gender role reversal written from ancient times to the aftermath of the French Revolution, those written in modern times are "legitimately within the province of science fiction" for their being "the extrapolation of the woman dominant" (Sam Moskowitz, "When Women Rule", in *When Women Rule*, New York, Walker and Company, 1972, p. 1). Even within pulp science fiction, there was the occasional gender role reversal narrative, such as "The Conquest of Gola" (1931) by Leslie F. Stone (1905-1991). This story is quite original, because men are violently repressed by women. This is "rather unusual, since it is a trait more often associated with all-female or women-dominated fantasies created by men" (Batya Weinbaum, "Sex-Role Reversal in the Thirties: Leslie F. Stone's 'The Conquest of Gola'", in *Science Fiction Studies*, 24, 3, 1997, p. 476).
6. "La pensée hégémonique de la séparation des sphères appelle une spécialité contraire à l'égalité revendiquée par les féministes. Une fonction, quelle qu'elle soit, doit répondre à cette logique et être soit féminine, soit masculine. Ainsi, si les femmes accèdent à un rôle, elles doivent en chasser les hommes pour que l'équilibre social soit conservé. (...) La logique de la séparation des sphères, basée

- sur un équilibre rigoureux, aboutit à l'inversion des rôles" (Anne-Sarah Moalic-Bouglé, "Femmes, politique et imaginaire. Deux romans de science-fiction au XIX^e siècle", in *Parlement[s]. Revue d'histoire politique*, 1, 17, 2012, p. 156).
7. Daphne Patai, "When Women Rule: Defamiliarization in the Sex-Role Reversal Utopia", in *Extrapolation*, 23, 1 (1982), p. 56-69.
 8. In this paper, any literary text primarily focusing on the description of the political organisation and operation of an imaginary society is considered 'utopian'. According to Patai, "utopian writers typically dislocate the traditional novelist's concentration on individual character in favour of exploration of a broader social landscape" ("Afterword", in Katharine Burdekin, *The End of This Day's Business*, New York, The Feminist Press, 1989, p. 169). In modern times, the society described is often set in the future, and this is why utopia is often considered a genre related to science fiction. Following Corin Braga's comprehensive taxonomy (*Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, Paris, Garnier, 2018), literary utopias can be divided into subgenres according to the perceived positivity or negativity, as well as depending on their possibility or impossibility of realisation in our primary world. Although the very concept of (im)possibility is quite slippery in fiction, the Romanian novel here considered here presents a future that is not completely impossible, at least within the encyclopaedia of chronotopes of science fiction. Therefore, the only relevant criterion here would be that of positivity vs negativity, i.e. 'eutopia' vs 'dystopia.'
 9. Ann Heilman, "Revolted Men? Sexual Fears and Fantasies in Writing by Old Men, 1880-1910", in *Critical Survey*, 25, 3, 2003, p. 56-73.
 10. Gretchen Lynn, *Quiring, Petticoat Government: Female Rule in British Fiction, 1870-1890*, Victoria, University of British Columbia, 2002, p. 139.
 11. Melanie Umerez, "¿Utopía o pesadilla? El futuro post-sufragista en *La Nueva Amazonia* de E.B. Corbett", in *Inter Litteras*, 4 (2022), 280, <http://revistascientificas.filo.uba.ar/index.php/interlitteras/article/view/11727/10922>
 12. Ștefania Mihăilescu, *Din istoria feminismului românesc. Studii și antologie de texte (1929-1948)*, Iași, Polirom, 2006.
 13. Hinrich Hudde, "Subversives Tagebuch aus der Zukunft: André Maurois's Erzählung 'La dernière histoire du monde' und die Formgeschichte der Antiutopie", in *Romanische Forschungen*, 89, 4 (1977), p. 445.
 14. Mariano Martín Rodríguez, "Un texto desconocido de la ficción científica rumana de ambiente urbano del período de entreguerras: 'O descubrirer antifeministă', de Alice Gabrielescu", in *Ángulo Recto*, 5, 1 (2013), p. 224, <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/ANRE/article/view/42376/40325>
 15. Ion Talpă, *Prin rotogoalele de fum*, București, Cartea Românească, 1937.
 16. *Ibidem*, p. 36-37.
 17. *Ibidem*, p. 209-210.
 18. Angelo Mitchievici, "Sexualitatea damnată și literatura gay", in *Cultura faliei și modernitatea românească*, Iași, Institutul European, 2013, p. 177-198.
 19. Burdekin foresees a war between Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany following the attempt of the latter to annex Austria. This forecast could only be made before the Anti-Komintern Pact of November the 6th 1937, after which Italy did not oppose the *Anschluss*.
 20. Emrah Atasoy, "Roles reversed in *The End of This Day's Business* by Katharine Burdekin: A Utopian Dystopian Social Order", in *Libros de la Corte*, 10, 16 (2018), 318, <https://revistas.uam.es/librosdelacorte/article/view/9628/9780>
 21. Ion Talpă, *op. cit.*, p. 49.
 22. *Ibidem*, p. 176.
 23. Emanuel Lupașcu, "Postumanul ca world literature. Cazul SF-ului românesc interbelic", in *Transilvania*, 11-12 (2022), 40, <https://revistatransilvania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/interior-RT11-12-2022-FINAL-37-46-LUPASCU.pdf>
 24. For example, *Les Hommes protégés* (1974; translated into English in 1977 as *The Virility Factor*) by Robert Merle (1908-2004) presents "un parcours du patriarcat au matriarcat libéral, en passant

- par le matriarcat haineux” (a journey from patriarchy to liberal matriarchy, passing through hateful matriarchy; Anne Wattel, “La communauté au féminin éradiquer ou rééduquer l’autre sexe (le 1er)”, in *Robert Merle. Écrivain singulier du propre de l’homme*, Villeneuve d’Ascq, Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2018, p. 247), based on “un sexisme anti-mâle exacerbé” (exacerbated anti-male sexism; Bernard Cocula, “Une utopie féministe et sexiste : *Les Hommes protégés* de Robert Merle”, in *Utopie et utopies : L’imaginaire du projet social européen. Actes du colloque européen de Bordeaux 15-16 février 1991*, II, Mont-de-Marsan, Éditions InterUniversitaires, 1994, p. 152) promoted by the lesbian ruler of the described gynocracy. In *The Ruins of Isis* (1978) by Marion Zimmer Bradley (1930-1999), lesbianism goes hand in hand with men’s oppression. Although Bradley’s approach seems quite balanced, it has been written that it “very much upholds and depends on a view of gender as a binary construct” (Cora Zoé Övermann, “Gender, Science, and Two Cultures in Marion Zimmer Bradley’s *The Ruins of Isis* (1978)”, in *Zeitschrift für Fantastikforschung*, 10, 1, 2022, 5, <https://zff.openlibhums.org/article/7937/gallery/22633/download/>).
25. Ovidiu Papadima, “Ion Talpă: *Prin rotogoalele de fum*”, in *Gândirea*, XVI, 8 (1937), p. 413.
26. *Ibidem*, p. 412.
27. Adriana Babeți, *Amazoanele: O poveste*, Iași, Polirom, 2013, p. 251.
28. After Talpă’s, there is a couple of Romanian gender role reversal narratives written by highly regarded authors. “Răzvrătirea din insula Maladona” (The Revolt on Maladona Island, 1946) by Victor Papilian (1888-1956) is a short comic and deeply masculinist imaginary voyage to an island where women rule. “Amazonia” (Amazonia) is one of the dystopias composing the volume titled *Alfabetul distopiilor* (The Alphabet of Dystopias, 2021) by Gheorghe Săsărman (1941-). In “Amazonia”, the homodiegetic narrator tells of his misfortunes following his arrival to a future world where women have imposed their nightmarish rule over debased men. The psychology of a contemporary gentleman who has internalised the idea of gender equality, but who is understandably puzzled and frightened by totalitarian gynocracy, is skilfully presented from the main character’s own perspective.