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## **Dystopias and Allegories about Communist Romania**

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**Abstract:** This study outlines a typology of dystopias and narrative allegories about Communist Romania, discussing three famous novels: *The Black Church* by A. E. Baconsky, *The Second Messenger* by Bujor Nedelcovici, and *Farewell, Europe!* by Ion D. Sîrbu. The three novels were prohibited from being published during the Communist regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu and became drawer manuscripts, seeing the light of print only after the fall of Communism, in 1990, 1991, and 1992-1993. Baconsky's novel circulated in samizdat (between 1976-1977) and was made into a series by the Munich-based Radio Free Europe, which broadcast clandestinely inside Romania. Nedelcovici's novel was translated into French in 1985, and was very successful. In Romanian literature, Ion D. Sîrbu's novel is considered the most important "drawer" work. All three novels, as dystopias, allegories and parables, focus on three recurrent topics: the world of oppressors, the world of victims and the method of brainwashing.

**Keywords:** Romania; Narrative; Fiction; Dystopia; Allegory; Communism; Securitate; Victim; Brainwashing; Katabasis; A. E. Baconsky; Bujor Nedelcovici; Ion D. Sîrbu.

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In what follows, I will mainly focus on two books: *The Second Messenger* by Bujor Nedelcovici (written in 1983, the book was banned from publication and was released in 1985, in France, by Albin Michel Press, and in Romania, only after the collapse of the communist regime) and *Farewell, Europe!* by Ion D. Sîrbu – a masterpiece about the Communist period, a drawer manuscript written by the author in the last years of his life (the book appeared only after the collapse of the Communist regime and received raving reviews in Romania).

Ion D. Sîrbu lived between 1919-1989 and was a political prisoner between 1956-1964. He was constantly persecuted and marginalized after his release from prison. Bujor Nedelcovici, born in 1936 (whose father was a political prisoner), emigrated to France in 1987 as a protest against Nicolae Ceaușescu's dictatorial regime. Both authors were relegated to the margins of the literary establishment during the Communist regime in Romania. A. E. Baconsky (1925-1977) was a poet, prose writer, and modernist essayist; initially he was a collaborator of the Communist regime in Romania, but gradually became a critic of the regime. I will briefly present the allegorical

novel *The Black Church*, written by Baconsky, by way of an introduction to the other two books.

### The Oppressors' World

The invasion of beggars who conquer and dominate the city in *The Black Church*, harassing the inhabitants, suggests that the beggar condition represents one stage of initiation into an occult society: the Beggars' League turns out to be a camouflaged totalitarian party, and the Black Church becomes an anti-Vatican fit for the new times; there are no more liturgies, only burial services. The whole city ends up being patronized by beggars who usurp the role of priests, modifying liturgies and prayers.<sup>1</sup> The emblematic master of this world is an old man with a huge moustache (a Stalin-effigy), whose statue suffocates all edifices, but the real ruler of this world is a female servant. Beggars have no names, they are gravediggers, chaplains, porters, guards, or lackeys; intellectuals are subordinated to beggars either as delators or as clowns. Museums and libraries are evacuated, books are burned, and beggars establish a dictatorship with monastic overtones. The League's headquarters are in the former National Library, converted into a sumptuous night asylum. The League is surrounded, moreover, by a mysterious halo: its writings and ideology are ambiguous and intricate even for neophytes; the members of the League chant choral hymns and give out compulsory catechisms to the population, or, taking up the Eucharistic ritual, set up a feast in which they distribute bread and wine to the inhabitants. The League has strange hierarchies: the gravediggers, for example,

are priests, and the entire elite is structured on a funerary functionality. Public trials have a priestly aspect, and funeral services degenerate into public trials. The League's parties, called "night universities",<sup>2</sup> are orgies doubled by flagellation shows. In the end, the power struggle between the League's elite and the dissidents ends with the storming of the Black Church and the installation of a new, but equally totalitarian, generation (former outcasts). The most interesting aspect related to the world of the masters, as it is described by A. E. Baconsky, is of a sacerdotal nature; there is not a single dictator in *The Black Church*, but a lot of beggars-dictators, usurpers of a Christianity that they pervert atheistically; the ending of the novel refuses redemption, even if the author wants to indicate some melioristic change, because the new priests (who will replace the old ones) are also despots, although they intend to pose as "enlightened".

The idea of repression understood as a perverted priesthood also appears in the novel *Farewell, Europe!* by Ion D. Sirbu, where the allegorically conveyed dictatorial structure mimics the Turkish structure of a sultanate. The character Marcus Winter, a former pupil of Professor Deziderius Candid (the main character of the novel – his Voltairean name is intentional!), works in the Agia (the repression apparatus) of Isarlyk (the totalitarian *topos* in the novel *Farewell, Europe!*), and considers that the dictatorial structure makes up "a monastic brotherhood /.../ in the service of a fanatical atheistic religion".<sup>3</sup> The Sultan's adviser himself defines a quasi-religious dictatorship, in which the Party is a Church that works through ideological evangelists; the imposture of this Church-Party reaches its

peak the moment when it aims to charismatically reclaim and confiscate Christ as an archetypal communist, the Party thus aiming to move on to the stage of “ascetic socialism”.<sup>4</sup>

Isarlyk, the Balkan setting marred by bribery and corruption in *Farewell, Europe!*, is a social-political pashalik, a city of widespread deceit, opposed to Genopolis, the spiritual city. Ion D. Sirbu’s satire is of the Swiftian type, as Swift is the author’s unconfessed inspiration. The people of Power are organized in a Turkocratic hierarchy (bey, *capucehaie*, Pasha, Aga, vizier, sultan), in which the dictator (Suleiman the omniscient) is only invoked, being presented through a portrait-effigy. Power is organized like a mafia, alternating between anarchic and deliberate terror. The Agia appears projected as an almost mystical institution, mediating between the Divan (Party) and the population. Ion D. Sirbu resorts to a symbolic bestiary, torturers and delators being projected as grotesque beasts. The process of metamorphosis is called *ratisation* and *demonisation*<sup>5</sup> and it pertains to a new kind of Hell, in which devils are no longer needed, since people themselves are voluntarily substituting them. Not in vain does the main hero of *Farewell, Europe!*, Deziderius Candid, a mocking philosopher, perceive all kinds of ironic, meditative and satirical demons outlining a burlesque Apocalypse. But this eventually becomes terrifying, because individuals touched by the devil’s bite (*morsus diaboli*) are infested, without the possibility of healing.

A political prisoner in terms of his inner structure, Deziderius Candid elevates detention to a national level, making the prison a projection of the leprosy-camp/

pashalik. In fact, prisons and camps were once laboratories for the training and biometapsychical restructuring of the population of Isarlyk. In the exercise of terror, the Power in the city of Isarlyk applies the “K. effect”, alternating hope with fear until the individual no longer rebels, but is disciplined through Pavlovian training, having the will “neutered”.<sup>6</sup> The Agia (i.e. the repression apparatus) relies on prohibiting the concept of innocence, in order to create a fatal legal duality through which individuals become accused and accusers at the same time. Members of the Turkocratic repression apparatus are classified into three types: *ruri* (cruel torturers, fanatics), *eunuchs* (opportunistic torturers) and *apteri* (non-torturers, bureaucrats serving the institution of repression), all of whom make up, along with the nomenclature, the neo-Byzantine class of *optimates* – those “from above”, opposed to the *pessimushes* – those “from below”.<sup>7</sup> The terms for the classification and typology of the repression apparatus members are invented by I. D. Sirbu. In the anti-utopian dream of the main character Deziderius Candid, he tries to exorcise evil: thus, for the Academy for the Salvation of the World that files petitions to hand them over to God, Sultan Suleiman and the Agia of repression are necessary precisely because they exhaust evil, taking terror beyond any limit.<sup>8</sup> But the ending of the novel indicates the amplification of the evil: Olympia, the wife of the main character is killed, and Deziderius Candid will be killed in his turn or will be admitted to the lunatic asylum. The asylum is the last circle of Hell, in a society that adapts to *inorcism* (a term opposed to exorcism), meaning *demonisation*.<sup>9</sup>

The surest effect that the repression institution expects is fear. In the novel

*Farewell, Europe!*, Deziderius Candid of Isarlyk is a theorist, but also a guinea pig, of fear. Candid even draws a kind of Mendeleev table of fear in which, although the fear from above (“metafear”; of sin, of God) and the fear from below (fear of suffering in the Gulag) are distinct, they blend into a turbulent maelstrom when the individual loses his stable bearings. Becoming almost a philosophical sentiment, fear is sublimated only ideationally; specifically, the inhabitants of Isarlyk who go through *demonisation* also experience *enfearing*.<sup>10</sup>

In the novel *The Second Messenger*, the punishment matrix is a Re-education Institute designed as a “political monastery”,<sup>11</sup> the only individuals who do not need to self-denounce and can think freely being members of an ideological Elite League (*i.e.* the nomenclature). The space of repression in *The Second Messenger* is represented by Victory Island, ruled by a governor and transformed into a huge barracks, a space where dreams are self-censored, reading is forbidden (only heroic novels are allowed), erotic desire is disciplined, feeding is rationalized, liberating collective fights are allowed in stadiums, and reality has become paranoid unreality: “we live in an *unreality* that surpasses any imagination or fiction!”<sup>12</sup> This is an infernal island, invaded by Calibans, but also the island of a rebel – Danyel Raynal, the main character. The generic inhabitant of Victory Island has an opaque and standardized face, he is the cloned man, born of the same mother (the Island) and the same father (the Governor). The island is structured as a geometric society composed of elitist leagues, coordinated by the Governor. The Governor, the only free man on Victory Island, is the Great Fisherman

(an ironic allusion to the figure of Christ), and his aides (members of the League and grey eminences of the Institute of Guidance, Education and Instruction, in fact an Institute of Re-education) are “fishermen of souls”, foils of the Christian apostles. Before Danyel Raynal, the Governor theorizes the idea of dictatorship in concentric circles, explaining that the dictator is not a supreme master, but Someone whom Someone-else commands, infinitely.<sup>13</sup>

The body of repression on Victory Island is the Institute, which is based on self-education and re-education. The institute has the function of psychic and cerebral remodelling. It aims to re-educate without torture, counting on a lengthy process of self-unmasking, on restructuring minds through speeches, lessons, screen projections, etc. In the Institute, neither physical nor moral torture or medication is used, but *ideotherapy*, as individuals and society are re-educated through the ideological moulding of the collective subconscious. Ideotherapy takes place at five levels: instincts, memory, affectivity, intelligence, and language, the predilect method being forced collective confession, with a cathartic purpose.<sup>14</sup> As a result of re-education through ideotherapy, the inhabitants “cleans themselves” of thoughts that are not in keeping with the Island and the Governor, each individual being at the same time a victim and executioner for himself. “Power means psychomorphosis”<sup>15</sup> says one of the teachers-reeducators from the Institute. Thus, the entire barracks-Island no longer needs guards, because the outer guards became internal guards, and the prison became an internal and self-censoring gaol. The Cartesian “I think, therefore I exist” turns into “I exist

because I do not think",<sup>16</sup> for this is the mantra of the lobotomized individual.

### The World of Victims

The most exotic form of resistance and confrontation against the dictatorship is illustrated by the former ontology professor Deziderius Candid and his wife, Olympia, in the novel *Farewell, Europe!* Deziderius Candid's reaction to the grotesque dictatorship is biting laughter, which offends power, the character being a refined *homo ridens*. Deziderius Candid's laughter is a "neocephalic" one, the laughter of a rebel who witnesses the comedy of history. He is a misplaced but tragic Gulliver, a "subhero of historical mishaps"<sup>17</sup> endowed with a rational neocortex.<sup>18</sup> Unlike the bestiary of the inhabitants of Isarlyk, the courage of Deziderius Candid is inherent to engaging in laughter and turning laughter into an ontology. As a former political prisoner, Deziderius Candid should have been psychologically trained, given that he elaborates, upon leaving prison, a "Prolegomena to a future victimology" – a science that deals with studying the causes and consequences of becoming, being and remaining an innocent victim.<sup>19</sup> But basically Deziderius Candid is a tragic buffoon, who cannot overcome the duality of his condition. His existential structure is that of a victim, which unwittingly produces other victims. If he saves himself externally through buffoonery, because internally he remains sacrificed anyway, those around him become victims by mere contact. The solution of prayer, once discovered in detention, is no longer valid in the totalitarian City of Isarlyk, except with very few exceptions. In the second ending of the novel

*Farewell, Europe!*, admitted to the hospice, Deziderius Candid, who is still ironic, but force-fed on drugs, finds neither the solution of laughter nor that of prayer; he is the victim who longs to be killed, because he understands that he is a victim-bait for other possible victims, and ends up considering himself demonised.

The generic inhabitant of Victory Island in *The Second Messenger* is an endlessly multiplied individual, a creature that is no more than shell and packaging. Returning from abroad to Victory Island, the character Danyel Raynal meets some "heretics" of the totalitarian space represented by the Island: they ask him to be the "confessor of truth", the one who will write the true Book of the Island, becoming *the writer*.<sup>20</sup> Harassed in order to be tamed, Danyel Raynal endures everything because he wants to find out what the limit of the dictatorship is, by experiencing it directly. In solitude, he experiences insidious terror, fearing his lobotomization according to the insular model applied to the other characters. He eventually ends up interned in the Re-education Institute, his vocation as a self-experimenter proving fatal to him. At the Institute he begins to write the book for which he risks his life, as he is manipulated, and his book will be published abroad and in the country precisely to demonstrate that freedom exists on Victory Island (a false assumption, in fact). Instrumented before returning to the Island to become an official "heretic", Danyel Raynal discovers that all opponents of the dictator – the Governor – are in fact re-educated people trained for Raynal's own subsequent re-education. Thus, unknowingly and unwillingly, Raynal was the theoretical reeducator of his friend Jean Elby

(the absolute “heretic”), and the latter was Danyel Raynal’s reeducator or the catalyst of his re-education. Raynal is re-educated through the method of detecting spiritual-affective dominants and is trained for the position of second-in-command, of a charismatic leader. The protagonist is trained in the psychology of the masses, in the science and practice of leadership. Once re-educated, he becomes the Governor’s advisor, the one who writes his speeches. He becomes Intendent of the press, ideology and culture of the island. He is trained, but at the same time he is also the second messenger after Christ (who was the first messenger), that is, the envoy plunged into the Communist apocalypse, the one whom Jean Elby expected as the Messiah. At some point, however, re-education fails, as Jean Elby, totally uneducated, is killed or commits suicide. Danyel Raynal himself will de-re-educate (get out of the re-education process), though not by becoming the one he had been, but by becoming Jean Elby. Only now is he truly the second messenger, in actual fact, not only the messenger, but also the writer of the apocalypse, thus saving himself.

### Katabasis and “Brainwashing”

**T**he *Black Church* by A. E. Baconsky is a novel built on the idea of a funerary katabasis: the city (“fortress-tomb”) invaded by beggars delineates a “boundary of darkness”.<sup>21</sup> All characters dependent on the Beggars’ League have a thanatic functionality, ranging from the gravediggers to the perverted priests. The cemetery itself becomes an uncrowded Metropolis, the Black Church turns out to be a “tomb of no one and everyone”, and the inhabitants have

features of “animated corpses”.<sup>22</sup> All living creatures end up a “carrion”. The narrator character, as visionary as a virtual living corpse, feels splintered either as the wandering soul of a dead man or as the body of an unburied dead man: “perhaps I myself have died and I am watching from the grave”. [...] “It seemed to me that I was a corpse that three solemn gravediggers were carrying through the labyrinth of a fabulous tomb, to the consecrated throne of an acherontic hierarchy”.<sup>23</sup> The novel of A. E. Baconsky is suggestive not so much of a funeral initiation as of imprisonment among the dead. The neophyte of death becomes a “dead man” without the possibility of return, although he is alive. The Black Church is an atheist, demoniacal church, opposed to the White Church, and that is why its initiate is doomed to remain unredeemed in life.

The characters in the novel *Farewell, Europe!* do not use the term “brainwashing”, but that of affective-cerebral erasure and corporeal-spiritual castration.<sup>24</sup> This erasure is combined with duplicity, considered by the characters of Ion D. Sirbu to be the only one capable of sustaining survival. Deziderius Candid sees in duplicity a “state of inversion”,<sup>25</sup> whereby individuals have a false official life and a hidden one, the reversal of the official one. The city of Isarlyk itself, as Olimpia, Deziderius Candid’s wife, explains, is twofold: one on the surface and another underground. Likewise, most of the inhabitants of Isarlyk have a shadow, and even words possess an underground linguistic double.<sup>26</sup> Deziderius Candid saw in aggressive Communism a *morsus diaboli*, a devil’s bite. Those bitten by the devil (whether they are touched willingly or not) have a double shadow, a normal shadow from the sun, and another,

of death-in-life, a shadow of the undead.<sup>27</sup> The only ones with integrity are people without a shadow, but they are purged, killed, or locked into asylums. The idea of the devil's bite, as Ion D. Sirbu presents it, is applied in the sphere of terror and the mutations produced by it. As regards "brainwashing" by classical and modern methods, as they appear transfigured in the Romanian anti-utopia or dystopia, the author of the novel *Farewell, Europe!* is the only one who tries to make the devil not just a grey eminence and a spiritual patron, but a torturer, albeit invisible for a while. The demonology proposed by Ion D. Sirbu is comic only at first (Deziderius Candid sees demons everywhere, just like others see angels), and it becomes terrifying through human incarnation. From one point onward, devils are no longer needed because humans have voluntarily substituted or subordinated them. The death of the Devil is as dangerous as the death of God when man takes over his role. If the deified human is a blasphemy, the demonised human denies any possibility of salvation.

The residents of Victory Island in the novel *The Second Messenger* are creatures that have the feeling of being eaten alive, forming a population of "undead" and "stuffed humans". The author develops the idea of "dead souls", abducted by the Re-education Institute, conceived as a "slaughterhouse of souls". "The dead are alive!"<sup>28</sup> a character exclaims, exposing the phenomenon of death-in-life, achieved through the erasure of re-educated and lobotomized souls at the Institute. Among these shadow creatures, the protagonist Danyel Raynal is projected as an Orpheus in the inferno. The structure of living corpses resembles that of opposite twins,

who nonetheless coexist in a two-headed body, and it is expressively rendered by one of Danyel Raynal's heretic friends: "in me there is a dead man and a living one who eats, speaks, moves, drinks..."<sup>29</sup>

In the novel *The Second Messenger*, "brainwashing" is intertwined with the duplicity strategy: individuals are cut in half, with a door in the middle, as a character in the novel says,<sup>30</sup> each creature containing two selves: one that is "alien" or a "nobody", and another possessing a remainder of the components of the integral self of the past. The inhabitants of Victory Island denounce themselves. The executioner and the victim coexist in the same being: the same individual is re-educator and re-educated, morally speaking. Each inhabitant contains a *Janus bifrons*, so that when one of the selves becomes ill, the healthy one denounces the other (but in fact self-denounces) in order to request healing at the Reeducation Institute.<sup>31</sup> Self-unmasking is mandatory self-voiding, because before the new ideology is implanted, the individual is void for some time. Consciousness is projected as a "coconut"<sup>32</sup> emptied and then filled with a new substance, unrelated to the original matter. Danyel Raynal's physical sensation is one of cerebral compression: "Someone has thrust his hand under the bones of my skull and is squeezing my brain like a bath sponge from which a purulent discharge is oozing..."<sup>33</sup> Becoming schizoid, the inhabitant of Victoria Island is a man with two fish inside: one swimming through the mud, on the bottom of the lake, and another swimming at the surface.<sup>34</sup> The ideologically and psychically schizoid character in the novel *The Second Messenger* needs no outer executioner, since he has internalized his executioner.

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2. *Ibidem*, p. 216.
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4. *Ibidem*, II, 1993, p. 308, 339-340, 343.
5. *Ibidem*, I, 1992, p. 421; II, 1993, p. 40.
6. *Ibidem*, II, 1993, p. 269-270, 325.
7. *Ibidem*, I, 1992, p. 330-331; II, 1993, p. 85.
8. *Ibidem*, II, 1993, p. 213-216.
9. *Ibidem*, II, 1993, p. 364, 365.
10. For all the nuances of fear, see *ibidem*, I, 1992, p. 20, 44, 138-139, 162, 222-225, 358; II, 1993, p. 34-35.
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12. *Ibidem*, p. 28.
13. *Ibidem*, p. 214.
14. *Ibidem*, p. 125, 126, 284, 287, 288-289.
15. *Ibidem*, p. 307.
16. *Ibidem*, p. 190.
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18. *Ibidem*, I, 1992, p. 82, 84.
19. *Ibidem*, II, 1993, p. 36.
20. Bujor Nedelcovici, *op. cit.*, p. 70, 88.
21. A. E. Baconsky, *op. cit.*, p. 154, 155.
22. *Ibidem*, p. 224, 232.
23. *Ibidem*, p. 192, 213.
24. Ion D. Sirbu, *op. cit.*, II, 1993, p. 89, 119.
25. *Ibidem*, p. 241.
26. *Idem*, I, 1992, p. 106-107.
27. *Idem*, II, 1993, p. 126.
28. Bujor Nedelcovici, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
29. *Ibidem*, p. 77.
30. *Ibidem*, p. 29.
31. *Ibidem*, p. 123.
32. *Ibidem*, p. 308.
33. *Ibidem*, p. 346.
34. *Ibidem*, p. 353.