

Romanian Studies & the Society for Romanian Studies (SRS) at 50: The State of the Art

The idea for this Special Issue first took shape in the Summer of 2024, when James Kapaló, Professor of History of Religion at the University College Cork and, at that time, President of the Society for Romanian Studies together with Dana S. Trif, SRS Secretary, visited *Phantasma*, the Center for Imagination Studies. The 50th anniversary conference of the Society for Romanian Studies – ‘Voices and Silences – 50 Years of the Society for Romanian Studies’ – was then under discussion. As had been decided shortly before, the Faculty of European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University, was to serve as its host for a period of three days, between 29 and 31 May 2025. Following discussions with *Phantasma*’s President – Comparative Literature professor Corin Braga – the Center for Imagination Studies offered us the opportunity of editing a special issue featuring some of the papers presented at the conference.

The outcome of this collaboration is therefore a joint effort to survey the landscape of Romanian studies at a critical moment for Romania’s politics and democracy. Although the date of the conference had been chosen well before the events of November 2024 – with the historically unprecedented invalidation of the 2nd round of Romania’s presidential elections – and the (presidential) elections of May 2025, this coincidence turned out to be a fortunate one for our anniversary event and for this Special Issue. The Society of Romanian Studies traces its origins back to the 1970s and to the efforts of a small group of American scholars, some of whom had been Fulbright fellows doing fieldwork in communist Romania. The ‘founding fathers’ of the SRS share this mixed heritage – as Americans or as scholars of different ethnicities – and mutual interests in the expansive field of Romanian Studies. As an association that prides itself on inclusivity and a broad research scope, the Society for Romanian Studies was keen to provide a survey of some of the latest trends in this rapidly growing area. With more than 250 participants at its 2025 anniversary Conference, hosting a variety of presentation formats and special events, some of them showcasing recently published books at prestigious Romanian and foreign publishing houses, the SRS anniversary served as a celebration of diversity and inclusivity. This special issue of *Echinox Journal* and the *Journal of Romanian Studies*¹ both published articles presented by conference participants.

We believe this Special Issue demonstrates both the success of this event and the growing dynamism of Romanian Studies as a field of study. We have grouped contributions according to five thematic foci, which cover the inter- and trans-disciplinary interests of Romanian Studies scholars: (1) Communism: between history & memory; (2) Identity, biography & biofictions; (3) Human, nonhuman, posthuman & beyond; (4) Memory, intimacy & private space; and (5) Cultural heritage, philosophy, and trauma in the public eye. The Communist legacy in Romania spans half a century. Its many cultural, ideological, social, and political repercussions still shape Romanian public discourse today. The relatively sudden demise of one of Eastern Europe's most repressive Communist dictatorships did not pave the way instantly for liberal democracy. The 1990s are etched in our recent memory as the "transition" years. Under the stewardship of political elites mostly educated and socialized in the previous regime, Romania slowly found its footing again in the "free world". For many Romanians, this entailed membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union. The population largely embraced democracy and liberalism as counterpoints to dictatorship and communism. Yet history seldom works in the linear way we all expect, or perhaps wish for. Behind post-Communist Romania's international success lie various social and cultural phenomena, whose political impact becomes visible and transformative only in moments of crisis. As a discipline, Romanian Studies covers theoretical and methodological discussions spanning the humanities and social sciences. As a form of cultural enquiry, it is uniquely positioned to uncover hidden societal convulsions by examining developments in areas such as art history, ethnography, cultural criticism, literary studies & literary history, history of religion, migration studies, sociology of culture, politics, etc.

The five thematic foci identified in this brief survey of the field share several common features: Romanian history as a fractured landscape of recovered facts and fragmented memories, as the terrain of identity searches and efforts at identity-building, and as a seemingly perennial desire for synchronicity with European culture/s. The first thematic focus – *Communism: Between history and memory* – shows that a considerable portion of contemporary cultural production continues the symbolic dialogue with the period between 1947 and 1989, as well as with the decades following 1989. Adelina Ștefan worked with original archival documents, demonstrating the ways in which cultural heritage and visual artifacts such as guidebooks, photo albums, and exhibitions were employed to showcase the country internationally during the 1950s and 1960s. Ștefan argues that tourist promotion in socialist Romania evolved into an identity-building exercise, initially tested in the Middle East and the Global South before being exported to Western Europe. Her article is part of a bigger research project, whose findings were published in a book – *Vacationing in Dictatorships: International Tourism in Socialist Romania and Franco's Spain* (Cornell University Press, 2024) – recently distinguished with the biennial 2025 SRS Book Prize. Ligia Tudurachi unearthed audio recordings from the so-called "radio editions" produced between 1963 and 1975. These were earlier attempts at transposing works by classic Romanian writers already accepted into the communist canon into a different medium: radio. Tudurachi's research interest in the spectrality of writers'

voices relied on audio files sourced from the “Fonoteca de aur”, an archive hosting recordings of writers’ voices. Communism, a politically and professionally disruptive period, is the secondary character in Ioana Apostol’s critical recreation of amateur-turned-professional George Oprescu’s career. A man of perceived “low” social origins – born as an illegitimate child – Oprescu shows remarkable career resilience. In the manner typical of an educated social upstart, not only does he succeed in acquiring the patronage of his professor – Nicolae Iorga – inserting himself within the ranks of influential inter-war Romanian intellectuals and scientists, but he also manages to maintain his privileged position as a professor of art history despite the post-World War II regime change. The next contribution in this section, bridging literary and cultural studies, is Maria-Andreea Fărcaș’ analysis of two novels by Transylvanian writers: Ádám Bodor’s *Zona Sinistra* (*The Sinister Zone*) and Marta Petreu’s *Acasă, pe cîmpia Armageddonului* (*Home, on the Plain of Armageddon*). Blending an identity-building approach with assemblage theory and the concept of “interimperiality” advanced by Anca Pârvolescu and Manuela Boatcă, Fărcaș examines two literary texts for traces of political struggle. She uncovers the mechanisms through which the unifying nationalism of the communist period sought – and ultimately failed – to do away with Transylvania’s interimperial character, as a region located at the crossroads of empires, occupying a semi-peripheral position. The final contribution in this section is, perhaps appropriately, a critique of the Western myth – the “good” America – as a form of mental self-colonization in Eastern Europe. Lidia-Cristina Mihai analyzes Radu Pavel Gheo’s *Noapte bună, copii!* (*Goodnight, children!*), arguing that the novel “demonstrates the effects of a cultural and psychological ‘colonization’ that is typical for the Eastern European postcommunist space”.

Another closely related thematic focus – *Identity, biography & biofictions* – takes the reader on a journey through various texts – novels, theatre plays, case study portraits, and literary productions written in ‘exile’ – in search of an elusive identity-building process and its multiple “truths”. Corin Braga deconstructs Constantin Stere’s novel – *În preajma revoluției* (*On the Eve of the Revolution*) – by connecting the author’s childhood trauma with “an ideology of political resentment” like Poporanism. Braga’s reading unpacks the novel’s multiple layers – social, cultural, and political – showing the reader how a narrative structure acts (almost) like an autobiography. Similarly, Constantina Raveca Buleu delves even deeper into the complex relationship between biography and fiction. In her study of Cluj-Napoca-based author Florina Ilis’ books on Romanian poets Mihai Eminescu and Lucian Blaga, Buleu explores the reincarnation of the 19th historical novel under the guise of *biofiction*. This concept recognizes recent developments in memory studies and, moving beyond fact-based history, turns towards the domain of fiction. This conversation between “historic” truth vs. “truth” qua rediscovery through fiction is something Buleu presents vividly to the reader. At the other end of this theoretical discussion lies the search for “true” ethical models of behaviour. Ruxandra Cesereanu continues her recovery efforts of less well-known “heroes” of the anti-communist resistance. Her contribution to this Special Issue is a case study of a prison survivor – Lucreția Jurj – whom Ruxandra Cesereanu personally knew and admired. A peasant woman caught

up inadvertently in the major geopolitical and ideological struggles of mid' 20th century, Jurj becomes a member of a resistance group in the Apuseni mountains (western Carpathians). Her story not only shines a light on women's contributions to these anti-dictatorship struggles, but also challenges the status of ethical "truth" in mainstream biographical research. Identity may be constructed, yet these constructions remain constrained by societal limits. Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru reminds us of these limits in his article – *Othello the "Moor" and Răzvan the "Gypsy"* – where he adopts the perspective of two tragic – one fictional (Othello) and one historical (Răzvan) – figures. Both Othello and Răzvan rise above their socially disadvantaged origins, yet fail to achieve full acceptance in societies marked by persistent racial prejudice. Their lives end tragically, both privately and publicly. It also testifies to the difficult cultural and social negotiations faced by a person from a disadvantaged social background. Finally, this section concludes with two articles: an exploration of the "waves" of Romanian literary productions in exile, from Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran to Petre Dumitriu and Andrei Codrescu; and a comparative analysis of Mihai Eminescu and Mircea Cărtărescu's works. In her article, Anca Pașca-Saturn argues in favour of a global turn in Romanian Studies, suggesting that "exile literature", along with the many challenges posed by cultural displacement, has yet to fully reveal its (literary) productivity. This productivity is also a concern for Veronica Isăilă, who traces the genealogy of a core cultural identity – the Romanian national poet – through its various incarnations.

Next, we turn our critical attention to studies that engage with contemporary Western cultural debates. This section – *Human, nonhuman, posthuman & beyond* – brings, under a broader umbrella, studies related to Romanian sea adventure fiction (Gabriela Bănică), theoretical innovations such as somatic narratology (Amalia Cotoi), posthumanism in contemporary Romanian poetry (Elisabeta Maria Mârza), animal studies in Romanian children's literature (Andreea-Georgiana Nagy), the status of the body in contemporary Romanian art (Ileana Nicoleta Sălcudean, Maria Scînteianu, and Anna Decheng Zhu), and the post-historical man in Mircea Eliade's conception (Oana Soare). Gabriela Bănică explores sea adventure fiction in Romania by framing it within the emerging discipline of oceanic and mobility studies. She analyzes Radu Tudoran's popular novel – *Toate pânzele sus!* (*Full Sail Ahead!*) – discussing the genre's dissemination and reception in Romania, a phenomenon that mirrors historical developments in local maritime history and international trade. Amalia Cotoi revisits Max Blecher's work from an equally innovative perspective. She chooses the concept of somatic narratology to explore literature as an expression of bodily and sensory experience. Cotoi talks about embodied memory and cognition, drawing on the 4E model of cognition – embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended cognition – and on the postcognitivist methodology of enactivism, thereby opening Max Blecher's writing to an entirely new hermeneutic dimension. If the body is central to Cotoi's analysis, for Elisabeta Maria Mârza, the body has become a site of controversy. The *human* itself becomes a category of enquiry in the new posthumanist philosophical framework that Mârza brings to the analysis of works by contemporary Romanian female poets Gabi Eftimie, Elena Boldor, and Ana

Zett. One of Mârza's key findings is that the contemporary Romanian poetry adapts to, rather than imitates Western ideas on the posthuman. The lyrics of the three poetesses reveal "meaningful reflections on the technological and socio-political condition of the present".

Literature may reimagine a more oceanic and mobile human, it may explore narration as a somatic, postcognitivist process, it may play with the posthuman and its implications, but it cannot ignore the nonhuman. This is exactly what Andreea-Georgiana Nagy invites us to do by exploring the "emancipation of the animal" in her study of Romanian children's literature. Nagy positions her research in a posthumanist framework by examining the transformations of tropes in children's literature from the 1960s to the 2010s. The works of five female authors – Nina Stănculescu, Ruxandra Berindei, Gabriela Negreanu, Lavinia Braniște, and Adina Popescu – extend across these decades. Nagy's study bridges the gap in Romanian literary studies on the development of this genre in a local context as well as the economics behind its dissemination. One of the final contributions in this section reminds us that the visual is, at times, more powerful than words. Ileana Nicoleta Sălcudean, Maria Scînteianu, and Anna Decheng Zhu question the corporeality of the human body itself. If previous contributors still embedded their approaches in something material and present – the post/non/human body – our three co-authors move beyond this presence by emphasizing the perennially related issue of constructing one's social identity. Identity is a technologically and visually-mediated process. This is the overarching message of *Occhio*, a digital interactive art exhibition consisting of two installations: *Human MegaCosm* by Maria Scînteianu and *Moonz - The birth of a virtual star* by Anna Zhu. *Occhio* purposefully breaks down through performance the interaction between artist and spectator, challenging viewers to set aside assumptions about the body's material presence and remain open to perspectives that extend beyond mainstream understandings of self and other. Oane Soare concludes this exercise in reimagining the human by revisiting selected prose by Mircea Eliade. Her engagement with Eliade's novelistic explorations of myth and science leaves us with more questions than answers, with his post-Apocalyptic human closely resembling the super-knowledgeable AI minds of today.

Two articles on *Memory, intimacy & private space* shift the discussion from a general perspective to a more personal one: Lajos Lakatos sifts through private correspondence, retracing Hungarian women's experiences of internal migration from Transylvania to the Regat in the 1960s Romania. Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu is also interested in women's experiences and their memories. Rather than following the well-trodden path of examining various subgenres of the broader category of life-writing, she engages with the unspoken, with the silences, and the erasures female authors like Ana Blandiana and Nina Casian engage with in order to retain a certain amount of control over their public images. That which is left unspoken appears to result more from an internal process of negotiation, a delicate balancing act between one's own historical "truth" and what is considered socially acceptable. In Fătu-Tutoveanu's article, memory transmission becomes a field of enquiry, one that returns memory as a process from the public sphere to the private sphere.

The final section of this Special Issue – *Cultural heritage, philosophy, and trauma in the public eye* – addresses the relationship that contemporary Romanian society and scholarship continue to cultivate with Romanian cultural patrimony, be it literary, ethnographic, visual (film), or otherwise. Corina Croitoru traces back to the 19th century a practice of political insurgency enacted through the rewriting of major Christian prayers such as the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed. Croitoru carefully selects a series of influential writers – Alecu Văcărescu (the Phanariot period in the 18th century), Mihail Kogălniceanu (19th century), Eugen Jebeleanu, Ioanid Romanescu and Mircea Dinescu (the Communist period in the second half of the 20th century) – and argues that irony and humor enabled leading intellectuals to act subversively towards authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Delia Enyedi's exploration of the silent film industry in interwar Cluj/ Kolozsvár represents an attempt at cultural recovery. Her article reconstructs Cluj as a cultural metropolis, inviting the reader to reimagine the city as ethnically multilayered and cosmopolitan. Cristian-Teodor Priscorneac and Magda Wächter continue their engagement with two prominent Romanian intellectuals: history of religion & culture scholar, Ioan Petru Couliano (Priscorneac) and, respectively, philosopher-cum-literary prodigy, Emil Cioran (Wächter). While Priscorneac guides us through the development of Couliano's own method – morphodynamics – elaborating on Couliano's views on the theory of cultural transmission, Magda Wächter addresses the long-standing question surrounding Cioran's work: philosophy or literature? Through carefully structured arguments grounded in Cioran's oeuvre, Wächter convincingly contends that the answer may well be both. Two further contributions conclude our state-of-the-art survey in Romanian Studies. Both may point to new ways of engaging with emerging forms of cultural production and contestation. Eleonora Sava discusses the cultural implications of a relatively newly established Romanian Blouse Day (*Ziua Iei*). In 2022, the Romanian Parliament adopted a law selecting the 24th of June, the day Romanians celebrate an old Agrarian tradition – *Sânziene* (or *Sânzienele*) – as the Universal Day of the Romanian Blouse. Sava links the event's popularity to contemporary discourses in anthropological and cultural heritage research, such as pan-European memory-heritage-identity complex proposed by Sharon Macdonald and the *Authorised Heritage Discourse* (AHD) formulated by Laura Jane Smith. She contends that the traditional Romanian peasant blouse has metamorphosized into a symbol of Romanian cultural identity, sustained by complex transnational social practices. Last, but not least, Diana-Nicoleta Mirancea's article highlights the negative side-effects of *organizational* culture. She relies on feminist institutionalism theory to re-examine – from the perspectives of political science and discourse analysis research – the 2024 public scandal over sexual harassment prompted by student testimonies and a journalistic investigation at the University of Bucharest. Mirancea's methodology and findings provide a scientific background for revealing a persistent veil of silence over trauma caused by harassment and other forms of sexual abuse perpetrated within a space that is supposed to be safe for women: academia.

Finally, as a brief but significant conclusion: the Guest Editors of this Special Issue of the *Echinox* Journal feel that no matter how much we have strived to provide a

comprehensive overview of the field of Romanian Studies, a lot more is still left unsaid and, perhaps, unwritten. There is a vital energy in these studies that bodes well for future research. We hope that this “taking of the pulse” will be acknowledged as such: an inevitably imperfect attempt to survey an evolving landscape that comes together under the banner of the Society for Romanian Studies, with the aim of fostering further inquiry, more questions, and ever more imperfect answers.

Dana S. Triș & James Kapaló

NOTE

1. *Journal of Romanian Studies*, Volume 7, Issue 2, October 2025, “Heroes or Villains? Democracy, Discourse, and New Actors in Romanian Politics”, <https://doi.org/10.3828/jrns.2025.9>.