

THE POST-COMMUNIST NOVEL OF TRANSITION AS REALISM OF TRANSITION. THEMATIC PRECEDENTS IN ROMANIAN AND EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT. *The Post-Communist Novel of Transition as Realism of Transition. Thematic Precedents in Romanian and East-Central European Literature.*

The present study aims to analyze how certain narrative formulas circulate within the world literary system – one but unequal (Moretti 2004, WReC 2015) – starting from the case of the novel of post-communist transition, specific to many Eastern European literatures. The Romanian literature abounds in such novels, which take various forms according to the different literary paradigms from which they have emerged. Thus, we consider that post-communist Romanian literature, or at least its social-political regime of relevance, is a symptomatic case of what the authors of *Combined and uneven development: Towards a new theory of world-literature* (WReC) call “(semi-)peripheral irrealism”. According

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to this study, the literature produced in peripheries and semi-peripheries is often formally dominated by a series of practices identified as specific to modernism, which arise, determined by the condition of the semi-periphery, in the unique and uneven system of world-literature, in which fiction becomes the narration that mediates lived experience in the “palimpsestic, combinatory and contradictory ‘order’ of peripheral experience.” (WReC). Nevertheless, a new direction of contemporary prose is being traced recently in order to rethink/reproblematize the past and the way it can be reflected in literature. A series of recent novels such as Bogdan Coșa’s *How Close the Cold Rains Are* (2020) and Mihai Dușescu’s *Beech Sponges* (2021), as well as others, give rise to a new aesthetic formula of the post-communist novel of transition through the ways in which they operate with realism. We therefore propose to investigate the recent history of the phenomenon of fictional representation of the Romanian transition in relation to similar phenomena in East-Central Europe, while also analyzing the specifics of “the realism of transition” (as we will call this new literary category, in the footsteps of Mihnea Bâlici).

Keywords: *the novel of transition, (semi-)peripheral literature, peripheral realism, post-communism, the realism of transition*

REZUMAT. Romanul tranziției post-comuniste românești ca realism al tranziției. Precedente tematice în literatura română și est-central europeană.

Lucrarea de față își propune să analizeze modul în care anumite forme narrative circulă în interiorul sistemului mondial literar – *unul dar inegal* (Moretti 2004, WReC 2015) – plecând de la cazul romanului tranziției postcomuniste, specific pentru multe dintre literaturile Europei de Est. Literatura română abundă de astfel de romane, acestea luând diverse forme, conform diferitelor paradigme literare din care au luat naștere. Noi argumentăm însă că literatura română postcomunistă, sau cel puțin regimul ei social-politic de relevanță, reprezintă un caz simptomatic pentru ceea ce autorii studiului *Combined and uneven development: Towards a new theory of world-literature* (WReC) numesc “irealism (semi-)periferic”. Conform studiului, literatura produsă în periferii și semiperiferii e adesea dominată formal de o serie de practici identificate drept specifice modernismului, ce iau naștere, determinate fiind de condiția semiperiferiei în sistemul unic și inegal al world literature, în care ficțiunea devine relatarea ce mediază experiența trăită în “«ordinea» palimpsestică, combinatorie și contradictorie a experienței periferice” (WReC). Cu toate acestea, în ultimii ani se trasează o nouă direcție a prozei române contemporane în vederea regândirii/ reproblematizării trecutului și a modului în care acesta poate fi reflectat literar. O serie de romane recente precum *Cât de aproape sunt ploile reci* (2020) de Bogdan Coșa sau *Bureți de fag* (2021) de Mihai Dușescu, dar și altele, dau naștere unei noi formule estetice a romanului tranziției postcomuniste prin modurile în care operează cu realismul. Ne propunem așadar să investigăm istoria recentă a fenomenului reprezentării ficționale a tranziției românești în relație cu

fenomene similare din literaturile est-central europene, analizând totodată specificul “realismului tranziției” (așa cum vom numi această nouă categorie literară, pe urmele lui Mihnea Bâlici).

Cuvinte-cheie: roman al tranziției, literatură (semi-)periferică, realism periferic, postcomunism, realismul tranziției

Introduction

The dynamics of the post-revolutionary Romanian literature represents an interesting case among East-Central European literatures. Despite sharing the same totalitarian past, the Ceaușescu regime presumably incited repugnance at the highest level once it was taken down. The literatures of ex-communist countries attempted to depict the changes that came with the transition to capitalism. Consequently, a new functional category of literary texts emerged, texts that were called, in the Romanian research field, by Andreea Mironescu “novels of transition” (Mironescu “From social memory to literary representation: the novel of transition in post-communist Romania”). The novelist’s predilection for writing about the social realities afferent to this period set in motion a trend that manifested itself without interruption from 1989 to present. Notably, some of these novels succeeded to circulate across their borders due to being translated into multiple languages in the former communist literatures and also in the ones that had never known communism.

What makes this subject worth discussing is the fact that, as we will attempt to argue, the germs of fiction about transition have perpetuated in the Romanian literature in a continuous flux all these years, taking different forms and leading to what has emerged in the last 3-4 years and what we label, following Mihnea Bâlici, the realism of transition (Bâlici 2023). In his essay Bâlici uses this term in a more or less rhetorical way, trying to explain the growing number of recent novels that discuss the realities of transition, opting for narratological and formal approaches closer to realism. His argument is especially justified by the fact that in the Romanian literature, the majority of the novels about transition incorporate a series of literary techniques that surpass realist conventions. We intend to conceptualize the term proposed by Bâlici through an analysis that deals with Romanian literature in relation with the fiction of changes that emerges in the context of East-Central European post-communism, in the combined and uneven system of world literature. We will also try to demonstrate the specific characteristics of the realism of transition based on case studies of two recent novels that we consider to be defining for

delineating the limits of this realism. For a better understanding not only of the specific nature of this realism, but also of the means through which this mutation is produced, a periodization of the most representative paradigmatic events that have defined and redefined the problematic of transition is needed. We divided them into three categories, as defined in the Romanian research field, based on their characteristics.

The miserabilist realism

The first movement in prose is that of the novel inclined to examine the social climate, that manifested itself in the post-communist Romanian literature under the name of miserabilist realism (Iovănel 2021 403-408)³. The most representative authors of this period include Radu Aldulescu, Emil Mladin, Cornel George Popa, Petre Barbu, among others. After the metarealist postmodernism (Iovănel 2021, 375)⁴, miserabilist realism brought social observation back to the forefront, with most of these novels discussing transition as it was happening. As Mihai Iovănel states:

The miserabilist realism ‘chooses’ a method of representation as noise, as a quantum of fragments or as a nightmare-like or carnival-like delirium. The lack of grounded meaning is compensated by the introduction of harsh allegories which usually explain the anomalies of the communist system: this is why anticommunism is the main ideological engine of the novels written in the ‘90s. The authors usually resort to schemes typical to sensational literature (not in the spirit of a postmodern reclaim, but in a rather naive way) (403)⁵

³ The representative authors of this paradigm were not familiar with this term, which has been recently formulated by Mihai Iovănel in his *History of Contemporary Romanian Literature*.

⁴ “The miserabilism of the ‘80s is a forced consequence of late communism (as opposed to Eugen Negrici’s belief that they abandoned the omniscient-balzacian realism out of comfort). This generation maintain a suspicious distance not that much with reality (which they argue that they expose it more authentically than the former generations), but with the methods of the old omniscient realism”/ “Metarealismul opzecist este o consecință forțată a comunismului târziu (contrar tezei susținute de Eugen Negrici că ei ar fi abandonat realismul omniscient-balzacian din comoditate). Optzeciștii întrețin un raport de suspiciune nu atât cu realitatea (pe care pretind că o expun în viziuni mai autentice decât scriitorii din generațiile anterioare), cât cu metoda vechiului realist omniscient și totalizator.” (Iovănel 2021, 375, our translation).

⁵ „Realismul mizerabilist «alege» o formulă de reprezentare a realității ca zgomot, ca o sumă de fragmente sau ca delir coșmarec ori carnavalesc. Lipsa sensului la nivelul solului este compensată prin introducerea unor alegorii groase, care de regulă explică anomaliile sistemului comunist: de aceea, anticomunismul este principalul motor ideologic al romanelor scrise în ani 90. Autorii recurg frecvent la scheme din literatura senzațională (dar nu în spiritul reciclării postmoderne, ci într-un mod mai curând naiv” (Iovănel 2021, 403, our translation).

If countries like Germany or Poland have generated a particular literature that took into consideration a reconciliation with the past⁶ and the capitalization of the perspectives that the neoliberalism will enlarge (Trepte, 259), in the first decade of Romanian post-communism the leading principle of literature was anticommunism. Thus, transition appears in these novels as a difficult period caused by the legacy of communism (406)⁷. These narratives have a strong ideological underlayer that have remained unaddressed because of the “anti-communist ethos” which dominated the critical discourse of the period.⁸

The Millennial Realism

The second representative movement concerning the literary representation of the sociology of transition is dominated by what Adriana Stan has labelled as millennial realism. It refers to the literature written by young poets and novelists in the early 2000s, whose aesthetic surpassed the anticommunist practices of the miserabilist realism. Regarding the prose based on this this realism, it is generally written in the first person, having a testimonial character and pleading for biography and authenticity. The term of “realism” from the phrase “millennial realism” reflects the authors’ propensity to map the reality of transition as it was happening. The Fracturist Manifesto, written by Marius Ianuș and Dumitru Crudu, represented the aesthetic movement that gave birth to the millennial realism as violent, voracious and critical towards its society. Thus, millennial realism can be discussed as the first artistic and literary manifestation capable of realistically portraying the social realities of transition. Concerning the limits of this realism, Stan brings into discussion the capacity of social observation that first-person narration can produce in relation with third-person narration:

⁶ “Expectations of the readers as well as of literary critics run high, demanding impatiently a universal, comprehensive “Wenderoman”, a seminal novel on the peaceful revolution in post-communist East-Central Europe as well as in Germany.” In *Trepte* (2019-2020, 257-266). “In search of an adequate novel on the democratic changes of 1989/1990. A paradigmatic approach”. *Wolność i Solidarność*, no. 11–12, 2019-2020, p. 257-266.

⁷ See how Iovănel describes the realities of the most visible Romanian miserabilist realist author, Radu Aldulescu: “The novels create a modernist-naturalist puzzle where the modernist pulverization of omniscience and the adjustment of the narrative to the interior perspective of the characters meets a neozolism that explains the present misery through a simplistic, ideologic and socio-economic determinism (a trivial perspective of anticommunism where present dysfunctions are caused by a communist past).” / “Romanele compun un puzzle modernist-naturalist, în care forma modernistă a pulverizării omniscienței și a ajustării narațiunii la perspectiva interioară a personajelor întâlnește un neozolism care explică mizeria din prezent printr-un determinism socioeconomic simplist ideologic (o viziune trivială a anticomunismului, disfuncțiile prezentului sunt cauzate de trecutul comunist)” (Iovănel 2021, 406, our translation).

⁸ See Dumitru (2019, 1-7).

[T]he self-assertive stance of this new literary authenticity and the overlap of realism with radical individualism weakened the force of social observation that was, and still is, traditionally associated with realist esthetics. [...] The more articulate realism envisioned instead by the theorist should «efface the individual personality» in favor of a «blank third-person narrative» meant to «register a pure present of time and space» Following the steps of Lukács, then Raymond Williams' accounts of nineteenth-century realism, today's criticism still doubts that subjectivist art could provide a valid vantage point from which to comment upon the social reality. (76)

As related to the predilection of these authors, like Adrian Schiop, Ionuț Chiva, Alexandru Vakulovski, to write their works in a biographical manner using first-person narration, Stan argues that, according to the fact that only a decade had passed since communism ended, the period was too short for the authors to take a reflexive distance (74) from the presented events, strongly related to the ascension of capitalism. Thus, by “incorporating typically capitalist ideologemes of subjectivity” (74), millennial realist writers managed to produce a realism capable of “reflecting a larger social order”.

Stan adds that millennial realism has lost its relevance with time, particularly because the authors lost their revolutionary enthusiasm and their characteristic violence (80). What followed this realism was a prose of layered fictional architectures (80), which will be discussed further. After the historicization of millennial realism, especially after 2010, “the type of first-person critical realism patented by millennials was only carried on incidentally and within individual projects, albeit in narratives that were able to shed a crude, zero-stylized light on the havoc wreaked on subjectivities by current economic orders (prose writers Adrian Schiop and Lavinia Branîște are the standout cases here)” (82).

The novel of transition as a novel of memory

Unlike the two paradigms discussed above, the novel of memory involves a much looser category of texts. We have chosen to denominate this functional category following in the footsteps of Andreea and Doris Mironescu, who dedicated a study to the novel of memory as a world genre⁹, where they provided a categorization of it. Three novelistic subcategories are thus proposed: the semi-autobiographical narratives of traumatic memories, published in the immediate aftermath of the revolution (1990s) and agglutinated by vehemently anti-communist discourses; the novels of (n)ostalgic memory, published after

⁹ See A. Mironescu, Doris Mironescu (2020, 97-115).

2000; and the novel of agonistic memory (which overlaps temporally with the second subcategory), characterized by mysterious plots, historical implications, dialogism, exposition of a post-ideological position, etc. In support of our labelling, the novel of transition is a subgenre of the novel of memory defined by the two scholars in the study aforementioned, resulting from the merging of the last two subcategories: the novel of nostalgic memory and the novel of agonistic memory. Extending the scope of the discussion to the East-Central European literary heritage, we find that there are two different narrative approaches to the democratic turning point of 1989/1990: “one is the concentration on «personal autobiographical experience» in combination with «documentaries»; the other is concentrating first of all on «literary imagination» – that is, on literary fiction *par excellence*.” (Trepte 2019-2020, 259)

Memory narratives began to circulate in the Romanian literary field in the 2000s, *Simion liftnicul* [*Simion the Lift-Boy*] being one of the first novels of this kind. The novel of transition, as a subgenre of the novel of memory, questioned the collective memory of the time and shaped its processes, while also having a satirical intentionality. Its mechanism within Romanian literature has been thoroughly analyzed by Andreea Mironescu:

“In recent decades, memory has tended to become a refuge-concept: as an ideal of societies in a post-historical era, on the one hand, and as an object of study with interdisciplinary openings to the humanities, on the other. [...] It combines the nostalgia for the past and a violent rupture with it, the attention to the discontinuity of reality and history, pluriperspectivism, the consciousness of the mediated, distorted character of perceptions of the world.”¹⁰ (Mironescu A. 2016, 34)

The first writers to fictionalize the immediate reality of the transition, the miserabilist realists of the 1990s, instrumentalized the poor living conditions by blaming communism for this reality. Subversive reactions to the past were also inserted into the discursive web of memoir novels about the transition, in a way specific to that period, but they went beyond the aesthetic formula of miserabilist realism, which was characterized by a carnivalesque, nightmarish dimension, allegorical underlayer, and anticommunist pathos rendered through sensationalist narrative constructions. They also break away from the millennial

¹⁰ „Memoria tinde să devină, în ultimele decenii, un concept-refugiu: ca ideal al societăților într-o epocă post-istorică, pe de o parte, și ca obiect de studiu cu deschideri interdisciplinare către științele umaniste, pe de altă parte. ... În el se întâlnesc nostalgia față de trecut și ruptura violentă cu acesta, atenția către discontinuitatea realului și a istoriei, pluriperspectivismul, conștiința caracterului mediat, distorsionat, al percepțiilor despre lume.” (Mironescu A. 2016, 34, our translation).

realists by dispensing with autobiography and the unmediated perception of reality through the prism of narrative subjectivity. Thus, if the hallmark of the 2000s novels was visceralism and miserabilism, those within the sphere of the novel of memory stylized reality differently by immersing everyday life in burlesque fantasies with well-defined ironic and parodic nuances.

One of the best-known novels of this kind from its early period is *Simion liftnicul* [*Simion the Lift-Boy*, 2001] by Petru Cimpoescu, an exponent of the 80s generation, but who established himself with the novels published around 2000, the one mentioned above being one of them. A series of other novels of memory about transition would continue to appear, including *Coming from an Off-Key Time* (2004) by Bogdan Suceavă, (2005) by Florin Lăzărescu, *Sînt o babă comunistă!* [*I'm an Old Communist Hag!*, 2007] by Dan Lungu, or *Cruciada copiilor* [*Children's Crusade*, 2007] by Florina Ilis, to name but a few. Writers in this category have critically interrogated and deconstructed social memory and multi-layered local identity at the fictional level through irony and metatextual parody (Mironescu A. 2015, "From social memory to literary representation", 35), debunking discursive clichés encrypted in a transnational code. For example, in *Simion liftnicul* [*Simion the Lift-Boy*] the attempt of a "mystical escape from the hell of transition"¹¹ is rendered (Iovănel 2021, 384), resulting in a metarealist representation of the phenomenon of transition, with the narrative being constructed by appealing to a series of narrative techniques such as metafiction or artificial typology. In a 2001 book review, Luminița Marcu points out in detail the way in which the author relates to the reality of the transition: "the preferred object of the novelist Petru Cimpoescu always remains reality, although this novel with thickened strokes and metaphysical parody does not offer us realism in the traditional sense of the word."¹² (Marcu, 2001).

In Bogdan Suceavă's novel, *Venea din timpul diez* [*Coming from an Off-Key Time*], and in Dan Lungu's novel, *Raiul găinilor* [*Chicken Heaven*], one can observe the predilection for satire and meta-textual parody (Mironescu A. 2015, "From social memory to literary representation", 35) in terms of the way the characters relate to the past (through recourse to nostalgia), and in Filip Florian's *Degete mici* [*Little Fingers*], there is the same satirical intention, the plot being constructed in the logic of magic realism while historical objectivity becomes irrelevant (35). In Florina Ilis's "masterpiece of the genre", *Cruciada copiilor* [*Children's Crusade*], Mironescu observes the meta-fictional narrative, thus interpreting the novel as a "metaphor of transition" (36). Another effect such strategies have is to narrow the perspective on historical reality. For instance, Dan Lungu, in *Sînt o babă*

¹¹ „evadare mistică din infernul tranziției” (Iovănel 2021, 384, our translation).

¹² „obiectul predilect al romancierului Petru Cimpoescu rămâne mereu realitatea, deși nu realism în sensul tradițional al cuvântului ne oferă acest roman cu tușe îngroșate și parodie metafizică.” (Marcu, 2001, our translation).

comunistă! [*I'm an Old Communist Hag!*] chooses to present the post-communist reality through the eyes of a single character: Emilia Apostoae. In this way, a part of reality is masked and the perspective limited.

When analyzing the Romanian memory novel, Andreea and Doris Mironescu notice that most of these texts take narrative forms that, in the WReC's terminology, can be labelled as "irrealist". Among them there are allegorical novels (as a subgenre of the traumatic literature, as theorized by them, but also having having the anticommunism as the main characteristic) (Mironescu A, Mironescu D. 2020, 108), the nostalgic ones (frequently self-fictions, others having an "unreliable narrator, usually a child positioned as the reflector of the story," or operating even with the fantasy as in *Orbitor* [*Blinding*] by Mircea Cărtărescu) (110) and the agonistic ones (where the most interesting case is the one of the novel sub-categorized as satirical that combines, as Florin Filip in *Degete mici* [*Little Fingers*], the detective plot with the reduction of the characters to standard typologies and with a satirical perspective of the past) (111).

Viewed together, these novels rely on "satirical, even grotesque" (36) representations of the reality of transition, attempting to "deconstruct the clichés of everyday life in post-communist discourse" (36). It is also worth noting that these novels (and others) have also been analyzed by the same author in terms of their hypertextual dimension, which she interprets as a legacy of postmodern literature.¹³ (A. Mironescu 2015, "The novel of transition as hypertext", 170). We note that, at the level of textual construction, all the aesthetic formulas systematized here abound in narrative artifices designed to alter the veracity of the social context/reality. Among these we would mention inconsistent narrators, meta-textual parodies, satire, humor, thesism (especially in *I'm an Old Communist Hag!*) (see Terian 2019), predilection towards metafictional form, hypertextuality, etc. In summary, we are dealing with what Adriana Stan calls "layered fictional architectures in prose".

The transnational dynamics of the novel of transition

By considering two guiding conditions, the novel of transition becomes a spongy global literary subgenre: on the one hand, it is generated by the same

¹³ „De altfel, ficțiunea postmodernă a redefinit nu numai rolul intertextualității în literatură, ci și formele ei de manifestare. Prin multitudinea reprezentărilor sale mediatiche, un eveniment devine un „text” nu doar în înțelesul extensiv al termenului, ci și în acela propriu, de relatare a ceva uzând de tehnicile proprii narațiunii.” / “Moreover, postmodern fiction has redefined not only the role of intertextuality in literature, but also its forms of manifestation. Through the multitude of its media representations, an event becomes a ‘text’ not only in the broad sense of the term, but also in its own sense, of relating something using the techniques of narrative.” (A. Mironescu 2015, "The novel of transition as hypertext", 170, our translation).

collective, social, political conditions/experiences, on the other hand, it attracts common international readers (Mironescu A. and Mironescu D. 2020, 98). The mutability of the novel of transition is an inherent aspect of global literary systems, proving its transnational potential.

In terms of the novel of transition, one cannot say that its narrative form is transmissible; rather, the phenomenon of narrative pleomorphism appears in the early phase of the development of this formula, opening the way to a comparative approach to the phenomenon. Specifically, in the case of the novel of transition, one can mention the concept of polygenesis/pleomorphism (Mironescu A. and Mironescu D. 2020, 97), because its literary formula manifests itself simultaneously in the ex-communist countries as a result of a socio-political mechanism common to the countries of the Soviet bloc. It cannot, therefore, derive from literary areas with a divergent historical and political framework, but it can only spread within these spaces. This phenomenon is particularly interesting for the theory of the circulation routes of narrative schemes, which posits that most narrative circulation is from the center to the periphery, while circulation from the periphery to the center is rare and from the periphery to the periphery is almost non-existent (see Moretti 2003).

Investigating the transmission of memory in Eastern Europe, Andreea Mironescu argues that the narrativization of transition is closely linked to the issue of transmission and encoding of collective memory, especially through “the transmission of affects and emotions through the ‘narrative of pathos’ [...] and the phenomenon of ‘resonance’ at the level of cultural memory of the emotional cargo of exemplary images, motifs and figures” (A. Mironescu 2016, 26), concepts taken from the researchers Geoffrey Hartman and Aleida Assmann (Hartman, in Hartman & A. Assmann 2014).¹⁴

Thus, for circumstantial reasons, there is no direct literary influence (center-periphery), nor exportability (in terms of borrowing and reproducing a specific form) of the novel of transition (from the periphery to the center, at least so far), since it appears simultaneously in countries with related collective memories: “That is because the novel of memory springs from a concern with political identity, not with form, so it is not essentially influenced by mimetic aspirations to replicate international commercial success, but instead it is fueled by national and local stakes and conditions.” (A. Mironescu and D. Mironescu 2020, 97). However, the novel of transition, also seen as a generic formation, does not remain a strictly local phenomenon but becomes an individual narrative pattern that circulates transnationally, especially in the sphere of East-Central European literatures (and also in post-dictatorial non-European literatures) or in societies

¹⁴ In order to understand how the memory of communism works in literature, see the concept of *(n)ostalgia* discussed by Maria Todorova (Todorova 2010).

with a similar political, economic, and social status. Analyzed on a global scale and considering, in addition to the relations between literary texts, the social practices surrounding them, we observe that a number of similar characteristics and methods specific to any period of transition, stemming from the fall of political/colonial regimes, are activated, so that some *cultural patterns*¹⁵ (Assmann 2011) are reiterated at the narrative level in several post-Soviet areas.

As Andreea and Doris Mironescu suggest in the study quoted above, “it also goes to show that, sometimes, a subgenre is a matter of perception and that ‘local’ sub-subgenres such as the novel of Romanian communism, American neo-slave narratives, and the novel of genocide may very well function as parts of the same world literary genre” (A. Mironescu and D. Mironescu 2020, 98-99). We can only understand a national literature in relation to a broader context—the context of transition, in this case. Even if the literary phenomenon of transition is common to every post-communist state (and not only), it is nevertheless individualized according to the specificity of each environment and even to the specificity of each period.

How is the fiction of post-communist change constructed in East-Central Europe? For instance, according to Rajendrei A. Chitnis, just as the first part of the Romanian novel of the post-communist transition (1990s), “Czech literature in the 1990s, to a greater extent than either Russian or Slovak, was dominated by explicitly or implicitly autobiographical works seeking to give an eyewitness account of the experience of the 1970s and 1980s, and at the same time to assert the writer’s own anti-Communist credentials” (Chitnis, 11-12). One can observe an exhaustion of realism as a literary formula in the post-communist East-Central European context and an assumption of a self-reflexive voice, in contrast to the collectivizing one specific to totalitarian ideology (59). In addition, the carnivalesque function of narratives, specific to postmodern aesthetics, serves as a technical support for the autobiographical discourses of the aforementioned period. The authorial auto-stylization is also found in “Podobojí” by Czech writer Daniela Hodrová, by means of “the characterization of Diviš Paskal in Podobojí as clownish, irrepressibly curious and constantly in danger of over-reaching himself” (107). In Slovakia, for example, in Peter Pišťanek’s novel “Rivers of Babylon,” the description “of an amoral cartoon world in which every character is motivated only by personal gain relieved Slovak literature of its seriousness, hyperbolically breaking taboos on sexual motifs, restoring parody, black humor, and the grotesque” (51).

Another interesting case is that of the Russian writer Victor Pelevin, characterized by R. Chitnis as an author of emptiness, where this emptiness represents the general state produced by socio-political changes in the post-

¹⁵ See the concept of *cultural patterns* theorized by Aleida Assmann (Assmann 2011).

Soviet period. His novels, especially “*Omon Ra*,” are interpreted through a carnivalesque lens as a literary technique, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin (142). This novel presents the journey of Omon, who wants to fly to space and thus fulfill his duty towards his country. However, it is only a parody of socialist realism prose dedicated to “Heroes of the Soviet Cosmos” (155). Omon does not fly to the moon but travels through the subway tunnels of Moscow. In the end, when he attempts suicide, his gun does not function, an image representing “a metaphor for the collapsing Soviet military-industrial complex” (155).

All these particularities that we have briefly outlined have been produced by the fiction of changes that emerged as a result of the collapse of communist regimes in East-Central Europe. They were analyzed from the perspective of world literature in the context of a combined and uneven world literature by the WReC researchers. The authors of this study observed that the novel produced in peripheral and (semi)peripheral spaces (that were, or still are, under the pressure of the changes produced by the capitalist ascension) are written in a manner that they call “irrealist.” The researchers observed that these novels:

“[S]hare not only common themes, plots and subjects, but also a range of formal features that we propose to call ‘irrealist’. Of course, anti-linear plot lines, meta-narratorial devices, un-rounded characters, unreliable narrators, contradictory points of view, and so on, have all been identified as the techniques and devices characteristic of the distinctive (and restricted) Euro-American literary formation typically addressed under the name of ‘modernism’. But we understand these techniques and devices more broadly as the determinate formal registers of (semi-) peripherality in the world-literary system, discernible wherever literary works are composed that mediate the lived experience of capitalism’s bewildering creative destruction (or destructive creation)”. (WreC 2015, 51)

Therefore, irrealism as a formal register first appears in the (semi)periphery and periphery of the world-system because of the emergence of capitalism in these spaces with either a colonial or a totalitarian past. Their observation regarding the narratological element of fiction refers to how the writers of this literature used a wide range of literary techniques specific to modernism. The consequence of these formal choices was, certainly, the estrangement of the narrations from any conventional form of realism, or the “ideal type” in their own terminology.

A series of examples are incredibly relevant when it comes to the link between the modernist form of the narratives and the under-development characteristic for semi-peripheral territories. In Pio Baroja’s novel *The Quest* the scholars from Warwick remark a narrative whose “twitchy plot, non-linear structure and persistent anxiety over mimetic stability”, narrated by an “anxious,

unreliable narrator” is in direct relation with “Spain’s evident ‘backwardness’”, in the context of a “capitalist modernization in the semi-peripheries” (130). A more interesting case is the one of a more recent novel, *The Busconductor Hines* by the Scottish writer James Kelman. This book is published five years after his debut with “Thatcherite neoliberal revolution” (139), and it discusses the life of an “archetypical victim of the transformation sweeping across his region: he loses his job in a time of rampant privatization of the ‘public’ transport service”. As such, the novel intends to criticize the establishment by discussing the consequences of neoliberalism, mainly for the unprivileged social groups, such as losing one’s job, the widening of the social class gap, and the need for people to change dwellings and habits, and compete for “jobs, housing and other forms of social security” (142). The narrative form, which the Warwick researchers consider the direct effect of that period’s instability, was generated, however, by techniques specific to modernism:

Kelman’s prose shuttles between sober modes of documentary naturalism and intense bursts of subjectivist modernist narration, often rendered in the working-class dialect of his main characters. This modernist consciousness is conveyed through a narratological procession of esoteric thoughts and visions combined with linguistic denotations of sensory overload and psychic disturbance. Temporal shifts are also apparent throughout, down to the granular level of the tense phrasing in many sentences... Hence the ubiquity of fragmented plot lines, meandering narratives, random and restless focalisation, the concern with memory and memorialisation that disrupts the progression of story, and the use of contingency and surprise events, of spatial deformation and of anecdote and compression. (142)

We have chosen these two examples to demonstrate how this method functions within any area with a (semi)peripheral status. When discussing the literary documentation of the socio-economic transformations resulting from the transition to neoliberalism in East-Central Europe, WReC dedicates a whole chapter to the prose of the Russian writer Victor Pelevin, as well as a subchapter to the novel *Rivers of Babylon* by Peter Pišťanek. In the case of the contemporary Russian novelist, especially in his novel *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf* (2008), where “the aesthetic registration of the transitions to neoliberal forms of capitalism in the post-Soviet semi-periphery of Europe” (97) proposes a satirical allegory of post-Soviet Russia built through the relation between two “irrealist” mechanisms: the neo-gothic aesthetic of the narration and an unreliable narrator. The novel has a first-person narration from the perspective of the female character A Hu-Li, “a 2,000-year-old fox spirit.” Despite the supernatural characters, the addressed problems are usually mundane, from the emergence of the Russian oligarchs to the Russian politics of oil export. This kind of unreliable

narration plays a key role: “Pelevin’s own novel uses A Hu Lui’s unreliable narration and reflections on reading to speculate on the role of dialectical hermeneutics in the revelation of ideology and mystification [...] As she seeks to understand the antinomies of her social order, the reader is forced into a mode of dialectical interpretation, deepened by the additional difficulty of A Hu Lui’s own unreliability as a narrator, since she is prone to regurgitate and reformulate ideas she has heard before” (112).

Rivers of Babylon, which we discussed through the lenses of R. Chitnis, who analyzes it regarding the parodic and grotesque dimension, is analyzed by WReC with emphasis on the way in which the narration is constructed. The novel tells the story of Rácz, a country man who, after the chaos produced by the transition, ends up gaining power inside a system controlled by the Mafia and by the imperative of capital accumulation, proposing a world “unthinkable just two or three months ago”. Thus, this novel is a documentation of the transition, not only through the presented events, but also through the fragmentation and implausible narration, all suggesting the lack of coherence in the reality of transition itself:

“The structure and plot of Pist’aneč’s novel challenge its readers to reflect on the credibility of events as they unfold. The central plot line itself the incredible rise of the novel’s anti-hero Racz from peasant to political oligarch - is designed to give readers several pauses for thought. Racz’s initial ‘leap’ - straight from the pages of Trotsky’s formulation of the law of uneven and combined development - from rural field to urban boiler room is presented, in a circumspect movement between present and future imperfect tense, as simultaneously plausible and unbelievable. Temporal challenges punctuate the narrative, indexing anxious attempts on the part of the new plutocrats to break decisively with and supersede the past of the chapters move forward in staccato fashion, with unbalanced leaps and bounds, mirroring the outlandish yet startling ‘progress’ possible for some, such as Racz and his various hangers-on, in this new world of temporal unsteadiness and altered social relations” (116)

Therefore, fragmentarism in relation to an unreliable narrator leads the WReC scholars to consider the novel, from a formal perspective, a “modernist picaresque satire” (116). It can be observed how the irrealist way of building a novel specific to the periphery becomes a pattern frequently encountered in East-Central European literatures in the combined and uneven literary world-system. Whether we talk about the “elements of dystopian, magical realist, fantastic, gothic and speculative fictions” which “allegorize social upheaval and transformation in the ‘new Russia’” (108), or about the predilection for autobiography, which frequently becomes a satirical or grotesque representation of the reality of transition, which R. Chitnis observes in the fiction of changes, especially in Czech, Slovak, and Russian literature, it can be formulated that

these ways of surpassing realism through reports register the changes in the periphery.

The Romanian post-communist literature makes no exception, as we have shown above through the chronological division of Romanian novels of transition. In this regard, the novel of transition represents a symptomatic case for the condition of semi-peripheral literature, subject to socio-political transformations. Starting from Mihnea Bâlici's observation regarding the "new Romanian realism of transition," we will demonstrate in the upcoming pages that, with the emergence of this new realism, the intentions behind the literary representation change, especially because their narratives are of a more traditional realism, emphasizing the verisimilitude of the action and discussing the period of transition through critical reflection. We argue that the main reason for this mutation towards realism in discussing transition in literature is the temporal distance from that period. As WReC researchers argue, (semi)peripheral realism develops as such precisely because it emerges in the middle of the transition. The question that arises is: When does the transition end so that it can be discussed as part of the past? It has been said over the years that a temporal reference point could be the year 2007, the year of Romania's entry into the EU, but the integration was not instant, and thus, 2007 does not define a real change that reshaped society's life. This impossibility of tracing the end of the transition in time was best approached by Florin Poenaru, who understands this period as an ideological construct, not a temporal one, the finality of which "is drifting away as you get closer to it" (Poenaru, 11). Therefore, even if we cannot precisely tell when and if the transition has ended, it can be stated that the distance from its epicenter (the first two decades of the transition) represents the starting point of this change of perspective. This relatively recent trend in Romanian literature manifests itself through a number of novels published in the last few years, and for the present paper, we will focus on two of them that we consider the most representative for the analysis of the formula of the realism of transition.

Case studies

Bogdan Coșa's novel, *Cât de aproape sunt ploile reci* (*How close the cold rains are*), published in 2020, reveals a glacial naturalism (narratively, not humanly), a realism without inkhorn falsifications (Goldiș 2023), with vivid, unprocessed recordings of the Romanian countryside of the last decades. The first 40 pages of the book leave the reader with the feeling of a deliberate dissipation of the narrative framework, of the world, caused by ambiguous references to different situations or characters, without many clues or insights. As Alex Goldiș notes in a review dedicated to this novel:

“[T]here is no clumsiness in the construction of the text here, but, on the contrary, a programmatic refusal to counterfeit the raw reality through forced causal or explanatory interventions: it comes to the reader as it is, without interpretative lenses. The asceticism of the narrative voice, which refrains from commenting on or in any way anticipating the harsh logic of the world in view, represents a way of letting it deliver itself to the reader in all its complexity.”¹⁶ (Goldiș 2023).

The author does not seek to accomplish the narrative experiment through metatextual tricks, flamboyant narratives, or sceneries but produces an aesthetic mutation towards a realism devoid of the narrative means used so far in literary representations of the transition. Up to 2020, the reality of the transition was burdened, at a discursive level, with metatextual games, intertextuality, remnants from postmodernism, schematism, artificial typological characters, and carnivalesque vision. Coșa solidifies a realism purged of artifice and based on a critical reflection on the post-communist period.

The narrative spans a period of about 25 years and is set in the countryside, in Dumbrava Frumoasă, an isolated and isolating village, “surrounded by high mountains from all directions” (Coșa 2020, 31). The narrative rises from two synergistic fulcrums: the decline of rural families (the Toaders’ and Camelia’s family, related through Nuțu’s marriage to her daughter Casiana) and the economic precariousness of transition (a factor that triggers migration, job loss, inter-family and emotional imbalance, divorce, alcoholism, violence, and abuse). The rural environment is configured as a form of escapism for those living in small industrial towns (Nae, Petru), which spread their noise to small mountain villages. Even though Nae moves to an urban environment, he still lives in harsh conditions, on the outskirts of town, in a neighborhood for those without families.

The plot does not focus on a single character; all the voices cooperate to complete and densify reality. The characters sum up social voices whose intensity is scattered and almost blurred in the reality of the time: rural people, emigrants, or proletarians working as foresters, saleswomen at the village shop (later purchased by Profi), or nurses. The narrative operates with causal nuances, presenting different facts as deriving from each other: violence, social deprivation, and other issues arise due to social pre-events and changes in social morphology. The author dispenses with any intention of caricaturing the

¹⁶ „nu e vorba de stângăcie în construcția textului aici, ci, dimpotrivă, de un refuz programatic de a contraface realitatea brută prin intervenții forțat cauzale sau explicative: ea survine către cititor așa cum e, fără lentile interpretative. Ascetismul vocii narative, care se abține să comenteze sau să anticipeze în vreun fel logica aspră a lumii aflate în vizor, reprezintă o modalitate de a o lăsa să se livreze cititorului în toată complexitatea ei.” (Goldiș 2023, our translation).

characters, never condemning them, and never seeming superior to them. He configures a fictional world that retains the reality's landmarks while maintaining a lenient view towards social castes affected by historical phenomena such as transition or migration. Aurelia is perhaps the voice that controls and governs (or wants to govern) everything within the diegesis. Like Moromete¹⁷, she wants to keep alive the rural micro-world, whose main satisfaction comes from working the land, but "now the gardens were only worked so that they wouldn't remain unworked, so that they wouldn't disgrace the family; Aurelia no longer raised so many animals, the children would not be interested in that."¹⁸ (44).

The novel brings up the issue of migration with the arrival of Dumitrița (the youngest of the family) and Bebe from Italy, announced during a discussion between Dana and Petru. Their temporary return reveals traces of insecurity and quasi-inferiority in Dumbrava. The BMW, the sweets, the lust for life, and the apparent economic stability of the two emigrants mask their real life; *la bella vita* is interrupted in Italy, where the characters do menial work, and family dysfunction persists.

The narrator never exposes the shortcomings of the period but only suggests them, letting the reader infer from dialogues and previous situations. Often, we learn about the situation or life of some characters from other characters and their dialogues, not directly from the narrator (e.g., the discussion towards the end of the book between Petru and Nae about the instability of the family relationship and Peter's accident). The intensity of veracity is thus supported by the suggestion or remembrance of events or relationships in the corpus of dialogues and conversations, without being directly stated by the authorial voice. The narrator gives way to his characters: for example, we learn about the communist period from a letter sent to Aurelia years ago by Sanda's parents. Moreover, the language of the characters remains vivid, unprocessed.¹⁹ (33)

¹⁷ The two volumes of the novel *Moromeții* impose the most extensive literary record of the time. The former (1955) is considered emblematic in terms of its representation of the evolution of social relations in the countryside, and the latter (1967), the novel of the obsessive decade, representative in terms of the context in which it appeared, socialist realism). The novel reveals the struggle of the central male character, Ilie Moromete, for financial independence and for the preservation of the family center in the countryside, around the household, in a period of great social transformation - the disappearance of rural life/ of the Romanian village caused by the communist regime.

¹⁸ „acum grădinile erau lucrate doar ca să nu rămână nelucrate, să nu se facă de râs; Aurelia nu mai ținea atâtea animale, pe copii nu-i interesa.” (Coșa 2020, 44, our translation).

¹⁹ „- D-apăi la Margareta. S-o dus pe la amiază și n-o mai vinit. Nu mai căta geozdanul, ți l-am pus eu în antreu.” (Coșa 2020, 33).

“- She is at Margareta. She went at noon and has not come back. Stop carrying the schoolbag, I put it in the vestibule.” (Coșa 2020, 33, our translation).

Pauperism breeds failure, failure breeds alcoholism, alcoholism breeds violence, and violence breeds a lack of empathy and love, culminating in the disintegration and loss of rural life. A world where the only source of culturalization is TV shows like *Mom Swap* (*Schimb de mame*). Meteorological, emotional, economic, and social instability grind the fate of the rural community and individuality alike: “the present was empty, life was swirling in the void, everything remained in the past.”²⁰ (170). This narrative about failure and alienation, family dysfunctionality, and the accelerated disintegration of the rural center—family and community—relies on a realistic representation of reality. Thus, the realism of transition no longer needs the narrative techniques specific to previous paradigms but expresses itself through the veracity of the narrative.

Beech Sponges (2021), the novel by Mihai Duțescu, sparked one of the most interesting polemics²¹ in recent Romanian literary discussions regarding the fictional representation of communism in post-communism. The novel tells the story of a family from Teleorman over several decades (the narrative spans from 1960 to 2000), staking the social dynamics of the characters across three generations. The first part (chronologically) presents the life of a regular family under communism. Here we see not only the reprehensible aspects of the system: propaganda, censorship, food deficiency, Security’s intrusion in family life, traveling only within the Socialist Bloc, and institutional abuse (e.g., when they return from a trip to Moscow and their jewelry is seized), but also the benefits of social mobility made possible by communism. Schematically presented, it refers to how the two young teenagers from the rural world managed to study and move to the capital. There, they were offered a bedsitter, and after their firstborn, an apartment.

The Revolution marks the shift to the period of transition and is mentioned briefly because the protagonists did not take part in it. Additionally, throughout the narrative, nothing sensational or heroic happens; Duțescu engages in building the life of common characters, where the little things in life represent the whole reality.

The novel maps the instability of the period and its effects on the psychology of the characters, all representative of the bourgeoisie of Romanian post-communist society.

“the Revolution came and even like that, without debts, their money lessen from a moth to another. You could find anything you wanted, and they were young and craving any sort of foolishness, better

²⁰ „prezentul era gol, viața rodea în gol, totul rămăsese în trecut.” (Coșa 2020, 170, our translation).

²¹ The controversy was sparked by Marius Chivu in his review “Comunismul de carton” [Cardboard Communism]. *Dilema Veche*, no. 932, February 17-23, 2022, and it was later pursued by Mihai Iovănel in a Facebook post. For more information see (Contea 2023).

cigarettes, nesses when convenient, jeans, creams, soaps: everything they had to obtain until then under-the-counter and with a lot of money.” (Duțescu 2021, 123)²²

Duțescu documents with precision the economic dynamics of the beginning of the transition and especially the huge consumerist accessibility in opposition to the economic inflation and the devaluation of currency. The opening of the borders represented an opportunity for small businesses, and the Romanians chose Turkey and Yugoslavia for commercial trades. Radu (Ducu), the protagonist in *Beech Sponges*, participates in such trips by selling ball bearings and other personal goods:

Everywhere you looked, the parking lot was filled with Romanian cars and buses from across the country, crowded in the middle of a market spread without logic which Ducu believed was called ‘car boot sale’[...] With the night [...] the Romanian buses were almost empty: the majority of the women were taking their purses and also going towards the town, coming back only at daybreak [...] Ducu [...] understood what it was to understand- also witnessing in silence, together with the rest, to that sad and solemn nocturnal exodus of the women of all ages from the Romanian buses that were going to Turkey at the beginning of the ‘90s.” (125-29)²³

Therefore, the novel records the compromises that some people had to make under the pressure of economic dynamics. Ducu also takes advantage of the new freedom: he engages in commerce in Turkey and Yugoslavia, takes repeated holidays from his job, opens a store with some family friends, travels across the country (this time staying in hotels rather than camping as during the communist period), and buys land on the outskirts of Bucharest, which he works with his wife Angela. The novel excels in building the psychology of its characters. Living in the capital and failing to live a decent life exclusively from their salaries, the married couple starts trading across borders and running a

²² „Venise Revoluția și chiar și-așa, fără datorii, banii li se împuținau de la lună la lună. Începuseră să se găsească tot ce voiai, iar ei erau tineri și poșteau la fel și fel de prostii, țigări mai bune, nesses la discreție, blugi, creme, săpunuri: tot ce se chinuseră să facă rost pe sub mână și cu bani mulți până atunci.” (Duțescu 2021, 123, our translation).

²³ „Cât vedeai cu ochii, parcare era înșesată de mașini și autocare românești venite din toată țara, îngrămădite în mijlocul unui târg întins fără noimă, despre care Ducu credea că se cheamă „talcioac” Odată cu lăsarea nopții [...] autocarele românești se goleau aproape cu totul: majoritatea femeilor își luau poșeta și ele spre oraș, întorcându-se abia când se crăpa de ziuă [...] Ducu [...] a înțeles până la urmă ce era de înțeles- asistând și el în tăcere, alături de ceilalți, la acel exod nocturn, sobru și trist al femeilor de toate vârstele din autocarele românești care făceau Turcia la începutul anilor 90.” (Duțescu. 2021, 125-29, our translation).

small business, leading to estrangement from one another. Angela suffers from a reproductive system condition, but Ducu seems unaware of it. In a review, Marius Chivu states that “Ducu is a careless husband and father, lazy, unloving, and absent, and the only event that affects him is his father’s death, because he doesn’t take his wife’s illness seriously, just as he does with his” (Chivu 2021). Although Chivu’s description is fair, it is not sufficient since the character begins to act this way once he starts leaving the country for long periods for commerce, once he opens the store, and generally once obtaining money becomes the main effort for their family. Therefore, the novel excels in faithfully representing the realities of transition and maintaining an authorial balance. The narrator relates without judging the characters’ actions, and their psychology is attentively constructed in relation to the socio-economic changes without becoming didactic. Through this novel, the anticommunist tendency to judge the present through the past, social satire, allegory, artificial typologies, and sensationalism give way to a more realist representation capable of capturing the reality of the transition as it was for the majority.

Conclusions

The novel of transition has a well-defined history in post-communist Romania, shaped by the historical paradigms from which it emerged. The first to fictionalize the transition were those known today as the Miserabilist Realists (Iovănel). They mapped the first decade of the Romanian transition using a series of literary techniques from the postmodernist toolkit. Among them, Radu Aldulescu is probably the prose writer who came closest to realism, but the anticommunist theses of his prose took precedence over the truthful representation of reality. They were followed by the 2000 generation, represented by a number of younger authors who wrote critically in relation to society. Their prose immediately recorded reality by opting for first-person narrative. This was also a short-lived artistic movement, but still an important avant-garde movement in the rediscovery of realism.

A third category we have discussed is the novel of transition as a novel of memory, borrowing Andreea Mironescu’s term, which treated the subject separately. This category includes novels published after the 2000s, which narrativized the transition period by appealing to the cultural memory of society, opting for various narrative formulas, from allegory to magical realism, and even to various narrative games of a satirical nature. Analyzing these forms of the Romanian novel of transition in relation to a number of other East-Central European literatures, we have noticed how they all developed in similar ways. Using the methodology and terminology of the WReC study, which argues that

(semi)-peripheral literatures are written in “irrealist” ways in terms of the literary techniques by which they are constructed, we have demonstrated how Romanian literature is no exception in terms of the “irrealist” representation of transition (except for the millennial realism of the 2000s).

However, following Mihnea Bâlici’s observation about the recent “realism of transition,” we have tried to demonstrate the recent emergence of a new form of literary representation of the period of transition. Considering as case studies Bogdan Coșa’s *How Close the Cold Rains Are* and Mihai Duțescu’s *Beech Sponges*, we have observed how they propose a realist narrative, purged of “irrealist” techniques specific to previous aesthetics, but also of satirical or anticommunist intentions. Taking into account the argument postulated by the WReC research group, according to which peripheral irrealism arises precisely because it appears as a chronicle recording the transformative dynamics of the semi-peripheries under the pressure of the rise of capitalism, we also argue that one of the causes that led to the emergence of the realism of transition is the reflexive distance that the authors can now take from the first two post-communist decades, in which the effects of the rise of capitalism were much more pronounced.

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