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The Resemantization of Historical Symbols in the Romanian Poetry of the 1960s–1980s

Abstract

In Romanian culture, in the 1960s–1980s, communist totalitarianism went through various stages (Eugen Negrici, 2003, 2019); poets varying in style and creative instincts were active in a social and political context influenced by several factors varying in intensity such as the censorship constraints, party ideology, the resumption of cultural exchanges and translations from great works of world literature, the promotion of aesthetic autonomy, etc. Obviously, the main battle pitted aesthetics against ideology. Throughout this period, poetry was largely ideology- and propaganda-tinged and its themes changed from one decade to the next, moving from the pro-Soviet enthusiasm, which glorified Stalin while criticizing the “corrupt” West in the 1950s, to the tributes paid to the “beloved leaders” Nicolae Ceaușescu and Elena Ceaușescu, in the 70s and 80s. Such poems used significant figures in Romania’s national history to legitimize the new leaders.

In parallel to this type of “poetry”, however, there were numerous formulas that returned to lyricism and intellectualization, word play magic and creative experiment. Among the

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most important post-war writers of the neo-modernist generation are Ana Blandiana and Marin Sorescu, therefore we will analyze – in the larger context of their work while also referring to other lyrical representations of the same theme –, two poems: *Avram Iancu* by Ana Blandiana, from the volume *Poeme* “Poems” (1974), and *Biografii* [Biographies] by Marin Sorescu from the volume *La liliaci. Cartea a doua* [Near the Lilac Bushes. Book Two] (1977). Both resemantize history in an original manner that moves away from its official and ideologized versions. Taking as a starting point the dramatic death of a fighter for social and national rights from the nineteenth century, through resemantization and ambiguity, Ana Blandiana creates a poem that could be read, on a deeper level, as a comment on the tendency to give up one’s desire for freedom and the danger of the social and spiritual inertia common during the communist regime. Marin Sorescu, using innovative techniques closer to postmodernism, brings to the fore a complex world, a regional language, another “Macondo”, which deconstructs its mythology while exposing its history through individual stories that become exemplary and counterpose an alternative imaginary to the official culture.

Keywords

literature, censorship, communism, ideology, neo-modernism, aesthetic autonomy, Ana Blandiana, Marin Sorescu, poetry with historical subject-matter, Romania

During the communist period, Romanian literature used various aesthetic formulas, ranging from the Proletkult writing of the first decade to onirism and postmodernism. The neo-modernism of the 1960s was the most successful of the trends, given the great number of writers and the central place they occupied on the literary scene, in literary histories and in textbooks. The emergence and development of these writers cannot be fully understood without succinctly presenting the political and cultural context after the Second World

War, with its main stages. The literary historian Eugen Negrici (2019) considers that the first stage is that of “absolute Stalinism” (1948–1953), when, due to the presence of the Soviet army on the territory of Romania, aggressive forms of control and pressure are established, literature becomes “part of the class struggle”, becoming one of the “effective instruments through which power is accessed and consolidated” (Negrici, 2019, p. 25). Poetry becomes merely a manipulative, ideologized, propagandistic form of discourse.

Devoid of any aesthetic value, with verses whose rhyme and meter patterns often recall folklore or ballad patterns, the main principle of propagandistic poetry is accessibility. The “red aesthetics” covers themes such as the vilification of party enemies, the “odious past”, the glorification of the “collective farm”, “Papa Stalin”, etc. Poetry is integrated into a “political religion”, where the “apostles” are Stalin, Lenin, Dej, and the Communist Party is the protecting church (Negrici, 2019, pp. 85–87). It was also during this period that censorship was established. Researchers such as Liliana Corobca (2014) and Liviu Malița (2016) show that this was one of the institutions of force in the cultural field after the Second World War. Liliana Corobca demonstrates that, in communist Romania, the censorship institution was the third repressive force, along with the Communist Party and the “Securitate” (the political police of the time). Under Decree No. 218 /1949, the General Directorate for the Press and Printed Matter (GDPPM) was established, a body in charge of censorship and control. It authorized the printing, distribution, import, and export of newspapers, books, art objects, it regulated bookstores, antique bookstores, libraries, warehouses, it provided guidelines for the organization of censorship offices in the capital city and the rest of the country, it established the conditions under which proofs or manuscripts were stamped “good to print” or “censored”. Even though the institution itself was disbanded in 1977, the control over books is carried forward through various mechanisms and roles, with the ultimate perfidious and tragic effect of self-censorship. In the first decade, almost all established authors, from Vasile Alecsandri and Mihai Eminescu to Otilia Cazimir, T. Arghezi and V. Voiculescu, disappear from bookstores and libraries, as do many publications. An unprecedented purge of books ensues, but things

do not stop there because “the hunt for books goes hand in hand with the hunt for people” (Negrici, 2019, p. 23), as intimidation, repression, denunciations, arrests follow. A group of young writers under the influence of the modern writer and philosopher Lucian Blaga, a group that had manifested itself in the early 1940s, during the war, known as the “Sibiu Literary Circle”, was then deemed the “lost generation”. Some of its members ended up in prison, while most of them were socially marginalized after 1948. Members of this literary group such as Radu Stanca, Ion Negoitescu, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, Cornel Regman, Eugen Todoran, Ion D. Sârbu, Nicolae Balotă, Eta Boeriu, Ioanichie Olteanu and others had emerged on the literary scene with a manifesto in the form of a letter addressed to the critic who supported modernism, E. Lovinescu. The latter, in his turn, had called them *the fourth generation which defended aesthetic autonomy* (after Titu Maiorescu, the first critic from the second half of the nineteenth century). It was precisely this concept, which had seemed lost forever during the first decade, that subsequent generations sought to recover gradually and partially.

In this cultural and political context, in 1952 was published the large anthology “New Poetry in the Romanian People’s Republic”, which includes only Proletkult texts infused with communist ideology, illustrating the recent past of the class struggle. The mythical figures of Stalin and Lenin were present (in the work by poet A. Toma and many others), “the history of the great Bolshevik March” – in a verse written by Maria Banuș -, as well as historical figures who took part in social uprisings such as Horea, Cloșca and Crișan – in Mihai Beniuc’s poetry -, the workers’ Grivița strikes, the 1907 peasant uprising, Doftana Prison – a recurrent theme, a symbol of the struggle of the “communist heroes” in the illegal period, the victory of the “Red Army” – in work by poets Dan Deșliu and Imre Horvath, among others, then the figure of the old “Soviet tankman comrade” – as Eugen Frunză calls him, etc. Historical references of a different nature are infrequent, for instance, the medieval voivode Basarab or, pejoratively, King Michael, called “fat Michael”. In other words, during this stage, history is seen exclusively through the lens of class struggle and the friendship with the “heroic Soviet army” – an army that was still stationed on Romanian territory, which it left

in 1958. The history of Romanians supplies only personalities who distinguished themselves in the struggle for social justice and are now used to legitimize the “new order”.

The second stage, in Negrici’s classification, is the “stage of perfunctory destalinization” (1953–1964): after Stalin’s death, a certain détente in international relations is an opportunity to renew cultural exchanges. Some studies on universal literature are published, classical authors are translated, books that could not be published before are now allowed. A re-discussion of the cultural heritage starts, writers and books reenter circulation. However, the works and their meanings, texts in their entirety and creative destinies, are falsified, deformed, censored, reinterpreted from the perspective of Marxist and class ideology. “Reassessments” of this type occur alongside a more nuanced interpretation, alongside bursts of artistic freedom that run under the radar of political dogmatism, which means that “regimented literature” seeks to find some balance, to foster the creation of more complex, more nuanced characters. In addition, intellectuals with a solid literary and artistic formation are allowed to resume their work, while young authors are encouraged. An “international pole” (Pascale Casanova, 1999, p. 163), a sign that national artistic creative endeavours were again drawn to great world literature is, at this stage, the publication of the periodical entitled *The 20th Century*, which publishes good translations of poetry and prose from the Soviet Union, but also from universal Western literature, even if left-wing writers are preferred initially. Foreign poetry is translated into Romanian by Gellu Naum, Maria Banuș, Nina Cassian, Virgil Teodorescu, Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, Mircea Ivănescu, Ioanichie Olteanu, Miron Radu Paraschivescu, Eugen Jebeleanu, Ion Frunzetti, Ion Horea, Nichita Stănescu, Petre Stoica and Veronica Porumbacu. Creativity and stylistic forms become more dynamic, breaching the fortress of ideologized “enslaved poetry” prevalent in the 50s, while some freedom and originality are finally allowed.

Between 1964–1971 occurs the “stage of relative liberalization”: socialist realism is left behind, the severity of censorship becomes weakened, literature returns to its natural, relatively autonomous path, the aesthetic code is altered. These are some of the main features

of the period. The beginning of Nicolae Ceausescu's regime provides the right conditions for liberalization, unhoped for in the previous decade. Literary circles become active, quality literature is published in cultural magazines and so on. A new literary generation – the so-called “60s Generation” – reaches prominence. Its members seek to resume the literary tradition of interwar modernism and thus will be called – at least when it comes to poetry – neo-modernist or “a modernist remake” (Manolescu, 2008, p. 1000). This generation includes Nichita Stănescu, Ana Blandiana, Constanța Buzea, Marin Sorescu, Ileana Mălăncioiu, Leonid Dimov among others.

After 1971, the “nationalist communist stage” begins: Romanian culture is once again isolated from the wide sphere of universal literature, while the secret police becomes increasingly repressive. The main features of the period are censorship and self-censorship, poverty, the absence of freedom of expression, the establishment of a personality cult for the Ceaușescus. Therefore, many intellectuals are forced to emigrate, for instance, directors Lucian Pintilie and Liviu Ciulei (whose performances had been banned), or dissident writers like Paul Goma or Herta Müller. The omnipotence of the censorship offices, which are now present in every cultural institution, from publishing houses to the national television station, results in self-censorship: the authors themselves avoid certain themes, ideas or formulas that would lead to their work being banned, pulped or not published. At the same time, allegorical or parabolic expression becomes widespread; thus, certain realities are masked by various figments of creative imagination to bypass the censors. Thus, creators sought to make readers their accomplices in their implicit satire of the world in which they lived (E. Negrici). Under these circumstances, censors step up. In March 1982, the *Tribuna* magazine was withdrawn from circulation, due to some poems signed by Ileana Mălăncioiu (also found in the volume *Linia vieții* [Lifeline], which was withdrawn from the printing house and censored in three successive stages). The author then came to the attention of the secret police. When, in 1988, Ana Blandiana introduces in a “children’s” book the tomcat *Arpagic*, a character in which everyone recognised the dictator, the author is again banned, now indefinitely, and her books are removed from libraries.

In the 70s, a new generation of poets included Mircea Ciobanu, Mircea Dinescu, Emil Brumaru, Șerban Foarță, Mircea Ivănescu, Cezar Ivănescu, Dan Laurențiu, Virgil Mazilescu, Ion Mircea, Adrian Popescu, Dorin Tudoran, Daniel Turcea, Mihai Ursachi etc. Their writing has an even darker tone and is stylistically even more varied. Playfulness, irony come to the fore; whole autonomous poetic universes are built, fueled by a bucolic, erotic, politically rebellious, or sad, domestic, narrative imaginary. Thus, with this new series of poets, Romanian literature enriches its subversive arsenal, building a rather neutral or banal universe on the surface, and an “Aesopian” one in the underground, as noted by literary critics.

The personality cult around the leader and his glorification were supported by some ideological myths exploited in a literary form in “patriotic poetry”, among them the myth of the imperiled motherland (which had been perpetuated since the 1950s, as E. Negrici shows), and the myth of the hero of the nation. Among those who contributed to the development of this form of adulation typical of all tyrannies were, initially, Dumitru Popescu and then, through the activity of the *Flacăra* [The Flame] literary circle and through much of his own literary creation, Adrian Păunescu (along with, among others, Corneliu Vadim Tudor and Victor Tulbure). Obviously, they are not on their own, as one of the most prolific writers of “party-minded” poetry from the communist period was Mihai Beniuc. It should be noted that, despite the critical and public success of “tolerated poetry”, school textbooks were always, until the revolution of 1989, replete with propaganda poetry and works related to the cult of personality of the Ceaușescu family. Prominent figures of national history are put together with famous characters from fairy tales to build a hyperbolized, mythic image of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, whose glorification was supported by all state institutions including the ministry of culture, the party and political police, the “Securitate”. Nicolae Ceaușescu’s lineage is said to go far back in history to the Dacian rulers Burebista and Decebalus. Elena Ceaușescu is compared with Ileana Cosânzeana, a character from folk tales, with Ana from the Master Manole’s Ballad, with the mother of the medieval Voivode Stephen The Great, as it transpires from a poem by Victor Tulbure:

Cosânzeana / your eyes like Voroneț blue / like Manole's Ana in a ballad /
you rise under the halo of supreme sacrifice / Like Stephen's mother /
you raise your children with fierce resolve / the son returning from
battle with a lowered brow / is sent away on the threshold (...) And
now when your bright future is built on a sound foundation / sweet
Romania, embodied in its most precious daughter / Elena Ceaușescu!
Our brave and fearless Romanian comrade! Thus do we lovingly call
her while she courageously strides on the path of glory.

The verses are simple and accessible, the tone is declamatory, similes are the most frequent figures of speech. In addition, the lyrical monologue which includes verbs and pronouns in the second person emphasizes the suggestion of direct dialogue. The interaction between "we" (the people) and "you" (the homeland) supports the image of the embodiment of "sweet Romania", Elena Ceaușescu, using historical and literary symbols that pertain to our cultural identity. "Brave" and "fearless", as the heroes of history are, Elena Ceaușescu is placed, next to Nicolae Ceaușescu, in the centre of the national identity representations. Most of the time this type of glorification of the family at the head of the state was associated, almost inexplicably, with the "sacrifice" motif, precisely to put the two in the lineage of the heroes of the nation, who died for the "prosperity of the motherland", for freedom, for the unification of the nation, etc.

Returning to the liberalization stage, one finds that Romanian poetry becomes emancipated by once again finding inspiration in interwar modernism and by discovering new avenues of creative freedom, a common denominator being the fact that declarative discourse is abandoned in favour of confessional discourse. The most famous of the poets of the 1960s generation, Nichita Stănescu, with an aura of a bohemian genius, is the creator of poetic work meant to be a return to lyricism, while revolutionising the expressive potential of language, redefining poetry, and looking for new poetic avenues. In Nichita Stănescu's neo-modernist poetry one can find reimagined echoes of interwar modernist poetry, such as the transfiguration of reality into words, the lexical magic reminiscent of T. Arghezi, hermeticism and a propensity towards the abstract coming from Ion Barbu, the "visionary" and philosophical

vocation of Lucian Blaga. However, all these echoes are implanted onto new lyrical soil, grafted on a new poetic sensibility. From the first volumes – *Sensul iubirii* [The Meaning of Love] (1960), *O viziune a sentimentelor* [A Vision of Feelings] (1964) – there is a surprising return to poetic lyricism, and a certain “materiality and corporeality of perception”. The poetic space is conceived as a world of objects and beings that are playfully transfigured, the whole world turns into a ludic space, and erotic gesticulation is instantiated as ritual and play (Pop, 1985). In addition, the literary critic Ștefania Mincu noted that “the titles of the first volumes suggest the aspiration to meaning and vision expressed by the poems, the intention to reestablish knowledge-centric poetry. However, his path to knowledge is totally new for the reader familiar with prestigious poetic systems, such as those of the interwar modernists Ion Barbu, T. Arghezi, and Lucian Blaga. Ready-made notions, myths, symbols are given up and what is emphasised is sensory knowledge, in which human bodily faculties have a primary role.” (Mincu, 1997, p. 12). With the volumes *Dreptul la timp* [The Right to Time] (1965) and *11 elegii* [11 Elegies] (1966), the dominant theme changes. The auroral time of love, the miraculous discovery of sensuality and feeling is replaced by an awareness of time and its dramatic effect on human existence and verbal expression, by the “adventure of self-knowledge”. In the last volumes, a preference for the themes of time and death becomes evident. In his last books, which illustrate the attempt to transform language, to fight against its limits employing absurd play and “non-words”, Nichita Stănescu’s poetry reaches at the higher end of modernism. Poetry is at the same time aspiration, play upon words, but also painful integration of the lyrical self, self-play in an attempt to understand the world.

In other words, we are dealing with a type of poetry quite different from “politically regimented” poetry, devoid of historical/patriotic/ideological themes. This is a kind of poetry that turned to the world before communism and to its predilect themes, having as its center interiority, the states of the self, and general human, even philosophical, problematics. With an ever-increasing focus on poetic art, poetry becomes self-reflexive. Styles diversify, recourse to metaphor and prosodic renewal, free verse and enjambment is increasingly

frequent, to the detriment of folkloric narrative, musical-folk or declarative triumphalist versification, full of exclamations and interrogations, and the directness typical of Proletkult poetry. As is the case in modernist aesthetics, poetry is increasingly ambiguous, dissociating itself from the facile attempts of the first communist decade.

Ambiguity plays an important role in the author-reader relationship, facilitating the use of double language and double decoding, political and social allusion. This new direction, drawing in more and more authors including women writers, revives the literature of the era and becomes, in fact, central in the literary arena. However, from the point of view of literary history, given the pressure of censorship and other repressive bodies, this type of poetry was called “tolerated poetry” (a term coined by historian and literary critic Eugen Negrici). It is perhaps not by chance that, at this stage, as Nicolae Manolescu (2008, p. 10001) states, “the first literary genre that rose from dogmatic sleep was poetry”.

The lyrical universe of Ana Blandiana (born in 1942) is built in the same way, drawing inspiration, from the very first volumes, as regards the poetic vision and imaginary, from the work of the great interwar modern-expressionist writer Lucian Blaga, also adopting imagism features. A prose writer and author of numerous poetry volumes, she became established as a female voice of special sensitivity, pondering and emphasizing questions of a moral and metaphysical nature about human life. The titles of her poetry volumes published during the communist period demonstrate, on the one hand, an attempt to recover intimacy, and, on the other hand, a preference for weakly connotative language and for a (domestic) proximity imaginary in which metaphysical nostalgia prevails: *Persoana întâia plural* [First Person Plural] (1964); *Călcâiul vulnerabil* [The Vulnerable Heel] (1966); *A treia taină* [The third mystery], (1969); *50 de poeme* [50 poems] (1970); *Octombrie, noiembrie, decembrie* [October, November, December] (1972); *Poeme* [Poems] (1974); *Somnul din somn* [The sleep from sleep] (1977); *Întâmplări din grădina mea* [Stories from my garden] (1980); *Ochiul de greier* [The cricket's eye] (1981); *Ora de nisip* [Hour of sand] (1984); *Stea de pradă* [Predatory star] (1986); *Alte întâmplări din grădina mea* [Other stories from my

garden], (1987); *Întâmplări de pe strada mea* [Stories from my street] (1988); *Poezii* [Poems] (1988). A prolific, civically engaged writer, Ana Blandiana gained national and international recognition, receiving numerous awards, such as the Poetry Prize of the Writers' Union of Romania, 1969; the "Gottfried von Herder" International Prize, Vienna, 1982; the "Vilenica" International Prize, 2002; the "Camaioire" International Prize, 2005; the "European Poet of Freedom" Prize, 2016. In addition, because of censorship, she was banned for several years under communism in two rounds: 1959–1964, 1988–1989. At first, her poetry is suggestive of the innocence of youth, full of delicate diaphanous feeling. Gradually and discreetly, her poetry moves towards the intellectualization of feeling, growing more serious and more melancholy. Her images are increasingly poignant, problematizing the self and language. In her debut volume, rain, the vegetal, nature and the bucolic, her own sensations and visions are transposed into the experiences of a whole generation to which the author adheres, while also manifesting her distinct identity. Gradually, the poet's own sadness merges with the weariness of the world, fuelling poetic work full of dramatic questioning and bitter confessions, but not devoid of a sense of the fragility and joy of human life – transient as it may be. Snow, inner exile, the (im)possibility of prayer, images of heaven and nature, rain and the field, the presage of death, crying, the night, leaves, cosmic stillness, etc. – these are all motifs that make up a poetic imaginary of rare plasticity and tenderness. The critic Nicolae Manolescu described Ana Blandiana's poetic work as follows: "a constant emotional vibrato accompanied open confessions, perspicuous professions of faith, frank eloquence. Formally, her poems are flawless, with rounded corners, unassuming metaphors which seemed impressive ("the ropes of the rain", "the marrow of the smile"), rarely pushing towards pre-war avant-gardism ("the dead cat of the fog"). In *Călcațiul vulnerabil* [The Vulnerable Heel] one can find both Ana Blandiana's first masterpiece (the dramatic parable *Torquato Tasso*), as well as Blaga's influence ("I want the village with the sound of my tear", the themes of sleep, ancestry, the matrixial). Only *A treia taină* [The third mystery] is the first volume truly characteristic of the style of the poetess. Her discourse becomes exclusively ethical, and prosody is free" (Manolescu, 2008, p. 1048).

In addition, in Ana Blandiana's poetic work, there can be found, even if infrequently, motifs and historical figures that are presented in a *sui generis* manner, completely differently from what one finds in "politically regimented" poetry. An outstanding figure for the destiny of Romanians in Transylvania, a hero of the struggle for social and national liberation, a romantic confident in the ideals of justice and freedom, a leader of the 1848 revolution, a lawyer and military, Avram Iancu (1824–1872) is also representative of our patriotic and historical imaginary and is also found in the poetry written by Ana Blandiana. Another member of the same literary generation is the poet Ioan Alexandru, who debuted in the same year and who, like Ana Blandiana, hails from the same Romanian province which used to be under Austro-Hungarian administration for a long time. They grew up in a cultural milieu in which Avram Iancu is a dramatic emblem of national and social consciousness. Like Ana Blandiana, Ioan Alexandru also wrote a poem that is actually called *Avram Iancu* (from the volume *Imnele Maramureșului* [The Maramureș Hymns], 1988), which presents the tragic end of this freedom fighter, who, in the last two decades of his life, wandered with a clouded mind through the Apuseni Mountains, through villages and towns: "from one end to the other / the Prince roams the Apuseni on foot / his mind in disarray." Thus, the poet does not describe Avram Iancu as a revolutionary hero. There is no mention of glorious armed confrontations, of the dialogue and negotiations for the rights of Romanian peasants, of assemblies and proclamations with tens of thousands of people. Instead, Ioan Alexandru preferred to ponder on Avram Iancu's moving, romantic destiny, and the tragic death of the hero who had apparently lost his mind and travelled the country where he had fought both gun in hand and through appeals to the Austro-Hungarian emperor.

An unexpected, original resemantization can also be found, a decade earlier, in another poem entitled *Avram Iancu* published by Ana Blandiana in the volume *Somnul din somn* [The Sleep from Sleep] (1977). The author chooses the image of a melancholy, wandering Avram Iancu, who carries the burden of collective suffering. In accordance to the title of the volume, the hero goes forth, "sleeping" and "playing his subdued pipe", into a dimension which is

hard to define and beyond reality and history. On the one hand, “sleep” can be, alegorically, the sadness and numbness of a people held back by the Iron Curtain, upon which totalitarian pressure was exerted. The semantics of the poem are built around common weeping and a sense of existential void: “In his wake grow great forests of weepin / and perpetual disasters roar. / In his wake, an earthquake ploughs itself / our land ravaged by sleep / and, under the day’s red trembling, / it sows itself with old royal bones.” Sleep is suggestive of an apocalyptic worldview, evoking powerful, expressionist images. Sleep, a recurrent motif in Ana Blandiana’s poetry, obviously also means death, “in the literal sense and in all senses”, as another great poet would say. Thus, it means spiritual death and vegetal death, a call from beyond the visible and the desire to plunge into the “Great Passage” (Lucian Blaga) and the stillness of the eternal abyss. It suggests, in places, a reaction to the boundary between bliss and renunciation. At the same time, for the reader of the time, the metaphor of falling asleep is suggestive of renouncing freedom and effort, resignation and the entrapment of the nation in a closed, oppressive society. This sooner or later, one way or another, leads to social ossification and spiritual paralysis: “a whole country transhumed while in a dream”. Avram Iancu himself, a symbol of bravery during the 1848 revolution, becomes, in Ana Blandiana’s words, “the defeated King of our suffering”, “His Majesty, asleep, eyes wide-open and grey, / goes forward playing his subdued pipe”. The loss of hope, the dissolution of heroic symbols, the reification of the world all result in sad resignation and “sleep”, the equivalent of the transition to metaphysical nostalgia. Nothing is awakened because the hero is himself under the spell of the end of life and inertia: “but the clouds fall asleep in the heavens and the waves on the lake”. What an enormous difference from the bellicose and triumphalist rhetoric of Proletkult poetry! The nation’s historical slumber merges with metaphysical sadness in a poem in which metaphors and expressionist images abound. The synaesthetic construction “the day’s red trembling” is a chromatic reference to the communist regime, an allusion that the reader of the era would quickly identify, assigning it a subversive and corrosive reading. Only a single stanza preserves hope and at the same time suggests doubt that it will be

fulfilled: “it would be enough for his pipe to whisper the call / shuddering, the earth would sprout heavy warriors, / but his helmet is a sleepy swarm of bees /and my slumberers flock to his army”. The piper’s tune, a staple of Romanian imaginary, related to the long pastoral history of the nation, no longer has the force of a real call to life. The orphic suggestion of the end to the magical, divine word, capable of transfiguring reality, suggests another apocalypse. The “old bones”, the “slumberers”, the desolate Earth, the grain stalks that “lie down to die in the vineyard, / under the weight of poppy flowers “– are images and metaphors of vegetal death, which takes over the whole world. The hero’s sleep is also the sleep of the world and of the whole history, leading to the slow descent into the still depths of the Earth.

The poem *Avram Iancu* by Ana Blandiana invites at least two readings: the first rather superficial one emphasizes the figure of the national hero, a common historical reference in Romanian poetry from the nineteenth century onwards. The second deeper interpretation is a critique of the tendency to give up one’s desire for freedom and the danger of slipping into social and spiritual “sleep” or inertia. In a way, the poem describes the collective subconscious proclivity for lethargy or lack of social reaction.

Another writer of the neo-modernist generation, a poet, playwright, and prose writer of striking originality was Marin Sorescu (1936–1996). The first volume, published in 1964, entitled *Singur printre poeți* “Alone among poets”, showcases the writer’s desire to assert his originality through parodic poetry. Other volumes of poems follow, at an impressive pace, while Sorescu also distinguishes himself as a playwright in the country and abroad, being equally inventive and inclined to experimentation. He soon becomes one of the most translated Romanian writers and is always at the centre of the literary scene. Throughout his career, he is awarded numerous prizes, by the Writers’ Union, the Romanian Academy, and prestigious foreign institutions (Herder Prize, Vienna – 1991, Fernando Rielo Prize, Madrid – 1983, Le Muse Prize – 1978, etc.). He also earns the admiration of the public through his use of language, through his ironic-parodic imagination and through the ingenuity of his literary approach. Marin Sorescu’s drama is reminiscent

of Beckett's or Eugen Ionescu's theatre. His plays – *Iona* [Jonah], *Matca* [The Matrix], *A treia țepă* [The Third Stake] (with medieval Voivode Vlad the Impaler as the main protagonist), etc. His work uses elements of both expressionist drama (character essentialization, predilect themes such as the opposition between man and the world, inner division, special ways of communicating) and the theatre of the absurd (impersonalization, abolition of various plot elements, the journey into the labyrinth, the meaninglessness of facts, etc.).

Poetry volumes such as *Poeme* [Poems] (1965), *Moartea ceasului* [The Death of the Clock] (1966), *Tinerețea lui Don Quijote* [Don Quixote's Youth] (1968), *Tușiți* [Cough] (1970), *Suflete, bun la toate* [My Soul, My Factotum] (1972) thematize the human condition, fate, life, death, serious topics addressed in a tragic-ironic style, with references to myths, ancient symbols and famous characters from ancient and modern universal literature. The six books of the cycle *La liliaci* [Near the Lilac Bushes] create a peculiar rural universe where an idiomatic, deliciously ironic language is used. The first book, published in 1973, was considered "the most radical poetry volume of verse published after the war" (Negrici, 2019, p. 354), deemed an instance of "depoetization" shedding light on an extinct civilization. Moreover, literary critics noted that Marin Sorescu's poetry goes beyond modernism to postmodernism precisely through prosaism, its focus on the mundane, transitivity, playfulness, the anecdotic. In the 1987 volume *Despre poezie* [On poetry], Nicolae Manolescu stated that the volume *La liliaci* [Near the Lilac Bushes], inspired 1980s postmodernism, a fact "that it will have to be recognized one day". The literary critic Eugen Simion changed the title given to the chapter on Marin Sorescu from his book *Scriitori români de azi* [Contemporary Romanian Writers] (vol III). In the 1974 edition, it used to be called *Ironiști și fanteziști* [Ironists and Fantasists]. In 1998, the title becomes *Ironie, fantezie, postmodernitate* [Irony, fantasy, postmodernity]. The dominant feature of Sorescu's poetic language is orality, in the regional dialect of Oltenia. The author gives a voice to authentic rural figures, men, women, young or old, who speak a language that is archaic, closer to the abusive or affective registers. Thus, *La liliaci* [Near the Lilac Bushes] is a literary reconstruction of a colloquial language model, the expressiveness

of the Oltenian dialect becoming a way to instantiate the poetic function of language.

Marin Sorescu builds the world of a village on the edge of history, populated by picturesque and tragic “characters”, who engage in seemingly banal dialogues, but which sometimes hint at the absurdity of existence. In the second book of the series *La liliaci* [Near the Lilac Bushes] (1977), the history of the Oltenian village makes the respective topos – a village at once real and imaginary like Bulzești – into the centre of the world. The comic, the burlesque, irony, slight nostalgia, all create a unique atmosphere that goes beyond its regional hypostasis to a world that simultaneously builds and deconstructs its own myth. As Eugen Simion states, “a world that lives in a mythical world, without a sense of the sacred, and acts, without knowing, like the Greek shepherds and navigators, in a way that will enter into legend” (Simion, 1984, p. 165).

The poem entitled *Biographies* seems, on its first reading, an enumeration of the members of a family tree and those related by alliance, with their dramatic stories told in an ironic and natural style. The central figure is a man, Banța. Each character, however, has a tragic life, a personal history that becomes exemplary simply by the very act of narration. History belongs primarily to individuals and the events they experience: “Nae’s mother was from Florești / Mitruș Nică’s daughter, very rich / And she also had a brother / who was a tax collector. / And he was a really mean fellow / And he measured the drinks while the tavern keepers were in the cellars / Then one night he took a candle, and went into the hallway of the cellar, and then into the cella / to measure a barrel of spirit / And when he moved the candle nearer, to see / the barrel caught fire and burned there in the cellar, / with the house and everything.” Feasting, widowhood, drinking, arguments between spouses, stories from the war with the Cossacks and trains, the traditional village customs and life habits – all these make for a fascinating, unique tableau, whose outlines are enhanced by authorial irony. The village of Bulzești is, in fact, similar to Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Macondo, a topos in which history merged with the destiny of the individual, which becomes an exemplary story. Nae’s father, we further learn, is called Banța and had been rich, wouldn’t let anyone enter his many

bought forests. Moreover, in the large and beautiful houses where he had amassed his wealth, he used to hide the “outlaws”, “Trancă and his thieves, so that the posse could find no trace of them.” The old times, full of legends about outlaws, social rebels, who preyed on the rich to give to the poor, in a simulated act of rebellion and justice, belong to an undefined and somewhat unexpected past for a character who was also a member of the upper class. Next comes the list of children, because Banța had not only “bought estates, forests” but had also had several children: Anica, the girl who had got married, but died young, then Gligore, who had also got married to a rich girl, “then Gogu, / who had got married in Bălcești and was curse / Machea, ‘cause he had two boys and when they became teachers / they both died of consumption.” The fact that a seemingly insignificant detail like “consumption”, that is, pulmonary tuberculosis, is mentioned speaks to the havoc that this disease wreaked in the nineteenth century and up to the beginning of the twentieth century, especially among the poor. Here history is a way of life, it is the history of the School of the Annales, with an economic and social focus.

The story of this family then overlaps with great historical events, because the last child, Fănică, “died in 1917 in the war.”

In a striking, unembellished, simple style, the author ponders the tragic paradox of the father, who became a collaborationist mayor during the German occupation during the First World War, while all of his five children were fighting on the front against the Germans:

during the German occupation, Banța had five son / all in the war, but
he had become the mayor of the Germans / he went to the people, he
cussed, he swore, / he took their oxen, sheep and even the eggs from
under their broody hens, so all the women cursed him, / and he walked,
roses on his lapel. / [...] / He would dress up and go hunting all that
stuff, / give it to the Germans. / He died in peace, at home.

The bitter, burlesque image of a mayor commandeering goods for the occupier’s army and swearing at the villagers, while dressed elegantly, in a shirt and overcoat, evokes a historically and morally charged period going back several decades.

The ironic effect is enhanced in the short, unexpected, and surprising ending, typical of this series of volumes written by Marin Sorescu. The ending turns out to be a sign of the dark irony of fate. The collaborationist mayor “died in peace, at home,” but had lost all his young children in various circumstances, including the war he himself supported, forcing the villagers to contribute and making them curse him. Wealth, which is the literary leitmotif in the first part of the poem, glues together families and marriages; what matters is how substantial each of the spouses’ dowry is. But wealth does not save anyone from death, on the contrary – this is Sorescu’s moral lesson. Another law of traditional village life is overturned in the very fact that the evil mayor lives a long and prosperous life. According to folk culture, immoral, uncommonly callous people, such as Banța, “do not die a good death”. Such people for sure pay for their acts with a tormented end. Nevertheless, in the very last verse, we learn that Banța “died in peace, at home”, which again ironically contradicts ancient common wisdom.

In other words, Marin Sorescu, using new techniques reminiscent of postmodernism, associating playfulness, tragedy and irony, brings to the fore a complex somewhat strange world, which deconstructs its mythology while exposing its history. In this way, he forges a new poetic path in Romanian literature and his own vision on humanity and history, from the level of individuals living side by side and one after the other, weaving their destinies at the edge of time.

The title of the poem, *Biografii* [Biographies], could very well be lent to other poems that narrate personal stories or merely list names and their minimal ancestry. The paratext refers to the writing of these lives. It is only through an act of creation that they become part of history, which finally incorporates us all.

The novelty of Marin Sorescu’s poetry lead to a difficult reception at the time, although, in the public space, including in comedic shows on state television featuring the great actor Amza Pelea, Oltenian village life and its irony had extraordinary appeal. It might be said that this is a form of escapism and subversive consumption, “tolerated” under the increasingly transparent roof of official, sclerotic culture which employed awful quasi-generalized wooden language. The brutal and dramatic authenticity of the village world, viewed

through a deforming burlesque lens, undoubtedly broadened the artistic experience of the people and induced a diversification of the cultural thematic range.

In conclusion, in the communist period, history remains one of the references of the poetic imaginary, but it acquires various interpretations, depending on the author's worldview and sensibility, but also on the latter's relation with either propagandistic, "politically regimented" poetry or autonomous censor-"tolerated" poetry, sending complex messages to the readership and questioning one's own interiority.

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