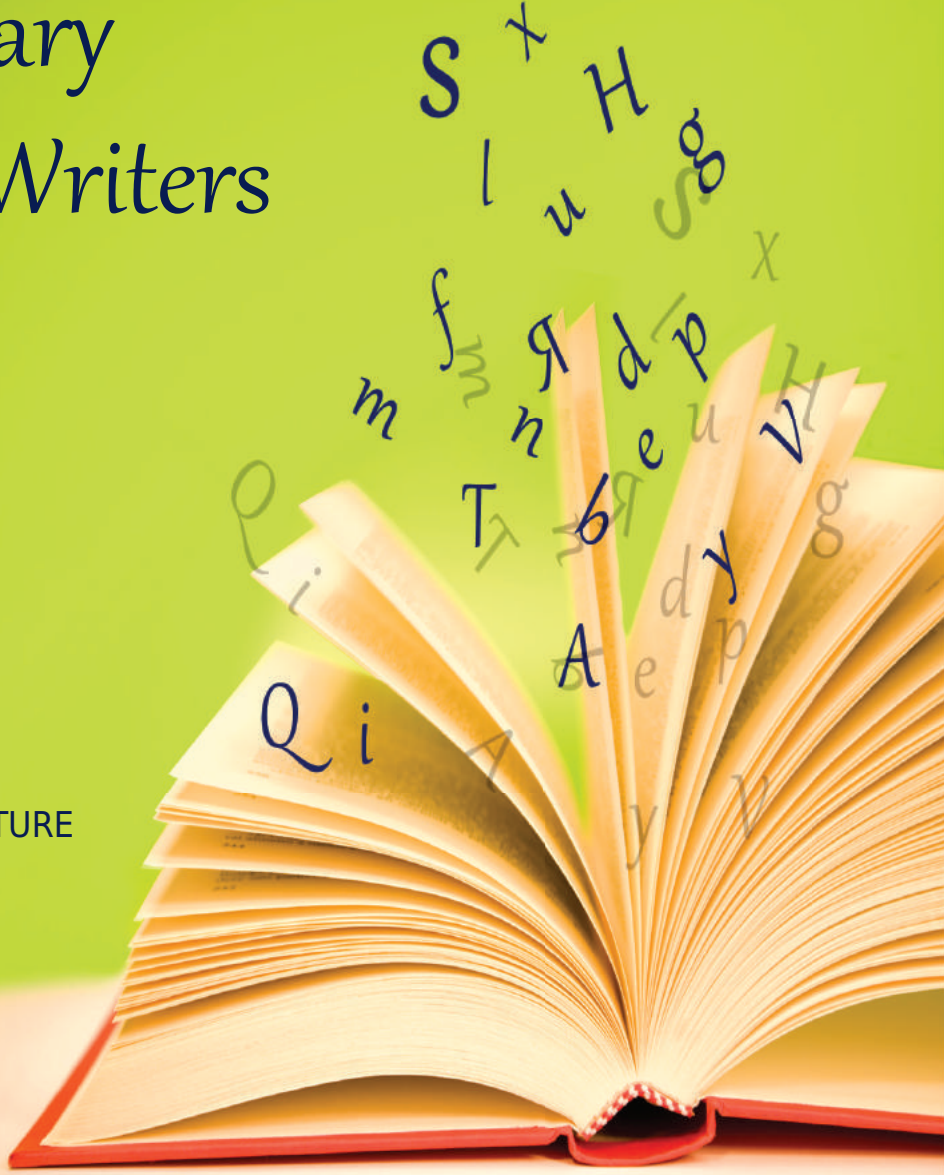
Contemporary Romanian Writers



MINISTRY OF CULTURE

A Mature Literature

A few years ago, in Romanian literature there was a clear split – in terms of themes, imagery, and devices – between writing that was firmly grounded in the critical canons, on the one hand, and texts by young writers more in tune with new trends and more receptive to outside influences, on the other. Those who had only recently entered the literary arena had the air of being a group, and this came not only from their shared imagery, disinhibition and rebelliousness, but also from their redefinition of literature and the literary. In time this split has become blurred. Whether young or old, whether esteemed by traditional-minded literary critics or beloved by the online media and literary blogs that nowadays set the publishing trends, active writers, i.e. those who publish a book at least every two to three years, have become more professional. Today's osmosis, the crystallisation of a unitary literature, is undoubtedly a sign of maturity, of the fact that the post-1989 literary transition has been left behind, and (why not?) of intellectual generosity on the part of those literary generations that have already become established. The memoir-dialogue between Paul Cornea and Daniel Cristea-Enache excerpted in this catalogue is a clear illustration of this idea.

Therefore, it is pointless to discuss the literature being written in Romania today in terms of different generations. However, the genres currently being tackled might paint a livelier, more dynamic portrait of Romanian letters. The novel, still regarded as the dominant genre and the one with the greatest public impact, wagers on authenticity, parody and irony, and the results could not be more diverse. In Romanian literature today, there are novels that mine an autobiographical lode (Mircea Cărtărescu, Marta Petreu, Norman Manea) and neo-realist novels that explore the great unanswered questions (Lucian Dan Teodorovici, Ruxandra Cesereanu, Ioan Groșan, Ioana Pârvulescu), but also fantastical novels of minor human mysteries (Daniel Bănulescu, Florin Lăzărescu, Răzvan Rădulescu, Filip Florian), metaphysical novels set in the mirror of the present (Dora Pavel, Simona Sora, Dan Stanca), essayistic novels (Florina Ilis), on-the-road poetic novels (Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari, Lavinia Bălulescu), self-ironising novels (T.O. Bobe, Radu Pavel Gheo), and even an elegiac novel about an Irish ballad (Radu Paraschivescu).

The poetry being written in Romania today is so dense, so varied and so difficult to label that only multiple well-focused anthologies could provide any idea of its thematic range. Three major poets of the extraordinary generation that emerged in the 1960s are included in this catalogue (Ileana Mălăncioiu, Ana Blandiana, Emil Brumaru), but the first two are presented via an essay and memoir respectively, since it is harder for poetry to pass the test of translation. Young poet Ştefan Baghiu, who made his much-acclaimed debut in 2013, is also included. But no overview of the younger generation of poets would be complete without at least a mention of the names Claudiu Komartin, V. Leac, Doina Ioanid, Robert Şerban, Dan Sociu, Elena Vlădăreanu, Bogdan-Alexandru Stănescu, Ştefan Manasia, Radu Vancu, Dan Coman, Ana Dragu and Florin Partene

In Romanian literature today, the essay is the specialty of the Timișoara School. There are also very good essayists from Jassy (Luca Piţu, Valeriu Gherghel, Dan Petrescu, Liviu Antonesei, Andrei Corbea), Cluj (Ion Vartic, Marta Petreu, Sanda Cordoş), and Bucharest (Andrei Pleşu, H.-R. Patapievici, Andrei Oişteanu), but the Timișoara School, which crystallised around the Third Europe Foundation, is the most European in its outlook. Mircea Mihăieş, Cornel Ungureanu, Livius Ciocârlie, Alexandru Budac, and Adriana Babeţi are just a few of those Romanian knights errant still in search of the "Grail of the Central-European idea." Their anthologies (*Europa Central. Temores, dilemas, utopias,* 1997; *Europa central. Memoria, paraíso, apocalipsis*, 1998; *Le Banat. Un Eldorado aux confins*, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2007) are unique in post-1989 Romanian culture. And Adriana Babeţi's latest essay, *The Amazons. A Story*, which was declared Book of the Year 2013, is the perfect illustration of the Timișoara School's excellence in the field of the essay, as well as of the utopias that Romanian culture periodically secretes.

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Dandysmul. O istorie (*Dandyism. A History*), essay, Polirom, 2004;
Arahne şi pânza (*Arachne and the Web*), essay, Editura Universităţii de Vest, 2002;
Dilemele Europei Centrale (*The Dilemmas of Central Europe*), essay, Mirton, 1998;
Bătăliile pierdute. Dimitrie Cantemir, strategii de lectură (*Lost Battles. Dimitrie Cantemir, Reading Strategies*), essay, Amarcord, 1998;
Femeia în roşu (*The Woman in Red*, with Mircea Nedelciu and Mircea Mihăieş), novel, 1990, 1998, 2003; Polirom, 2008

Adriana Babeţi

(born 1949)

Adriana Babeţi is one of Romania's leading contemporary essayists, and is part of the Timişoara school that formed around the Third Europe Foundation (Mircea Mihăieş, Cornel Ungureanu, Liviu Ciocârlie). She teaches comparative literature at the Western University in Timişoara. Together with literary critic Cornel Ungureanu, she has edited the anthologies *Central Europe: Neuroses, Dilemmas, Utopias* (Polirom, 1997) and *Central Europe: Memory, Paradise, Apocalypse* (Polirom, 1998). She has also edited the anthology *Le Banat: Un Eldorado aux confins* (Cultures, d'Europe Centrale, CIRCE, Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 2007). In 2013 she published *The Amazons. A Story*, the second part of a trilogy, which she began with the volume *Dandyism. A History*. She has received a number of prestigious literary awards, including the Literary Criticism and Theory Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers (1998, 2004), the Prize of the Romanian Comparative Literature Association (2004), and the Prose Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers (1990).

The Amazons. A Story

Adriana Babeți

This essay about the Amazons is a total journey into the world of the warrior women, ranging from Antiquity to the twenty-first century. The book's aim is twofold: to exhaust its subject and to tell a captivating story. Structured like a treatise on military strategy – with attacks, counterattacks, encircling manoeuvres, charges, parades and retreats – this (pseudo-) treatise on warrior women takes us on a journey through all the arts and sciences with which the Amazons have ever been associated. In an inimitable and highly personal style it tells the story of how those unusual women fought, loved, dressed, trained, and ate. A first-class essay and an ironic, epic yarn!

Extract

And now we come to the most fiercely contested flank of the Amazons' assault: their amorous relations with men, ranging from pure sexuality to love in the fullest sense. From the tales concocted by the ancients, as well as by moderns, and from what we have been able to discover about the "man-killers" of old, one idea has clearly come to stand out by the time of the neo-amazons of the third millennium: namely, these creatures, now *antianeirai*, now *philandroi*, are not content merely to turn upside down the world's given order when they take up arms and go to war. Between violent hatred and passionate love, they also overturn even the rules laid by down tradition on a different battlefield, that of the Eros, which brings a man and a woman face to face. Why does this happen?

The answers can be found (not always directly, it is true, but rather obliquely) at the intersection of a number of disciplines: cultural history, anthropology, comparative mythology, psychoanalysis, ethnology, gender studies, and so on. Of all these disciplines, anthropology, grafted onto a sound knowledge of ancient history, puts forward one of the most comprehensive and plausible explanations. Jeannie Carlier-Détienne formulates it with great clarity when she makes the connection between the Greek imaginary, the distribution of sexual rôles in ancient Hellas, and the representation of an inverted world in the stories of the warrior women. She argues that for the Greeks, the Amazons were thrice other: firstly, because they were women, "with all that that entailed for a Greek: bestiality, uncontrolled violence"; secondly, inasmuch

as they hated men, because they were *antianeirai*; and thirdly, because they were barbarians.

On the other hand, let us also recall Demosthenes, who, in his resounding speech *Against Neaera*, bluntly says the following: for pleasure, a man has courtesans, for everyday needs, he has concubines, and for legitimate heirs and home comfort he has a wife. In each of these three cases, the woman is an object, to be utilised in different rôles and circumstances. In the name of her exceptional freedom, this is exactly what the Amazon does not wish to be.

However, a closer examination of the texts (be they fables or be they histories with a claim to veracity) reveals that no two stories about the Amazons' relations with men are the same. And so, having placed the numerous texts side by side, we need to think about what strategy would be most suited to allow us to come to grips with the new subject. This is not at all simple, given the host of nuances and modulations of the central myth, which, from the time of Homer, clearly says that almost all the Amazons are *antianeirai*. Which is to say, the enemies of men (when they are not "the equals of men"). And in the name of this misandry, a whole range of epithets was developed. Aeschylus, in *The Suppliants*, when he compares the Danaids with the Amazons, is the first to call them *anandrai*, i.e. "women without men", who, acting in complete freedom and defying all rules, reject marriage. At the opposite extreme, they are "killers of men," or *androktonoi* or, on the contrary, according to Plutarch in *The Life of Theseus*, they are "by nature lovers of men," or *philandroi*. What then?

In some cases, they are both the one and the other. No few ancient and modern Amazons start out, for one reason or another, hating men and end up falling in love with the Hero who faces them in battle. How such love stories turn out we shall see below. But until then, let us take note of the certain fact that most of the bellicose maidens and women are initially gripped by misandry. At least this is how they appear to the imagination of various periods, a dominantly masculine imagination, as has often been said. The Amazons, creatures whom the myth-making Greeks imagined as monstrous aberrations from the norms of their androcratic world, hate men from the bottom of their hearts, live in a world parallel to men, and fight men to the death. They mostly kill the men they fight, but some they take prisoners and dominate and humiliate them in every imaginable way. And if they decide to become mothers, their hatred even extends to newborn infants of the male sex.

But the Amazons are highly various, depending on whether they preserve or lose their virginity and on whether or not they marry. Here, then, is a first criterion for classifying Amazons in their relations with men: their socio-biological status (virgin/woman; celibate/married), if we may put it like that. Even if to most people it seems that the Amazons can be penned inside definitions such as "warrior women" or "women without men," things prove to be more complicated. Not all of them are or remain chaste, just as not all of them reject marriage. It is clear that the way the poets, tragedians and historians have described them since Antiquity is highly various and nuanced. So, looking at the map of *Amazonland*, drawn up during the major periods when the doughty warrior women were described, what may we conclude? That the tales about the Libyan Amazons' relations with men sound different from the stories about the warrior wives of the Sauromates and Scyths on the Don/Tanais. That the exploits of the Amazons on the Thermodon are different still. And that even greater discrepancies between those tales of love or hate arise when we take into account the different periods in which they were created. In the archaic period of Greek culture, in the *Iliad*, for example, the Amazons appear merely as fleeting shadows. But by the time of Stieg Larsson's *Millennium* trilogy, they have come to serve openly as a model for extraordinary present-day heroines.

Adriana Babeţi
Amazoanele. O poveste
Polirom, 2013
ISBN 978-973-46-3944-1

Selected bibliography

Spre Sud, la Lăceni (*Southward, to Lăceni*), Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 2013.

Ștefan Baghiu

(born 1992)

Photo © Robert-Adrian Gavrilescu

Ştefan Baghiu is a student of Romanian and French in the Literature Faculty of the Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj. He made his debut as a poet in *Familia* magazine. He writes a weekly literary review for *Cultura* magazine and contributes to *Steaua* and *Familia* magazines. He has also worked as an editor for the *Echinox* student magazine. He was awarded the title of Young Poet of the Year at the Young Writers Gala in 2013 and was the winner of the Opera Prima section of the Mihai Eminescu National Poetry Prize in the same year.

Southward, to Lăceni

Ștefan Baghiu

Ştefan Baghiu's debut volume is a biographical-quotidian X-ray of the poet's inner and outer world. The central motifs of the volume are the behavioural subtleties of the people around the poet, his permanent anxiety and desire to integrate into a world that becomes more seductive the lower it sinks. Written in a language that is uninhibited, but without becoming vulgar or trite, the poems in this collection speak of a major crisis of identity, of melancholy alienation in the new cityscapes.

Extracts

Where Petra

Whose is that beauty of yours, Petra?
Could it be the dynamic of the human race
and the result of that rotation, as the Indians say
on the banks of the River Chenab, when order is established,
but in the morning why does your beauty seem to me
so big, to me of all people, could it be
the dynamic of the human race, or quite simply
this moment of silence and light
that's somehow cherished by my newly opening eye?

Because I'm not even talking about love
that moment of persistent sadness
that makes people weep for pity
thinking they're happy in the family orchard,
I'm not even talking about love when I say
"*Whose is that beauty of yours*?" but rather
I'm talking about the dynamic of things,
the natural course of mornings
when you will have looked the same in Bucharest
after a night from which now I'd keep
just the light-headedness, I'd discard the queasiness
and I'd stay like that, until morning, when,
turning to look out of the window,
where the first signs of warmer weather have arrived,
where the drugs have actually done their job,
I'd see things more clearly:
why so many walks and such long sleep by your side?
Whose is that beauty of yours,

if not mine,
after I've practised falling down in the main square?

Because these are the thoughts
I don't want to explain any more,
they arrive during walks through dangerous neighbourhoods
where the cherry tree is in bloom.
Whose is that beauty of yours?
I study your ingenious chemistry at length
and the curves you reveal to teenagers
in every region of the country.

Because love too has revealed itself,
it was brief and striking in its decorousness,
it determined my way of being for the next year and a half,
and now, now that something else has taken its place,
now that a kind of wretched sympathy has taken its place,
all that's left is the danger that that beauty of yours
might somehow lead to happiness.

Southward, to Lăceni

I listened to the electro forest,
a rave at minus twenty in the last sleeping bag.
Insomnias for the lucky ones,
ecstasy for the ones whose lymphatic systems
are riddled with adrenaline,
axial myopia,
photorefractive keratectomy
and hypnosis for the electro idiots,
who've powered up the porno mechanism
in Lăceni.
The snorting that was going on was enough
to set the weedy *Erasmus* students shuddering,
who pierced their girlfriends' ears,
it was the only way to make the conical
wooden flash drive fit,
who punched tattoos
on their girlfriends' necks,
“*this is it!*” –
the hole in the girlfriend's ear,
the porno flash drive of love between adolescents,

the firm breasts covered with Japanese flowers,
black and white, there writes Gabi.
The great evolution is visible only after nightfall
in the abandoned factories, in the electric forests.
The acid will take control of the turntables,
they'll compose the final music,
which you can't dance to any more,
and I'll remain sedated until morning in the *Goa* club –
with a glass of vodka constantly vibrating on the speakers.

With hatred we cram ourselves eighty to a room,
drum beats and night echoes
left me panting heavily, sickly and so tired.
Look at me now, far away, on crutches,
trying out a new nervous tic I'm thinking of adopting
and in the evening, when everything looks like it is,
I can hang from the trendiest fears:
that the time I wasted
(even if I always say, with a cough,
that I never regret anything I've done)
wasn't even mine.

It's only then that it all gets back to normal,
when they pass before my eyes,
eyes pierced by the neon and led lights of advertising hoardings:
all kinds of random statements,
which calm me,
"yes, this is the world I'm accustomed to."

Ştefan Baghiu
Spre Sud, la Lăceni
Cartea Românească, 2013
ISBN 978-973-23-3048-7

Selected bibliography

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MOV (*MAUVE*), poetry, Prier, 2004.

Lavinia Bălulescu

(born 1985)

Photo © Ionuţ Suciu

Lavinia Bălulescu graduated with a Degree in Journalism and English from the Political Sciences, Philosophy and Communication Sciences Faculty of the Western University, Timișoara. She currently works as a journalist. She made her literary debut in 2004, publishing a collection of poetry entitled *MAUVE* (Prier Publishing House). In 2007 she published a further collection, *Lavinucea* (Cartea Românească Publishing House), having won the Union of Romanian Writers Work in Manuscript Competition. Her work has featured in a number of anthologies, including *My First Porno* (ART Publishing House, 2011) and *Father Christmas & Co.* (ART Publishing House, 2012). In 2005 she was awarded the Prize for Debut of the Timișoara branch of the Union of Romanian Writers.

Here in My Head

Lavinia Bălulescu

Lavinia Bălulescu's first novel is a mixture of realism and minutely described hallucination. It is a tale that constantly tends towards its own disintegration: a girl named April – both child and woman in too confined a body – discovers on the ceiling of her bedroom the outline of another woman. Proceeding from this doubling of identity, everything becomes twofold: two worlds (World 1 and World 2), two realities, one "realistic", the other magical and phantasmagorical, and even two overlapping stories. *Here in My Head*, a novel of the imaginary under the control of the intellect, has been well received by Romanian critics and readers alike.

Extract

World 1

When the end came, I had just bought a green bicycle. I would be walking down the street and I kept seeing beautiful women in dresses riding one of those superb, elegant bicycles with a basket in front. Great! Even if I didn't have anywhere to put it, even if I would have to haul it up the stairs to the first floor, I still wanted one. I had been imagining how an ordinary bicycle would quite simply change my life.

Fresh, fresh, fresh. In the morning, you open the window, you have two perfect variations: 1) It's the first day of winter, it's been snowing, it smells of coldness and cleanness. 2) It's spring, it's been raining, a dog is barking at the corner of the block of flats, it doesn't yet smell of food being cooked.

Another variation would be when you sense the sea, even though the water is a thousand kilometres away. As fresh as when you've bought a hot loaf and you eat half of it on your way home. As when the man enters the room, having shaved and put on a lotion that smells like the one your father uses. As when you've just washed your hair for the first time in a whole week. Or else, as when you slip and graze your knee, not very badly, but still it's a cut, and so as if you were to bleed a little, enough for it to hurt, enough for somebody to have to help you wash the grit out of the gash, to dab it with hydrocortisone and to bandage your leg with gauze. Fresh birds, which take fright and fly up into the air in flocks, fresh shoulders, sometimes bared, intimate. The loveliest pair of high-heeled shoes, absolute killers, pointless, impossible to wear, good for keeping in a shoebox under the desk, good for a memento in old age, for when it's all over.

Freshly awoken, Tudor, still nestling under the quilt, wants everything at once, the television remote, his slippers, the towel from the cupboard, open the window to let some air in will you? you couldn't bring me a couple of sandwiches, could you? could you make them in the toaster? do you know where my 'phone is? are you making some tea? but won't you bring it here to me in bed? pleaaaaase, please, in the morning, with two fried eggs, with sliced tomato and a little ham, a glass of milk, an orange and toast, please, come in the morning.

My room has a balcony, which would be something fortunate, if I didn't always fill it with all kinds of junk, plastic bags full of newspapers, old, dirty clothes, it would be even better if the walls weren't mouldy and if the windows opened all the way. In front of my window it's not the city that spreads out, it's not life that opens up, but only the rear of the regional business centre, a car park and a huge container. People come and go, drivers clog up the path to the block with their cars, the pensioners swear at them, dragging two or three little dogs behind them, and life goes on. We fight for parking places every God-given evening; it's all a game in the search for a little corner where you can leave your car. Even when we take off our shoes in the hall, we imagine we're actually parking them. The neighbour upstairs has a dog, I don't know what the animal looks like, but I can hear its claws on the parquet, I can sense its life, it's fresh and agitated, it wants to crash through the walls, the ceiling, the floor. Hacksaw, bark, boom-boom, somebody flushes the toilet, once, twice, thrice, somebody else is having sex, screams, imagines she's acting in a film, the dog barks again, happy at being alive, at having its own ball, at being warm, at not feeling absolutely any need to scratch itself. Whatever you might do, there's always something else to be done. You're such an oaf, it's you who's a fucking cow, boom, my neighbour's body as she hits the kitchen wall. Boom, fall the plates, glasses, a metal basin full of doughnuts. Boom, something else, a screech. A woman is doing her nails and spills the bottle of varnish. It's not yet nine o'clock; some neighbours are still sleeping. I still haven't fully woken up. I'm still imagining what it will be like when I die.

Lavinia Bălulescu
La mine-n cap
Cartea Românească, 2013
ISBN 978-973-23-3003-6

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Te voi iubi pân' la sfârşitul patului (*I'll Love You Till the End of the Bed*), novel, Cartea Românească, 1993.

Daniel Bănulescu

(born 1960)

Photo © Cato Lein

Poet, novelist and playwright, Daniel Bănulescu is one of the most interesting writers active in Romania today. He studied engineering at university, but went on to work as a journalist. He has received a number of literary awards, including the European Poetry Prize of the City of Münster (joint winner: Ernest Wichner), the Prize of the Romanian Academy, the Poet of the City of Bucharest Prize, and the Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers. His work has been translated in numerous foreign languages.

Flee from your hideous, revolting life and into my book

Daniel Bănulescu

In *Flee from your hideous, revolting life and into my book* can be found two different Bucharests simultaneously: one is fantastical and shadowy, like in a nineteenth-century novel of mystery, a city of political but also metaphysical intrigues, the other is a motley place, painted with a realist palette. Daniel Bănulescu's Bucharest is also the Bucharest of official convoys making their way along the capital's main thoroughfare, Calea Victoriei, of speeches at mass rallies, of spies, and of the all-powerful secret police, the Securitate. But above all, this Bucharest is the backdrop for the evolution of an out-of-the-ordinary protagonist: Nicolae Ceausescu, a sinister, comical, Faustian, Mephistophelean anti-hero, whom an equally remarkable character, Swallow-wort (a youthful thief, the terror of the town and rôle model for all Bucharest's burglars), is planning to murder.

Extract

Lying on the hot floor with his right arm behind his back, Nicolae Ceausescu was scratching his arse with the Romanian people.

What he referred to as “the Romanian people” was in fact a delicate ivory-encrusted bathing brush, of which he was deeply enamoured. After officiating his religious services at the Central Committee, as soon as he got back to his Palace in the Primavara quarter he would dismiss the presidential convoy, climb the steps at his own lively, healthily savage pace, and run to the sauna to find out how the Romanian people was doing.

“How is the Romanian people doing?” said the President, darting his narrow, mischievous eyes in every direction.

“Comrade Supreme Commandant!” the commandant of the masseurs' corps rhythmically rapped out. “Allow me to report. The Romanian people is well! It is washed, dried and sitting on the shelf, waiting impatiently for your orders!”

“Very good. Mind you take care of the Romanian people. In it rests our future hope.”

It was by no means clear how the future hope of so many could depend on that sanitary item. Every day, Ceausescu looked at them to see whether they were pretending to

comprehend the incomprehensible. Never did they have any qualms about pretending. Then the Beloved Leader would go to attend to various tasks, and around two hours later he would smear his blemishes with liver paté, which is to say, he would have his evening meal. At around nine o'clock, when he managed to get away and have some time to himself, without his wife, he would go back to the swimming pool to find out whether anybody dared to give him a massage.

"Let's see now: which of you is up for giving me a massage? Where do we think we are, in a bus?" the Most Beloved Son of the People would say, with a wink.

The night before, sometime between 28 February and 1 March 1987, a serious incident had rocked the country's political life. Unknown perpetrators had set fire to the Triumphal Arch that guarded the pathway to the House of the Spark Exhibition Pavilion. And the Triumphal Arch, being made of cardboard, had burned like a torch, from its roof to the cobblestones.

What was unacceptable was not the loss of a few hundred square metres of shoddy materials, but the destruction of the portrait of Comrade Nicolae Ceausescu, the slogan "The Age of Nicolae Ceausescu - Romania's Golden Age!", and the various other slogans that had decked the Arch and which "you can't go burning down just because it gives you a bone-on," as Alexandru Gabrea put it, while admonishing his inferiors. "Those slogans are as sacred as the Homeland itself!"

Even before the crack of dawn, the jokers from the Parks Department were dragged from their beds and made to clean up the area, while the forces of the Ministry of the Interior, trying in vain to establish what had happened, could do nothing but pour the remaining ashes on their heads and take photographs of the asphalt.

At around half past eight in the morning, given that nobody wished to take responsibility for hushing up such a resounding act of popular revolt, they were forced to inform the President.

They informed him, but they lent the facts exactly the opposite meaning.

"Last night, the Triumphal Arch in front of the Exhibition Pavillion caught fire. It burned to the ground, by accident, because of some sympathisers."

On the evening of Sunday, 1 March 1987, Ceausescu summoned Colonel Alexandru Gabrea to his house and demanded that he report on the causes of the fire and whether any enemies of the people were mixed up in the affair.

He received him in the sauna.

From discreetness and jealous possessiveness, he thrust the brush beneath the folded-up bathrobe on which he was resting his head.

Daniel Bănulescu
Fugi din viața ta, revoltătoare și slută, în cartea mea
Cartea Românească, 2009
ISBN 978-973-23-2884-2

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Octombrie, Noiembrie, Decembrie (*October, November, December*), poetry, Cartea Românească, 1972;
Călcîiul vulnerabil (*Achilles Heel*), poetry, Cartea Românească, 1966;
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Ana Blandiana

(born 1942)

Ana Blandiana is one of Romania's most important contemporary poets and during the communist period she was a leading figure among intellectuals opposed to the regime. She was banned from publishing her work during a number of intervals: 1959-1964, 1985, 1988-1989. In 1989, Ana Blandiana re-established the Romanian PEN Club, becoming its president. She was one of the founders of the Civic Alliance, which she led from 1991 to 2001. She is the founder and president of the Civic Academy, which, under the aegis of the Council of Europe, created the Memorial to the Victims of Communism and to the Anti-communist Resistance in Sighet. She is a member of the European Academy of Poetry, of the Stéphane Mallarmé Academy of Poetry, and the World Academy of Poetry (UNESCO). Since 1982 her poetry and prose has been translated into numerous languages, published by prestigious imprints in Poland, Germany, Italy, Britain, Estonia, Sweden, Norway, Hungary, France, Holland, Bulgaria, Latvia, Albania, Serbia, Slovenia, Macedonia, China, and South Korea. The literary awards she has received include the Poetry Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers (1969); the Poetry Prize of the Romanian Academy (1970); the Prose Prize of the Bucharest Association of Writers (1982); the Gottfried von Herder Prize (1982); the National Poetry Prize (1997); the Opera Omnia Prize (2001); the Vilenica Prize (2002); the Camaiore Prize (2005); and the Acerbi Special Prize (2005).

Faux Treatise on Manipulation

Ana Blandiana

Ana Blandiana's recent volume of memoirs is an exercise in understanding the past, in self-remembrance, and also in reconstruction of meanings that had been lost in the whirlwind of events. As the author understands it, the book, ironically titled *Faux Treatise on Manipulation*, is an account of herself and of the times she experienced during communism, as well as in the post-communist period, "seething times, swept by a wind constantly blowing from the wrong direction of history, shattering meanings, but not the stubborn effort to understand them." It is a book about both past and present, in which events, people and crucial moments of recent history are re-examined and painstakingly dissected.

Extract

***Addendum to* The Applause Drawer**

Before I begin to narrate it, I cannot help but ask myself why this episode, from which the very idea for *The Applause Drawer* was drawn, was not included in the book. Did I find it too implausible? Too unreal? Too literary, ultimately?

I was living, as I still do now, near the Radio building. From my window you can see the entrance to the Radio Concert Hall. At the beginning of the 1980s, or perhaps a year or two earlier, from this vantage point I quite often witnessed deployments of the forces of law and order, when the concert hall was being used for Party or union meetings or for rallies. And so it was nothing unusual for me to awake in the morning to the din made by the militiamen as they evacuated the cars parked on our street and the surrounding streets, to clear the way for the buses that would be arriving from the various counties (the name of each county was written in large letters on the windscreen) to discharge their loads one after the other: young people in folk costume; men with double chins, bellies that spilled over their belts, and three-piece suits, regardless of the fashion or the season; women whose architectonically arranged curls were set with hairspray; little girls with scientifically constructed white ribbons mounted on top of their heads like helicopter rotor blades. All of them were swallowed in orderly fashion by the radio building, whence they emerged long hours later, sweating, rumpled, looking exhausted, as if there in the mysterious innards of the

auditorium they had been toiling, rather than merely suffering boredom, repeating or listening to the same slogans over and over again, slogans they knew by heart and which they had long since stopped trying to understand. In the evening, during the two hours of the scheduled television broadcast, I would see images from the concert hall and hear a torrent of words about what had taken place therein.

What I would like to recount appeared no different from such events, but what intrigued me was that I sensed that something else was going on, without managing to find out what it was. Once or twice a year at the most, they would arrive the evening before to prevent you from parking there, and the next day, in the morning, by the time I woke up, no matter how early it was, the pavements on both sides of the street would be lined with identical military buses, from which alighted, in carefully planned orderliness, in silence, line after line of soldiers, who then made their way to the concert hall. What was mysterious was the lack of noise, which made you think of a secret operation, although obviously the dozens of buses could not be camouflaged. The buses remained there for hours and hours, the whole day, and then in the evening the same orderly lines of conscripts emerged from the building and took their places in the buses, which then set off in the same, as it were cautious, manner in which they had arrived.

I tried to find out what hundreds of soldiers could possibly be doing inside the Radio Concert Hall for so many hours. I asked the neighbours, I asked acquaintances who worked for the Radio, I asked members of the symphony orchestra. Some of them had obviously never wondered about it and the question set them to thinking. Others had obviously thought about it and had their suspicions or even knew what was going on, but they evaded answering the question. Their anxiety, their hesitancy, the way they tried to wriggle out of it by cracking a joke, the way they quickly ended the conversation or changed the subject turned my curiosity into an obsession and made me suspect there was something nefarious behind the mystery. And when I finally found out what the mystery was, it far surpassed any supposition or expectation.

The hundreds of soldiers were brought there once or twice a year in order to replenish the stock of recorded applause and cheering that was used as a soundtrack to broadcasts of rallies and meetings. The Radio Concert Hall, equipped with the latest recording technology, was the place where the soldiers were made to applaud; they were skilfully instructed and coached so that this mechanical action, under the baton of a real conductor, was transformed into almost a work of art. The result was recorded: enthusiastic applause, cheering applause, rhythmic applause, frenzied applause. The cassette tapes were indexed and arranged so that they could be easily selected and used whenever the need arose. However fantastical it might seem, the story is, up to this point, strictly authentic. But from this point on, it is *The Applause Drawer*.

Nevertheless, I feel it is only natural that I conclude by moving from reality not to literature, but to history. Those recordings were made in the early 1980s and were probably used thereafter for the almost imperceptible retouching of reality. But towards the end, by 1988 and 89, there was nothing more disturbing and fascinating than to watch, during the famous two-hour television schedule, footage of crowds that had been assembled against their will, listening in silence, stony-faced, to endless speeches that they certainly could no longer hear. In the front seats a row of Securitate men would be applauding, clapping with wide motions of the arms, to disguise the motionlessness behind them, and all the while, prolonged applause, cheering applause, enthusiastic applause, rhythmic applause, frenzied applause resounded in the background…

Ana Blandiana
Fals tratat de manipulare
Humanitas, 2013
ISBN 978-973-50-4246-2

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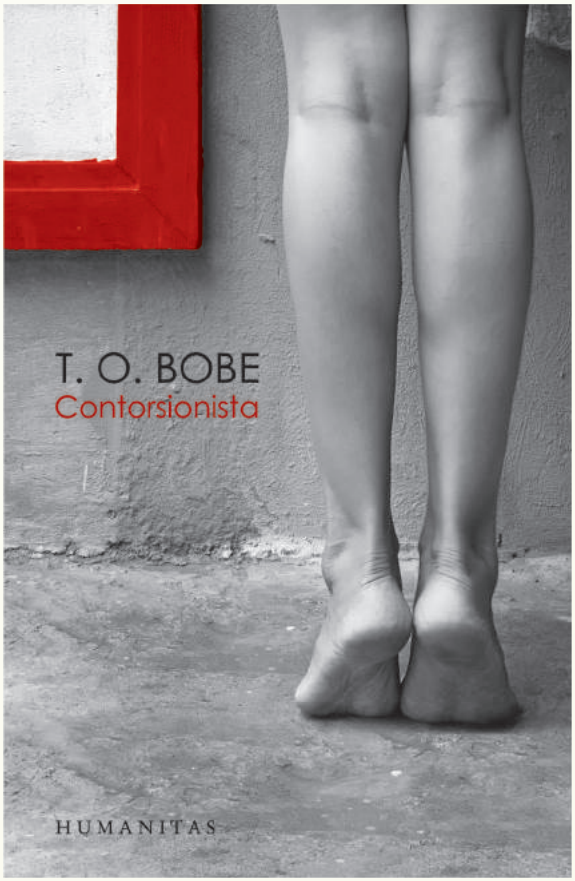
T.O. Bobe

(born 1969)

T.O. Bobe studied Literature at the University of Bucharest and made his debut as a poet in the anthology *Family Portrait* (Leka-Brâncuş, 1995). From 1995 to 2003 he worked as a literary secretary for the Small Theatre in Bucharest, as an editor, and as a television scriptwriter. In 2000 he was awarded a residency at the Akademie der Kunste in Berlin, and in 2003 and 2004 at the Akademie Schloß Solitude in Stuttgart. In 2001 he received the Trans Europe Script Award for the feature film screenplays *Getting Together* and *Morgan ReCollection*, which he co-authored with Ana Valentina Florescu.

The Female Contortionist

T.O. Bobe



The collection *The Female Contortionist* is one of the best books of Romanian short prose in recent years; it is a hotbed of (prose) subtleties, (Hassidic) ironies, and (human) emotions. The eight prose pieces that make up the collection are not only genuine "lessons in literature," in which procedure, technique, pastiche and intertextuality intersect to create a unique prose, but also tales about the clichés, patterns and sadnesses of the derisory everyday. One of Romania's best young prose writers today, T. O. Bobe is a freelancer and fanatic of literature for literature's sake.

Extract

Laura Vlad became a part of literature on 11 November, at around half past one in the afternoon. At the time, she had been living next to the State Circus in Bucharest for more than sixteen years, which is to say, since almost the day she was born. Her mother was a trapeze artiste and her father an animal trainer, and so almost her entire life had revolved around the circus ring, the safety cord and, above all, the springboard on which her older cousins worked. Ever since she was a little girl, Laura had been fascinated by her cousins, because they tumbled so beautifully through the air and then stood one on the other's shoulders to form the highest pyramid ever to have been seen at any circus. Of course, her cousins took a fall from time to time, but only during practice. Her mother never fell because after she gave birth to Laura she had specialised as a catcher. As for her father, it may be said that he always inspired her admiration, despite being a weak, even spineless, sort of man. But he had a whip, which, we must admit, was no small thing, either for a little girl or for the ponies. Because she had been born in a circus and her mother was a trapeze artiste and her father an animal trainer, Laura had the great advantage of never having been confronted in childhood with the terrible conundrum that well-meaning adults usually couch in the following words:

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

It was plain for all to see that, given it was one big family, the circus would look after her and all Laura would have to do would be to choose one of the specialised disciplines that were opening up before her eyes. And in order to make that choice, the young girl had variously worked as the assistant to the

ringmaster (an old illusionist, who was also her grandfather), the animal trainer, the juggler, and the White Clown. She was industrious and learned from everybody, displaying a flexibility and adaptability that were wholly out of the ordinary. One winter, when her cousins received an invitation to perform their six-woman pyramid at a festival in Monte Carlo, the family decided that the time had come for Laura to see the world's foremost circus acts. And so they applied for her passport and sent her abroad as an assistant to her cousins. Her cousins' act was a spectacular success, but the thing that impressed Laura Vlad the most was the Chinese women who could spin plates while contorting themselves into any position. There were so many Chinese women and they span so many plates with such intricate designs that the girl decided then and there to become a great contortionist. No sooner said than done. As soon as she got back home, she started practising. When it came to her ambitions, flexibility of the vertebral column, or, more plainly put, the spine, proved to be of the greatest importance. Laura started with warm-up exercises and then went on to do backbends. That was easy. And then, in time, she came to master the upwards-facing bow. Her age was of great help, as the ligaments between her vertebrae had not yet had time to stiffen. But that was just the beginning. The young Miss Vlad went on to hold first one leg and then the other behind her neck. And then both legs together. One day, in the window of a bookshop, she saw a book by Joyce Tenneson, called *Transformations*. The photograph on the cover showed a woman with her arms crossed beneath her chin and holding the palms of her hands on top of her head. It was rather a simple posture, but Laura found it fascinating. It was then she realised that in order to become a great contortionist she would have to combine technical and artistic merit, the same as in figure skating. She transferred her exercises from the sawdust floor of the big top to her mother's caravan, where there was a full-length mirror. From dawn till dusk, Laura contorted herself in front of the mirror, intent on every detail: the angles of her elbows and knees, the expression of her fingers, the emotions that could be read on her face. The ringmaster, her grandfather, the conjurer, once caught a glimpse of her through the door of the caravan, which was ajar, and pleasantly impressed he offered her second, albeit prominent, billing on the circus poster. And this is what he told her:

“Laura, you've grown to be a beautiful young lady. It's time you began your career. As I can see, you are able to do things that other girls your age can only dream of. You display a flexibility and adaptability that are completely out of the ordinary. Starting from the next season, you will have your own act.”

“What act, grandpa?” she asked, her heart shrinking to the size of a thimble.

“I don't know,” he replied. “You have been the assistant to the ringmaster (an old illusionist, who also happens to be your grandfather) and to the animal trainer, the juggler and the White Clown. Let's say your act will be called something like The Return of the Assistant. Well, what do you think of that?”

Laura did not think very much of that at all. In embarrassment for her grandfather, she wanted the ground to swallow her up. Not only because she didn't like his name for her contortionism act, which sounded like the title of some second-rate film, but also because her great defect was perfectionism. Had she not been a perfectionist, she would have made her debut in the big top long ago, but instead she kept working on every single tiny detail and was never satisfied herself. What was she to do?

T.O. Bobe
Contorsionista
Humanitas, 2011
ISBN 978-973-50-3374-3

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Emil Brumaru

(born 1939)

Photo © Radu Sandovici

Emil Brumaru is regarded as one of Romania's most important contemporary poets. From 1963 to 1975, he worked as a doctor in the small town of Dolhasca, Suceava County, an essential locus in the imagery of his work, which in his correspondence he named "a nature reserve for angels." He subsequently dedicated himself to writing, while working as a proofreader (1983-1989) and editor (1990-1996) for *Convorbiri Literare*, a literary magazine published in Jassy. He made his debut as a poet in *Luceafărul* magazine in 1967, and published his first two collections of poetry in 1970: *Verses* and *Arthur the Detective*. In 2001 he was awarded the Mihai Eminescu National Poetry Prize for his Opera Omnia, and in 2011 he received the *Observator Cultural* prize, also for his lifetime's achievement as a poet. His poems have been included in anthologies published in Romania, Germany, France and Britain.

The Angel Reserve

Emil Brumaru

Regarded as an event in Emil Brumaru's career as a poet, a turning point in the poetic form of his lyricism hitherto, the collection *Angel Reserve* shifts the emphasis from the world of household objects to sweeping metaphysical and erotic vistas. The poet's well-known eroticism here becomes ritualised, "angelised", and naïveté and refinement combine within the space of a single line, creating a new and crepuscular world, in which, for the first time in his work, the idea of death finds a place. Compared by many critics to the Arghezi of the inter-war period, in this volume we find a disquieting, seductive, sparkling poet.

Extracts

With the poet Rilke's angels I should like to parley...

With the poet Rilke's angels I should like to parley,
Once or twice a year would do,
So that we might set the world to rights most squarely
Before we came to bid adieu.
That rabble, they take us for fools, idly gawking,
Slobbery pond scum that they are. It's we who bear the brunt
Of their wallowing sloth and their piggish talking
In a grunt!
It makes me sick. I'd like to glue my thirsty lips to the muzzle
Of a water fountain. After which, half a pound of halva let me guzzle.
Do you object?
And then I'd read *Herr Puntila and His Man Matti*
By Bertolt Brecht!

Journey

Lily in one hand, broadsword in the other,
At peace with destiny my angel passed
Through morning's greenish exhalations,
Moving from life and, thence, away to death.
Fearless, without a care, and unsurprised,
Gently he swayed betwixt the stem's corolla
And the bright glare of steel, although his eyes,
I thought, did seem to overflow with pleasure.
Behind him I did walk, and trod the trail

He printed on the grass. And after us
In droves there came both stags and drooling weasels.
And I did try to pluck up courage thenceforth
Never to let him go away from me.
And all the while the heavy dew I breasted.
I strove to be his friend forever more,
There in the place where tears and laughter merge,
A place to stow away I tried to find,
    There in the house of God so silky soft.
    Above our heads the rainbows wheeled and turned
    As from the chalice each did drink the dew.

Looking behind, I saw you were no longer there...

Looking behind, I saw you were no longer there,
My guardian angel. Nor were you in front of me.
And then the thought came to my mind, all suddenly,
That I, alas, was left to other people's care,
Here in this world. But warm and white and lissom,
In ringlets swathed, your ankles moistened in the dew,
You made your way toward me, only that we two
Might feed and nourish ourselves on a blossom
Whose every petal sings of life with sweetest sigh,
Woman, with your eternally defeated thigh,
Flesh sweetly broken by the pleasure that makes us lie
    Together, with none else but God at the window pane,
    Hidden in ivy, butterflies, and things in that vein,
    That He might keep our bawdy shamelessness in rein.

We were walking hand in hand

We were walking hand in hand
Through a region so queer
You said this is heaven's land
I said heaven is far from here

Now there's nought but plain and afar
Tall greenish slender grasses
With a laugh you would scold them
Lest they sway as high as your breasts

And gently you took my hand
To caress it unabashed
On and on we went you were
Beside me and you were bare

For every garment is a sin
Cumbersome in love and shameful
And angels with their halos broad
Silently did wrap you in light

To be closer to the heavens
We walked through woods with wellsprings
Through ancient mysterious dells
Flowers from bushes you gathered

And poisonous fungi you picked
Bulbous they were and wore a hat
Of felt and thereafter with a sigh
You would wish to give them to me

For poison sweet it did please me
To take when I was by your side
And then oh it was only then
That the slightest shame you felt

And quickly you'd cover yourself
With a lily or large butterfly
Grumblingly hiding away
Your legs so long and so white

Creeping into the shattered dew
Around the soft spiders' webs
You would laboriously dress
And then we would be off again

We were walking hand in hand
Through a region so queer
You said this is heaven's land
I said heaven is far from here

Emil Brumaru
Rezervaţia de îngeri
Humanitas, 2013
ISBN 978-973-50-3857-1

Frumoasele străine (*The Beautiful Foreign Women*), short stories, Humanitas, 2010;
Orbitor (*Blinding*), trilogy of novels, Humanitas, 2007;
Nostalgia, short stories, Humanitas, 2006;
Jurnal (*Diary*), 2 vols., Humanitas, 2005;
De ce iubim femeile (*Why We Love Women*), short stories, Humanitas, 2004;
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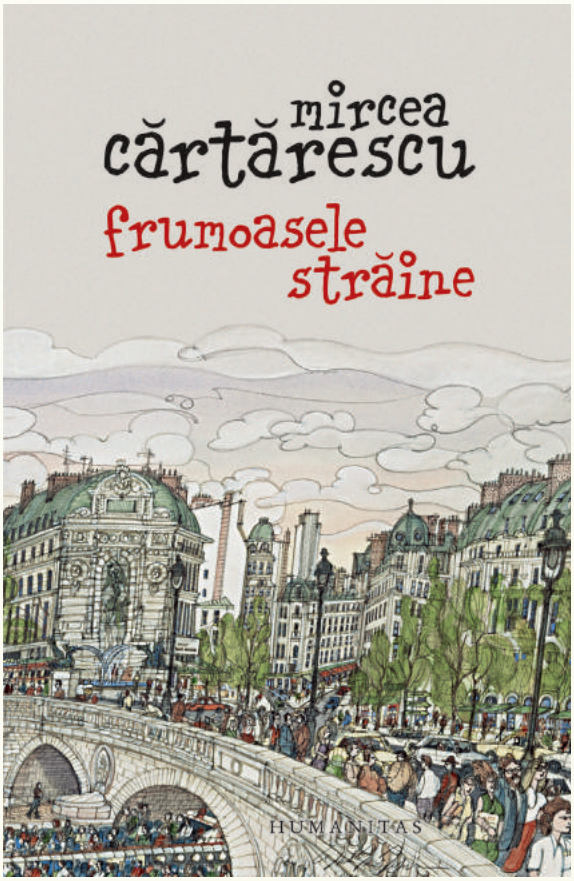
Mircea Cărtărescu

(born 1956)

A poet, prose writer, essayist, and professor of literature at the University of Bucharest, Mircea Cărtărescu is regarded as the most important living Romanian writer. He was the leading poet of the eighties generation and has become the biggest-selling contemporary Romanian prose writer, his work having been published in thirty editions in twelve languages. *Why We Love Women* (140,000 copies sold in Romania) is now in its third edition in Spain. His books have received awards from the Romanian Academy, the Union of Romanian Writers, the Union of Moldovan Writers, the Association of Professional Writers, the Romanian Publishers' Association, and countless cultural magazines. In 1992 the French translation of *Nostalgia* was nominated for the Médicis Prize and the Best Foreign Book Award, and in 2005 it won the Giuseppe Acerbi Prize in Italy.

The Beautiful Foreign Women

Mircea Cărtărescu



After an epic poem featuring a very unusual main character (Romanian poetry from its beginnings to the present day), a substantial critical study entitled *Romanian Postmodernism*, and, above all, the *Blinding* trilogy of novels, regarded as the most ambitious and most successful Romanian literary project on such a scale, the three overtly autobiographical stories that make up *The Beautiful Foreign Women* wager on humour and a highly personal kind of satire that is pushed to the limits of the grotesque. In this triptych, Mircea Cărtărescu paints deliriously absurd vignettes from literary life (of both the native Romanian and the cosmopolitan-European variety). He dissects the literary world with the instruments of a writer-moralist who neither forgets nor forgives, least of all when it comes to his own mistakes. The stories ("Anthrax", "The Beautiful Foreign Women, or, How I was a Third-rate Author", and "Bacovian") are not just road movies narrated with sincerity and simplicity, but sequences from a human comedy in which deceptive appearances, behind-the-scenes machinations, and meticulous play-acting count more than talent or genuine cultivation. A must-read for both the Romanian and the globalised literary world.

Fragment

I flee from interviews and film cameras like a devil from holy water. Usually, it all begins with a call on your mobile, with the sensuous, irresistible voice of a languorous woman who has been dreaming of you since childhood: "Hello, Mr Mircea Cartarescu?" "Yes," I answer, with the feeling that I'm speaking to Marilyn Monroe. Then comes a deluge of enamoured words. She proposes a tête-à-tête in some languid setting, "when and where you like." The voice sounds as if the interview, for the culture section of some newspaper, is nothing but a pretext for a delightful afternoon together. "All right," I say, taken in yet again, "let's make it tomorrow, at my house." No sooner have I accepted than I know what is going to happen the next day, because the same thing always happens: instead of the excited young lady, a hirsute individual turns up on my doorstep, with his shirt unbuttoned to his navel, bored to death, who stays long enough only to ask me the few things that

interest him about me as a writer, namely: how much did I get paid for *Why We Love Women*, what make of car do I have, whether I am afraid of the number 13, and whether I prefer Italian to Greek cuisine. Then he disappears without trace: nobody informs me when the interview will be coming out, nobody sends me a draft for approval, and when I finally see it in the paper, it drives me out of my mind: a title in minuscule letters, which says, "Cărtărescu likes stuffed peppers," or "Cărtărescu is sick of Romania," or "A Nobel for Cărtărescu?" and beneath it whatever inanities I uttered in the interview have been turned into something ten times more inane… I always say to myself: this is all I need, what an idiot I am, but I always end up doing it all over again, because in this vale of tears the temptations are never-ending…

When a television crew arrives it's infinitely worse. Five or six bearded blokes wearing jeans, jumpers and waistcoats burst into your office, lugging countless metal boxes, which by their shape look like they must contain machineguns, but nonetheless the blokes extract from therein items that are more innocuous: rods, cables, spotlights, microphones, and other objects that I can't put a name to. Setting everything up takes longer than you would need to learn German. You're always in their way, they wordlessly move you back and forth, your poor rug gradually gets covered with mud samples from the road outside, with grease, and above all with the astonishing entrails of all that cabling. The technicians seem to multiply with each passing moment, prehistoric Betacams appear, a glass of water gets spilled, a painting falls off the wall… What can I say? Within my poor office is replicated the state of Tohu va Bohu, of which the Talmud speaks. One of the bearded men thrusts a plug into the loose socket in my wall, and then one of two electric phenomena usually occurs: either the bulb of the spotlight explodes, or my fuse box explodes. If neither of the two occurs, then I subsequently receive a gigantic electricity bill. Finally, a generously shaped lady further complicates the situation in the office, which by now has been transformed into a kind of elevator cabin. They point to the place where I have to sit down, and which I would in any event have been able to guess for myself, as it is the only place left vacant in the room. The experience of being interviewed for television is not for claustrophobes. Yet another bearded man palpates me obscenely beneath my shirt under the pretext of inserting a microphone clip. Then I am made to pretend to write something on a laptop, to take a book from the bookcase and read it with the utmost interest, to gaze out of the window, gripped by sudden poetic inspiration… The interview lasts for centuries, although at the start they tell you that it won't take more than half an hour. There is always something wrong with the cassettes, with the lighting, with the makeup on the lady's upper lip, I am always interrupted in the middle of my subtlest sentence (given that I make desperate efforts to look clever when sixteen blokes with disgusted faces are watching me) and they make me say it again… The questions are, of course, always the same, why do I love women, how much do I earn from being a writer, what kind of car do I have. After that, I get in their way again. It takes them as long to dismantle their equipment as it did to set it up. Another glass of water gets spilled, another painting falls off the wall: the same film, only in reverse. I even get the impression that as they leave they are walking backwards, babbling backward words. Until evening, I amuse myself watching the creation of the world from primordial chaos once more. Naturally, I'm not given the slightest clue as to when it will be broadcast. In any event, I don't watch television, let alone to see myself (if I longed to see my own mug, I would look in the mirror), but my poor parents are always happy when I'm on.

Mircea Cărtărescu
Frumoasele străine
Humanitas, 2010
ISBN 978-973-50-2692-9

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Ruxandra Cesereanu

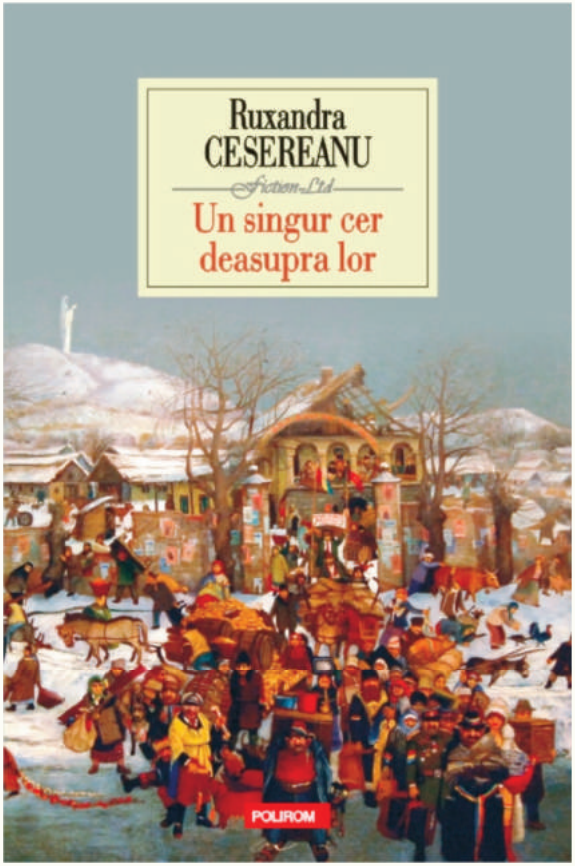
(born 1963)

Photo © Cătălina Flămînzeanu

Ruxandra Cesereanu is a prose writer and essayist. She lectures in the Comparative Literature Department of Cluj University and is a member of the staff of Phantasma, the Centre for Research into the Imaginary, based in Cluj, where she holds creative writing workshops in poetry and prose. With students of Journalism and Literature, she has published four books of social reportages and analyses of mentalities in Romania. Her work has been included in numerous anthologies of Romanian poetry in translation. She has received a number of awards, including the Prize of the Cluj Writers' Association and the *Cuvântul* magazine Prize. She is the author of a short film – an artistic essay entitled *Thirteen Churches* (TVR Cluj, 1998) – and a documentary (co-author: Doru Pop): *Memory, Horror, Survival* (2008).

One Sky Above Them

Ruxandra Cesereanu



One Sky Above Them is the first realist novel by Ruxandra Cesereanu, a writer known up to now for her fantastic prose and autobiographical fictions. It is a sweeping novel of the transformations that took place in Romania from the early 1950s to the period immediately after the 1989 revolution, which incorporates the minor histories of people on the side of communism or against it and thus gives shape to the overarching major history of the period. Resistance fighters in the mountains, deportees, political prisoners, opponents of the regime, dissidents, frontier escapees, and revolutionaries, but also Securitate chiefs, state presidents, torturers, informers and many others, both victims and oppressors, they all live under the same sky, between 1945 and 1991, the chronological boundaries of this epic fresco, on which the author worked for a decade. Ruxandra Cesereanu proposes a composite narrative of lives and deaths controlled by a violent collective history, like the world painted by Varlam Shalamov in *Kolyma Tales*.

Extract

When they returned home from the war after being refugees, they found the village overrun with weeds and rats; the weeds stood as high as the eaves, and the rats were so many that they even scurried through the trees. Far from weeping, however, the people laughed at those rats: the village was no longer occupied by the Germans or the Russians, but by rats. In the first few days you could not even sleep. You had to stay awake, lest the swarming rats get you. The returning refugees had to slaughter and cook the few hens they brought with them straight away, otherwise the rats would have gnawed them feathers and all. Feathers did not bother the rats; they devoured everything they could find. But the peasants were cunning: in the end, they made traps using sacks and kernels of maize, and in that way they caught most of them, because they flocked to the sacks and the people caught them inside, battered them with mattocks, and then set fire to them, to prevent infection spreading through the village.

Lucretia was one of the girls who helped lay out the sacks to catch the rats and if one thing surprised her it was the way those small creatures wailed, they squealed almost like pigs,

they grunted once they were caught in the trap and when they were burned, unless they had been killed by the blows of the mattocks first. But in the end the villagers eradicated them all and they settled back into their homes, even if the walls of the rooms still reeked of rats for a long time afterwards.

In those days folk did not have much to do with politics, but soon some of them were forced not to stand idly by, but to take a hand in things. Lucretia came to understand what was what only after she got married, but that was because she married the forester. Her father-in-law had a number of milk-cows and a few horses: Lucretia's job was to walk the horses, and she liked doing that because they were velvety and silent. Her in-laws employed a woman to milk the cows. Lucretia also had another job: the farm had a large smokehouse for fish, because her father-in-law received many guests, guests from the town, lawyers and doctors. As a number of them sometimes stayed at her father-in-law's house overnight, Lucretia was the one who guarded the smokehouse and took care that the fish should be smoked just right, so that they would be at their tastiest.

And the lawyers and doctors talked about everything under the moon and stars, about the direction in which the times were headed, about the movements of the heavens, about the king, about governments, about politics. From which Lucretia was able to understand one thing: that life was not good under the comrades. Her husband, the forester, explained it to her from time to time, but she could already see it for herself around the village: if the comrades had found out about their storeroom full of cheese and milk and cream, where there lay rounds of cheese and kegs of butter and cream, it would not have turned out well at all. The comrades had already begun to steal people's land, to take their oxen and cows, to kill people. A kind of disaster was in progress.

And so, one evening, when the comrades, wearing leather coats and black caps, came to take away the old man, Lucretia understood what there was to be understood: she had to flee, and where else could she flee except up into the mountains? She had to flee with the forester. Once they had embarked upon their flight, however, the forester was no longer so sure of the legs under him and the ground beneath his feet, and so Lucretia had to keep telling him not to be afraid and that once he had joined the ring dance, then he had to dance. She told him that summer, autumn, winter and spring would pass. And the communists would fall. It would not be long; it would not be long at all. If she had stayed behind at home, her husband the forester would have come back to the village one night for his wife and then they would have caught him, they would have beaten him and forced him to talk. Nobody could know how long he would stand up under torture. The same went for Lucretia. She knew she would have talked in the end, and so it was better that they both go up into the mountains, because that way they were free.

But the other men did not want her to come with them and they agreed to it only reluctantly. What would a woman do up in the mountains? And such a young one at that. But in the end she discovered what she could do: she cleaned the guns and she carried the radio set, on which they listened to the news from outside and inside the barbed wire. She nicknamed that radio set “The Americans Are Coming!” They listened to all kinds of things on that radio. They even listened to the news of Stalin's death on it and they rejoiced, not knowing that they rejoiced in vain. Lucretia believed unswervingly that the Americans would come in tens of thousands and that they would mercilessly slaughter the Russians. But that was another story. Because the forester had taught her, Lucretia knew how to strip down a rifle, clean it, oil it; she knew how to load a cartridge in the barrel. The carbine was nicknamed America, the hunting rifle Europa, and the pistol Romania. They were all guns from the time of the war.

Sometimes, when they were sick of the squalor and of fleeing from place to place up in the mountains, they thought about crossing the border, about running as fast as they could, like in a race, until the crossed the border with Yugoslavia. They moved mainly at night, like bats or owls. They were weary and discouraged and they no longer believed that anything would change. Their bodies had grown accustomed to sleeping in lean-tos made of

branches and grass, without walls, because they were merely to keep off the rain: they lay on the bare earth. Sometimes they slept beneath trees with low-hanging branches. They slept and then they separated, and they slept and separated again. They could not stay together in a group: there were too many of them and they risked being caught. You could not run off somewhere without the others knowing: you had to say where you were going, when you were coming back, and what you would do when you came back. It was not like being at home, where you can walk out of the door, lock it, and then unlock it and enter when you come back.

Ruxandra Cesereanu
Un singur cer deasupra lor
Polirom, 2013
ISBN 978-973-46-3410-1

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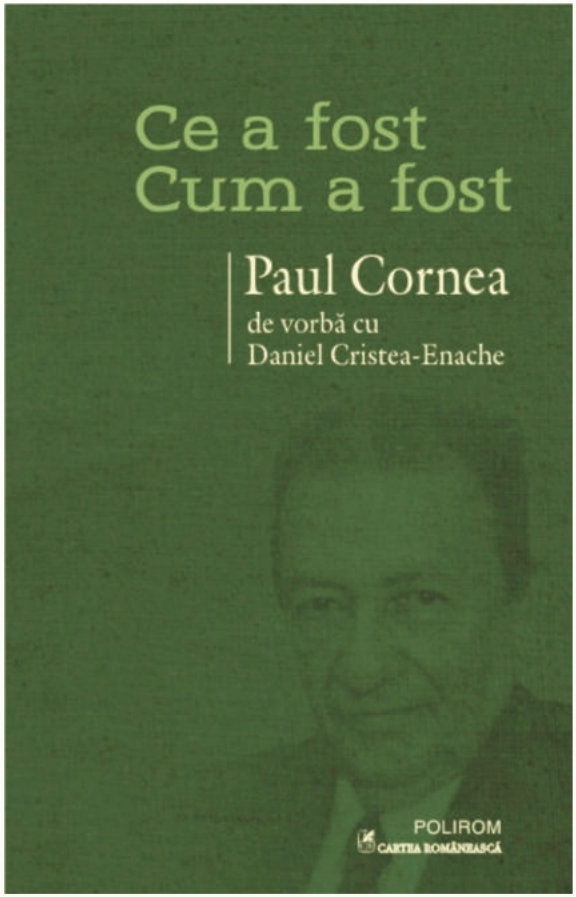
Paul Cornea

(born 1924)

Paul Cornea is a literary critic, historian and theorist with interdisciplinary leanings. He is Professor Emeritus of Literature at the University of Bucharest, where he was head of department and dean of the Literature Faculty from 1990 to 1996. He is the most important figure in Romanian comparative literature. He was a board member and vice-president of the International Association of Comparative Literature from 1991 to 1997 and is honorary president of the Romanian Association of General and Comparative Literature. In 1997 he was awarded the Palmes Académiques to the rank of officer. He contributes to various scholarly journals in Romania and abroad (*Neohelicon, Études balcaniques, Philologica Pragensis*).

What was. How it was. Paul Cornea in dialogue with Daniel Cristea-Enache

Paul Cornea



What was. How it was, a dialogic autobiography and an occasion to commemorate half a century of Romanian culture, was regarded as a major literary event of 2013 in Romania. With analytical acumen and his famous lucidity, Paul Cornea dissects his communist illusions of the 1950s and his disillusionment of the 1980s, a dramatic ideological as well as human journey. At the same time, he reconstructs the entire arcane, but also implacable, hierarchy of a totalitarian society. At the age of ninety, the Romanian man of letters recounts his life with charm and equidistance, a life that has in large part been synonymous with the literary and university milieu.

Extract

D. C.-E.: *In brief: in order to oppose Nazism and fascism, at the age of eighteen you still required the communist* illusion *and to do so you ignored the terrible reality that day by day was being revealed in the East? Or was the Soviet world still nebulous to you, still distant, meaning you did not come to grips with the reality of actual socialism until it took hold in Romania?*

P.C.: The question you are asking me, about adherence to communism, is opportune. I have been expecting it for quite a while. It is one of the significant issues, one that had a great existential impact in my case. To give a valid answer, I shall obviously have to agree to a clause of full divulgence: otherwise, what would be the point of bearing witness? But I also have in mind a second criterion, this time a procedural one, which during my career as a literary historian and theorist I have come to see as indispensible: in order to understand how things took place, it is always necessary to place them in their generative context. This is a context that deserves to be examined closely, all the more so given that younger generations in particular have a cloudy and, quite often, unilateral vision of the ambience of the period.

Firstly, allow me to make a comparative reference. In the West, there is an entire literature of memoirs written by former communists or former sympathisers, who out of pure idealism rallied beneath the Party flag (or alongside it), but then saw their dreams shattered, their hopes trampled underfoot, their consciences riven, so that sooner or later they decided to make a radical break with the movement they had once thought

embodied the meaning of history. The list of leading intellectuals, who, particularly in their youth, when enthusiasm comes easily, and the generosity of the impulse to action is not limited by petty calculation, shared the convictions of the radical left, only later to renounce them with a vehemence proportional to the trauma of trust betrayed, is extremely long. I shall mention just a few names, according to the capriciousness of memory, rather than with any systematic intent: George Orwell, Arthur Koestler, Leszek Kołakowski, Ignazio Silone, Richard Crossman, Stephen Spender, Louis Fischer, Edgar Morin, Panait Istrati, Victor Serge, François Furet, Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér. The works of these authors, who are highly different in their aims, style and vocabulary, but each of whom experienced the shudder produced by the same inner drama, emphasise, as is only natural, the motive of lost illusions. They try to clarify how the change in direction, the conversion, the adoption of a different *Weltanschauung* became possible. For this reason, they deal only briefly with the fascination exerted upon them by their first encounter with communism, that lay religion whose aim, according to its founding fathers, was to emancipate mankind, but which in fact led to a further enslavement. Nevertheless, it is very important that we know about not only the horrors and outrages of the system, but also the means by which it succeeded in deluding the lucidity of so many elect spirits. What was the magic that made it so seductive? How did it manage to maintain its influence, despite the disasters it caused? This is what interested French historian Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, who told me, during a flying visit to a Bucharest only just emerging from the shadows, at the beginning of 1990, from his experience as a former ephemeral Party member: "Inoculation through exorcism is just a part of the problem. Our duty is to act against the source, to explain what kind of spell communism cast to win over so many leading intellects."

In Romania, as is well known, the savage, unadulterated Stalinist repression made it impossible for any opposition groups to be formed, even ones with limited objectives. A dissidence of far lesser amplitude than in neighbouring countries (Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary) nonetheless manifested itself, thanks to a few courageous people, whose names I mention with respect and gratitude (despite any divergence of opinion caused by the course some of them have subsequently taken): Paul Goma, Doina Cornea, Gabriel Andreescu, Radu Filipescu, Mircea Dinescu, Dan Petrescu, Dorin Tudoran. But their revolt was individual in nature and was quickly crushed, before it could find any meaningful echo. On the other hand, because of the absolute control over the press – wielded by Gheorghiu-Dej in the name of proletarian internationalism and by Ceausescu in the name of national communism – it was impossible to publish any text that was hostile to the regime or even controversial in character. Under such circumstances, resistance to the regime's increasingly harsh abuses and degradation manifested itself through "lizards," ambiguities, antiphrasis and at first sight innocent allegories, in general, and through ingenious methods of insinuating and suggesting what people wanted to know or felt but could not express. It took the 1989 revolution for there to come to light moving testimonies about the persecution of the inter-bellum political and intellectual elite and the sufferings endured by those thrown into prison, mostly on the basis of slanderous denunciations or fabricated evidence. It was only then that it became possible to utter long-hidden truths, to unmask the poverty of so-called multilaterally developed socialism, to get rid of the taboos that cut off our access to the civilised world, to criticise the Stalinist ideology on which almost four decades of totalitarian tyranny had depended. But likewise, taking advantage of the newly won freedom of speech, many former collaborators of the dictatorship – high officials, secret policemen, Party activists – also took to the media to justify and explain themselves.

Ce a fost. Cum a fost. Paul Cornea în dialog cu Daniel Cristea-Enache
Cartea Românească, 2013
9ISBN 78-973-23-3050-0

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Degete mici (*Little Fingers*), novel, Polirom, 2005.

Filip Florian

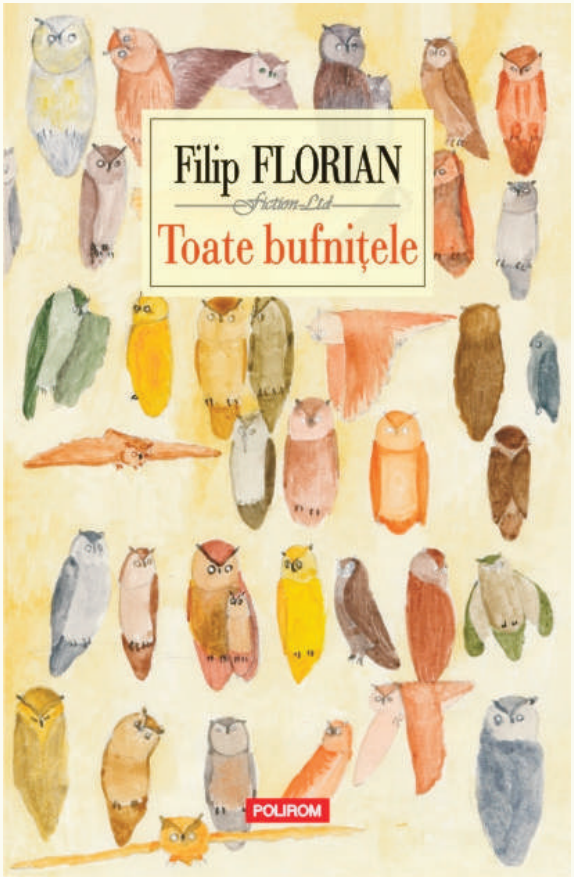
(born 1968)

Filip Florian is one of the aesthetes of the new wave of Romanian prose writers. Between 1990 and 1999 he worked as a journalist for *Cuvântul* magazine and then as a radio correspondent for Free Europe and Deutsche Welle. His first novel, *Little Fingers* (2005), won a number of awards. In 2006 he and his brother, Matei Florian, published an autobiographical novel, *The Băiuţ Alley Lads.* Both titles are now in their fourth editions. His latest novel, *All the Owls* (2012), won the Book of the Year Award in the fiction section at Romania's second Bun de Tipar ("Imprimatur") Gala.

His books have been translated into ten languages and are published by Houghton Mifflin-Harcourt (USA), Suhrkamp (Germany), Acantilado (Spain), Fazi (Italy), Magveto and Bookart (Hungary), Czarne (Poland), Didakta (Slovenia), Ciela and Panorama (Bulgaria), Kalligram (Slovakia), University of Plymouth Press (UK), and Animar (Egypt).

All the Owls

Filip Florian



All the Owls is a novel of subtle symmetries, structured around two voices: one is that of Luci, who recollects his late childhood, from the age of eleven, and adolescence (in the 2000s), the other that of Emil Stratin, a sexagenarian engineer from Bucharest, who retires to a boarding house in a small town in the mountains. Each tells his own stories about family, friends, love, and betrayal, which intersect, answer and supplement each other, in a dialogue of memory. Between the two a close friendship forms. The two narrative voices, – one a young man's bildungsroman, the other an old man's melancholy recollections, – combine to create a book of personal and historical remembrance, whose writing is expressive, powerful and seductive.

Extract

First of all, after New Year's Day, luck fell from the clear blue sky. Literally. For three days it snowed with abandon, until the street and the fences vanished, until the cars looked like slumbering white whales and the houses were half-buried. Never did I dig such a long tunnel as then, at the height of the blizzard. I started it at around lunchtime, in haste, about twenty minutes after Mother, having muffled herself up as if for the North Pole, pointed at the shovel by the front door and ordered me to clear a path to the shed. Maybe she was going to the castle; maybe she was paying a visit to one of those whingeing women who always had a headache. She slowly moved into the distance. The snowflakes teemed down on her overcoat. She kept looking back and trying to see whether I was at work. She was small, very small, she swayed as she walked, like a penguin on an ice floe, and then she disappeared from view. In any event, I didn't abandon the shovel as soon as mother vanished among the snowdrifts, but only after I had settled on the plan with the girl from the house opposite. She was wearing a red padded coat and she held her cheeks between the palms of her hands, leaning her elbows on the balustrade of her balcony. She called to me, but not by my name, laddie, laddie, and asked me why I was such a chump and why I didn't start digging a tunnel. I admit that I didn't condescend to answer that. I loosened the knot in my scarf. I didn't attack her with snowballs, as I was worried I might break a window again. I was just about to fling some swearword at her when all of a sudden, before I could open my mouth, in that very instant, it seemed to me that the locks of hair poking from beneath her woolly hat looked just like the curly

tufts of Zuri's fur. I had seen her quite a few times in the preceding week, after she arrived at Bugiulescu's to spend the holidays, but she had never happened to be alone and so I had not got a close look at her. Quite tall, slightly snub-nosed, she talked down to me; after all, she was staying in the mansard, where the wind whipped up whirlwinds of snow from the roof. She proposed that we build a tunnel together: I would start from one end, she from the other, each with his and her section, without consulting one another, without helping one another, without stopping for a rest. I replied that I was not a mole or an earthworm, that I was not a lizard. She laughed and said that the rule was that we should not say a word until we met in the middle, that we should remain mute. I leaned on the shank of my shovel and tried to cut a surly figure, to scare her. She neither laughed nor was scared, but she twisted around towards the room inside and said: And there I was, wanting to give you something special… Even though I felt hot, there were cold beads of sweat on my forehead. I asked her to come down. I heard my own voice and I couldn't believe what I was hearing: I was asking her not to get annoyed, but to decide on where we would start digging. And when she appeared on the steps with a metal dustpan, the cold and the heat abated. She chose a sheltered spot for herself and then guided me five or six metres downhill, next to a cherry plum tree. And even though her red padded coat and my grey tracksuit didn't look like camouflage uniforms, I was reminded of a scene from a film about two soldiers in the Norwegian winter, who communicated with each other by signs as they prepared to blow up a bridge. I ran back to the kitchen to look for the rusty trowel I used for raking ash out of the stoves and went back to her brandishing it over my head like a weapon. I crouched down and traced a broad semicircle. I struck at the frozen crust within the semicircle a few times, I hacked away some large chunks, as large as I could make them, and tossed them aside. After the entrance took shape, I went on hacking. I came to new strata: the snow here was not fluffy or crumbly, but compacted. For a while I managed to maintain the same crouching position, but soon I was forced to lie flat, because the hollow had become a lair and did not allow me to work otherwise. Gradually, taking care lest the vaulted roof cave in, I was completely swallowed by the hole, which was less than one metre in height. The light dimmed and a strange silence that wasn't silence at all buzzed in my ears. […] I learned the taste of weariness from the languor of my arms and thighs, it was not a bitter taste, and so I continued my mechanical movements, those of a mechanism that stutters, judders, but does not lose its momentum. The gallery had by now reached four metres in length. I was curious how long it measured on the girl's side and what distance separated us. I pricked up my ears at the slightest sound. I kept thinking of her face, the first image of her, with her dark eyes amid the snowflakes, with her slightly arched eyebrows, with her chin resting in her palms, like a shivering kitten. I imagined that without her crocheted woolly hat her brown curls would tumble over her shoulders and soon turn white from the snow. All of a sudden, with a kind of fearfulness, I hoped that my expectations had been wrong, that the gift was not in fact going to be a badge, a toy monkey, a music cassette, a cap or a spinning top. I was dreaming of something sweeter, of a caress or a kiss, and it seemed to me that soft sounds were coming from nearby, from very nearby. I laid down the trowel and started scrabbling with impatient fingers. From time to time I slowed down and listened with all my senses, as if I had formed eardrums in my eyelids, my nostrils, my cheekbones. In the moment when the last chunk of snow collapsed, when the tunnel lay open from one end to the other and the darkness was scattered, I felt like shouting out loud, because the silence was over, but the shout remained stuck in my throat. Zuri, the dog, rushed at me, licking me madly and whining happily. I shooed him away and dragging myself forward on my elbows I reckoned that I had dug around seven eighths of the way. The girl was up on the balcony, from where she blew me a kiss. She didn't even press her fingers to her lips. She just pretended.

Filip Florian
Toate bufnițele
Polirom, 2012
ISBN 978-973-46-3236-7

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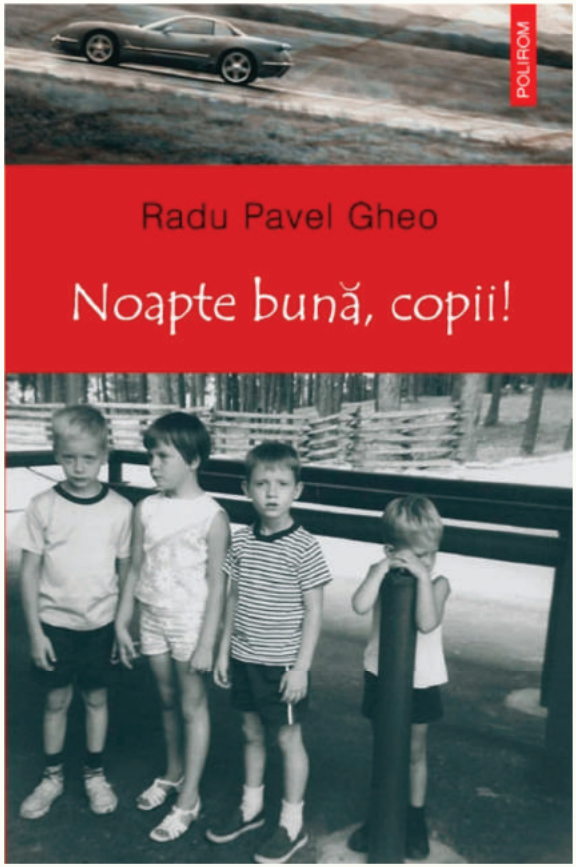
Radu Pavel Gheo

(born 1969)

Radu Pavel Gheo is an editor and translator. He has published short prose, essays, and literary criticism. His work has been included in anthologies of prose and essays in Romania, and a number of his short texts have been translated into French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Serbian and Slovenian. In 2007 he wrote a play, *Hold-Up Akbar, or, Everybody in America*, which has been staged at the National Theatre in Timişoara. With Dan Lungu, he has edited a collection of texts entitled *Women Fellow Travellers: The Female Experience under Communism* (Polirom, 2008). He has been a member of the Union of Romanian Writers since 2003 and of PEN Club Romania since 2004. He was a founder member of the Club 8 Cultural Association. His novel *Good Night, Children!* was awarded the *Tiuk!* magazine Prize for Novel of the Year 2010, the Prose Prize of the Timişoara Branch of the Union of Romanian Writers (2010), and the *Ziarul de Iaşi* National Prize for Prose (2011).

Good Night, Children!

Radu Pavel Gheo



Good Night, Children! is a novel about a generation of children who grew up dreaming of escaping from communist Romania. Written in multiple voices and weaving together a number of different stories about a gang of childhood friends, as well as about the lure of literary glory, the narrative moves back and forth between past and present, giving shape to four parallel lives. After living as an émigré in America for many years, the main character, Marius, returns to Romania on a business visit, driving a red Chevrolet Corvette – the fulfilment of a teenage dream. Waiting for him in the country he left behind are not only happy memories and the pleasure of showing off the prosperity and success he has found in America, but also the dark shadows of the past. The novel is a journey through space and time, through the darker side of Los Angeles, through childhood games in a village in the Banat, through another village, this time in Moldavia, where old scores have to be settled, and through the literary world of Jassy, where one of Marius's long lost friends, the only one to have remained in Romania, is eking out a living. A mature novel about eternal youth.

Extract

DUNKELMAN: ... No, no! Write whatever you want! Nobody is putting any limitations on your freedom. But it would be well to know what it is you want. Freedom is necessity understood (*Dunkelman laughs*). That's more or less how one of the classics of Marxism puts it. I believe you're more familiar with the quotation than I am. Think about your readers on the Other Side – in Western Europe, America... There'll be readers: yes, there will! Just think of it. They walk into a bookshop and purely out of curiosity they pick up a book written by some Romanian. Your book. And what do they expect to find there? Depth psychology? Musings on the destiny of mankind? A critique of contemporary society? A survey of the modern world? A new perspective on the meaning of life? Not a bit of it. If they suspect the book deals with something of that sort they'll put it down straight away and you'll have lost them forever. They have their own English, Spanish and German writers who go on about stuff like that... And they've been doing it for hundreds of years. In fact, they were the ones who discovered all that stuff. If you're looking for a quality product,

you go to a professional with a longstanding tradition, an established brand, not to those Chinese sweatshops that pirate famous makes. You lot are the literary equivalent of the Chinese sweatshops. Except that there are fewer of you. You imitate what they do in the West. The major themes are the property of the major cultures. That's the way things are judged. Does that seem unfair to you? It does to me, too. But tell me: when was the last time you read something by a writer from the Gambia or Senegal?

If I were in your shoes, I'd try to write a novel about a familiar Romanian subject: communism, Ceausescu, the revolution. It's a subject they'll all recognise – people from here and people from the Other Side – and one that nobody else owns. Only you. I reckon a book like that would attract a lot of interest. And you can't say that it's not a good or a broad subject. What's more, it's something you know about. You experienced it for yourself, after all. Communism, I mean. Yes, that's what I would write my first book about. A Romanian writer. Ceausescu. Life under communism… a hard life, but one in which people discovered their humanity precisely because of all the hardships. They had solidarity, they helped each other, they lived to the full those minor joys they were able carve out for themselves in those harsh years. I'd also add a dash of nostalgia. Not for the dictatorship, obviously, but for the human solidarity of those times, for youth and childhood. A happy book would be better than a sad one – I've noticed that you have a sense of humour. It could even be ironic, but not bitingly so. And certainly not savagely ironic. People are sick of bitter and accusing books. People don't read so that they'll feel bitter. Or if they do, they won't agree to Romanians making them feel bitter. I'm not telling you what to write. I'm just giving you a few pointers. It's a subject where you won't have much competition and you'll be able to get yourself noticed more easily. Have you any idea how many tens of thousands of books are published in Britain every year? Or in Germany? Ceausescu and communism would be your brand. A humorous look at the communist dictatorship, but also one that clearly presents it as something negative. Because, as I told you, the translation is going to get published in America. To get a translation published in France we'll need to make a few adjustments, because you can't go saying that communism was a bad thing over there. You might call it Stalinism instead and ease up on the criticism, or say that communism was put into practice in a distorted way… But I've also got lots of other ideas. I know what I'm talking about, believe me! For example, to get yourself translated in Hungary, given that they're our neighbours, it would be a good idea to add a friendly Transylvanian Hungarian, who could be a friend of the main character's. In Germany, you'll do well to have a Jewish character, who will be an impoverished, persecuted intellectual. And so on… I'll explain it all to you.

PAUL (ironically): And how should I go about writing for the English?

DUNKELMAN: For the English you can write however you like. They're a bit odd. There's no sure-fire recipe when it comes to them. You just have to write. But take care, because an English edition also means an American edition, and things are different again over there. Ah, I almost forgot: don't mention too many bands or songs and don't go quoting all kinds of people, because in the States you have to pay copyright and it's not worth it. And for American readers I'd advise you not to put in anything sexually risqué, such as (*he laughs*) some teacher who gets involved with an underage schoolgirl, because it won't get past the first edit. Over there, not even Nabokov was able to get away with it on his first attempt.

Radu Pavel Gheo
Noapte bună, copii!
Polirom, 2010
ISBN 978-973-46-1720-3

Un om din Est (*A Man from the East*), novel, Tracus Arte & Noul Scris Românesc, 2010;
Jurnal de bordel (*Bordello Diary*), journalism, Seara, 1995;
O sută de ani de zile la Porţile Orientului (*A Hundred Years at the Gates of the Orient*), novel, Editura Fundaţiei Culturale Române, 1992 (3rd edition, Polirom, 2007);
Planeta Mediocrilor (*Planet of the Mediocrities*), mini-novel, Cassandra, 1991 (3rd edition, Polirom, 2008);
Trenul de noapte (*Night Train*), short stories, Cartea Românească, 1989;
Caravana cinematografică (*The Cinema Van*), short stories, Cartea Românească, 1985.

Ioan Groşan

(born 1954)

Ioan Groşan is a novelist, playwright and journalist. He studied Philology at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj and over the years he has worked as a teacher, as the artistic director of the Ministry of Culture's film studio (headed by director Lucian Pintilie), and as an editor for *Contrapunct* and *Academia Caţavencu* magazines. He is currently an editorialist for the *Ziua* newspaper. He is a member of the Union of Romanian Writers. He has received numerous literary awards and his prose has been translated into French, German, Hungarian, Polish, Russian and Vietnamese.

A Man from the East

Ioan Groşan

The long-awaited novel by one of leading short-prose writers of Romania's Eighties Generation, *A Man from the East* was regarded as one of the best works of fiction to be published in 2010. The setting of the novel is a small town in provincial Transylvania during the communist period, and the cast of characters includes professors obsessed with erotic conquest or political self-advancement, forestry engineers in search of big prey, Bovary-like husbands, and naïve young girls, plus a bitingly ironic and all-knowing insider narrator. An inter-textual novel, whose allusions and literary references range from Kafka and Gombrowicz to Gheorghe Crăciun and Ştefan Augustin Doinaş, *A Man from the East* elaborates on a Romanian recipe for the novel, in which irony, humour and local colour are the main ingredients.

Extract

And it had worked, what is more, it had worked too well (or too badly, as far as he was concerned), because three days later, to his astonishment, the telegram was published in none other than The Spark, signed "Wilhelm Schuster, second-year student, Forestry Faculty, Braşov." His folks did not know how to react: mixed in with their dreadful embarrassment at his blemishing the family name like that, there was nonetheless a small, very small, feeling of pride that of all the students in the country, who had without doubt been forced to send telegrams, he was one whose message had been chosen, since in the eyes of the judges it combined all the qualities necessary for publication in the Party's central press organ. "I never thought you'd be able to come up with such servile crap, Willy," a fresher from the first year had told him, a girl to whom he had been making advances. To which he could only shrug and answer: "They beat me at poker." But others had patted him on the shoulder and congratulated him: "Bravo, Willy, you're one of us!" And the genial Vasile, far from being annoyed that Willy had not done him the honour of composing an official telegram on his behalf, gave him a wink and whispered: "Old man, let's celebrate with a bottle of Joffre, n'est pas?" There's nought so queer as folk.

But he himself felt trapped. Not even a week passed

before comrade Trifu summoned him to his office again: there was going to be a Conference on agricultural matters, and so Willy took the opportunity to mention in passing that his cousin from Mediaş, Heidi Schuster, the daughter of his father's older brother, had applied for an exit visa to go to West Germany. He went back downstairs to the basement archive and using the *Free Romania* newspaper, he cooked up the necessary text for the Conference.

And he kept going back down to the basement, to the rhythm of each new initiative on the Comrade's part. You would have thought the Comrade had gone berserk. He was constantly making trips. He could barely keep up with him. Was the Comrade off to Guinea-Bissau? Then Willy would quickly rustle up a communiqué. Was the Comrade making a working visit to Timiş County? Then student Schuster was on duty. Was the Comrade organising a march for world peace? Then, sentences at the ready, Willy the ecologist, Willy the pacifist, invisibly marched in step. But after a while he frequented the basement less and less often: he had learned by heart the formulas for opening and the phraseological templates for closing, and so the newspaper archive was of less and less assistance to him. Perhaps it was also because he finally realised that all the speeches made by delegates to conferences, congresses and plenary sessions, all the telegrams, communiqués, and homages, all the newspaper articles, absolutely all of them expressed the same thing and as an art they were, en masse, ultimately based on synonymy. And so he quickly bought himself a copy of Gheorghe Bulgăr's *Dictionary of Synonyms*, which thenceforth became his trusted companion, his merry Bible. For example, he would take a word invariably used on every occasion: *gratitude* (to which was automatically added the adjectives *sincere*, *deep*, *boundless* etc.). He would open the dictionary and immediately find the equivalent *appreciation* (also obviously *sincere*, *deep*, *boundless*). *Respect* would relentlessly drag behind it *consideration*, *esteem*, *admiration*, *honour*, and *honour* was not to be outdone, roping into its semantic prison *acclaim*, *praise, accolade, homage, reverence*. True, as proof of how messed up the Romanian language was, *cinste* (*honour*) also had the secondary but no less valid meanings: *present*, *gift*, *baksheesh*, *backhander*, *bribe*, *boodle*. He had even heard that in high places, in Bucharest, at the Party Central Committee, at the Central Committee of the Union of Communist Youth, and even in the upper echelons of the Union of Romanian Associations of Communist Students, there were entire teams of specialist "wordsmiths": they too probably used the dictionary of synonyms. And one night at the Town Party Committee, when he and comrade Weisman were bogged down in writing an acceptance letter for the Comrade's visit to Morocco, the ageing Ms Weisman had rested her chin on her palm, looked at him through the fug of tobacco smoke that filled the room, and said: "Willy, what the hell are we?" "What do you think we are?" he replied. "We're *synonymologists*!" "What!?" exclaimed comrade Weisman. "Synonymologists, in other words specialists in synonyms. Hadn't you realised?" The old lady began to laugh hoarsely, a hacking laugh punctuated by coughs, recovering herself only to spit into a handkerchief and say: "You're a one, Willy! Why don't you go to Germany? You'd make a packet working for Radio Free Europe."

Ioan Groşan
Un om din Est
Tracus Arte & Noul Scris Românesc, 2010
ISBN 973-606-8126-10-4

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Fenomenul science fiction în cultura postmodernă (*The Science Fiction Phenomenon in Postmodern Culture*), essay, Argonaut, 2005;
Cruciada copiilor (*The Children's Crusade*), novel, Cartea Românească, 2005;
Chemarea lui Matei (*The Calling of Matthew*), novel, 2002 (2nd edition, Cartea Românească, Bucharest, 2008);
Coborârea de pe cruce (*The Descent from the Cross*), novel, 2001 (2nd edition, Cartea Românească, 2006).

Florina Ilis

(born 1968)

Photo © Petruţ Călinescu

A novelist by vocation, Florina Ilis is a member of the generation of young prose writers that has come to the fore in recent years. She made her literary debut in 2000 with *Haikus and Calligrammes,* an unusual combination of poetry and calligraphy (Rodicu Frenșiu being the calligrapher), which she followed shortly thereafter with two novels. Her third novel, *The Children's Crusade,* established her reputation as a novelist and has been awarded numerous prizes, including Book of the Year 2005, the Prose Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers, the Romanian Academy's Ion Creangă Prize, and the *Courrier International* Prize for Best Foreign Novel. The novel has been translated into Hebrew, Hungarian, Spanish, Italian and French. Her latest novel, *Parallel Lives*, has won the Liviu Rebreanu Prose Prize, awarded by the Cluj branch of the Union of Romanian Writers; the title of Best Romanian Novel of 2012, bestowed at the sixth annual Colloquia of the Contemporary Romanian Novel; the 2012 Prose Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers; the National Prose Prize of *Ziarul de Iaşi;* and the Prose Section of the Radio Romania Cultural Prizes. She is a member of the Union of Romanian Writers.

Parallel Lives

Florina Ilis

In a factual novel that defies the laws of time, Florina Ilis reconstructs the one-hundred-and-fifty-year existence of romantic poet Mihai Eminescu, as it was lived and as it has been recorded, idealised and fictionalised. In present-day Romania, the life, illness and death of the poet are still subjects of dispute, unanswered questions, and conspiracy theories. In a dramatic attempt to get to the truth, Florina Ilis draws upon countless authentic documents, medical records, apocryphal sources, diaries, urban myths, contemporary accounts, letters, manuscripts, official files, reports drawn up by the pre-communist secret police and the communist Securitate, and heated debates in cultural magazines, newspapers and blogs. A poetic genius such as Eminescu – whose "parallel lives", both the historically real and the idealistically metaphysical, are part and parcel of modern Romania itself – required a literary vision to match, a vision capable of conjuring up, as if part of a national metempsychosis, the archives of a sempiternal political police.

Extract

The woman in the coach sinks back into the soft seat. It is hard for her to look at the duelling ground. A teardrop as large as a bead of dew trickles from the corner of her left eye. She does not wipe it away. Its coolness soothes her burning cheek. Then, driven by an understandable impulse, she leans once more towards the window of the coach. Steam wafts from her parted, murmuring lips. Her eyes are watering because of the cold. She sees the two men talking to the arbiter of the duel. They both shake their heads to signal that there can be no reconciliation. "Oh!" Whispers the woman. Gazing at the scene, she watches as they roll up their sleeves and, after briefly looking each other in the eye, they stand back to back. They stand stiffly to attention. And then, like a muffled echo, in the frozen silence of the forest the arbiter's voice can be heard abruptly calling out each number of the count. With cadenced steps, Caragiale and Eminescu advance in opposite directions. To the woman the moments that elapse before the two come to a stop seem to drag on for an eternity. An immense white silence has settled over the world, causing all things to petrify as if in a painting of raw and harrowing beauty. All that can be heard is the sound made by the diaphanous fragility of the

snow as it shatters beneath the feet of the two duellists, a dreadful sound, which echoes painfully in the immense silence of the forest. Black birds wheel in the misty sky on outspread wings. From time to time, rending the glassy air, the sharp cry of some wild animal rings out. The woman in the coach would have wished to run up to the two duellists and stop them. Ultimately, it was not worth either of them dying for such a thing of unimportance. But something stronger than her (the hand of destiny, which clamped itself on her right hand as it gripped the door handle) prevented her. Then, in the immense, bluish silence (Veronica found the word *bluish* very poetic) two gunshots resounded almost simultaneously. The condition of the duel was that there should be three exchanges of bullets if necessary. A cold chill flashed through her heart. But the shots did not cease. Rather they increased (exceeding the three regulation bullets). She had the impression that they were moving towards the place where stood her coach, hitting the window at short intervals. She sank back into the depths of the coach once more, wondering in amazement why the bullets did not come through the window, but rather, in some strange fashion, merely struck the pane of glass with a loud rap.

Awakening, she realised that the rapping was caused not by gunshots or bullets, but by a rain of hailstones beating against the window of the room where she had been sleeping. She got out of bed and slowly went to the window. She did not light the lamp. She slightly parted the curtains. Very close to the window, only two or three metres away, she glimpsed the familiar outline of a man down by the fence. He smiled at her beseechingly. It was Caragiale! He had a very comical mien. He pressed his hands together in fervent prayer, but the ironic expression on his face lent him, despite his imploringly amorous attitude, a vaguely mocking air (his bowler hat, cocked slightly to one side, enhanced this impression). Veronica did not know whether the playwright was laughing at himself, or at her, or at the situation. For an instant she was filled with pity (Poor him! Perhaps he is suffering!), and considered letting him in. Should she open the window for him?

She had forgotten that the ground floor was quite high up, but the reckless thought tempted her, kindling sweet pangs in her heart. Ah! Then, she gave a start, overcome with shame at her own boldness and, like a young girl caught unawares by impetuous puberty, which appears to her in the form of a winged incubus, she flinched back in fear. What an idea! The pang in her heart was extinguished as suddenly as it had been kindled, and, imagining the feeling of despair that would surely have overcome her if she had allowed Caragiale to enter, she was thankful at having had the strength to resist the temptation.

And then there was also the fact that she could not forgive the playwright for the interruption of her poetic dream, causing her to miss the most beautiful part of the story. In a huff, she drew the curtains and flung herself on the bed. “Let him freeze!” she said to herself, climbing under the quilt. And then, out of an inner necessity understandable in a soul such as hers, which was fond of hatching mysteries, she was visited by a sudden and terrible thought: What if he had killed Eminescu and now he had come there to beg her forgiveness? Horrified, she strained her ears to hear, but the rain of hailstones on the window had ceased. She approached the window on tiptoes, but as far as she could see, through the darkness outside, Caragiale had left. “It cannot be,” Veronica told herself, driving away the insane idea, “Eminescu is in Bucharest!” Later, she fell asleep and dreamed he was in her arms (in her dream, the two men bore a striking resemblance to each other).

Florina Ilis
Vieţile paralele
Cartea Românească, 2012
ISBN: 978-973-23-2989-4

Amorţire (*Numbness*), novel, Polirom, 2013;
Lampa cu căciulă (*The Lamp with a Hat*), short stories, Polirom, 2009;
Trimisul nostru special (*Our Special Envoy*), novel, Polirom, 2005;
Ce se ştie despre ursul panda (*What there is to know about the panda*), novel, Polirom, 2003;
Cuiburi de vâsc (*Mistletoe Nests*), short stories, Outopos, 2000.

Florin Lăzărescu

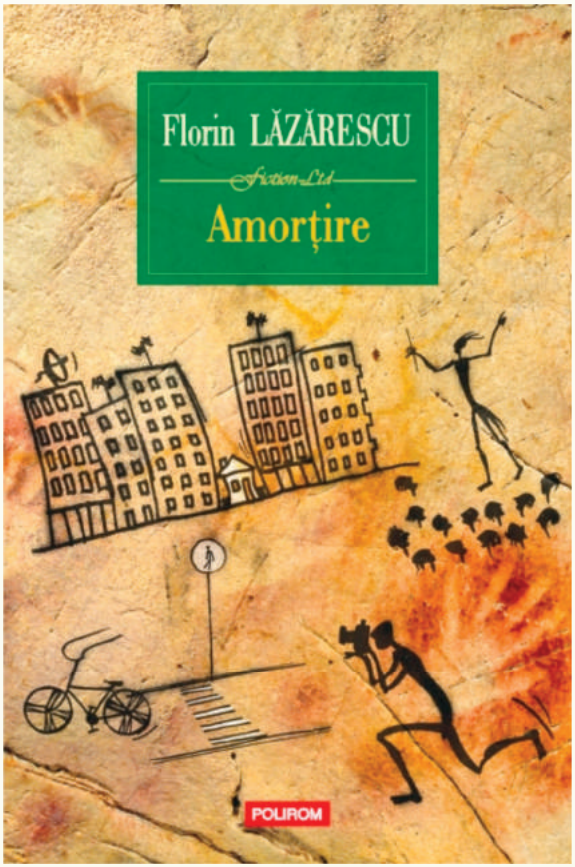
(born 1974)

Photo © Mircea Struţeanu

Florin Lăzărescu is a prose writer, publicist and scriptwriter. He made his literary debut in 2000, with a volume of short stories, and in 2003 he published an online collection of short stories: *Six ways of remembering a horse, or, Six tales* (LiterNet Publishing House). His short film *The Lamp with a Hat* won the competition held by the National Cinematography Centre in 2005. With Lucian Dan Teodorovici he wrote scripts for eight seasons of the *Animated Planet Show* (a satirical cartoon show). His novel *Our Special Envoy* won second place in the Grand Prize for East-European Literature.

Numbness

Florin Lazarescu



For the first time, Florin Lăzărescu writes about a *condition*: that which afflicts a discontented character who wants to write a book at all costs, but also one that affects an entire habitat. The characters in his novel, the residents of a small provincial town, struggle with a strange condition, which is now physical (numbness of the legs, panic attacks), now figurative or moral (idleness, depression, aboulia). A metaphor for being at a standstill, for an ankylosis that prevents any change, numbness can be the first symptom of growing old (such as memory loss, as in Alzheimer's disease), as well as a more general sign of intellectual stagnation. *Numbness* is ultimately a story about failure, but narrated with energy and extraordinary humour.

Extract

"He obviously has some experience with women," Evghenie says to himself as he returns from the skip with the wheelbarrow. "He must have known what he was talking about when he advised me not to trust them."

In two hours, Evghenie has finished clearing out the cellar. He puts the wheelbarrow and the pick back in their place. He fetches a broom and sweeps up the debris.

"Valeria, starting today, I'm not going to sell books any more. I'm ditching the second-hand book trade," says Evghenie determinedly, when she comes to see how things are progressing.

Mrs Stoican looks at him as he sweeps the space vacated by the books.

"What are you going to do from now on? You're not going to start breeding snails again, are you?"

Mrs Stoican was mordantly ironic. She was one of the few people who left Evghenie lost for a reply.

It was from him that Valeria had learned the story: after university, the first business venture he had dreamed up was a snail farm, in the country, in his parents' village. Even though he became the butt of everybody's jokes, the snails thrived. He had even found himself distributors. It would have been guaranteed success. Except that one day, while he was in town, he left his mother to look after them. She forgot to close the door of the shed and they all ran away. All right, they didn't run away. At their own slow pace, they dispersed outside, up the walls of the house. There must have been some other reason behind it, apart from the open door, some reason for why they all set off on their exodus at the same time, without giving any prior warning. But

he never found out what it was. And nor did he wish to start the business again from scratch.

For a few moments, Evghenie is stuck for a reply.

"But I already told you that I'm working on a book… I'm going to be a real writer."

Mrs Stoican smiles disbelievingly.

"Yes, yes. Of course you are… You're going to publish a book. And I'm moving to Papua New Guinea, and I want to see it before I leave."

It's a big problem. And not just with Mrs Stoican.

Half a lifetime had passed since he first swore he was going to write a book and he still hadn't done it. His relatives, various friends, and even chance acquaintances were still waiting for it, as if they might have some use for it, as if it might solve their problems. Because he had spent the greater part of his life among books, Evghenie believed, and his good friend Cazimir had also taught the same thing, that a book did not solve anything. A thousand books solved nothing. In any event, books possessed none of the importance that some people ascribe to them.

Writers nowadays, Cazimir also instructed him, are a bunch of egomaniacs, divisible into two categories: narcissists and tradesmen. The first are under the illusion that somebody is genuinely interested in their dramatic experiences, their joys, their revelations, their petty stylistic craftsmanship, that somebody really wishes or is able to understand them. The tradesmen make a cool analysis of market demands and on their caravan of words they bring back from the exotic realms of a precarious imagination thousands of trinkets – cheap mirrors, glass beads and ribbons, all of them garishly coloured – for their slack-witted customers, who can't tell the difference between literature and entertainment, who swallow whatever you give them, as long as you hit on the right packaging for the goods and trumpet them loudly enough.

Most critics are nothing more than failed authors, who judge everything through the lens of what they might have written, but unfortunately have never had the courage to write. They flick through the new literature and fish for "symbols" or "structures" to match the systems they have constructed in their doctoral theses. They muddle up concepts, and with all the grace of a giraffe shod in hobnail boots, they stir together in the same pot the theories of Genette and whatever they have managed to understand from watching some film by Tarantino.

As for publishers, they are failures who peck up the breadcrumbs left by the real businessmen, who couldn't be bothered to sweep up after themselves. If you were to ask them, they would see no difference between the profit from selling biscuits and the profit from selling literature. They always claim to know "what sells," but they never understand what it is they're selling.

In the end, contemporary literature, Cazimir further confided to him, is a cart harnessed to a large number of oxen, each pulling in a different direction, without ever really caring about the load. Whom should you write for, even if you did have something authentic to say? What good is one more book?

Evghenie suspected that everything there was to write had been written. And others had done it much better. He for one didn't really have any stories to tell and, if he were completely honest, he had never really had any calling for it. The fascination was enough for him. Then again, he regarded himself as intelligent enough not to believe, even for one second, that he was a genius. And if you are going to take up writing seriously, you have to be naive enough to believe, even for one second, that you are a genius. But despite all that, he felt the time had come for him to publish a book.

Florin Lăzărescu
Amorţire
Polirom, 2013
ISBN 978-973-46-3538-2

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Atrium, novel, 2nd edition, Polirom, 2008;
Înaintea despărţirii. Convorbire cu Saul Bellow (*Before Parting. Conversation with Saul Bellow*), Polirom, 2008;
Sertarele exilului. Dialog cu Leon Volovici (*The Desk Drawers of Exile. Dialogue with Leon Volovici*), Polirom, 2008;
Plicul negru (*The Black Envelope*), novel, Polirom, 2007 (2nd edition, 2010);
Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Prostul (*The Apprenticeship Years of August the Fool*), novel, Polirom, 2005 (2nd edition, 2010);
Despre Clovni. Dictatorul şi Artistul (*On Clowns. The Dictator and the Artist*), essay, Polirom, 2005;
Întoarcerea huliganului (*The Hooligan's Return*), novel, Polirom, 2003 (reprinted in 2006, 2008, 2011).

Norman Manea

(born 1936)

Photo © Iván Giménez - Tusquets Editores

Norman Manea is one of Romania's most highly regarded prose writers and essayists. He is professor of European literature and writer in residence at Bard College, New York. Between his literary debut in 1966 and 1986, the year when he left Romania, he published ten books and was awarded the Prize of the Bucharest Writers' Association (1979) and the Prize of the Writers' Union (1984), which was then withdrawn by the Council of Socialist Culture and Education. In 1992, he was the recipient of a Guggenheim Grant and the MacArthur Prize. In 1993 he was celebrated at the National Library in New York, where the title of Literary Lion was bestowed on him. In 2002 he was awarded the Nonino International Literature Prize for his Opera Omnia, and in 2006 the Médicis Étranger Prize for his book *The Hooligan's Return*. In 2010 the French Government bestowed on him the title of Commandeur dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. In 2011 he won the prestigious Nelly Sachs literary prize. In 2012, the Union of Romanian Writers awarded him the National Prize for Literature.

The Hooligan's Return

Norman Manea

The Hooligan's Return is a profound and complex autobiography, but also one of the best novels to have been published in Romanian in the last decade. Proustian in structure, digressive and diffuse, gathering together in the same sentence different biological ages, precocious depressions, premonitory readings and screenshots of the "hooligan year" (1935) before the birth of the author – a victim of the century's two cataclysms: Nazism and Communism – the book commences and concludes in the (illusory) present of the "End of the World": contemporary America. The "hooligan" tacitly identifies himself with Mihail Sebastian and agrees with Paul Celan when he describes the solitude of the writer: "In the struggle between yourself and the world, take the side of the world." His return mirrors his departure; it is the final segment of a frame that encloses the reconstructed past, the past as a story, as a living part of the "posthumousness" of one of the most topical and stimulating Romanian writers in exile.

Extract

At the age of forty, on my first trip to the "free world," my friends and relatives abroad gave me an ultimatum to leave the cursed place once and for all. "But what if I dwell not in a country but a language?" I asked. A banal sophism of evasion! In exile, now, I carry within me the Promised Land, Language, Schlemiel's nightly refuge. The snail shell is by no means caulked, by no means impenetrable. New sounds and meanings continuously gush in, from the new geography of exile; the unknown penetrates the wanderer's armour. The futility can no longer be ignored, however. Every moment it warns of the death within you. Language permits only a proud emblem of failure. Failure legitimises you, Mister Hypocrino!

All of a sudden, through the haze in the windowpane, I see Cioran! He is walking warily along the corridors of the hospital, mumbling words sparse and unintelligible. By means of a hellish transplant operation, half a century previously he freed himself from his native tongue and triumphantly took up residence in the French Cartesian paradox. Now, he is muttering, but the old words once more! Behold, the Romanian language, so suited to his temperament, from which he exaltedly de-nationalised himself, has found him once more, in the happy Land of Alzheimer's. He incoherently mumbles old words in the old language; his stateless person's exaltation has

been replaced with sweet prenatal senility.

He would probably have liked to hear himself being called Monsieur Hypocrino! We would confront the aberrations of exile, as we did one evening in 1990, in his Parisian mansard. Should I now tap on the windowpane of eternity, remind him of the letter in which he explained to me his departure from Romania? *C'est de loin l'acte le plus intelligent que j'ai jamais commis.*

Traumatic vanity, Monsieur Cioran, nothing but traumatic vanity? Why survival? Why at any price? The flattery of the name and nothing more? Why do we not accept the end? Why do we become rhetoricians once more?

But what do you think about hatred, Monsieur Hypocrino? Does hatred of others ultimately cure us of confusion and illusions? Does it make us more interesting in our own eyes? Does Cioran the "metaphysical Jew" understand the ancestral articulations of hatred better than the Jew himself? Would our Bucharest be a suitable venue for such a debate?

The watch dial, on the left wrist, next to the heart. It no longer had three hands, as it used to, for the seconds, minutes and hours, and I no longer had to wind it up before going to bed. I no longer listened to my time shattering second after second. I would not have heard anything, anything. The seconds died, unknown, in the watertight belly of the new toy.

Shall I go down to the hall on the ground floor to hear the language of the past, to hear Cioran, to hear myself? To hear the old sound, the old language, the memory of him who you were before you began to be?

Such opportunities should not be wasted. In Turin in 1992, at a writers' meeting about Eastern Europe, the English text of my paper proved, Thank God, to be unnecessary: in the auditorium there were excellent translators from Romanian into Italian. Saved, revived, happy on discovering the news, I found myself accosted by two compatriots. With a broad, standard-issue smile the short, portly, elegant man introduced himself as the Romanian cultural attaché to Rome, and the man next to him as a man of letters from the Accademia di Romenia in Rome.

"In what language will you be speaking?" the cultural attaché asked me, looking me straight in the eye. "In Romanian," I answered. "Finally, I'll be able to speak in Romanian," I added, happily. My compatriots barely suppressed a smile, as they continued to scrutinise, in silence, the face and gestures of this surprising literary representative of the Homeland, one so joyous – who would have thought? – to be able to speak to people in Romanian. The poor child, happy at speaking Romanian, even if only to the official representatives of an officialdom in which he had no faith.

As we parted and I made my way to the podium, without wishing to I left a "pair of ears" behind. The pair had not realised that the lady who had been looking on, a pace away, was my wife. The surveillance tympanum recorded the dialogue that ensued: "Hear that? He's going to speak in Romanian! Big deal! He's enchanted – have you ever heard the like!" The other's reply came promptly: "He can speak in Hungarian for all I care." Hungarian, of course, would have been even worse than English.

Yes, Ken was right to insist on asking Mister Hypocrino about language. Its nocturnal whisper often wakes me, like a stray electrical current, seeking its recipient, while night's phreatic networks capture in small, tender and tumultuous waves the somnambular monologue on the richness of failure and beneficial insomnias.

The hand on the watch dial has passed five in Bucharest, and in New York it pierces the depths of night. The silence of the room and the silence of the ageing heart measure the implacable, childish pulse. For time's fleeting tenant, this hotel space is appropriate.

Norman Manea
Întoarcerea huliganului
Polirom, 2011
ISBN 978-973-46-1912-2

Lunetistul (*The Sniper*), novel, Polirom, 2013;
La două zile distanţă (*Two Days Away*), poetry, Charmides, 2011;
Apropierea (*The Likeness*), novel, Cartea Românească, 2010;
Cartea tuturor intenţiilor (*The Book of All Intentions*), novel, Vinea, 2006 (2nd edition, Cartea Românească, 2008);
Zborul femeii pe deasupra bărbatului (*The Woman's Flight Above the Man*), poetry, Eikon, 2004.

Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari

(born 1971)

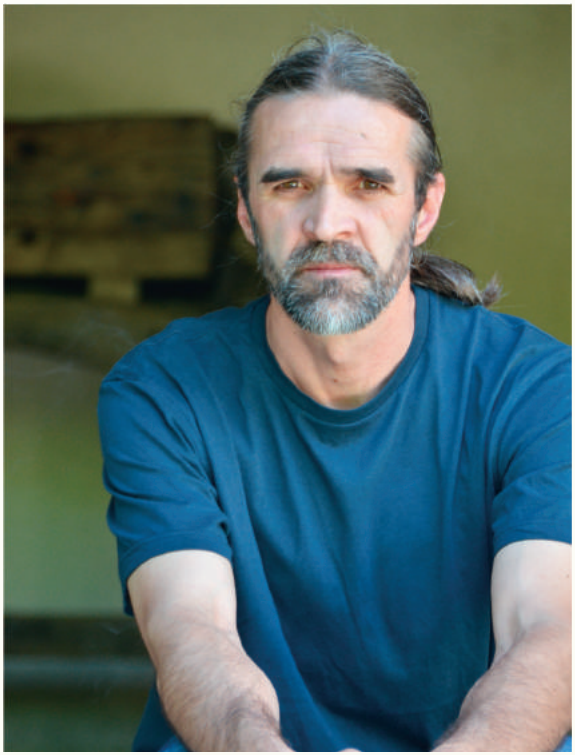

Photo © Karina Ciurus Wachter

Poet, novelist and translator Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari is that rare example of an "authentic" Romanian author, who embraces his vocation without theorising about it. Having spent many years in Spain, where he learned the language and discovered Spanish literature (while working as a watchman, driver and gardener), he went on to translate a number of major Hispanic writers, including Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, Care Santos, and Luis Landero. His first published work, *The Woman's Flight Above the Man*, won the Debut Prize of the Cluj branch of the Union of Romanian Writers. His collection of poems *Two Days Away* received awards from *Poesis International* and *Transylvania* magazines. He has translated Spanish poetry for *LiTerra* magazine. His novel *The Likeness* is currently being made into a feature film.

The Sniper

Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari

The novel tells a Romanian love story that unfolds against the literary backdrop of the novels of Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño. The arrival of a mysterious family in a town in Transylvania alters the destinies of Cristina and Constantine, two young people passionately in love with literature. She marries Jim, the newcomers' son, while Constantine becomes a hitman. But their adolescent relationship catches up with them, and although they have taken very different paths in life, the two meet again thanks to Carlos, a poor orphan adopted by Cristina. Years later, Constantine is contracted to assassinate the orphan, who has become a famous writer. Out of love for Cristina, Constantine warns Carlos of the danger he is in. Reading Carlos's books, the hitman begins to suspect the motives behind the contract, and his suspicions are borne out in the end. A literary pseudo-thriller, in which the true enigma seems to be woven around literature itself.

Extract

Ophelia's mother had been a teacher. Now she was deaf and said that she had lost her hearing from having had to put up with the din of the classroom for countless years, but she, Ophelia, told me that it wasn't true, that she had gone deaf from excessive drinking. When I asked her how she knew that, she said that her father told her. Her father had been a carpenter, until he lost his right hand. Drink had been the ruin of him, too, Ophelia told me, and when I asked her how she knew that, she said that her mother had told her, that her mother said he drank until his vision went dim and instead of sawing a plank, he sawed off his fingers. That was what Ophelia's parents were like, and in their house the lights were never turned off, to my delight, because sometimes, at night, when my parents weren't at home, I would sneak outside and look at the illumined window overlooking the park and I would sit down to wait, hoping to catch a glimpse of Ophelia, and sometimes I would be lucky and through the dusty windowpane I would see the freckled girl with the long blonde hair.

I had often seen Ophelia walking barefoot down our lane. Every two days she would go to buy milk from a neighbour. I asked her why she walked barefoot and she told me that you don't need to look after your feet. I thought that her parents

must scold her, like mine did me, for wearing out her shoes too quickly. Then I invited her to play football with the children on our lane and she came a few times and each time I ended up remaining alone with her, which is in fact what I wanted most of all, and we didn't even play football any more, we would meet each other and make up our own games. One winter, Ophelia taught me how to play drinking. She turned up with a bottle and two plum brandy glasses and we went behind the station and filled the bottle with snow. We waited for it to melt, and then we poured it into the glasses and drank. Then we started to talk loudly and totter around. And I taught her how to play arguments. She was mother and I was father and she scolded me for not chopping enough firewood or for spending all the money on drink and I had to bawl at her and slap her, and then Ophelia could get upset and stop speaking to me, and once I think I hit her too hard, because she burst into tears and then I didn't know how to go on playing and I went home.

During the two years she was my best friend, my only friend in fact, we repeated countless times the two games that only we played. When we weren't playing, we would wander the hills. She always went barefoot, from the beginning of spring until late autumn, when thick hoarfrost settled. We ate wild cherries in June, sour cherries, summer apples and strawberries in July, sweet cherries and pears in August, plums, grapes and potatoes baked in the embers in September, and walnuts in October, all of them stolen.

When it rained, we sometimes took shelter in my yard, under the front steps of the house. We would sit there in the dust, like hens, and Ophelia would poke her feet outside for the rain to wash them and reveal their scratches.

Once, one summer holiday, she called me over and we climbed into the loft of her house and we looked through the empty bottles and old clothes and we found some walnuts in a corner, but they had all dried up and so we made a boat from one of the shells and went to the Someş River, the Someş being the juice squeezed from a cherry. It was about two centimetres long and wide and two millimetres deep and we were cast ashore on a desert island, where we died. And we lay like that, dead, until evening, when Ophelia asked me whether I was afraid of spiders and I told her that I wasn't and then she asked me to help her catch some flies and I caught four, and then she took each fly and dropped it into a spider's web. She told me that if we fed the spider, he would make us a web as big as a hammock, in which we could rock all day and he would feed us flies and we would never have to go to school again. Then she asked me if I wanted to be her boyfriend and I said that yes I did, but that I didn't really know what a boyfriend did and she said that a boyfriend and girlfriend wait for each other after school and they walk along the tops of walls and they speak to each other in foreign languages and he isn't allowed to cry or ever leave her side, and she leads him by the hand like a blind little dog. I told her that I would never cry and that I would never leave her side and then she took me by the hand and we sat like that, holding each other's hand, while her favourite spider devoured the flies and worked on our hammock.

It all ended one night, when Ophelia's house burned down and she had to move with her parents to another village, to her grandparents'.

I didn't see her again until very many years later. She was wearing shoes and neither of us said anything about our games, because now both of us drank and argued, but not as a game, and we weren't friends any more, because I had cried greatly in the meantime and I had left her side.

Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari
Lunetistul
Polirom, 2013
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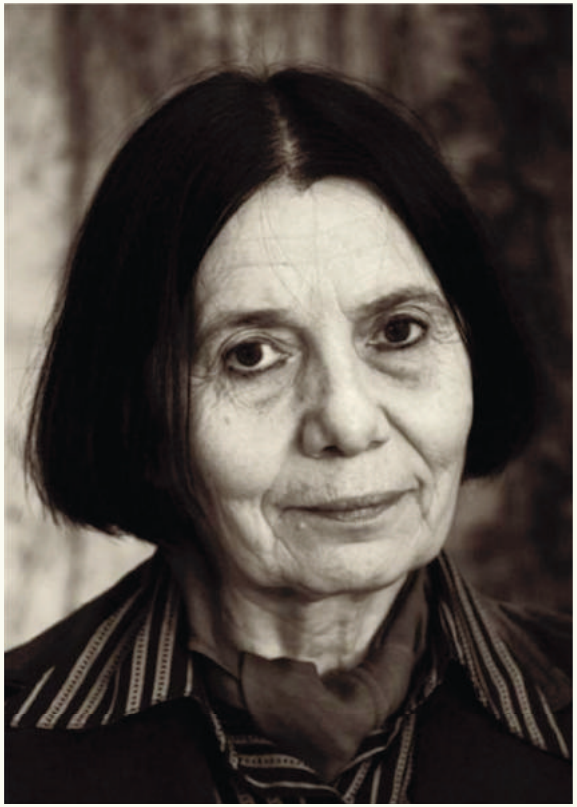
Ileana Mălăncioiu

(born 1940)



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Crini pentru domnişoara mireasă (*Lilies for Miss Bride*), poetry, Cartea Românească, 1973 (2nd edition, 2011);
Inima reginei (*The Queen's Heart*), Eminescu, 1971.

Ileana Mălăncioiu is one of Romania's profoundest contemporary poets, as well as being a prestigious essayist. She took a Degree in Philosophy at the University of Bucharest and in 1975 she was awarded a PhD for her thesis on tragedy. She has worked as an editor for Romanian Television, *Argeş* magazine, the Animafilm Cinema Studio, and *Viaţa Românească* magazine. Since 1990 she has been deputy editor-in-chief of *Viaţa Românească*. Her books have been translated into French, English and Swedish. She has been awarded the Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers many times, not only for her poetry, but also for her collections of essays and articles. For her lifetime's achievement as a writer, she has received the Mihai Eminescu National Prize, the Lucian Blaga Grand Poetry Prize, the *Adevărul Literar şi Artistic* magazine Prize, and the National Literature Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers. In 2009 she won the Prometheus Grand Prize for her Opera Omnia. Since March 2013 she has been a corresponding member of the Romanian Academy.

Tragic Guilt. The Greek Tragedians, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Kafka

Ileana Mălăncioiu

Setting out from the premise that "the Tragic is not an aesthetic category, but a broader category of the spirit, and the sphere within which it manifests itself encompasses real life, knowledge and tragic art," Ileana Mălăncioiu makes surprising connections between famous figures from various epochs, figures both literary and real. The trial imagined by Kafka leads her thoughts to the real trial of Dostoevsky and the trials to which he subjects his characters, which in turn leads her to Hamlet, who reminds her of Oedipus. Likewise, she finds similarities between Ivan Karamazov, Job and Pentheus, while the slogan of Dostoevsky's nihilists, according to which "everything is permitted," seems to her to be closely connected with the myth of the fall. Oedipus, Antigone, Hamlet, Prince Myshkin, Joseph K. – all are called upon to meet negative exigencies and it cannot help but end up tragically.

Extract

Ivan Karamazov wonders why children have to suffer. We might take his question further and wonder why Orestes suffers, who is as innocent as a child, despite having been born to parents prey to hubris and despite his destiny as an avenger. Why does King Oedipus suffer, who is likewise innocent, even after he solves the riddle of the Sphinx, given that he experienced good and evil without being able to distinguish between them? Why does Cordelia suffer, even though she is the very epitome of goodness and morality? Why does Prince Myshkin suffer, even though by his nobility and goodness he is akin to the figure of the poor knight and even though he imitates the model of Christ? Why does Joseph K. suffer more than he would deserve to suffer for a crime he committed in ignorance, for which he tries in vain to take responsibility so that he might regain the meaning of life? Why did Job suffer, who was God's most faithful slave? Why does suffering exist?

Both Ivan Karamazov's questions and those of the other rebels against an order founded on the suffering of innocents were asked by the unfortunate Job, of whom God Himself, as it is written in the *Old Testament*, said: " There is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man."

In order to understand the essence of the tragic, the *Book of Job* should be analysed like any other book, setting out from the flagrant injustice that God visits upon his most faithful

slave and from the questions that that slave asks during his revolt. In other words, we should start by remembering the unjustified suffering to which Job is subjected as a means of testing his faith before the slightest fissure in that faith becomes visible.

We shall observe from the outset that Job's God, like the god of Pentheus, cannot be comprehended from an ethical and rational viewpoint. God is what He wills, in that He can be good and just, but equally He can turn into a jealous, capricious and unjust master. He cannot be understood by means of the reason, but only by means of the heart.

But let us examine the *Book of Job* as we would any other tragic myth. In other words, let us look at it not through the lens of its consoling conclusion, but rather let us closely follow the *action*. First of all, there are the unjustified ordeals to which God (at Satan's suggestion) subjects His most faithful slave. Then there is Job's reconciliation with God and His Order, which permits the suffering of innocents.

We shall observe that Job strongly resists every attempt to deprive him of his external possessions. But after everything he owned has unjustly been taken away from him, he is still able to utter the following pious prayer: "Naked came I out of my mother's womb and naked shall I return thither. The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

"Skin for skin and bone for bone," Satan will say to God: "All that a man hath will he give for his life. But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face." At this suggestion on Satan's part, God will bring evil into the life of Job, unjustly touching his flesh and bones. Satan's suggestion, which should be viewed as the negative pole of Transcendence, proves to have been justified in its own way. Job does not resist: he has given everything he had for his life, putting up no resistance, but he cannot give his life before he has lived it. When the Lord touches his flesh and bones, he does not hesitate to throw Justice into doubt. Job's revolt is preceded by that of Pentheus and followed by that of Ivan Karamazov, who cannot accept salvation if its price is the unjustified suffering of innocents in general and of children in particular. If God exists, then heaven should be on earth, he says, rejecting virtue in the name of logic and arriving at the idea that everything is permitted, whereby murder becomes justified. He arrives at the moral guilt of murdering his father and, ultimately, at madness. In other words, he comes to lose even the logic he has chosen over virtue. The touching of the flesh and bones of Joseph K. – whose innocent crime, committed in ignorance, cannot be revealed or atoned for with a view to regaining the meaning of life – despite all appearances gives rise to the same type of revolt. For, although it does not have any concrete representation of its own, Joseph K. also postulates another court behind the law, also sacred in its way, before which he wishes to present evidence in defence of his existence.

Ileana Mălăncioiu
Vina tragică. Tragicii greci, Shakespeare, Dostoievski, Kafka
Polirom, 2013
ISBN 978-973-46-4032-4

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Radu Paraschivescu

(born 1960)

Photo © Radu Sandovici

Radu Paraschivescu is a prose writer, translator and journalist, and the editor of a list of humorous writers in translation published by Humanitas, Bucharest. He has translated and co-authored two sports reference works: *The Larousse Encyclopaedia of Football* and *The Olympic Games from Athens to Athens: 1896-2004*. He has translated more than sixty books by English, American, Canadian and French authors. He won the Ioan Chirilă Prize for Best Sports Book of the Year for The Red Pennant (2005).

Today is the Tomorrow You Were Afraid of Yesterday

Radu Paraschivescu

In *Today is the Tomorrow You Were Afraid of Yesterday* a song makes its way around the world, travelling across centuries and continents. It is first heard during the Irish Famine in the nineteenth century, when its lyrics voice compassion for a man thrown in gaol for stealing corn. Then, nestling in the memory of the prisoner, the song travels to the colony in Macquarie, Tasmania, where it is transformed into a protest against appalling conditions. A prisoner's diary from the period is published in present-day England, having come to the attention of an antiquarian. In this way, the song returns to Europe, where, thanks to the efforts of a football fan, it becomes the stadium chant that accompanies Liverpool to the finals of the Champions' League. *Today is the Tomorrow You Were Afraid of Yesterday* is a novel about suffering and solidarity, about fear and guilt, about success and failure. But above all it is a story about the same hunger for freedom that we feel whether we be locked up in a prison cell or whether we be imprisoned within the walls of convention and prejudice.

Extract

And so Mickey sets about summarising the book for him. He tells him about how Irish commander Michael Flaherty was convicted of attempting to steal some corn during the famine in the west of Ireland and about how he was shipped to the Macquarie penal colony in the bowels of the *Ajax*, a vessel that reached its destination with less than half its human load, the other half having been thrown overboard amid sickness, terror and squalor. As he tells the tale, he smiles bitterly as he recalls that the Irishman who craved victuals intended for export to Holland had ended up on an island originally named after a Dutch governor, aboard a ship whose name was the same as that of present-day Holland's best-loved football team. Then he tells Geoff about the horrors of the penal colonies, the perfidy of the governor, the sadistic games played by the executioner, and the obtuse obduracy of the guards. About Flaherty's escape along with the other prisoners, while they were chopping down trees in a wood about half a mile from the prison, about the murder he committed while at large, about the act of cannibalism to which hunger and madness drove him, about his capture by government troops on Sarah Island. About the cell where Flaherty came across the following words, scratched there as a message to all those awaiting the noose: “Today is the tomorrow you were afraid of yesterday.” Hang on a minute, said Mickey to himself, pausing for a few moments in his story. That would be a great slogan for a

banner, if we get past Chelsea and especially if we get to play Milan in the final in Istanbul. Oh, yes, what a good thing he came up with that idea. He shouldn't forget to tell the lads about it too, given that he'll be meeting them anyway.

Geoff takes advantage of this pause of few moments on Mickey's part.

"All well and good, in a manner of speaking, of course, but what have these stories got to do with you, or with the Kop, or with our ballad?"

Mickey takes another couple of sips of coffee, lights a cigarette from the packet that Geoff has all but polished off and heaves a sigh, in which are blended tenderness, memories and a kind of pride that has never taken hold of him before now.

"Now, you see, it's at this point that we come back to Fran."

"Fran from the Deportivo? I don't see the connection."

"My grandmother, Geoff. Grandma Fran and her tales of the olden days."

"So? As I recall, we both used to laugh at them. They even got on your nerves in the end."

"That's right," agrees Mickey. "But now I realise what an oaf I was. I mean, I was little and all I wanted to do was kick a ball around and go to the brook. I didn't even know where Ireland was on the map, and I certainly couldn't be bothered with annoying stories about heroes and martyrs."

Out loud, Mickey repeats the stories that Grandma Fran told him when he was a child. Some of them she experienced for herself, others had been passed down orally from one generation to the next, so that no Irishman in that part of the world might ever forget. And he sees it all as if it were happening beneath his very eyes. He sees the crowd gathered on the Mullaghmast to listen to Daniel O'Connell's speech on 1 October 1843 ("Listen to me and Ireland will be free"). He sees the hundreds of thousands of corpses during the famine. The hospitals full of the sick, the horror of their imminent deaths visible on their haggard faces. The pigs killed by tainted potatoes. The portly arrogance of Charles Trevelyan when he declared that the famine was how God had decided to punish the Irish. The tattered bands of beggars everywhere you looked. The ships full of prisoners being transported to the Antipodes. The other ships that set out for Grosse Isle and America, crammed with desperate people, who had sold everything they owned to buy a one-way ticket to the other end of the world. Allowing his mind to roam through Grandma Fran's stories, he sees Sean, Michael Flaherty's son, inciting disobedience against England and teaching his children and later his grandchildren never to lay their heads on their pillows before they had prayed to God to help them avenge their slain forbears. And the film sequence continues. Michael now sees the leaders of the 1916 uprising, living out their final days in the prison at Kilmainham, the same as the leaders of the 1798 uprising had done before them. He sees the fifteen heroes that were shot by the English, including James Connolly, so seriously wounded he was unable to stand, obliging the soldiers in the firing squad to bind him to a chair, which they then carried to the prison wall, placing him alongside the other men before riddling them with bullets. Amid all these things, he sees the tears of Grandma Fran, who was just two years old when her grandfather died inside the grim walls of Kilmainham, wounded, his throat rattling, shivering in the cold, vainly imploring the guards to take pity on him and put him out of his misery. He sees it all and he is unable to stop a lump from rising in his throat, while Geoff looks on in astonishment.

"You mean to say—"

Mickey nods and two or three seconds pass before he speaks.

"Exactly. The Michael Flaherty in the book is an ancestor. The ancestor Fran told me about. As for *The Fields of Athenry*… I know it sounds stupid, but in a way, it is… it is my song too."

Radu Paraschivescu
Astăzi este mâinele de care te-ai temut ieri
Humanitas, 2012
ISBN 978-973-50-3851-9

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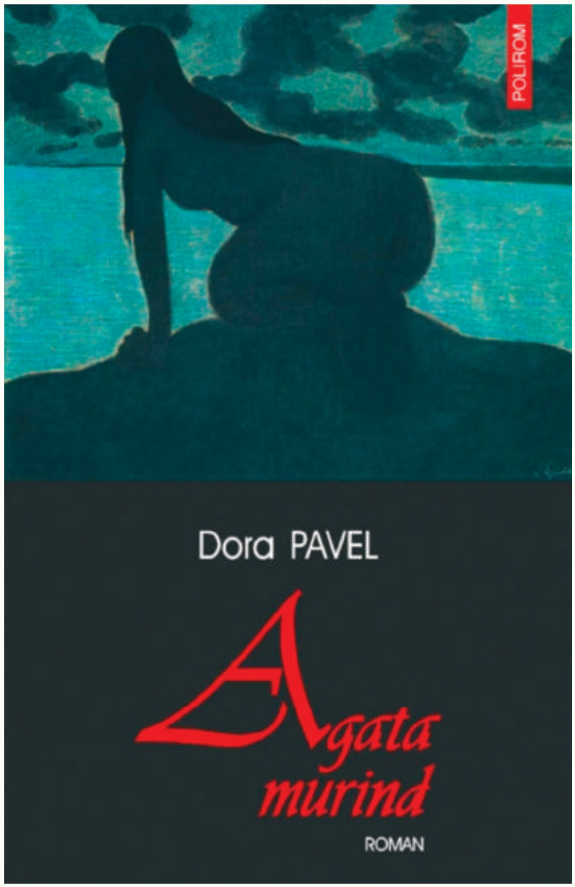
Dora Pavel

(born 1946)

Dora Pavel is a poet, journalist and novelist. She lives in Cluj. After taking a degree in literature, she went on to work in education and research. In 1990 she became an editor for the Cluj Radio Studio. She made her debut as a poet in an anthology that came out in 1984 and subsequently published four individual collections. She has published a number of novels and collections of articles. The literary awards she has received include the Timotei Cipariu Prize, bestowed by the Romanian Academy (2000), the Union of Romanian Writers Prize for Prose (2003), the I.D. Sîrbu Prize of the Cluj Branch of the Union of Romanian Writers (2006), the Book of the Year Prize (Journalism section) of the Cluj Branch of the Union of Romanian Writers (2007), and the Pavel Dan Prize for Prose (2007, 2010), bestowed by the Cluj Branch of the Romanian Union of Writers.

Agatha Dying

Dora Pavel



Agatha Dying is a personal, psychological novel, which crystallises in the form of the confession made by a young woman, Augusta Degan, who writes to the psychotherapist she is in love with, Arthur Cadia, revealing her inner life as it relates to the events she experienced during the four years she was in therapy. She recounts the case of a town council in Transylvania, which decides to move part of the municipal cemetery, threatened by subsidence, to a new site. The relatives of the dead are summoned to attend the macabre disinterment. The relatives are like the inmates of a madhouse, enveloped in a ghostly and morbid ambience, the creatures of a bad dream or neurotic delirium. But for Augusta Degan, the novel's main narrative voice, the disinterment is a test of her recovery after a long period of psychotherapy.

Extract

Let me tell you about it. You don't know. Not that there's any way you could have known. My father making love to my mother. They made love all the time. I think that's what killed him. I think he loved her. It was like he was devouring her. I wonder when or whether they ever got the time to sleep. Listen, we only had one room. Just one. Listen, all three of us in one room. They would wait for me to fall asleep. And no sooner did I start to nod off… They woke me up every time. My nights became a nightmare. Often, my days too. I would enter the room and always have to see the bedspread. Towards daybreak, they would wake me up again! Because of them, I experienced my first nocturnal pollution very early. Listening to them. Their lovemaking made a lot of noise. I'm not talking about the creaking bedsprings. Have you ever heard that muffled sloshing noise? It's the first time I've ever told anybody, forgive me, I don't know why I picked you, you of all people… Forgive me. It used to drive me mad! My excitement reached the highest pitch. I experienced multiple pollutions, but under no circumstances did I move a muscle. I did not dare move. I hated them. I hated my mother. She let herself be used, ridden, maltreated. That's what I used to think: that her groans were groans of pain. In any event, I was the last person they

thought of! You're wondering why I didn't move a muscle. It was because not even I wanted them to stop! I wanted to experience it all, to the bitter end. To hear it. To supervise it all. The only thing I could “see” in those moments was my mother's sex. Wide open! Open and huge. And obedient. And welcoming. Noisy. Like yours, Augusta. I know that you're going to let me! You're going to let me, aren't you? I need to see it! Don't be annoyed. Or do I tire you? Tell me whether I tire you. Go to bed, if you like, go to bed. Don't be afraid, look, if you like, I'll sleep in the armchair. I won't do anything untoward. I won't... I promise. But don't cover yourself up! Maybe your nightshirt will ride up by itself while you sleep. Is that such a big thing? You know very well that I wouldn't ever be able to ask anybody else apart from you. You know that, don't you? You realise that, don't you? I heard them having a terrible argument. I saw my father torturing my mother. Hitting her and then climbing on top of her. Forcing her. I hid under the table. She was crying. He was grunting. I was thirteen years old when I climbed on top of him and bit him on the hip as hard as I could. That night I didn't sleep. It was the last time I saw my father. I hid with mother for a while, outside, in the rain. I saw her running away somewhere to cry. I found her in the shed. She hugged me with her exhausted arms. We both cried until I fell asleep in her arms. Six months later I tried to assist her. She was lying on the sheets, miscarrying. She was roaring at the top of her voice. Later, much, much later, a nurse came with somebody from the prosecutor's office. They weren't allowed to touch her. Abortions were against the law in the totalitarian state! Have you ever seen a mother pleading for help? I looked at the stony face of the nurse and it was all I could do not to hit it. I couldn't understand what she was waiting for. Anyway, the bared knees, the belly arched high, high, the scream. The piece of inert flesh, dribbling between the thighs, the moist, rudimentary, vaguely human form. The dead, bloody body of my brother. My nameless brother. My graveless brother. “This is all I can do—” said the woman at last, wrapping it up, taking it away “—this is all I am allowed to do.”

Dora Pavel
Agata murind
Polirom, 2004
ISBN 973-681-863-2

Viitorul începe luni (*Life begins on Monday*), novel, Humanitas, 2012;
Viaţa începe vineri (*Life begins on Friday*), novel, Humanitas, 2009;
Întoarcere în secolul 21 (*Return to the 21st Century*), essay, Humanitas, 2009;
În Ţara Miticilor. De şapte ori Caragiale (*In the Land of the Miticăs. Seven Times Caragiale*), essay, Humanitas, 2007 (2nd expanded edition, 2008);
În intimitatea secolului 19 (*In the Intimacy of the 19th Century*), essay, Humanitas, 2005;
Întoarcere în Bucureştiul interbelic (*Return to Inter-bellum Bucharest*), essay, Humanitas, 2003 (2nd edition, 2007);
Prejudecăţi literare (*Literary Prejudices*), essay, Univers, 1999;
Alfabetul doamnelor (*The Ladies' Alphabet*), essay, Crater, 1999.

Ioana Pârvulescu

(born 1960)

Photo © Radu Sandovici

Ioana Pârvulescu's first novel, *Life Begins on Friday*, was the surprise of 2009 in the Romanian publishing world. In *Life Begins on Monday*, her second novel, the main characters from *Life Begins on Friday* become caught up in further adventures: swindles, politics, public unrest, and love affairs, none of which excludes the other. All these characters are bound together by one thing: an obsession with the future. Within the space of a single week, from Monday, 23 February to Sunday, 1 March, Bucharest is rocked by a large number of events. And it all begins with a scientific lecture delivered at the Athenaeum by a young, ambitious doctor on the subject of corsets and the dangers of wearing them, as well as with an anarchist assassination attempt on King Carol I. *Life Begins on Monday* is a skilfully paced novel, its writing cerebral and sensitive.

Life begins on Monday

Ioana Pârvulescu

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Extract

Today, the clock had struck eleven by the time we got ready to depart for my house on Fântâna Street, which Alexandru told me is now called something else, after a man whose name I cannot remember. Andru cautiously explained to me that it would be advisable that I dress differently. I paid heed to him for the reason I have already mentioned: he was on my side; he was concerned about me. From Vio he fetched me a pair of trousers (!) and a waistcoat. My blouse he said I could keep, as Vio's blouses would have been too small for me; they would not have fit me. With trepidation and curiosity, I pulled on a pair of trousers for the first time in my life and I felt as embarrassed as if I no longer had a single hair on my head. I felt like Vio, or like Viola from *Twelfth Night*, when she dresses up as a boy. Or like Gilda, when she dies in Rigoletto's arms, having sacrificed herself for the villainous duke. They were terribly unpleasant, the trousers. They discommoded me worse than a corset, clasping me tightly all over. It was if I had to learn to walk all over again, garbed in them as I was. And that is what I did: I walked up and down the room, until Alexandru knocked on the door – he always knocked – and told me that before we left his uncle would like to have a word with me. I did not have any inclination to do so, but I went to the salon nevertheless. Dr Cristescu gazed at me with satisfaction:

"You look much better like that!"

As far as I was concerned, I felt ridiculous. It was as though

I were making a spectacle of myself, and what was more, in front of a man who was both elderly and almost a complete stranger. But it was also nice, rather like a game.

"Iulia, I would like to ask you a few ordinary questions, which are just part of our medical routine, and so please don't get upset or take offence, will you?"

"With pleasure, doctor. Please do not worry on my account. In any case, I would like to thank you for agreeing to let me stay here. Alexandru told me that this is your house. Please ask me your questions and I shall try to answer them if I can."

"Naturally you can. Nobody fails a medical examination, although many make mistakes. I would like to ask you to answer me as accurately as possible. As you will see, the questions could not be more ordinary. When were you born?"

"On 17 July."

He pretended not to notice that I had not told him the year, but he caught me out with his next question:

"Do you know what today's date is? The day, the month, the year…"

Here was a question that was not at all ordinary: it was a very difficult question, the most difficult of all. The red square on the calendar showed Sunday, 26 February, but I knew it was Thursday. The month was February. But as for the year, I did like an ostrich in a sandstorm: I buried my head.

"It is 26 February," I said, trying to smile.

"Excellent. I told you it was routine. What about the day of the week?"

I decided to go by the calendar on the wall in the room:

"Sunday."

"Precisely. And the year?"

I met his question with silence and I think I flushed.

"Please answer. It's important. And also easy!"

"Were I to say 1898, you would laugh at me, wouldn't you?"

"I would like you to forget about 1898 and tell me what year you are in when you are not in 1898."

"1908? 1998? 2008? 2028? I have no idea!"

Embarrassingly and to my embarrassment, I burst into tears. It was only then that the lava erupted, the lava that had been scorching me for the last few days and in fact the last few months, since what happened to me with the other Alexandru and because of the fear that soon, before it was too late, I would have to make a decision and that whatever I might decide I would be unhappy. I did not know which decision would be the greater proof of selfishness. A person ought never to be placed in the situation of choosing between two evils: that which will harm herself and that which will harm others! […]

*

In almost every village on the outskirts of Bucharest there is an old man with a long, bushy white beard, whom the villagers call "the father of God." I don't know which wag it was in which village that invented the first "father," but soon afterwards they popped up everywhere, the same as in every village there is a mayor, a notary and a teacher, let's say. In Ciorogîrla, "the father of God" is a sexton, a job highly suited to the nickname, because he is the one that rings the bells to announce every decease. On Thursday, at twelve o'clock, the "father of God" was busy pulling the bell rope because the funeral service for Alexandru Beldiman was about to begin. The cortege of carriages stretched past the cemetery wall, and in the hearse, with his hands laid over his breast, buried in flowers even before he could be buried in the earth, lay he who had, up until just the other day, been the director of *Adeverul* newspaper.

"Lately you keep giving me surprises, Pavel—" said Mr Procopiu this morning when I offered to go to the

funeral as the representative of *Universul* newspaper so that I could report the sad event at first hand, "—I thought you said that you could not stand funerals!"

"Mr Procopiu, I don't like them, but as a reporter I feel obliged to undergo such an ordeal." [...]

"The fact that you are sparing me from wasting a whole day out of the office is a true gift. Shall I have a word with the director, to take you there in his carriage?"

"No, forgive me, but I would feel embarrassed. And besides, I would like to take with me some friends, who wish to attend."

"Well, all right, take one of our carriages. Thank you!" said the editor-in-chief, patting me on the shoulder, unable to conceal his happiness.

I like the fact that Mr Procopiu is not at all hypocritical.

It is well known that some lies, once uttered, are transformed into fact. I had said "friends" rather than "a girlfriend," and that is how things turned out. Elenuţa did not come alone, but with two unknown male companions, whom she introduced to me as colleagues from the Albina Company, admirers of the deceased. I opened my mouth to protest but then shut it without making a sound. [...] I was in quite a bad mood, and I was by no means cheered by the prospect of the speeches I would have to swallow and the endless service that would then ensue. Fortunately, a gloomy face was suited to the occasion and at least I would not have to mimic jollity, as I had had to so many other times. Even funerals have their advantages.

Ioana Pârvulescu
Viitorul începe luni
Humanitas, 2012
ISBN 978-973-50-3851-9

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Marta Petreu

(born 1955)

Marta Petreu is a prose writer and professor of the history of Romanian philosophy at the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj. She took her PhD in Philosophy at the University of Bucharest. Since 1990 she has been editor-in-chief of *Apostrof* magazine. Her work has been included in numerous anthologies of poetry in Romania and abroad. She has also contributed papers on Romanian philosophy and essays to numerous anthologies. She has been awarded the Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers (1981, 1997), the Prize of the Cluj Branch of the Union of Romanian Writers (2003, 2005, 2006), the Essay Prize of the Republic of Moldova Union of Writers (2003), the *Poesis* magazine Prize (1993, 2001), the *Contemporanul* magazine George Bacovia Prize (1993), the Nichita Stănescu Prize (1997), the Henri Jacquier Prize (2001), the Lucian Blaga Grand Prize (2002), and a Lillian Hellman/Dashiell Hammett Grant, bestowed by Human Rights Watch (2001). She is a member of the Echinox literary group, the Union of Romanian Writers, and the Apostrof Cultural Foundation. Her novel *At Home, on the Plain of Armageddon* was named Book of the Year 2011 by *România Literară* and the Anonimul Foundation, and was awarded the Prize for Best Book of the Year at the Romanian Publishing Industry Gala in 2012. The novel also received an award at the Chambery First Novel Festival in France in 2012.

At Home, on the Plain of Armageddon

Marta Petreu

The first novel by poet and essayist Marta Petreu is a book about a village in Transylvania, but also about disillusionment, loneliness, the mystery of death, and the search for a meaning beyond what is visible. The protagonist, Maria, a peasant woman from the Transylvanian Plain, who is unfulfilled in love and in life, ends up abandoning and cursing her own children. Two families weave their lives together over the course of a century, forming a spider's web at whose centre can be found this terrifying mother. The Apocalypse, expected at any moment by the clan's millenarian members, religious rigours, and the poverty brought by collectivisation shape unforgettable characters and incredible destinies. *At Home on the Plain of Armageddon* is "book of wrath", which establishes Marta Petreu as a prose writer more enduring than any passing fad.

Extract

I was beneath the black wing of the Apocalypse, held fast like a cockchafer gummed in tar, caught in the endlessly sadistic delirium of Armageddon, and it contorted both my sleep and my waking hours. At the time I knew no other religion. I did not go to church. I had no idea what other faiths promise you or demand of you. But rather than such a bloodthirsty and unforgiving God, who slurps the wine of wrath from the cup of wrath, better no God at all, the depths of me said triumphantly. And so, instead of bringing me salvation, My Father turned me for a long time into an atheist aware of her rights, and then into a loner. Rather than such a God, better the void. Better an empty sky as black as a sack of hair, to which, like a wolf, I might raise my human howl.

Much later, when I was in the seventh form and I told all these things to my Romanian teacher, Mrs Maria Chioreanu, who loved me, I learned from her that other religions have a different kind of God, one who does not terrify, but comforts. She answered reservedly, pensively, perhaps indignant that I could believe all the atheist nonsense I heard in class merely so that I would not have to believe in God My Father. From what she told me then, I was struck by the novelty that the God of other religions was different, more bearable than Ticu's Jehovah. And years later, in 1995, shortly before the Catholic Easter, alone in the Saint-Séverin Church in Paris I saw the

kindness with which a priest spoke to a little girl brought to confession by her father or grandfather and I wished I had been born Catholic, that I might have inside me and alongside me a God as good and as comforting as the scent of bread fresh from Mica's oven. Or the scent of nicotiana, when the bluish dusk of a beautiful summer evening falls over the village. And with a gust of gratitude and love, I suddenly remembered my teacher, Maria Chioreanu.

School helped me, naturally. The scientific education we were subjected to taught me that the universe is vast, infinite – it was not believed in those days – and that it consists only of matter. Today I know that that classroom science was as shaky as Ticu's mythology of Armageddon. But at the time, it was good for me to believe in a world without a God, rather than in the Jehovah that Ticu used to threaten us with. To me at the time, a world based on the laws of matter was better than Armageddon and its metal armies, which Ticu foretold with grim satisfaction:

"Armageddon is nigh!"

When I think about it now, Ticu would have been able to win us over, at least for a few years, if he had not terrified us so much. He would have won, if he had told me that I was perfect for the new heaven and the new earth to come after the Apocalypse, after the Last Judgement. That I too might come to be inscribed in the Book of Life. But he saw us as nothing but sinners to be cast aside at the great threshing. He saw us as nothing but sullied chaff to feed the flames of the fiery pit. I would have joined him in repentance, at least for a while, if I had not been so terrified. I too would have repented, if his prophets, whose mouths gaped with unspeakable voluptuousness at the thought of annihilation, had had eyes less glaring and glowing when they foretold the sufferings to be brought by the star whose name is Wormwood.

"Annihilation is nigh!" announced Ticu, "The end has come!" and we would see his mouth filling with satisfaction, as if he had just eaten the icy core of a red watermelon in the torrid heat of summer. What had brought Ticu to the Jehovah's Witnesses? I wondered, looking at a photograph of him, one of the few I have, taken five years after he repented. In it he is thirty-nine, his face furrowed by deep vertical lines, a defeated look in his eyes. A devastated look. That of a man who can no longer find joy in anything. A man who expects nothing more from this world. How great must his fear, his wrath, his pain have been? How great his loneliness? How great his loneliness at home? Why was it easier for him among them in their world of boiling pitch and blood than among other people? What was it that had terrified him so strongly, wounded him so deeply, that he, a thitherto normal man, ended up repenting? What was it that the Witnesses gave him that made him feel so at ease with them? Was it perhaps his pride at being a candidate for the new chosen people, a passenger in the second Ark?

Marta Petreu
Acasă pe Cîmpia Armaghedonului
Polirom, 2011
ISBN 978-973-46-1927-6

Seinfeld şi sora lui Nabokov (*Seinfeld and Nabokov's Sister*), essays, Polirom, 2014;
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Ultima Thule. Cetăţile dacice din Munţii Orăştiei (*The Dacian Forts of the Orăştie Mountains*), essay, Artec, Spain, 2009;
Regăsirea intimităţii (*The Rediscovery of Intimacy*), essay, Cartea Românească, 2008.

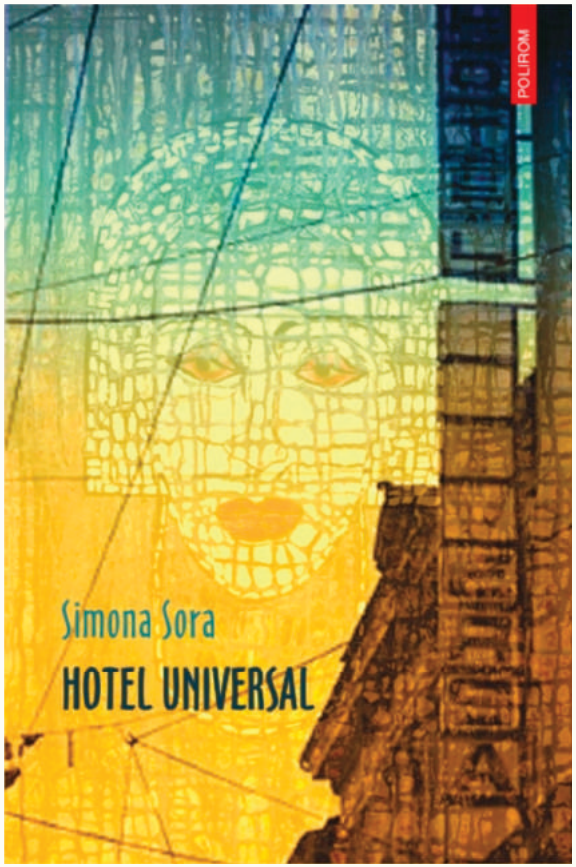
Simona Sora

(born 1967)

Simona Sora is an essayist and prose writer, who has been active in the Romanian cultural press for the past twenty years, writing columns on literary criticism and articles. She has taught literature and publishing theory at the University of Bucharest and translated Latin American literature. Her essay *The Rediscovery of Intimacy* (Cartea Românească, 2008) received a number of literary awards. Her short prose has been published in anthologies including *Women Fellow Travellers: The Female Experience under Communism* (Polirom, 2008) and *First Book* (ART, 2011). Her essay *Ultima Thule: The Dacian Forts of the Orăştie Mountains* (Artec, Spain, 2009) was her contribution to a UNESCO project to promote Romanian culture and civilisation. Her novel *Hotel Universal* was published in 2012. The novel was well received by critics and public alike and has garnered nominations for the majority of Romania's literary awards. A second edition of the novel was published in 2013. Simona Sora is a Doctor in Philology and a member of the Union of Romanian Writers.

Hotel Universal

Simona Sora



The novel juxtaposes two periods of Romania's history: the mid-nineteenth century, when famous confectioner Vasile Capşa, the founder of the celebrated restaurant of the same name in Bucharest, embarks on an unsuccessful business venture in the Crimea, and the 1990s, in the aftermath of Romania's controversial 1989 Revolution. In both 1856 and 1993, two forces as real as they are symbolic confront each other at the Hotel Universal (a building that still stands at No. 12, Gabroveni Street – "Cutlers' Street"). The character that links these two planes is the somnambular Maia, the great granddaughter of the "golden girl" that Capşa brings back with him from the Crimea on his return to Bucharest. As Maia travels deeper into the stories of her family's past, the novel is transformed into a series of "spiritual exercises", which, modelled on the example of Ignacio de Loyola, need to be practised rather than read. Part autobiographical fiction, part novel of mystery, *Hotel Universal* is an odyssey through an oriental world, which, in its essential values, has not greatly changed.

Extract

During the three days her private revolution lasted, Maia had not found anything to resuscitate, bandage or revive. All those who died at the University had done so shortly before she arrived with her first-aid kit and periodic urges to leap from a height. What the revolutionaries and *defenders of the homeland* needed more than anything else was food, coffee and clean clothes, and so amid the rhythmic rat-a-tat of gunfire, the shouts and the screams, past the soldiers, militiamen and civilians with tricolour armbands, Maia made a number of trips from the University, via Batiştei, Sahia, and Caragiale Streets, to Maria Rosetti Street and back. Next to Interpol, with its windows facing the gigantic satellite dishes, was the room that Maria, with her innate generosity, had given to Maia, although she could have rented it out for a great deal of money. From the house she collected sugar, coffee and tinned food, as if visiting a grocery, and then went back to the University. After a while, she returned, having forgotten to fetch a kettle; forcing her luck, which had never abandoned her, not even during her most reckless leaps, jumps and plunges from great heights, Maia even made a third journey to

Maria Rosetti Street, this time only to the bakery opposite the house, the one contiguous with the rabbi's flat, from which Radio Free Europe had blared the whole of the previous summer. Now it was silent, almost in darkness. The bread had not arrived, or perhaps it had already run out, and so Maia made her way back, without entering her aunt's house. Across the road from the bakery she almost collided with a very smartly dressed bespectacled man, who had just come out of the eight-storey building that flanked Maria's house on the right, with the intention of walking his dog. The elegant gentleman curtly acknowledged her apology and then they both continued on their way, in parallel directions between the houses. It was not until a few months later, when she saw him again on the television, that Maia realised (although obviously nobody believed her) that at around five o'clock in the evening on 23 December she had almost collided with General Chiţac, later to become Minister of the Interior, who had left the revolution to unfold on its own for a little while so that he could take his beloved dog for a walk.

The next two days and nights Maia spent in the Philology Faculty building on Edgar Quinet Street, by night sleeping in the secretariat offices and by day feeding the soldiers posted there by the National Salvation Front to defend the students from whomever necessary. One of the teachers from the folklore department, who was later said to have been a Securitate informer, walked up and down the main hall holding a grenade. Foreign reporters kept coming to the entrance, but nobody searched them, perhaps because little by little a consensus had been reached that the “terrorists” must be native Romanians. They would ask their questions, struggle to understand the answers, and then go away to transmit their breaking news. But amid that revolutionary commotion – the thing that Maia remembered most decades later was that strange night in the empty train that arrived in the Northern Station not so much as a minute late – she came to know all the people who mattered. In her mind remained the image of a soldier washing his feet in the toilet by the secretariat while his rifle and ammunition lay in a foul-smelling soapy puddle on the floor. And nor could she forget the uproar at the first free elections for the Students' League: overwhelmed by the shouting, the untranslatable swearwords and the tension that threatened to blow the meeting sky-high, the foreign reporters had been able to endure only a few minutes of it before they packed up their cameras, fluffy microphones and cables and scarpered. The three heads of the Romanian Association of Communist Students, whom nobody wanted to re-elect, also scarpered: they took refuge in the room by the lift, which had used to be the timetables room, and elected each other. Thus ended Maia's revolution and thus she came to take part, merely thanks to having been present at that meeting, in the transformation of the Hotel Universal into a student hall of residence. Through a conjuncture that had nothing mystical about it – it was sooner a case of a much-coveted location in the centre of town being assigned a different use – Maia came to be given a room in the no-star hotel where her great-great-grandmother Rada had lived for a time, the golden girl that Vasile Capşa had brought back from Varna as a souvenir of his first unsuccessful business trip to Sevastopol.

Simona Sora
Hotel Universal
Polirom, 2012
ISBN 978-973-46-3191-9

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Mut (*Mute*), novel, Cartea Românească, 2006;
Apocalips amânat (*Apocalypse Postponed*), novel, Gramar, 2004;
Morminte străvezii (*Transparent Graves*), novel, Albatros, 1999;
Contemplatorul solitar (*The Solitary Contemplative*), essay, Institutul European, 1997.

Dan Stanca

(born 1955)

Dan Stanca is a journalist and novelist, and one of Romanian literature's few metaphysical writers. To date he has published seventeen novels. He has twice been awarded the Prize of the Union of Romanian Writers and twice been nominated for the same prize. He has also received awards from the Bucharest Association of Writers and *Ateneu* and *Flacăra* magazines. His novel *The Night of Judas* was nominated for *România Literară* magazine's Book of the Year Award in 2007. In 2011, Napkut (Budapest) published his novel *Transparent Graves* in Hungarian translation.

The Rakes and the Dead

Dan Stanca

The Rakes and the Dead draws parallels between the lives of three journalists in present-day Romania and the fictional lives of the main characters in Mateiu Caragiale's *Rakes of the Old Court* (Paşadia, Pirgu and Pantazi), a Romanian cult novel from the early twentieth century. Constructed using a postmodern leitmotiv ("When you get sick of fiction, then you can be sure that that will be when fiction comes crashing down on you"), the novel is in fact a rehabilitation of storytelling and its eternal recurrence in literature. And ultimately, *The Rakes and the Dead* is a novel about outward failure and inward fulfilment.

Extract

I had got used to the game of mirrors, however. She saw in me what she herself was. She accused me of vices that were her own. She burdened me with her own sins. That was how she cleansed herself and, as was only logical, she no longer experienced the guilt of a double life. She used to experience an intense, an orgasmically intense, feeling of disturbance, scrutinising me with the greatest concentration, scanning each millimetre of my face, and then wham-bam, she would order me to go to the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. Just go and look at yourself! Do you like the way you look? How do I look? You're a lying, unscrupulous bastard, a hypocrite. You lie even in your sleep. Once, one summer, because of the heat wave, I had had a terrible nightmare and crying out in the middle of the night I had waved my arm and hit her. She refused to believe that it had been an accident caused by my having a bad dream. She said that I had done it deliberately so that I would wake her up and ruin her sleep, that it wasn't enough that I made her waking hours hell, but now I even attacked her during the night. She went on in the same vein until morning, when she instantly fell asleep, still tensed, clutching her fists over her chest, ready to fend off an imminent physical confrontation. Then, I recall, I quickly went over to Popescu's, where I met that officer, Sorin or Dorin or whatever his name was, who had been sitting with a carafe of white wine in front of him since six in the morning. I sat down at his table and, like the two steadfast early-morning customers we were, we drank until the sun rose high in the sky. And then, well

lubricated, propping each other up, we made our way home, at an hour of day when most people are at work, or, if they are on holiday, bathing in the sea or hiking up a mountain. That was what my life was like, is still like… But that evening, thank God, we didn't have an argument. I thought the decent thing to do would be to get a divorce, but for some perverse, hallucinatory reason, I quite simply couldn't do without her. There's an old Romanian saying: "it's bad when it's bad, but it's worse when it isn't," and that saying summed me up. I could have gone on like that until my dying day. Given that I never left Bucharest, I couldn't even enjoy the nuances of the changing seasons. For me, it was either hot or cold. The asphalt didn't allow any scale subtler than that. The two extremes were like two lampposts, which I kept colliding with until I knocked myself out. When I drank, I could imagine I was in Monte Carlo or in Malta, in the capital, La Valletta, but I couldn't be doing with the Americanised present: what I wanted was the island of yesteryear, a topaz set in the emerald or sapphire shield of the sea. For me, Malta was always as yellow as the honey that filled the knights' honeycombs, seeped into every capillary of their being, pervaded the mosaic structure of their testicles, rose to the wellsprings by the medullary canal and penetrated the bedchamber of the brain, where it trickled into heavy steel moulds. This is the honey of the Knights of Malta, which that upstart dwarf, Napoleon I, sullied with his shit. If you can think such thoughts, then why should you care about your wife cheating on you? Poor woman, she doesn't even know what's she's doing. Diana's face fills me with boundless pity and the pity is as sweet as honey, it melts away the edges, it turns the jagged angles into soft curves, and our prideful mind ends up being wax between the fingers of the invisible priest who moulds it into candles, which one fine day will begin to burn and will cast light into the lowest depths, into the most convoluted of viscera: that's what I want from life, a brain of fucking wax, let them do whatever they like to you, but start burning already, because I'm sick of your tyranny!

Might Diana be the reincarnation, centuries later, of Isabella de Molay? Victor told me that no serious history book could include any of the phantasmagoria I come up with. But I'm sure that I read somewhere about that mad girl who roamed the length and breadth of France, telling people that the Templars' fortune did not exist and that in the blink of an eye it all turned to ash when the birds of prey swooped down. Diana too would have gone from door to door and complained to all and sundry that my mind was nothing but ash and that she couldn't go on living like that any more. Analogies keep cropping up across the centuries, equivalences arise, the structure is the same, but the characters that enter the picture no longer rise to the height of their precursors. So too the cigarette-ash-filled briefcase of Florea Pirgu became the true blazon of the present times and the end times. Had he really not recognised me? The puzzlement persists later, in the night, when, unable to sleep, I examine its every facet. I hear Diana snoring faintly and I rejoice at the fact that, even if I can't sleep, at least she is snatching a few hours of oblivion and escape from the jaws of everyday torment. Why can't we be a happy family? When you try to escape from fiction, that's when it pounces on you. That's probably the only answer. I want not to imagine anything any more, to speak only the naked truth, but the lie creeps up on me unawares and trips me, I fall and it leaps at my throat, sucks my blood, and in its stead it pumps in a deceptive gas, which turns me into a ridiculous balloon carried away on currents of air, blown around the world at random. That's fiction for you, gentlemen: vagabondage, not being anchored, being bereft of the sacrament of confession…

Dan Stanca
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Matei Brunul (*Matei Brunul*), novel, Polirom, 2011 (2nd edition, 2014);
Celelalte poveşti de dragoste (*The Other Love Stories*), novel, Polirom, 2009 (2nd edition, 2013);
Cu puţin timp înaintea coborîrii extratereştrilor printre noi (*Shortly before the extraterrestrials landed among us*), novel, Polirom, 2005;
Atunci i-am ars două palme (*Then I clouted him twice*), short stories, Polirom, 2004;
Circul nostru vă prezintă… (*Our Circus Presents:*), novel, Polirom, 2002 (2nd edition, 2007);
Lumea văzută printr-o gaură de mărimea unei ţigări marijuana (*The World Seen through an Aperture the Width of a Spliff*), short stories, Fundaţia „Constantin Brâncuşi", 2000.

Lucian Dan Teodorovici

(born 1975)

Photo © Florin Lăzărescu

Lucian Teodorovici is a novelist, playwright, and screenwriter. He is the senior editor of *Suplimentul de Cultură* weekly and in charge of Polirom's "Ego. Proză" series of contemporary fiction. Regarded as one of Romania's best young authors, he has written a number of plays for the theatre and is one of the screenwriters for the *Animated Planet* television show. He also wrote the script for a television documentary entitled *Fireside Tales from Communist Times*. His novels have been published in translation in a number of countries, garnering success among readers and praise from the critics. His novel *Matei Brunul* has won the Augustin Frăţilă Prize for Prose, awarded by *Observatorul Cultural* magazine, the *Ziarul de Iaşi* National Prize for Prose, and the Public's Choice Prize at the Romanian Publishing Industry Gala. *Contrafort* magazine named the novel Book of the Year 2011.

Matei Brunul

Lucian Dan Teodorovici

Matei Brunul is a sweeping narrative of the Romanian gulag, of victims and torturers, of destiny, and of solitude as a means whereby the individual wards off the adversities of a domineering police state that keeps watch over every single moment of his life. After experiencing the horrors of the prisons and labour camps, Brunul blots out all memory of his past and devotes his life to his marionettes. He leads an anonymous, anodyne life in a grey and perilous world, constantly kept under surveillance by two other characters – comrade Bojin and the young Eliza – two presences that are as kindly and affectionate as they are disquieting. The mystery shrouding the protagonist's past gradually intertwines with another, new mystery, whose solution will change his view of his own history. *Matei Brunul* is a sombre panorama of communist Romania and one of the most important Romanian novels of recent years.

Extract

Two nights and the one day between them. Two faces. Two different attempts to persuade him. […]

The second attempt came after Bruno had refused to give himself or to give others the chance of setting off down a fresh path. The polite hulk of a man had left after less than an hour, but not before thanking Bruno for the conversation. Then, the second face. One that was almost pleasing, at first sight. One that shed any trace of humanity, however, in the instant when, with curses, punches and kicks, it violently blotted out the other man's polite words. And then, panting, weary, the second re-educator seated himself on a bunk.

"You've got thirty seconds before you start talking."

And he started to count. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven sounded in Bruno's mind only, as he had got ahead of what the other man was saying. And in the same instant there sounded the crack of a cudgel, which he hadn't seen on the bunk, behind the man. And after that there sounded other numbers. Ten, in the instant when the cudgel struck the muscles of his legs. Twelve, when his ribcage cracked beneath a blow. Sixteen, when the cudgel broke his shoulder, burningly brushing his right ear. Twenty, when his kneecaps transmitted a hellish pain, like the howl of a wounded beast, all the way to his throat.

Immediately after the appearance of the second face, he had remembered Kleist. Whom he had forgotten, abandoning him between the pages of his manuscript, which his first interrogator held in his hands. Whom he had refused to think of any more, associating him in his mind with the moment of his arrest. But after the very different approaches of the two faces, Heinrich von Kleist once more seeped into his thoughts, with his *Über das Marionettentheater*, which he had read in Italian translation and which he had once loved so greatly. Word for word, he remembered the things he had read, he had made use of them so many times, he had made use of them in discussions with his students, he had made use of them in his own manuscript. Just as the image of a concave mirror, said Kleist, after receding into infinity, suddenly reappears before our eyes, magnified, so too will grace reappear, after knowledge has travelled through infinity. He remembered; he would have been incapable of forgetting, even had he been forced to do so. And grace, said Kleist, grace appears in its purest state in that body which is either devoid of awareness or possesses infinite awareness. Which is to say, either in a marionette or in a god. And so all that is left for us to do is to eat once more of the Tree of Knowledge that we might regain the state of primordial innocence.

How could Kleist have ever imagined that one and a half centuries later there would no longer be any need for a Tree of Knowledge in order to regain innocence? That it would no longer be necessary to travel through infinity? For the regaining of innocence, men had been found who reduced everything to thirty seconds. Simple, easily counted. Infinity was no longer an option; thirty seconds were sufficient. The first twenty, so that the body's pain would subjugate the mind; the next ten, so that the mind could convey confessions to the mouth – the only requirement, if innocence were to be attained once more.

After the two nights and the one day between them spent in “thirteen–fourteen”, if anybody had been willing to listen to him and if he himself had felt the need, Bruno would have had many things to tell. There was one thing alone about which he would not have been able to say anything. He would not for the life of him been able to say whether, even for one second, he had heard the accordion. He would have wagered with anybody that none of the prisoners that had ended up there would have been able to say that. The music of the accordion could be heard only in the rest of the colony. It was impossible for the person it was being played for to hear it. Perhaps because his ears were deafened by the cries of the man beating him. Perhaps because his ears were deafened by his own cries.

On the morning when he was send back to his barrack, Bruno did not feel the need to talk about anything, however. And nobody felt the need to ask him to speak. Not because he had become part of that chain in which no prisoner wishes to be a link – repeated over and over again, the thirty seconds had indeed forced confessions out of him, albeit confessions in which he admitted his own crimes, not others'. But rather, because the whole colony was talking about something else. About somebody else. The whole colony was talking about the death of Dr Simionescu, who was lying curled up, his dry eyes still gazing towards the barracks, next to the barbed wire, the same as a few months before another prisoner had lain, having made a run for it. But neither the guards who had shot him nor the brigade members dared to call the doctor a traitor.

Ioan Simionescu, who had once been a member of a government, had no longer been able to endure the tortures to which he had been subjected in the “thirteen–fourteen.” And his desperate act of breaking rank the evening before and rushing at the barbed wire fence, ignoring the guards' furious orders to stop, before a bullet cut short his sprint, that act had, without Bruno's knowing, been the third piece of luck he had had since arriving at the Peninsula colony. This time, it was a genuine piece of luck, for by his sacrifice Dr Simionescu had released Bruno from the hands of the re-educators, allowing him to return to the barrack before his confessions could link him into the chain.

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