

The Ideology of *Semiosis* in Romanian Prose under Communism

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The article discusses the confrontation of the poetics of mimesis, directed towards nonlinguistic events, with that of semiosis, concerned with the production of signs, in literature under censorship. The case of Romanian fiction in the 1980s is representative of the “textual resistance” specific to East European Postmodernism.

Keywords: literature and ideology / Romanian literature / communism / censorship / metafiction / postmodernism / Aesopian language / semiosis / subversiveness

The title of this study could appear oxymoronic on the surface.¹ The notion of *semiosis* as a free activity of producing meaning disagrees with the content of the term *communism*, which has become synonymous with the attempt to reduce content to Party propaganda. It is no secret that between 1948 and 1990, in most of the Eastern and central European cultures under Soviet influence, literature was used as means of indoctrination. In prose writing, this aspect decidedly favored realistic ways of representation, the best vehicles for political autarchy. More than a poetics among others, *mimesis* became an ideology that signaled the attempt by totalitarian forces to control literary representation. A different ideological statement can be retrieved, nevertheless, in the literary strategies that discard the mimetic poetics. The study explores the political undertones of metafiction—with a focus on antirealist and pluralistic devices—starting from the particular case of Romanian prose writing in the 1980s. I use the terms *mimesis* and *semiosis* to distinguish between two poetics of fiction: the first is representational, directed towards non-linguistic situations or objects, whereas the latter is self-conscious, concerned with language and the production of meaning. The focus on the “work as semiotic project” (Culler 121) has been prominently illustrated by the *nouveau roman* and by Tel Quel literature, stimulated by Roland Barthes’s posit that “revolutionary art must admit the arbitrariness of signs, must allow a certain formalism in the sense that it must treat form according to the proper method, which is a semiological method” (Barthes 87).

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To understand the emergence of this new type of poetics in Romanian literature, however, clarifications of the political context are needed. Halfway through the 1960s, with the de-Stalinization of literature, an implicit agreement was established between the communist authorities and writers: as long as the latter did not directly attack Marxist–Leninist dogmas, threatening to destabilize them, the communist officials would commit to observing their creative freedom. In my book on Romanian literary criticism under the communist regime, I tried to show how the phrase “autonomy of the aesthetic” gained prominence in ideas of Romanian literature (Goldiș 122–126). This agreement—rather fragile in its premises—was broken, on certain occasions, by both officials and writers. The considerable cultural opening, between 1965 and 1971, when young Nicolae Ceaușescu seemed one of the enlightened personalities of European communism, was followed by a period of intellectual repression that once again complicated the relationship between politics and literature. On the other hand, the writers themselves took advantage of the signs of an ideological “thaw” by inserting subversive messages into their works. The unstable balance between the two ideological camps gave birth to a phenomenon greatly debated by postwar Romanian intellectuals, known as “resistance through culture:” although the Romanian writers did not complain in an open political discourse, their works tried to formulate an encoded polemic.

In prose writing, an obvious evolution towards the autonomization of literary discourse can be observed, from socialist-realist prose (1948–1965) to the prose of the “obsessive decade” (1965–1980) and that of “post-modern” writers (1980–1990). In the first decade of Stalinism, the only literary formula officially accepted—of course, not only in the Romanian context—was socialist realism. This type of prose writing surrendered the construction of characters and plot in exchange for the popularization of Marxist–Leninist dogmas and for the creation of the “new man.” As to the modes of representation, the only strategy tolerated was, obviously, the realism of the nineteenth century, as consecrated by Tolstoy or Dickens, owing to its capacity to communicate directly with the audience.

The second phase of Romanian prose under communism, a tributary to the 1965 ideological “thaw,” can be described as a broadening of stylistic and thematic possibilities. The books of Augustin Buzura, Nicolae Breban, or Alexandru Ivasiuc,² some of the most prominent prose writers

² Augustin Buzura (born 1938), Nicolae Breban (born 1934), and Alexandru Ivasiuc (1933–1977) are prominent representatives of the thaw in Romanian literature. Having confronted censorship, their novels expose social realist clichés by rediscovering the parable and symbolic narrative.

in the 1960s, took advantage of the general denunciation of Stalinism to criticize it, in the name of a more tolerant communism, now represented by the Ceaușescu regime. It is not difficult to see that, under the pretense of unmasking the atrocities of the Stalinist decade in the so-called “obsessive decade,” these prose writers aimed at communist ideology as a whole (Perian 130–139). Although the audience read polemic hints at the communist regime between the lines,³ these novels provided samples of socialist realism *à rebours*. In the broader communist context, the works of the aforementioned writers are very similar to the experience of Yury Dombrovsky, Vladimir Dudintsev, and Vasily Grossman, who “focused on the inequities of the Stalin period and featured fresh disclosures of the events and phenomena of those years” (Brown 8). As to the artistic formula, although the narrative techniques start to become more complex, the “novel of the obsessive decade,” as it was called in the Romanian context, remains a tributary to the realist paradigm.

In fact, the only type of prose that undermines *mimesis* in favor of *semiosis* appeared at the beginning of the 1980s, with the debut of a new generation of writers. Mircea Nedelciu, Ioan Groșan, Gheorghe Crăciun, and Gheorghe Iova directly assumed the poetics of the *nouveau roman*, and domestic critics label them as the Romanian postmodern generation. The birth of this new wave of prose writers is even more peculiar, given the fact that nothing in the context of 1980s Romania looked like the Western environment, where such innovating theories were underway. “The emergence of Postmodernism is closely related to the emergence of this new moment of late, consumer or multinational capitalism,” Fredric Jameson observes (178–179). The dilemmas of consumer society and of the commodification of art, with the ideological advocacy of Marxism, were far from being familiar to a society stifled by pauperism and by the censorship of the communist regime. Nevertheless, both the theoretical jargon and the writing practice of the Tel Quel group came into focus in the prose and theories of the group of writers that emerged at the beginning of the 1980s. One of the most careful observers of contemporary Romanian literature, Mircea Martin, coined a paradoxical syntagm to name the abyss between Romanian society, historically left behind, and its cultural ambitions, anchored in history: “postmodernism without postmodernity” (241–246).

³ In *Literatura română sub comunism* (Romanian Literature under Communism), Eugen Negrici seeks to develop the concept of a fictional pact specific to cultures in communism, according to which an unspoken agreement between the author and the reader functioned: the author’s mission was to encrypt subversive signs in the text, and the reader’s was to identify and amplify them. This is what the author called “paranoid reading,” a symptom of the malformations of literature under censorship conditions.

Self-referential literature, rooted in the reality of words rather than in reality as such, is a relatively sporadic phenomenon in literatures under communism. In a synthesis on the literature in post-communist Russia and Eastern Europe, Rajendra A. Chitnis signals the appearance of this type of prose, which he calls the “fiction of Changes,” only after the fall of the Soviet Bloc. Whereas “readers and critics had judged a work above all on the extent to which it holds the truth about the reality of life in contemporary society” (8–9), after the fall of communism one could see the outburst of “a literature which feels and acknowledges itself as only and nothing more than a phenomenon of language” (Potapov 252). According to Viktor Erofeev, a writer and literary critic that became prominent with the rise of the Gorbachev regime, the phenomenon of metaliterature appears in Eastern European cultures with the disappearance of the writers’ need to communicate directly with the audience and with the fading of their multiple stances in totalitarian regimes: “In Russia the writer was often called upon to carry out several duties at the same time: to be a priest, a prosecutor, a sociologist, an expert in questions of love and marriage, an economist and a mystic. He was so much everything that he frequently turned out to be nobody as a writer, unable to sense the peculiarities of literary language and figurative paradoxical thinking” (8).

More recent researchers of literature under communism sought to define “East-Central European Postmodernism” by insisting on individual cases, such as Bohumil Hrabal, Péter Hajnóczy, or Venedikt Erofeev. However, the unifying aspect of their work is not ascribable to a shared program, nor to stylistic similarities, but to the difference of each of them in relation to the didactic literature of socialist realism: their fictions are “suffused with an ambience thoroughly different from the literature of the sixties and early seventies, which packaged the ‘message’ in oppressive or cheerful, but always heavily coded, parables” (Peter Krasztev 70).

Obviously, also in the Romanian context, literature with a linguistic inspiration appeared as a reaction to the truth-telling function of literature, specific to the first “thaw” symptoms. With those “heavy coded parables,” backed up by an Aesopian language, the prose of the obsessive decade undertook the public role of exposing the errors of Stalinism. For this reason, Romanian critics frequently charged postmodern prose that, by forsaking *mimesis*, it would abandon the criticism—even if veiled—of totalitarian society. I show below that it is precisely this exposure of the artefact nature of literary discourse that, in a manner more radical than the directly subversive novels, denounces the forged character of communist ideology.

Notions such as the “great text of the world,” “textuation,” “inter-text,” the “signified-signifier” relationship, “themes and structure,” and

“language practice” are frequent both in prose as such and in the theoretical discourse of these writers. The assertion of the process of text-making and of the materiality of linguistic elements leads to a Romanian textualist prose cut off from the “naturalized” circuit of official culture and to its evolution into a subversive movement. The novels and short stories by Nedelciu,⁴ Crăciun,⁵ or Groșan⁶ abandon the construction of the so-called grand ideological narratives, preoccupied with man’s relation to power and his mission in the historical evolution of society. Prose writers of the 1980s moved away from this traditional poetics using two strategies. On the one hand, writers resorted to the neutral recording of day-to-day reality and its trivial details, which could not be restricted to an ideological pattern. The avoidance of politics by raw transcription of reality was not a new phenomenon in literature under communism because it had become a frequent formula ever since the first manifestations of de-Stalinization (Clark 236–238). On the other hand, by redefining texts as compounds of floating signs that resist meaning, the “self-reflexive fiction” of the 1980s becomes an even more efficient manner of undermining the ideological contents of the literary work. Far from being a simple strategy of refining

⁴ The essayist, short-story writer, and novelist Mircea Nedelciu (1950–1999) is a leading figure of the so-called 80s Generation (Rom. *optzeciști*). His neoavanguardist narrative—openly influenced by Tel Quel literature—represents a paradoxical alliance of neorealist conception with postmodern literary devices such as self-referentiality and intertextuality. Nedelciu’s most important works include both books of short stories and novels: *Aventuri într-o curte interioară* (Adventures in a Patio, 1979), *Efect de ecou controlat* (Controlled Echo Effect, 1981), *Zmeura de câmpie* (Wild Raspberry, 1984), *Tratament fabulatoriu* (Confabulatory Cure, 1986), and *Femeia în roșu* (The Woman in Red, 1990) in collaboration with Adriana Babți and Mircea Mihăieș.

⁵ One of the most versatile figures of the 80s Generation, Gheorghe Crăciun (1950–2007) wrote novels, short stories, essays, and literary theory. In his novels and short story, such as *Documente originale. Copii legalizate* (Original Documents. Legalized Copies, 1982), *Compunere cu paralele inegale* (A Composition with Unequal Parallels, 1988), *Frumoasa fără corp* (The Beauty without Body, 1993), or *Pupa Russa* (The Russian Doll, 2004), he tried to deconstruct traditional fiction by instrumenting *nouveau roman* techniques. Regardless of the topic, his literary works expose the polysemantic nature of language by revealing the text as a mere body of signs. His most important work of literary theory, *Aisbergul poeziei moderne* (The Iceberg of Modern Poetry), is a sharp reflection on the other side of modern poetry. As opposed to the lyrical concept consecrated by Hugo Friedrich in *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, Crăciun discovers an alternate western poetry tradition, centered on what he calls “transitive” values, neorealism, or new anthropocentrism.

⁶ Ioan Groșan (born 1954) is a prose-writer, playwright, and journalist, a member of the 80s Generation. His novels and short stories are characterized by both embracing post-modern techniques and dismantling them through parody: *Caravana cinematografică* (The Caravan Cinematography, 1985), *Trenul de noapte* (Night-Train, 1989), *Planeta mediocritilor* (Planet of Mediocrities, 1991), and *O sută de ani de zile la porțile Orientului* (A Hundred Years at the Gates of the Orient, 1992).

narrative perspectives, metafiction is a “critique of the dominant modes of narrative/cultural articulation” (Cornis-Pope 259). In fact, all recent theories of metafiction have placed a strong emphasis on the political bias of formalist literature. Raymond Federman emphasizes the free play that resides in the relationship between text, culture, and the reader (1145–1147), and Patricia Waugh dwells on metafiction as “a useful model for learning about the construction of the reality itself” (3). In cultures under Soviet influence, the fiction-reality relationship was even tenser than in the free cultures of the “society of the spectacle” because control of the language—in the double form of censorship and political denunciation—was an insurmountable aspect of daily life. More than in other cultures, East-Central European postmodern devices represented a way of denouncing the simulacrum nature of a regime built by propaganda. If the “whole sphere of language turned into one grandiose performative speech act, directed towards the affirmation of the Soviet simulacrum” (Annus and Hughes 58), then the abyss between “late capitalism” and “late communism” is not as considerable as it may seem at first glance.

In Romanian literature, the predecessor of this reflection on the nature of the literary text is Dumitru Țepeneag.⁷ The so-called “Oneiric” group he founded together with Leonid Dimov at the end of the 1960s was banned by the communist officials because of its subversive character. By using the dream as a literary technique, Țepeneag tried to deconstruct the classical composition of the story using two textual strategies. First, he abandoned the omniscient stance, seen as a form of textual dictatorship, in favor of subjective narrative perspectives. The fact that there is “no longer that complete consonance between the inner and outer selves of the protagonists, or between the narrator’s point of view and that of his protagonists” (231) is described by Katerina Clark as one of the most efficient strategies of the writers of the thaw. The narrator’s fall from his

⁷ Dumitru Țepeneag (born 1937) is a novelist, short-story writer, and essayist, and a member of the Romanian Oneiric group, founded in the 1960s. Due to its rejection of realist poetics, the group was banned by Communist Party officials. In 1975 Țepeneag established himself in Paris, where he founded the literary magazine *Cahiers de l’Est* (Papers of the East). An important bridge between Romanian and French culture, his works are representative of the transition from surrealist automatic writing to the deconstruction of the text as practiced by *nouveau roman* writers. In Romania, he became well known for his short-story collections *Exerciții* (Exercises, 1966), *Frig* (Cold, 1967), and *Așteptare* (Waiting, 1971), and in France his most important works are *Les noces nécessaires* (The Necessary Weddings, 1977), *Pigeon Vole* (The Flying Pigeon, 1988), and *Pont des arts* (The Bridge of Arts, 1998). Țepeneag is also one of the most prolific translators of French twentieth-century literature into Romanian, including works by the writers Alain Robbe-Grillet, André Malraux, Jacques Derrida, Robert Pinget, and Albert Béguin.

ruling position and the transfer of the point of view to unreliable characters were threats not only to the classical structure of the story, but also to the ideological message of the work as a whole. When it was no longer controlled directly by the authorities, text abstrusity increased.

The second textual strategy concerned the writer's choice of a series of textual mechanisms (the *mise-en-abîme* or the intertext) meant to improve the direct interaction of the author and the reader. In short-story collections such as *Exerciții* (Exercises), *Frig* (Cold), or *Așteptare* (Waiting), one can detect a performative poetics, with the dynamic between the writer and the public being described as a relationship between two free individuals (Țepeneag 128–130).

Such a call for the reader's active participation, which is reminiscent of Brecht's "epic theatre," is generalized in the texts of young prose writers of the 1980s. Nedelciu, the main theoretician of the new generation, admitted directly that the main character of the new prose is the reader as a social actor, capable of legitimizing and asserting his political status. This invitation to reflexivity opposes the reader's passive position, specific to the poetics of *mimesis*. "The role of meta-literature ... is precisely to draw the public's attention on manipulation; it is a constant declaration that I need the reader as a free spirit, a human being able to think for himself"⁸—this is perhaps the writer's most characteristic and most daring statement. Thus, far from being unwarranted, all of the textual games identified in the prose of the postmodern generation concern the indirect polemic on a society in which the reader is "manipulated" by an autarchic author created by the regime's paternalism.

The other important name in the Romanian postmodern movement, Crăciun, would plead for a self-referential literature in search of the "unpredictable processuality of life," not subjected to "already canonized perception and transcription formulas" (270). In order to access this unpredictable reality, "new points of view, new means, new textual strategies are required." The focus on the polysemous nature of literary language was an indirect advocacy for the "open" character of the reality it builds—in direct conflict with the reality of the 1980s, burdened by indigence and restrictions. In a society in which the strict control of meaning was regulated by Party propaganda, the emphasis on the never-ending slippage between signifier and signified underlying the idea of reality as a subjective construct had an obvious subversive nature.

The seriousness and the monovalent discourse of the Party propaganda (or of the literature created in its wake) are undermined in Crăciun's or

⁸ Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by the author of the paper.

Nedelciu's prose by complex linguistic challenges, in which intertextuality meets parody and pastiche. Narrative polyphony (often, the same scene is delivered from several points of view, in different stylistic approaches), the strategy of open endings and multiple beginnings, or the narrator's emergence at the surface of the text are devices meant to deconstruct the conformation of traditional prose writing, permeable to ideological content. This referential closure, in which the "reality" behind the text is no longer obvious or relevant, creates what was called a form of "textual resistance" (Dinițoiu 41), in which the polemic message regarding the regime could be encoded more easily.

To look at just one example, *Efect de ecou controlat* (Controlled Echo Effect), arguably Nedelciu's most interesting prose, is a *mise-en-abyme* of the entire totalitarian system, a sort of apex of textualist subversion. How does Nedelciu manage to perform such a writing stunt in a period roughly dominated by censorship? In the 1970s and 1980s, the Romanian secret police (Rom. *Securitate*) developed an exemplary surveillance technique based on which all the regular gestures of the population were noted down in sizable files. On that account, Romania (and not only Romania, because this was a generalized practice in totalitarian regimes) became *the* homeland of writing. In *Efect de ecou controlat*, the author uses Aesopian strategies (Terian 78) in order to overlap illicitly two opposed usages of language, current in the Romanian context of the 1980s: the *Tel Quel* conception, which praised linguistic production in the name of a total freedom of the signifier, and that of the political police, which used language as a means of surveillance and punishment. In Nedelciu's short story, a fiction writer wannabe, Gregor Vranca, is "asked" by his superior to note down, "as they were," the reprehensible actions of Fatache, a high servant of the state. This initial epic situation, which seemed to be nothing more than a test of Vranca's literary skills, hints instead at the more complicated issue of political denunciation. The main dilemma of the character is that of becoming a writer without letting his message become a political denunciation. How could one write "without an echo," without letting the meanings slide, once the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign can no longer be controlled? The question captures the key topic of Romanian textualist fiction: the writer's commitment through language and the negotiation of freedom in a political regime built by propaganda.

From many points of view, these experiments aiming at the "political nature of representation" in a totalitarian regime are similar to the Russian OBERIU avant-garde movement in the 1920s and 1930s. The breakup with mimetic literature and the insistence on the role of the reader in the production of meaning (Graham 171–178) stood as literary

reactions to the totalitarian regime *in statu nascendi*. Although Romanian writers' literary devices refer to OBERIU's textual practices, there is no reference to the Russian avant-garde. This can easily be explained politically: to prevent repression, Romanian prose writers chose to relate to a movement deriving from Marxism (the Tel Quel group) rather than to a phenomenon that had turned textual devices in a protest against the communist regime. However, Romanian postmodern writers could not share the Tel Quel advocacy of neo-Marxist values—because, in Eastern Europe, Marxism–Leninism was a fact, not a theoretical conjecture. From the political bias of the movement initiated by Philippe Sollers, Romanian postmoderns only kept “the will to position itself in opposition to the ‘isms’” (Kauppi 26).

The fact that the devices of Tel Quel writers were borrowed without their ideological assumptions, sheltered by the principle of the autonomy of the aesthetic, does not mean that Romanian fiction did not have a polemical nature. The radical approach of language was, similar to the experience of their French fellows, a way to evade the political or consumer logic of the society, whether capitalist (in the first case) or collectivist (in the latter). Although, by this non-referential literature, the French movement opposed the reproduction of the capitalist production relationships, Romanian writers of the 1980s eluded the reproduction of the communist relations of power. To “reflect reality” and to retain the Party-established meaning of the words—even when the writer's polemic intent was visible—meant to come to terms with the regime. Instead, the “textualist” fiction's rejection of totalitarianism began with the criticism of the language that had become the circulating currency of ideology.

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Ideologija semioze v romunski prozi pod komunizmom

Ključne besede: literatura in ideologija / romunska književnost / komunizem / cenzura / metafikcija / postmodernizem / ezopski jezik / semioza / subverzivnost

Članek raziskuje romunska literarna gibanja osemdesetih let dvajsetega stoletja v luči njihovih povezav s poetiko novega romana in literarnoteoretskimi inovacijami skupine Tel Quel. Poleg novih tehnik pisanja, ki so nadomestile *mimesis* s semiozo na področju literarne produkcije, so skušali literarni avtorji, ki jih povezuje ime »tekstualizem« (Dumitru Țepeneag, Gheorghe Crăciun, Mircea Nedelciu ali Gheorghe Iova so samo nekateri od predstavnikov), vzpostaviti protiutež uradni literaturi Ceaușescujevega režima. Besedilo pregleduje osrednje subverzivne strategije, ki jih vsebuje semiotični pristop k literaturi. Dekonstruiranje ideološkega okvira, skritega pod poetiko realizma, je bil glavni cilj, ki je bil tako podlaga precejšnjega števila ideoloških argumentov in literarnih postopkov. Poudarek na »prosti igri« lingvističnega znaka (sledječ derridajevskim principom), razsrediščenje enoglasne pripovedne perspektive ali vztrajanje pri avtoreferenčni naravi jezika, vse to je omajalo uradni pristop k literaturi. Ideja literature kot odprte semioze, ki vzpostavi demokratičen odnos med avtorjem in bralstvom, je bila glavni dosežek romunske tekstualistične skupine. V sklepu razprava ponudi premislek o ideoloških protislovnih gibanj, ki so se navdihovala pri semiotiki. Skupina Tel Quel sicer temelji na neomarksistični doktrini, toda v vzhodnoevropskem kontekstu so se njeni principi usmerili zoper socialistične totalitarne režime.