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DOCTORAL THESIS
TITUS POPOVICI
Monographic Study

(The writer and the dangerous game of extremes)

SUMMARY

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Summary

Key-words: Titus Popovici, communism, post communism, anticommunism, socialist realism, post-war Romanian literature, subversivity, concrete author, abstract author, irony, parody, auto parody, satire, free indirect style, the game of narrative perspectives, polyphony, game of the language, textualism, postmodernism, memorialistic literature, historiographic metafiction, auto fiction, ethic, aesthetic, east-ethic revizionism.

Suffocated during four decades by the most obtuse political regime as possible, the Romanian literature suffered extreme mutations which changed its role and its sense, restraining its natural evolution. The communist dictatorship suppressed the free will of the writers regarding the act of creation, forcing them to write a political literature which should promote the official ideology. Due to the fact that the communist ideology reforms several times its visions, we cannot talk about an unique and unitary course of literature during the dictatorship. What still remains a constant is exactly the censorship, the writers never enjoying the total freedom, and if the autonomy of the aesthetic developed in some cases, it was because of the permission of the party or as a result of a compromise made by the writer, meaning, again, on the basis of a pact with the leading power. In this exasperating and acultural climate, the writers were obliged to dig ditches in order to discover oases of freedom in which they could assert their literarity, and even more, find methods to detour or subvert the political doctrine, methods which had to be reshaped again and again. Still, during the most absurd historical period of Romania, there lived and wrote the most representative writers of our modern age, there have been born other writers too, there has been created literature (even if atypical), not only propagandistic manifests.

Whether for some specialists these mutations suffered by a literature terrorised by the political factor represented a necessary and challenging field of research, for others all that has been written during communism is considered jetsam, including the uncompromised literature of a compromised writer. Immediately after the Revolution of 1989, it starts a real discursive war regarding the “trial” of literature during the communism, one of the most vocal group being represented by the fundamentalist followers of “east-ethical revizionism” promoted by Monica Lovinescu. On 18 April 1990,

the “Dreptatea” journal publishes a list of writers that collaborated with the communist regime, compiled by Gheorghe Grigurcu, followed by an article in the same newspaper, from 2 March 1991, in which the vehement critic concludes that the “moral betrayal” of these writers led to an undeniable alteration of the aesthetic in their works. Actually, the upholders of the “east-ethical revizionism” suggest that *lustration* is the only solution for the compromised literature. At the other pole, there are the upholders of the aesthetic principle of critical revaluations and the opponents of the movement initiated by Monica Lovinescu, whom they accuse of political militantism. In an acid article, entitled “Who is afraid of Monica Lovinescu?”, published in “Adevărul” journal on 15 June 1991, Valeriu Cristea calls the former copy editor at Europa Liberă „an Ana Pauker of Romanian anticommunism”, affirming that for her, the literature is not more than a pretext to make politics. In this polemical context, the review „Apostrof” initiates an investigation in the middle of the year 1991 – „Revisions and survivals in Romanian contemporary culture”–, which points to the necessity of reevaluation of literature and the methods through which this could be accomplished. In the answers of numerous literary critics, writers, intellectuals, the aesthetical criteria is the most often invoked as the main factor in critical judgement, although there are “n” variants of reevaluation proposed, some of them starting with the determination of the degree of the writers’ complicity with the party.

After more than twenty years since the beginning of this polemic, we could say that the things are calm and that the literary world continued its course, closing the chapter of communism. However, we still live in post communism, “post” meaning here not a transgression of the phenomenon, but a remaining close to it. The disputes regarding the revision of literature are still a constant on the pages of cultural literary reviews, and equally in any study with regards to the post-war literature. In the article entitled „Critical revisions”, published in 2003 in “România literară”, Nicolae Manolescu came to the conclusion that three major causes detained the revision of the written literature under communism: the moral processes – aesthetical reevaluation was replaced by the ethical one, which aimed at the writer as a human being, not at his work; irrationality of the books’ market – the aesthetical value does not guarantee success in sales; the problem of canon – according to the critic from „România literară”, the critical revision implies also an attempt to control the evolution of the literary canon.¹ Although in this article Nicolae Manolescu

¹ Nicolae Manolescu, *Critical revisions*, in “România literară”, no. 6, 12-18 February 2003, p. 25

seems to take distance from the “east-ethical revizionism”, in practice (including his History...) he becomes its sympathiser (perhaps a more restrained one).

In 2010, under the title „The illusions of east-ethical revisionism”, Paul Cernat writes a history in three parts of the process of revisions, observing that there have not been taken any further steps, on the contrary, we have arrived to a contamination of the post-communist cultural space through “maintaining a deliberate, long-lasting confusion between ethic, aesthetic and politic”.²

However, the polemic of the revisions is not over and its perpetual actuality also generated positive effects: some just revaluations based on aesthetical principals and the attraction of young generations towards an imperious field of research.

There are numerous studies which offer a general view on the Romanian literature during communism, that classify the literature according to the stages of evolution or involution, that rank the writers according to the role they played in supporting or subverting the official doctrine, that prioritise the most “dangerous” or the most “genuine” literary works written during the communism, etc., studies which constitute the basis of any critical bibliography regarding the post-war literature. But the individual revisions are absent, those that could modify or shade the general, those particular cases that do not have the power to change the literary canon, but have the power to satisfy the reader from any decade and the right to a just representation in the history of literature.

A controversial character, whose name circulates in our days too, not necessarily as a writer, but as a prolific screen writer of the communist period, Titus Popovici represents such a particular case, an outsider who intrigues firstly through the fact that he is refused a fair critical “trial”. His prose, not very ample, was intercepted with only two measures, none of them based on an authentic grill of lecture. For Titus Popovici is not just one of the writers who manifested himself artistically, socially and politically during a dictatorship, but one who can be considered precisely *its canonical writer*. Still, this canonization is not the result of an aesthetical ranking, but of a political judgement. After 1989, following the moral revisions (true reiterations of the ideological literary processes), Titus Popovici became one of the most contested writer, put on the top of the black list of the opportunists. The post-decembrist criticism labelled him as realist-socialist writer, although after the publication of the two novels, “The Stranger” and “The Thirst”, Titus Popovici did not write assertive literature anymore, but became a member of C.C. of

² Paul Cernat, *The illusions of east-ethical revisionism (III)*, in “Observator cultural”, no. 541, 10 September 2010, p. 6

P.C.R. and accepted the hypostasis of domestic screen writer of the regime. The aesthetical value of his works and the talent of the prose did not succeed in breaking the boundary imposed by the weaknesses and the political options of the man, and thus, even the post-communist books of Titus Popovici are read through the “east-ethical” grill, which is also a political perspective. Consequently, within this doctoral dissertation, we endeavour to develop a re-reading, a critical revision, not an ideological one, intended for deconstruction and proposition of an interpretative alternative of the analytical univocal perspectives: neither fetishisation of the writing talent, transcending the eras, nor minimalisation of the aesthetical quality in the uproar of history.

Consequently, our work is based on a unitary interpretation of the prose of Titus Popovici through an objective and integrator critical process, which combines the thematic study of the artistic imaginary and the vision about the world with the analysis of narrative poetics. The chronological approach permits not only a coherent recovering and systematisation of the literary works, but also an examination of the creative evolution of our author. Not incidentally the current dissertation is structured in two parts – “Prose before 1989”, respectively „Prose after 1989” – and six chapters whose titles announce the evolutionary stages of Titus Popovici’s prose.

At the same time, our dissertation points to the configuration of an identity profile of the intellectual Titus Popovici, which is composed from an unique destiny of the man and a complex portrait of the writer, recomposed through the interpretation of the memorialistic prose, concentrated in the last chapter of the thesis that replenishes the monographic perspective of our research. In the attempt to render a coherent image of the biographical impact on the literary destiny of the writer, we considered necessary the reunion under the same chapter of the two confessional books of the author, the chronological principle being ignored in this case.

The title of the first chapter, „Party literature”, is expressive enough to realize the context in which the writer began his work (1950), and also the genre of literature with which he started his career. Thus, analysing the sketches and the short-stories from the first stage of Titus Popovici creative work, we noticed its literary precariousness. The rough phrase, the incondite expression, the hymnical tonality, the pathetic sentimentalism, the previsibility of epic plot, the dull characters transform them in unfortunate samples of propagandistic literature, without aesthetical relevance. Moreover, knowing the nonconformist personality and the mocking spirit of Titus Popovici, the sketches almost

seem acid ironies of a delirious humour addressed to the communist society and to the writers graduating the party schools.

But, the situation is completely different with the two realist-socialist novels – “The Stranger” and “The Thirst”, the so-called “proses without author”, published before the renewal of the literature by the “60s generation” – the first in 1955, the second in 1958. This acknowledgement does not intent to place Popovici in the position of a pioneer (it is not the case), but to point out the particular importance that the method of creation achieves in an atypical literature such as the one from a totalitarian regime. This is the reason why a narratological study of the two realist-socialist novels of Titus Popovici proves to be efficient and relevant from several points of view: using a contemporary bibliography – both in the field of narratology and in the aesthetics of reception – the relationship between the novels’s vision and auctorial vision acquires significant valences in the translation of the subverting strategies of the official ideology, with implications not only at the level of the contents and the message, but also at the level of aesthetical dimension. In this manner could be justified the title of the second chapter in our thesis: “The subversive literature”. On one hand, both “The Stranger” and “The Thirst” could easily serve the demonstration meant to confirm the identification, after the Second World War, of the literary works with party propagandistic purposes. Without any great interpretative efforts, in the two ample narratives could be identified manipulative discursive fragments or strategies, aiming at the enforcement of a way of thinking and the maintenance of a helplessness feeling, having as result the disparagement of authentic humanity through the amplification of the ideological power. On the other hand, analysed beyond their tendentionism, with the purpose of emphasizing their implicit poetics, these two novels offer the chance to treat as relative the prejudgements about Titus Popovici or about the total assumption of the realist-socialist principles in his works. Both novels comprise more narrative plans and levels than the partinical (post)communist criticism implies. For example, in both novels, the function of reflector-character is conferred not only to the communists, but also to the undecided and the anticommunists, the representatives of the old system, the bourgeois, the kulaks, etc., and from this amalgam of perspectives there is not only one that protrudes the others. If there is a dominant one, which is the case of the *stranger* from the homonym novel, it does not illustrate the official political vision, but rather its contradictions. Involving constantly and quasi-programmatic the interior monologue and the free indirect style, altogether with the devices of subjectivisation of narrative perspective which are almost experimental (the case of the

letters), the author creates tension and incertitude, an ambiguity typical rather for the arborescent modernist prose than for the predictable ideologised creations.

The adherence to communism has for Titus Popovici as a preamble a criticism of it. In other words, the vision that condemns or adheres to the communist ideology does not belong to Titus Popovici, the man who was part of C.C in real life, but it belongs to the abstract author. This dissociation is needed for an unbiased reevaluation of Titus Popovici's work, because the *lustration* is not a solution, at least not in the case of a literature where the aesthetical part becomes perceptible till the lowest level of the discourse. In this way, not only that the aesthetical value of his novels is attested, but also a game of ideas is enabled to mask subversive messages in different narrative voices, thus relativising the ideological option of the author, who seems to remain in the same interrogative position as his characters. Titus Popovici succeeds perhaps, with his first two novels, to impose himself in the literary world of his epoch only by approaching some themes enjoined by the official regime. Still, he surpasses the form dictated by this ideology, and thus, the background is enriched and open to subtilities.

Between 1964 and 1971 takes place the "ideological thaw", also called by Eugen Negrici "the relative liberalisation", explicable broadly by the national politics of "de-" or "anti-" sovietisation started by Dej and continued by Ceaușescu, that encouraged the birth of an authentic literature which does not have any connection with the socialist realism, called by Ion Simuț "the evasionist literature". After publishing the novel "The Thirst" in 1958, Titus Popovici leaves the literary scene, dedicating himself to cinematography until 1970, when he returns with the short story „The death of Ipu”, which confirms that not all the literature from the communist period is ideologically infested. Thus, through this short story, Titus Popovici discovers and takes advantage of the autonomy of the aesthetics, this being the reason why we have entitled the third chapter of this research "Tolerated literature". The short story „The death of Ipu” not only is uncompromised, but it is an example of veritable literature, that problematises eternal issues placed in a magnetic imaginary through volatility and originality.

Or, even the most valuable literary creation of Titus Popovici endured the impact of a minimalizing grill of lecture, caused by the public image of the author. Standing out from the above-mentioned prejudgements, we attempted to offer – through a distinction of authentic narrative techniques, of the existential-philosophical implications, of the possible socio-cultural contextualisations – a re-reading of the Popovici's work of art that should argue its enlistment in the most important artistic accomplishments of the Romanian post-

war literature. Accordingly, we have noticed that “The death of Ipu” guarantees the meeting of the readers with one of the most subtle and complex autochthonous artistic images of the vulnerability and the falsity of the man confronted with the abuse and the nonsense of the tyranny (in its various forms, from the military one to the social and domestic one). The reflector, this time, is the child, who reclaims the ridiculosity and artificiality of the others, of the society itself, of the world *outside*, from which he tries to escape but he is always brought back by those who want to transform him in a “normal man”, one like them, respectively, “the fool”, who cannot but live through a foucauldian frame of his own death/burial. Thus, the first example of uncompromised literature of Titus Popovici is also an authentic work of art, a sample of what the author could have become in the absence of communism. If we have something to reproach the author, it would be precisely the fact that he did not profit by this “literary evasionism” from the years of “ideological thaw”.

After the publication of the novel “The death of Ipu”, Titus Popovici disappears again for 20 years from the Romanian literary scene, returning immediately after the fall of communism in another hypostasis – that of the denouncer of the dictatorship. In his confessional volumes, the author suggests that he had never renounced at writing literature, but at publishing it, opting for the so called *drawer literature*, which explains somehow his return exactly in the year 1990 with his novel „The box for boots”, followed in a year’s time by „The book from Gura Zlata”. Unfortunately, his premature and unexpected death – turned up after a car accident in 29 November 1994 – thwarted his literary projects, leaving behind an incomplete work. The two novels left as manuscripts were recovered by Domnița and Alex. Ștefănescu – „The Primăverii neighbourhood. Heads or tails. ” and „The discipline of disorder ” –, being published in 1998 at the publishing house „Mașina de scris”. But the post-communist literature of Titus Popovici was not embraced by the criticism with the proper attention, being dedicated a few and thin remarks on the reviews’ pages or the literary Histories and Dictionaries – most of them predisposed to “east-ethical” generalisations and prejudgements, thus insufficient and inefficient in the configuration of the artistic specificity.

Major interest, contrary to the initial critical reception, is awakened by this prose (“drawer” prose or not) published in the early years of post-communism, which was contested even before being read, denying in this way the fundamental principle of criticism and imposing a false representation of the writer and his work in history. The novels “The Box for boots” (1990) and „The Primăverii neighbourhood. Heads or tails”

(1998) are complementary, because through them Titus Popovici (re)composes an image of Romanian communism, the former approaching to the impact of dictatorship on the lives of common people – victims of an aberrant regime – in a solemn tonality, the second being a virulent satire on the executioners – the representatives of the unique party that instituted and maintained the terror and the absurd. Another link between these two novels is identified at the level of narrative art, the lack of ideological constraints generating stylistic mutations in the prose of Titus Popovici, who inspired adapts his style to the new literary directions. A frequent issue tapped by Titus Popovici in his previous books – the language/the writing as manipulation, submission, guilt, atonement and evasion – becomes now tutelary. Using in the creation of the novel “The box for boots” almost all the arsenal of postmodern narrative techniques (defragmentation, intertextuality, irony, parody, auctorial interventions within the discourse that interrupt the omniscient narrative, autoreferentiality, etc.) Titus Popovici does not propose, in fact, a metanovel, but he provides the optimal means for the purpose of the book, that is the parody of the wooden language and, implicitly, a satire of the communist society. The people are perceived as marionettes of the language and of the absurd mechanism of communism, which refuses them any attempt of personalisation, of transgression the existential void. And this nonexistence creates a non-epic novel, a novel of voices and language, giving the reason why the forth chapter of our thesis is entitled “Textualist literature”. Similarly, in the *historiographic metafiction* “The Primăverii neighbourhood. Heads or tails”, included in the chapter „Postmodern literature”, the satire becomes a type of therapeutical oil, a way of self revenge, revenge of self consciousness, because the choice of being one of the intellectual mercenaries of dictatorship proved rather unbeneficial: a comfortable life without any worries in an atrocious era could not supply an irreconcilable consciousness and a stained name. The history here does not want to be verified, consolidated, mythicised, but polemised. Communism becomes demythicised and, at the same time, demythicised is what the author mythicised through his realist-socialist novels. Thus, we attempted to demonstrate that Titus Popovici is a realist writer, but this quality was diminished by the straps of socialist realism. Therefore, from the parody of the realistic novel results an autoparody of the one that, not incidentally, became an outsider, for no category reclaims him, as he is incapable of being rendered – completely and uncorruptedly – to any literary or political ideology.

The last chapter of our dissertation – “Confessive literature”, which includes two volumes – “The book from Gura Zlata” (1991) and “The discipline of disorder” (1998) –,

concentrates on the returning of a biography of the Titus Popovici's creative spirit. If "The discipline of disorder" aroused somehow the interest of the critics, more due to the audacity of the author to return against the communist regime he once served opportunistically and to uncover indiscretions from its official backstage, "The book from Gura Zlata" is remembered only in the index of all literary Histories and Dictionaries. Or, balancing between the seriousness of a historical documentary study and the sensationalism of the exposures of existential intimacies, between the complex poetics of the literary dimension and the complicate texture of the psychological dimension, between the pretensions of truth and the inherent demystifications, the confessional literature implies a generous and attracting critical incursion, but not facile at all, taking into consideration its hybrid character. Thus, our study tries to keep a necessary equilibrium between the autobiographical grill and the literary one and to order the representations in an integrator panorama capable of articulating both the stylistic valences and the particularities which create the personality of Titus Popovici and his becoming in the world and in fiction.

Hence, the explicit confessional literature of Titus Popovici delineates a demarche – rather exotic in the context of contemporary Romanian culture – of autoflagellation and public atonement of a traumatic past, morally speaking. Here, he oscillates between contradictory postures. On one hand, he wishes to be forgiven, although he cannot strongly claim that he regrets the epicurean life that the communist party assured for him in return to his services. We notice the assumption of a path that does not give credit to him anymore, still an easy path that offered him a "golden age", a "no-judge age". On the other hand, the writer realizes with regret that there is the possibility that the others, contemporaries or descendants, may refuse to forgive him for the chosen path and give him rehabilitation. Titus Popovici opts for lucid responsibility, and more, he writes with an ostentatious liberation about the roles played within the party not only by him, but by many other cultural figures, among who some succeeded in keeping up the appearances, declaring themselves unattained by the misery of dictatorship. But the most "dishonourable" aspects in Titus Popovici's life were always in the open: the role played in C.C. of P.C.R. was official and assumed, as well as his tendentiousness as a writer and a screen writer, thus we cannot talk about a *fictionalisation* of the history.

Though he took advantage of his collaboration with the party, he never believed in its doctrine, on the contrary, he was conscious about the absurdity of the regime which *invited to a beheading* any form of insubordination. Titus Popovici has neither expressed his regret towards the options during the dictatorship (he would have probably fallen into

cynicism and lie, risking to compromise his book even more than the name itself on the cover) nor has he had as main purpose the justification of his choices (although it is a matter of course that after '89 any acolyte of communism experienced the feeling of repentance – some because they have not resisted the temptation of a restful and wealthy life, other because they have ceded into the pressures and the threats, but there is another category who deplored the fall of dictatorship itself. No matter the nature of regrets, everyone has conceived a method of justification, of self-defence – in front of the accusers, of the public opinion, of the History or of his own consciousness). It is certain that Titus Popovici experienced these feelings too, even if he did not articulate them explicitly. Instead, he found another culprit, in fact he accused the fate for what he was and especially for what he could have become (a famous writer) if he had not lived in the most unfair and inquisitorial times for the men of letters (and not only).

As we have noticed, the entire post-decembrist literature of Titus Popovici – former member of C.C. of P.C.R. – is based on a criticism of the communist regime, but this change of vision only when the dangers had already passed attracted the dissent of the literary critics. Or, both the social dystopia from “The box of boots”, and the political dystopia from „The Primăverii neighbourhood. Heads or tails”, and even more the avowals from the two confessional volumes – not a few times full of atonement – come from a burdened consciousness which had been left little time to write and the hope that the work would cover the sins of the writer and not the other way around.

During this doctoral research, we have attempted to demonstrate that Titus Popovici does not wish and cannot remain the prisoner of his regrettable past, but nor he can dissolve it, giving the fact that in it stay all his childhood and his youth. And then, he succeeds to combine, harmoniously, the ironical register, which is sometimes trivial, with the nostalgic one. For this reason, Titus Popovici remains one of the *canonical* writers of the communist regime, but this moral guilt cannot discredit his entire artistic creation. Contrary to the verdicts of the “east-ethical revizionism” followers, the “nomenclaturist” Popovici is also an important writer of the post-war literature for, far from being a paradox, with the same hand he wrote both subservient prose for the system and literature, not only evasionist, but aesthetically valuable.

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