

FICTIONAL CONSTRUCTS OF COMMUNISM IN DAN LUNGU'S NOVELS

Marius Nica, Assoc. Prof., PhD, "Petroleum-Gas" University of Ploiești

Abstract: Communism has become one of the major sources of inspiration for novel writers nowadays, a phenomenon that brought to the creation of a specific imagery. It is the case of Dan Lungu's novels, in which the author has framed – using specific narrative techniques – the period of late Romanian communism. By answering questions such as how much of the real history survives in fiction and how much fiction alters the known reality, the paper tries to identify those elements that create specific metaphors, making up the fictional image of communism.

Rezumat: Comunismul a devenit în ultima vreme o sursă de inspirație pentru mulți prozatori și, de aceea, a apărut un imaginar specific. Acesta este și cazul romanelor lui Dan Lungu în care autorul a construit – folosind diverse tehnici narative – perioada comunismului românesc. Întrebările sunt în ce măsură istoria reală supraviețuiește ficțiunii și în ce măsură ficțiunea alterează istoria. Răspunzând la aceste întrebări, articolul încearcă să identifice acele elemente care creează metaforele folosite la alcătuirea imaginii ficționale a comunismului.

Keywords: fiction, communism, metaphor, imagery, history

In the last decades, apart from being a disputed subject among Romanians, communism has become more than an historical fact or a topic in politics-related discussion: it has become a source of inspiration to many contemporary novel writers, as communism identifies nowadays with the *image* of history more than to history itself. The communism is being transformed by the present generation into a series of mental and imaginary transpositions that make up metaphors of that historical period. Despite the fact that they may diminish the drama, they built fictional worlds to which the reader matches himself as well as the events he / she once lived. "The relative but unquestionable success of communist mythology, – quite paradoxical if one considers the lack of material support – cannot be explained otherwise but from its long history viewpoint and, mainly, from the perspective of imagery."¹ (Boia, 1999: 5) It is the case of Dan Lungu's novels in which the author has framed – using specific narrative techniques – the period of late Romanian communism. The questions that naturally rise are: how much of the real history survives in fiction and how much fiction alters the known reality?

The novel *Raiul găinilor* (Hen's Heaven) introduces the reader to a parody of the idyllic universe created by Mihail Sadoveanu or Ionel Teodoreanu distinguished through a nostalgic attitude towards the Romania of the second half of the 20th century, when socialism had "conquered" all administrative structures. The world Dan Lungu evokes is the result of this *victory* that led to important social and moral mutations. The "new man" was not necessarily better than "the old one", but he was too much afraid. This is why the characters seem to live in a fictional heaven: Salcânilor Street is nothing else but a closed space in which individuals live their own dramas.

In his novel, Dan Lungu describes with irony the transition to post-communism, using the wide range of their behaviour instead of the complexity of each character. The community he brings on the fictional stage "suffers" from that mild melancholy of history, sometimes

¹ All fragments of Romanian texts – critique or fiction – used in this article are translated by us (M. N.).

becoming ridiculous and frightening: Milica, the gossip who enriches any piece of news or rumour with her own details, the men who never misses dropping by at the pub, Mitu who entertains the locals with his stories about the Ceaușescu family, the Covalciuc or the ignorant daughter-in-law. The characters of the novel have a twisted pathology and none of them makes it as the main character. The universe of the novel is in debt not to the characters' actions but to their interweaving stories and memories.

The world of *Raiul găinilor* refers to the period of transition Romania has experienced after the events of 1989. It is a period of changes and, to some individuals, of alienation. To Dan Lungu's characters it is an endless tunnel with very little exit changes: "a colour TV" or the daily visit to the pub. The name of the pub is full of significance: "Tractorul șifonat" (*The Crumpled Tractor*), a slang collocation that brings forward a powerful metaphor: on one hand it is the name of the vehicle used in the new type of agriculture communism had introduced in the Romanian rural area and, on the other hand, in the adjective "crumpled" lays the warning that the pub is often the main reason of the frequent accidents. Moreover, this name makes easier for the reader to remember the fact that in the communism period many of the people living in towns or cities had been "brought" from the countryside. The tractor may become a symbol of their origin and eventually of their behaviour. Another spatial landmark is that of "Pufoaica ruptă" (*The Torn Padded Coat*) – a type of coat specific to workers on construction sites, which evokes as well another central feature of that age of socialism intent to build up the new world. Etymologically speaking, the word has the power of immediately linking the reader to the Russian universe, given the fact that "pufoaică" derives from the word "fufaika" (*rus.*).

Dan Lungu seems to place a great accent on terminology and semantic level as the novel brings communism into present by this technique of playing with connotations. A relevant example is that when the former communist president of Romania, Nicolae Ceaușescu, is not recalled by his name, but by those well-known nicknames: "Împușcatu" (*the shotman*), "Ciuruitu" (*the riddled*) or "Găuritu" (*the drilled*). And the postmodern irony is yet to be discovered. All these nicknames (referring, of course, to Nicolae Ceaușescu's execution) are brought into discussion on the same page in which stereotypical phrases from the communist propaganda are also included: "cel mai iubit fiu al poporului" (*the beloved son of the people*) along with all his medals and functions in the leading administration of the country.

In his stories about Liță, uncle Mitu is the one who brings forward the "reality" of the Communist Party. Liță, who talks "like a party member talks", establishes the conviction that if the Revolution had not happened, he would now be a spokesman in *Marea Adunare Națională* (helped, of course, by his father, head of C.A.P.). The author's allusion to the communist system of preferment to political positions is done by associating it to the professional ascending of different individuals. Liță's ambitious father wanted his son to become mayor. He supported him through some kind of vocational school, *greased* the hands of his teachers and bought him a brand-new Dacia after graduation day. Dan Lungu's satire explores even deeper, explaining through the voice of his characters the manner in which agriculture-related reports were done in those times. The papers "groaned with harvest", as lies do not hurt after all. "If lies hurt – the character explains ironically – what a wail would have been at the party's meetings [...]". The most disappointing fact for the character-narrator is that his wage got diminished because he was late to work and that is why, when he starts telling stories, he makes up extraordinary adventurous events. In the character's stories, the author's satirical strategy introduces real facts from the communist Romania. Thus, uncle

Mitu, talking about his meeting with Nicolae Ceaușescu, makes it clear he avoided telling the president that one has to wake up at 3 o'clock in the night for a bottle of milk to buy.

The epic is made up of characters' stories told in the fictional frame of the pub – a technique known to Romanian literature from Mihail Sadoveanu – but Dan Lungu interpolates the impersonal voice of the narrator, who makes use of retrospective. This reminds the reader of Mircea Cărtărescu's *Mendebilul*, where the foreground is provided by the children's games in the construction sites – future blocks of flats for people attracted by the city life. These children are to be changed over night into old men working in the Romanian socialist industry. The children in the district explore the places full of garbage like in an adventure of knowledge in an endless transition. The moral values have shifted, but curiosity still remains the main engine of their lives. These ethical changes are to be found also in Dan Lungu's novels. Traian Geambașu was an active member of the Communist Party in his youth; he believed in the Marxist ideals and in the justice of the new ideology and therefore preached it as many others were doing at that time. He now feels “out of time” and “out of identity”², while transition has left him the sole memory of his position: “the most important one, head-accountant at the Town-Hall”. The narrator records ironically Geambașu's discourse and that of all the other characters: “although they had to be proud of what was to come, they felt nothing good expected them”. The “systematization” concept has now a meaning that differs from the use it had when Traian Geambașu was a young member of the party. Now, *systematization* means nothing else but the demolition and destruction of their houses, of their homes. The psychological effect of demolition is presented with truthfulness, but for young people the reactions of the ones who lost their homes to the bulldozer seem somehow unnatural. The “cosy” apartment may support the idea of happiness, but it will never erase people's drama of losing their home, their place in a world they once believed in.

Communism is no longer a reality for the characters, if not in their memory. Thus, Dan Lungu adds up different perspectives on a history which has left a visible mark on people's behaviour. Relu Covalciuc reports his presentiments, but his discourse is interlarded (by a witty authorial conscience) with allusion to general habits of workers before '89. Even the walk he takes to the pub becomes an opportunity of presenting more of that street behaviour. Of great impact on the reader conscience is the description of houses as “they all revealed the working place of the owner, especially those build before '89 when one could easily steal all sorts of building materials”. People's habit of stealing different materials has grown into a literary motif in Dan Lungu's novel: in courtyards there are “wires taken from factory”, “paint from the governmental property”, “concrete blocks and bricks stolen from the station”, “cardboard and pitch peculated from the plant”. Recollecting all these, Radu Covalciuc is the voice of the past, by the means of which the writer shapes up one more metaphor of communism – that of appropriation of goods, of stealing things from the state institutions. It was a general behaviour which Dan Lungu tends to mock at. Yet, the reader follows the epic line and becomes aware of the “little” commerce done on the black market and of the *creativity* the individuals were capable of in times of need.

The characters of the novel are not fighting the communist era; they are fighting themselves and the monotonous life they have built over time. They will be on the centre of the fictional stage through their stories and the excitement built around them. This universe is one of mediocrity, with people lacking real purpose in life, a universe of the slum. “Crazy Hleanda”, who gathers all dogs and lives with them, cries out in the community her ideas

² It is the cultural theme of *Paradise lost* which presents the human being out of his *golden age*, living continuously the nostalgia of that history he cannot relive.

about the end of the world that is to come on Salcânilor Street: “The crazy woman could be seen digging along with them in that pit that had become more of a bump, looking for kindling, fragments of old doors, window sashes or fences which she would bind together with a rope or a cable and dragged them to her house in decay at the end of the street.”

The literary technique of the madman (the insane woman in our case) is obviously not new, but it reminds the reader of the post-war narrative techniques in which, the reality of that time was presented or at least suggested under the image of alienation (of any kind). Otherwise, the truth about communist society would not have passed the censorship. The insanity in Dan Lungu’s character no longer works in this way but, nevertheless, it has a literary purpose. As a narrative technique, the lunatic discourse becomes sort of a chorus, an obsessive replay of communist haunting images and motives (obsessive in their turn for the pre-revolutionary Romania): “Pray, kind folks! Our esteem and pride – Ceaușescu and Romania! (...) Repent, folks! Abandon brandy and wine, abandon adultery and lying, abandon all evil thoughts, educate yourselves, learn, learn and learn again, eat ocean fish, long live the 23rd of August!” Dan Lungu’s analogy does not lack purpose. Propaganda discourse – by obsessive repetition to all levels of communist society – had become a cliché which later, in the ’90s, turned into a synesthetic formula. The imperative “pray” highlights the way of constructing the propaganda cliché: repeating the same phrase (with no religious implicature) led to meaningless formula, abundant in rhythm and rhyme which, in time, have ensured the existence in the urban folklore of different ironical and accusatory constructions. A “history” of obsessive slogans and stereotypes is brought to life by the voice of crazy Hleanda, outlining in terms of sound the communist metaphor that governs the entire novel.

Salcânilor Street is the universe where characters create a perfect environment for spreading gossip and rumours. It is the fictional image of that part of population who has survived communism and who lead an ordinary life in the new regime. They learnt how to exist in the new order and how to forget – if possible – the old one. Thus, the reader learns about peoples’ habits in the communist period and the consequences the socialist society had on.

The antithesis is one of the most important literary devices used in this novel to create a clear distinction between the two historical moments: communism and democracy. This contrast is done, for instance, to express the financial status of people and to explain – by means of characters’ voices – that they could afford buying more things than now: “This is how life was at *Ceașcă*’s time: everyone had money, but not everyone could buy all they wanted. You were rich, but you couldn’t find a good piece of meat unless you went to the Communist Party canteen. You had the bills but you couldn’t go and see Italy if you felt like it.” This is how communism is recollected by some of the characters of the novel and this is what the communism becomes in terms of metaphor: richer people, less products.

The stories on communism and Ceaușescu continue in the same manner in the novel *Sunt o babă comunistă!* (I’m a Communist Bidy!) and “shares” uncle Mitu with the previous novel, a gifted character for story-telling. But the main figure remains Emilia Apostoae, a symbol for the nostalgic Romanian in the ’90s. She introduces herself as a “communist bidy” because she acknowledges her regrets over losing the former type of society. By comparing the rural life she led as a young girl with the city life her aunt provided, Emilia is the voice of mentality change that took place in the ’50s, being traceable also in Marin Preda’s *Moromeții*. Young people in villages no longer wanted to work land as their parents had done in an almost continuous effort. In those times, some of them felt the desire of living a more comfortable life and this is what the communist ideology speculated. The new man was promised a new type of happiness, in a new type of world. Yet, this new man had a very

interesting status: “This metamorphosis meant eradication of any individualism. [...] In the new context, some concepts lacked any meaning. *Property rights* became therefore a ridiculous anachronism as long as property was owned equally by all individuals. Not even *free will* had any sense as long as truth, scientifically defined, became, as well as property, unique and undividable.” (Boia, 1999: 123)

The working environment in which young Emilia Apostoae lives is another narrative pretext for the author to reveal the reasons behind communism nostalgia. The head of the workshop “knows all the important people in the town and has a lot of connections in all the factories in the country.” This simple observation of the heroine, although a good-enough argument for her and her colleagues to feel satisfied, shows another face of the socialist reality: that of the system of connections the entire Romanian industry was relying on. The workers were content with the number of orders, with the raw material they were receiving, with the salary and even with their free time used for crossword games or backgammon. Meanwhile the machines were running so that nobody could tell that production was stopped.

In the professional environment, workers were trained to fulfill orders from their superiors, especially those of the party, and never question them. The novel presents such an attitude with the announced visit of Nicolae Ceaușescu at the factory where Emilia worked. The discourse of the active members of the Party is specific to the manner in which propaganda was made back then: “Dear comrades, I have a good piece of news for all of us. Because your workshop has been leader for years in the «socialist emulation», the comrades from the County Party have given us an honourable mission [...]. And we should be proud of. The mission is to show and make known the harvest of our work to the highest level, to comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu.” Requirements coming from the party had to be prioritized and everything had to be repaired, repainted or refurbished in order to give the impression of normal place of work. “Towards the hill gate, the big dusty pine-trees are washed with the water hose. Next to our fence, near the street, the big piles of black dirt are taken away in buckets. The gravel and dry grass disappear and are replaced with flower beds. The guardians paint the big gate from the entrance of cars.” It is another opportunity for the reader to discover the strictness and obtuseness of life in the communist period. Fulfilling duties in such a short time was not the result of the belief in their being necessary but a reaction to fear. The Communist Party used *fear* as the main element of persuasion. Although Dan Lungu does not use his character’s voice to reveal this aspect, between the narrative lines one can depict the motivation behind workers’ behaviour.

Dan Lungu stresses the crisis people experienced in the period of transition by opposing two characters with two completely different stories of life and two different opinions on politics. Besides the main female character in *Sunt o babă comunistă!* There is Ms. Rozalia, an antithetical character with contrasting behaviour. In her isolation, with her pre-announced visits, this female figure becomes the ideological “counterweight” for Emilia’s communist nostalgia. Their encounter provides the chance for the reader to analyse and pounder upon what is real in each character’s life story and to find another aspect of the communist Romania: „My dear lady, this is my communism: the one that took away by force my dad’s workshop, destroyed in the bud my chance to become a painter and created a colourless life for me.”

Controversial elements of everyday life in communist Romania appear also in the novel *În iad toate becurile sunt arse* (In Hell all the Light Bulbs Have Burnt Out). The stories are narrated by Victor in his teenage years when everything seems less unrestrained, although the system was far from being so. The story is different, but the style remains the same: ironical, sarcastic, with sometimes blunt language. The failure to adapt is a distinct theme in

this novel and creates a new background for the image of socialist society in Romania. The novel is a little unusual as odd chapters present Victor's adult life and the even ones present his adolescence within his gang. Excesses were overlooked as they didn't affect too much the order imposed to community by the Party. But restrictions do not fail to appear in teenagers' lives and these are presented in a language characterising their age: "I would have made a bottle of beer evaporate in 30 seconds, but in the socialist commerce, before 10, you were convicted to hard thrust for life. I gawked at my watch – there were about 5 more minutes of pain."

Students' lives allowed them more freedom in their behaviour compared to working people who had to comply with the laws of the regime – they had to work with a sole purpose in mind: building up socialism. Becoming a pioneer meant a great deal to any kid those days, and therefore it ended up to be a representative brand of Romanian communism. And that is why it has imposed a lot of emphasis on children's duties in school. Yet, this created the outburst of personality outside the schools premises: "No sooner had they passed the gate than the school-girls became chicks. They stashed away the ribbon in their pockets, they plumped up their hair, hid they registration number. [...] For a trace of make-up you were expelled. Staring boldly would have meant your parents coming to school. After leaving school premises, students were supposed no longer to be their responsibility and so they could do whatever they wanted." These deviations and the manner in which teenagers transformed themselves after leaving school made life beautiful and bearable. There was a code which Dan Lungu reuses in his novel in order to increase the feeling of authenticity. Nowadays student no longer understand the code, yet they identify the historical moment through this code which becomes a symbol of the communist teenager.

Another characteristic feature of everyday life under communism is queuing. Perhaps the most known phenomenon in communist Romania because of the "mythology" it created. This place of waiting – sometimes in vain – made all people equal and destroyed any trace of dignity. The novel suggests this by placing the story in teenagers' mockery. Although queuing as the rest of the people, young boys find amusement in this: "We were making fun with all boys in the neighbourhood, picking up all chicks around with lines we were making up instantly, mocking at everything and everyone..."

In his prose, Dan Lungu creates a series of characters which typologically supports the communist Romania. They all bring into light representative moments of that time and their gestures become symbols of what the "new man" really was. In his novels, the author appeals to collective conscience in order to trigger the memory of socialist system; unmistakable elements are places in characters' discourse or behaviour in such a manner in which they remind the reader the times of queuing for food, of painting the fence for a presidential visit or of censorship and National Security. Even if the age of the reader does not allow memory to reinforce these elements, they all act as symbols, easy to recognise cultural and social motives of the "golden age".

Dan Lungu's novels do not recreate the history of Communist Romania, but the more powerful present sensation of remembrance. All characters – and together with them the reader himself – owe greatly this state of continuous reliving the past. Yet, there are two perspectives: on one hand is that within fiction, of the characters' voice; and on the other hand is the perspective of a superior narrative level – which builds up the entire fictional universe. Making use of these strategies Dan Lungu brings to Romanian literature additional elements supporting the typology of the communist nostalgic and, eventually, the image of socialist Romania as a literary topos.

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