

SCHOOL POETRY AND ITS PROPAGANDA DISCOURSE IN THE COMMUNIST ERA

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Abstract: The politicization of culture, art and literature during the Romanian communist regime (1948-1989) is reflected on the content of the literary texts published in the Romanian textbooks for elementary school (grades I-VII/VIII). The role of studying poetry is mainly to form the political consciousness of the pupils, not the literary one. The school poetry, turned into a propaganda tool, is designed to achieve ideological goals.

The poetry present in the Romanian textbooks reflects the intention of the communist regime to change reality according to its ideological claims. Some of the propaganda objectives pursued through lyrical creations are: strengthening the class consciousness (Dan Deșliu – "Lazăr from Rusca" in the Romanian textbook for 6th grade, edited in 1959), deepening faith in communism (Mihai Beniuc – "Coat of arms", 6th grade textbook, 1953), education in the party spirit (Victor Tulbure – "Saluting the Party", 3rd grade textbook, 1964), formation of the new man (Nicolae Labiș – "To the Communist", 8th grade textbook, 1981), building a secular communist iconography (Maria Banuș – "Stalin be praised forever", 3rd grade textbook, 1952), mirroring the beautiful republic (Adrian Păunescu – "Mother Country", 6th grade textbook, 1989), illustrating the great achievements (Virgil Teodorescu – "The Hydropower from Bicaz V.I. Lenin", 2nd grade textbook, 1952), promotion of nationalism (Ioan Nenițescu – "My Country", 5th grade textbook, 1975), labour valorisation and idealization of the working class hero (Dumitru Corbea – "Labour flower", 3rd grade textbook, 1960) and so on.

All poetry subordinated to the propaganda machine has the function to embellish the reality and to educate young minds in the communist spirit. Through the message it sends, the new poetry is effective in achieving propaganda objectives, thereby legitimizing the totalitarian regime. During the communist era, the poetry studied in elementary school builds on moral, aesthetic, but more prominently, on ideological level.

Keywords: Communism, discourse, ideology, poetry, propaganda, curricula

Introduction

After the establishment of the communist regime in Romania, the single party is faced with the need to put in accordance the cultural and educational apparatus to ideology and to the newly established power relations. One of the goals of the time is to spread culture among the masses. During the communist era, literary creation becomes a tool used to promote and implement a political program. Placed in the service of propaganda, the emerging literature will be appropriate to the sensitivity of the times.

The ideologization of all domains also affected school education. The role of education in the communist society is a privileged one, since it has the mission to disseminate and inculcate the values promoted by the totalitarian regime.

The unique textbook, turned into a propaganda tool, makes its active contribution to the education of students in the communist spirit. Vulnerable to the changes from the public space, the Romanian textbook aims to develop students' aesthetic taste by selecting and

ranking the literary values. The changes in the party's policy will influence the texts chosen to be published in the textbooks.

To make room for the new unique textbooks and for the school curriculum modeled on Soviet example, all textbooks designed before 1947 are phased out. Authors of literary value are replaced in the Romanian textbooks by writers whose texts serve the interests of the single party: "Romanian literature was illustrated by Ion Păun-Pincio, D. Th. Neculuță, Raicu Ionescu-Rion, Alexandru Sahia (for the past) and by A. Toma, Dan Deșliu, Maria Banuș, Mihai Beniuc (for the present). Through this series of infamies, the Romanian literature has been removed from school and from the consciousness of young people."¹

The poetry published in the Romanian textbooks between 1948-1989 is effective in achieving propaganda objectives, thereby legitimizing the totalitarian regime. Valuable poets are present in the textbooks together with the makers of communist poetry that doesn't have any literary value. The communism lacks aesthetic assessment of the poets, the only important rule for publication and presence in the textbooks is the reflection in the works of the communist values.

Correlating the children's poetry published in the Romanian textbooks with the single party policy, we can distinguish two periods of time: 1948-1964 and 1965-1989.

The mimetic attitude towards the Soviet model can be noticed in all domains in the first years of communist regime in Romania. The ideological alignment of our country was closely related to the Sovietization campaign and, therefore, in the textbooks published soon after 1948, one can find texts that glorify the Soviet Union, the Bolshevik heroes, Lenin or Stalin – the "brilliant" teachers of the working class. The poetry chosen for the textbooks reflects the intention of the communist regime to change reality according to its ideological claims. Some of the propaganda objectives aimed by lyrical creations are: strengthening of the class consciousness, promoting internationalism, deepening faith in communism, education in the party spirit, the denunciation of the class enemy (the kulak, the owner etc.).

After 1962, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej began to lead a prudent nationalist policy, which will be continued by his successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu. The demarcation from the Kremlin's indications will be translated into promoting National-Communism. The texts published in the Romanian textbooks during Ceaușescu's regime will serve this purpose of educating students in a patriotic spirit.

Although between the two phases there are differences regarding the topic of the poetry (issues approved in the first period are replaced later with themes in the socialist spirit) or the published authors (from party's favourites, some poets will entirely disappear) a common element remains very much alive in poetry – the party spirit.

School poetry and its propaganda discourse between 1948-1965

Many of the poems published in the Romanian textbooks for elementary school have a combative, utilitarian, militant purpose. Some false values are inoculated through literary texts and the textbook contributes to the "classicization" of the living authors of school poetry.

¹ Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism 1948-1964*, Editura Cartea Românească, București, 2010, p.59.

Some poems published in the textbooks between 1948 and 1964 aim at strengthening the class consciousness. These texts exemplify the theories of Marx and Engels about world and society, aiming to raise the proletariat to their own class consciousness: “The mechanism of species evolution was explained by the struggle for existence and the mechanism of human history through the struggle between races or the class struggle.”² The vehemence of the tone is high, the poems urging to hatred against the class enemy and to relentless vigilance.

“There are still goals and heights! We will fight without fear / Together with sister nations that have given us new missions. / Peace we want, and a proper living! / If on the way still track cruel undead, hungry wolves - / Let’s crush them, flying from victories to victories. // People, keep the brakes / In your strong hand / Long live the Romanian People’s Republic!”³ (A. Toma - *Song for Romanian People’s Republic*)

Another objective of propaganda pursuit through school poetry is to denounce the wickedness of the society based on “exploitation of man by man”. This phrase of social injustice is very dear to the Marxist theoreticians. Proletarians must join forces to get rid of class antagonisms and of the competitive climate in capitalism. Gheorghiu-Dej’s report on the Constitution draft did in the Grand National Assembly on April 9, 1948 stated in this regard: “The situation of the workers in the bourgeois democratic countries is characterized by unrestrained exploitation and lack of real rights and freedoms.”⁴

“A mother near her baby longing, / Turned two withered eyes, with-bitterness, / Like two complaints into the sunset. // You go, holy messenger! To say that the world dies / In the fight for love and bread - / And bring your counsel with your dawn tomorrow!”⁵ (A. Toma - *Vespers*)

After denouncing the exploitation of the proletariat in the past, several poems aim to strengthen the faith in communism. Thus, some poetic texts are dedicated to communist heroes devoted to the cause and having extraordinary biographies: “Become legal with a small number of members and a dubious national component, the Party needed to be legitimized by a respectable past and as many heroes. The communist calendar filled quickly enough with a small but satisfactory number of martyrs, whose heroic story ought to be known and relived with fervor...”⁶

“And heaving broken the lower back, leaning on it / Bloody in the night which tightens / Vasile Roaită seems - a red flag, / On drowned in blood Grivița.”⁷ (Alex. Şahighian – *The Hooter of Vasile Roaită*)

In order to strengthen faith in the party’s ideology, the cult of Communist heroes is associated with the holiday poetry, dedicated to representative events for the communist historiography.

² Lucian Boia, *Mitologia științifică a comunismului*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2011, p. 49.

³ *Limba română. Manual unic pentru clasa I elementară*, Editura de Stat, București, 1950, p. 89.

⁴ Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, *Articole și cuvântări*, Editura Partidului Muncitoresc Român, București, 1951, p. 165.

⁵ *Limba română. Manual pentru clasa a VI-a*, Editura de Stat Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1953, p. 23.

⁶ Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism 1948-1964*, Editura Cartea Românească, București, 2010, p. 122.

⁷ *Limba română. Manual unic pentru clasa a VII-a elementară*, Editura de Stat, București, 1949, pp. 278-279.

“The brave Soviet soldiers / shatter gates, shatter barriers / and in line with the victorious / battle released ours! // It has been many years since then ... / Years of struggle and work. / We all fondly started, / both the old and the grandchildren, / to raise to bright horizons/ New Country from ruins! / And in front of them as a flag / stands our dear Party!”⁸ (Marcel Breslașu – *August*, 23)

Trying by all means to inspire the youngest members of society the attachment to communist values, the school poems depicts the realities of the times with optimism. The poetry dedicated to the great transformations of the socialist republic mirrors in fact the forced industrialization and urbanization of the country.

“But now, in Bicz, / The diligent worker / Built a high barrier / For the sprightly wave. // It will fall in large waterfalls / The tide into the turbine / And the engines will change / Its power into light. // From hydropower - then - / Heart of the country - / Will glow a new sun / Off over the horizon.”⁹ (Virgil Teodorescu – *The Hydropower from Bicz “V.I. Lenin”*)

Educating the party spirit, another important goal of the poetry published in the textbooks, reflects the ideologization of the Romanian education. The poems capture the tireless vigilance of the party and its role in building the communist society. In reality, we are talking about a totalitarian regime in which the single party exercises absolute control over all spheres of public life.

“You were shield, and sword, / to protect our hearth’ fire, / From those with swastika to spur / Planted to people in the ribs. // You are our guide and book / Teach us, dear father, / And what to do next, / And how to go forward!”¹⁰ (Mihai Beniuc – *To the Party*)

Propaganda discourse keep alive in the textbooks worshipping the fathers of Marxism and the communist leaders.

“Never mankind did not know such a man, / like a lightning he broke forever history / separated the bloody past of suffering, / from the heroic happy future! - / Lenin – the Party of Bolsheviks shaper / the builder of communism.”¹¹ (Radu Pădure - *Lenin*)

If Marx, Engels and Lenin occupy highly visible positions in the school lyric, Stalin is worshiped by March 1953. Thereafter, the fourth classic of Marxism will be removed from the textbooks without remorse. We quote from the “Declaration of April” made by the leader of Communist Romania, Gheorghiu-Dej, condemning the cult of Stalin’s personality: “Our party considered fair the critical analysis of personality cult made by the 20th Congress of the CPSU, giving high praise to this analysis, and underline the need for the Congress to enforce the consistency of the Leninist norms in the party’s life and in the world’s communist movement.”¹²

Few poems are dedicated in the Romanian textbooks to the first national idol, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. Eugen Negrici’s hypothesis is relevant: “If he survived, the real

⁸ Citire. *Manual pentru clasa a IV-a*, Editura de Stat Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1960, p. 16.

⁹ *Limba română. Manual pentru clasa a II-a elementară*, Editura de Stat Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1952, p. 74.

¹⁰ Elena Dărmănescu, Gheorghe Ghiță, *Limba română. Manual pentru clasa a VI-a*, Editura de Stat Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1959, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ *Limba română. Manual unic pentru clasa a V-a elementară*, București, Editura de Stat, 1950, p. 147.

¹² *Declarația cu privire la poziția PMR în problemele mișcării comuniste și muncitorești internaționale*, în „Scânteia”, anul XXXIII, nr. 6239, duminică 26 aprilie 1964, p. 3.

confidence that the population had acquired after 1964 in his his patriotism, would have certainly made him the subject of a strong adulation.”¹³ The names of the “apostle of faith”¹⁴ in communism will be replaced in order to strengthen his personal power in the late 60s to Ceaușescu’s name.

Poetry in the service of propaganda values labor and idealizes the working-class hero. Achieving these ideological goals through literary texts materializes the communist morality according to which the duty to work is a matter of honor and a consequence of the exploitation disappearance. Participation in competitions to increase productivity at work is the origin of the stakhanovite movement. Virgil Teodorescu offers in one of his poems a local version of Alexey Stakhanov: “Vasile Vlad is known / To be a skilful worker / And his hands do not rest a moment / and do not waste mortar. / And one can always see him. / In the capital he built / schools, homes and hospitals. / During a single shift, / From dawn till noon, / A wagon of brick he places/ in the masonry.”¹⁵ (Virgil Teodorescu – *The Famous Mason*)

Another goal of school poetry is promoting peace among peoples. In the communist epoch the initiation of peace campaigns under the pretext of saving humanity hide an anti-American propaganda.

“If you lend your ear, you can feel, you can listen / The word of peace as crosses - / It is sung by many people, / Revived cities / Tall poplar, gurgling, / Which grows close to my window, / And by the fields as a rug / And by the red flower in the pot.”¹⁶ (*Peace to homeland!*)

School poetry and its propaganda discourse between 1965-1989

The partisan attitude characterizes the school poetry published in textbooks between 1965-1989. Assuming a necessary (in the epoch) political responsibility, the poets approved by Ceaușescu’s regime create texts that reflect adherence to the communist principles. Some propaganda objectives of the school poetry are common to the prior period, others almost entirely disappear. It is noteworthy, however, that the voice of poetry no longer keeps its vehement and aggressive tone.

School poems compete to capture the power and majesty of the party. By educating the party’ spirit the authorities aimed at transforming the future citizens of the socialist republic in faithful executants of the state policy. Party’s monolithic power, its omnipresence, its absolute control in both humanistic and scientific fields are captured by the famous “thesis” of Ceaușescu (July 6, 1971): “it will strengthen the management and control of the party in the political orientation of the educational activities to promote to the masses our party ideology, its Marxist-Leninist policy, to increase combativity against bourgeois ideology influences, retrograde mentalities, foreign to the communist ethics principles and to the party spirit.”¹⁷

¹³ Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism. Poezia (I)*, Editura Fundației Pro, București, 2006, p. 76.

¹⁴ Idem, *Poezia unei religii politice. Patru decenii de agitație și propagandă*, Editura Pro, București, 1995, p. 350.

¹⁵ *Limba română. Manual pentru clasa a II-a elementară*, Editura de Stat Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1952, p. 100.

¹⁶ *Citire. Manual pentru clasa a IV-a*, Editura de Stat Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1960, p. 81.

¹⁷ *Propunerile de măsuri prezentate de tovarășul Nicolae Ceaușescu Comitetului Executiv al C.C. al P.C.R., pentru îmbunătățirea activității politico-ideologice, de educare marxist-leninistă a membrilor de partid, a tuturor oamenilor muncii*, în „Scântea”, anul XL, nr. 8839, miercuri 7 iulie 1971, p. 1.

“In lift my head to the red flag, / It is purple as my red tie / That waves on my still small chest, / In which it beats a pure heart. // And from the depths of my soul, / I bring my warmest greetings / To the party whose flag so will I / take it tomorrow to the peaks, ahead.”¹⁸
(Victor Tulbure - *Praise the Party*)

Although Ceaușescu “insisted that the party’s leadership remains the fundamental principle of Romanian socialism”¹⁹, the power belonged only to him. The pious cult of the leader is obvious in the textbooks. The communist poets compete in dedicating “the great man” odes and hymns.

“Under his forehead gather constellations / Of dreams for those who are or come, / Making this nation a strong way, / Proprietor over its own destiny. // [...] He reveals the golden age / And in the front of everyone is him.”²⁰ (Mihai Beniuc – *The Son of Homeland*)

Party relies on promoting nationalism in school poems that glorify the revolutionary victories. Many poems published in the textbooks aimed at cultivating patriotism, associated with the national symbols like the flag or the emblem.

“Blue is the sky in the distance, / With yellow stars I play, / And red is the blood which/ It is burning in our hearts. // [...] Praise be, Romania, / The Party rises you in flight! / Forever be your colors / Worn in the tricolor flag!”²¹ (Eugen Frunză – *The colors of freedom*)

Another important objective of the period is the formation of new man, with high socialist consciousness. The antiintellectualist obsessions emerge from this poems, the new man being the worker, the peasant, the soldier. The proletariat “is credited as being the progressive class of society, with an advanced consciousness. The intelligentsia, however, must be constantly monitored, because it is always in danger of betraying the progressive ideals of humanity (ie the Communist Party), being corrupted to the petty-bourgeois tranquility or to Western imperialistic propaganda.”²²

“Your silent steps, heavy, pass / Over the still wet and cold lands,/ Human feelings seeme to resurrect in the ground, / To catch your frantic song.”²³ (Nicolae Labiș – *To the Communist*)

The learner is not an individual, but an integral part of stratified structures. The youngest members of communist society are enrolled in civic organizations for children (The Falcons, The Pioneers Organization) or for youth (Communist Union of Youth).

“I am much shorter than cherry trees in bloom, / With poplars I do not dare to compare myself, / But my dreams can fly / With eagles above a cloud. // [...] The red flag plays over my forehead, / The tie over my shoulders, ardent, - / And I’m like a mountain peak, / When it is kissed by the sun at dawn.”²⁴ (Ion Brad – *The Pioneer*)

¹⁸ Constanța Iliescu, Silvia Nichita, Victoria Petrescu, Stela Popescu, *Citire. Manual pentru clasa a IV-a*, Editura de Stat Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1977, p. 5.

¹⁹ Vladimir Tismăneanu, *Fantoma lui Gheorghiu-Dej*, Editura Univers, București, 1995, p. 96.

²⁰ Marin Toma, *Limba română. Lecturi literare. Manual pentru clasa a VII-a*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1988, p. 8.

²¹ Elena Constantinescu, Maria Vărzaru, Emilia Zarescu, Elena Sachelarie, *Limba Română. Manual pentru clasa a II-a*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1988, pp. 56-57.

²² Sanda Cordoș, *Literatura între revoluție și reacțiune*, Editura Biblioteca Apostrof, Cluj-Napoca, 2002, p. 146.

²³ Dumitru Săvulescu, *Limba română. Lecturi literare. Manual pentru clasa a VIII-a*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1988, p. 147.

²⁴ Graziella Ștefan, Vladimir Gheorghiu, *Limba română. Lecturi literare. Manual pentru clasa a V-a*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1982, pp. 101-102.

Mirroring the beauties (and wealth) of the socialist homeland is subject of exaggerations. The propaganda discourse conveys important aspects of communist society (building sites, farms, canal, hydroelectric plants), praising the implementation of party politics. Working people enjoy the great achievements of socialist times (Casa Scânteii, The hydropower “V.I. Lenin”, the Danube-Black Sea Canal etc.) and benefit from them.

“New sites emerge on the horizon, / Haughty city of light; / And songs can be heard and youthful rumor, / And the moon clings to the branches... // And I seem to see gleaming to the windows / The morning stars of our Bistrița ... / From charmed sights I embrace you / O, times of masterly works!”²⁵ (Eugen Frunză - *When the branches are bending*)

Conclusions

Much of the lyrical production present in the textbooks is characterized by lack of artistic ambition, inconsistency in the quality of writing, versification of common places, abandonment of value criteria. School poetry is used by the political power in order to achieve propaganda goals. The poetry published in the textbooks lacks lyricism: the creation of historical inspiration is limited to simple retelling of events, the lyric that captures the great achievements of the communist times is written in a journalistic style, the poems that reflect upon the Communists fight turn into political manifestos.

The formative nature of education in schools is overshadowed by its informative and propagandist character. The texts published in the textbooks from the communist era demonstrate the political dirigisme into creation. The manipulation techniques are obvious even to the questions at the end of the lessons or in homework.

The presence in the textbooks, editing and republishing in very large print runs, the acclamations of media, the translations into other languages, the awards received, the social status will contribute to the classicization of the Romanian poets who published in the communist era.

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²⁵ Tanța Munteanu, *Citire. Manual pentru clasa a IV-a*, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, București, 1988, p. 128.

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