

THE LAST HUNDRED DAYS: THE DEATH THRALLS OF ROMANIAN COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP THROUGH FOREIGN EYES

Sorina Chiper

”Al. Ioan Cuza” University of Iași

Abstract: Published in 2012, Patrick McGuinness’ novel The Last Hundred Days captures the end of the Communist regime in Romania through the eyes of a London professor of English literature, hired to teach in Bucharest. The novel occasions a fine analysis and detailed representation of the underground world that had developed in the capital city, the risks and pleasures of living under communism, the world of the over-privileged and of the underprivileged that endangered their lives in the attempt to cross the Danube. My article will focus on the paradoxes invoked and elaborated on in the novel, as well as on its international dimension.

Keywords: communist regime, Romanian 1989 Revolution, communist subcultures, escape, paradox.

1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of the cultural representation of the *other* encountered in the experience of travel. The 19th century was the hayday of travel accounts which were involved, at the time, in the exoticization of the culturally and physically different persons, often seen as less than human, barbarian, children of nature or potentially dangerous strangers. The most investigated travel trajectories have been from the West to the East and from the North to the South, with only recent reversals of the scholars’ gaze in, for instance, Verena Krebs’ research on African Christian pilgrims to Western European pilgrimage sites in the late middle ages (2015), the series of publications issuing from UCL’s research project “East Looks West: East European Travel Writing on European Identities and Divisions, 1550-2000” (*Orientations. An Anthology of East European Travel Writing on Europe,*

Under Eastern Eyes. A Comparative Introduction to East European Travel Writing on Europe), or *Balkan Departures: Travel Writing from South Eastern Europe*. Representations of Romania in the West have been marked by the mythical imagining of Transylvania as the birth place of count Dracula, which was perpetuated in popular culture by recontextualising Bram Stoker's gothic novel in filmic productions. In the post-communist context, as early as February 1990, Georgina Harding published *In Another Europe: A Journey to Romania* – the account of her 1988 bike ride from Vienna to Istanbul, through Hungary and Romania. Her more recent book, *Painter of Silence* (2012), constructs an emotional story set in Iasi, in the early 1950's, when the Stalinist regime was taking hold in Romania. On the other hand, another book that came out in the same year, from the same UK publisher, Patrick McGuinness's *The Last Hundred Days*, gives an insight into the final stage of the communist regime in Romania, and of the shocking event of the Ceausescu couple's trial on television, immediately followed by their execution of Christmas day.

This article aims to analyse the representation of the subcultures that developed under communism, as they are perceived by the narrator in *The Last Hundred Days*, and to retrace the paradoxes of the end of Communism in Romania, in its simultaneous, seeming impossibility and immediacy to occur. Finally, I will discuss the points of convergence between communism and capitalism in Romania, in the informal networks of the promised escape to the West.

2. Encounters with the Eastern Communist Other

Inspired from his own stay in Romania in 1989, Patrick McGuinness's debut novel – a literary thriller that won him several prizes,¹ is constructed on the motif of the (Western) foreigner who travels east and is confronted with difference, records it and learns how to live near it, if not with it. The plot is set in Romania's capital city, where the narrator arrives in mid-April 1989, to take up a teaching position in the University of Bucharest.

From the very first chapter, the narrator renders the atmosphere of the communist 1980s: boredom taken to the extreme, reminiscent, in its over-pervasiveness, of Dickens' description of fog over the Thames in *Bleak House*; mute resignation; complacency with the *status-quo*; an economy of shortage that created its rich upper-class. The heavy, creeping totalitarian boredom

implied a state of expectation “already heavy with its own disappointment, the event and its anticipation braided together in a continuous loop of tension and anti-climax” (McGuinness 2012: 1). In the seemingly surrealist Romanian society, shortages were so numerous that – according to McGuinness, even the dead “felt the pinch” as funeral stones were reconditioned to be used for facades and interior decoration, during the constructions boom in the final communist years (McGuinness 2012: 2).

The narrator posits himself as a spectator or a “passer-through” – an observer in a polarized world in which events were happening “around me, over me, even across me, but never to me” (McGuinness 2012: 2) – for whom the journey to Bucharest is also a journey in a visual and technological past: the plane that takes him to Romania is old, the inflight magazine is dated, and upon landing, he notices that the earth is tilled by horse-ridden ploughs. The severe gap between the highly privileged and the underprivileged is obvious from the first contact with Romania, where the image of the farmers, “hunched and beaten down with drudgery” is set against the stiff appearance of VIPs getting off the airplane – “square-suited men in grey” soon riding off in anthracite-black limousines (McGuinness 2012: 4). Gatekeepers to the entry in Romania are the customs officers, who operated with “malign lethargy” (McGuinness 2012: 13) and took his cigarettes, coffee, chocolate and batteries as an unofficial tax. This episode was just a brief introduction into the abusive operations of the system and of those who enforced it – the petty abused clerks, finding little satisfaction in the abuse that they themselves could inflict on others.

In a city that seemed to materialise itself abruptly, from the surrounding fields, and where the pace of constructing new, architectonically tasteless blocks of flats was matched by the pace of demolishing churches and houses whose style did not match the new ideology, the narrator receives an unexpectedly welcoming flat, whose previous owner/tenant (Belanger) seemed to have left in a hurry, leaving behind clothes that fit the narrator, books and records that match his taste.

Leo O’Heix, the man who, without knowing him, intermediated his hiring for a teaching position in the University to replace Belanger, acts as his unofficial guide and intercultural mediator in the “Paris of the East” – as local folklore would term Bucharest. Their first night out in Leo’s black Skoda, for which he had bought a “Corps Diplomatic” car plate on the black

market to avoid being stopped by the police, occasions further observations and descriptions of the city: empty pavements, shadows in which the lurking eyes of secret agents are on the watch-out for potentially unconventional gestures or behaviour; cranes and diggers everywhere, lending the city the air of a deserted funfair; a “perpetual architectural dance” where areas that looked like Paris *arrondissements* were crossed by Istanbul-like suburbs; Nicu Ceausescu’s red Porsche pulling in front of Intercontinental Hotel and the luxury at Capsa – a select restaurant, both places frequented by party officials and expats, versus the long lines for food; the small and cold flats for the proletariat, electricity and hot water cuts... The contrasts that he observes in the outer world are mirrored by the tension that develops inside him, between the almost claustrophobic feeling of oppression – a “sense of the world closing in, tightening up”, and the excitement and elation of being in a new place, that seemed to be brimming with possibilities (McGuinness 2012: 26).

To adapt to this new reality, to a city where, according to Leo, he can find anything: passion, intimacy, fellowship, the narrator soon finds out that one needs to separate people from their acts which, most of the times, were not dictated by their wills as free agents, but by the need to conform to what the system expected as “normal” and “safe” behaviour. Coming from a Western democracy to an Eastern police state, the narrator cannot help noticing the over-pervasive greyness of buildings and clothes, the emptiness of scenery, public spaces and leisure time, the lack of basic staples and the fossilisation of people into broken puppets that would have needed an electric shock to be turned into revolutionaries who would challenge the system and radically change it.

The novel manages to depict the duplicity and double standards on which the system thrived, the corruption and underground subcultures whose networks of support, ideas and unofficial artistic production made life bearable and sustained hope in the possibility of real or imaginary escape. Several minor characters in the novel dream of fleeing the country by swimming across the Danube into Yugoslavia, and from there to the “free” West of plenty. On the other hand, there was an undeniable generalisation of accommodation to the *status quo*, which routinised want, sorrow and repression until they became invisible and one’s awareness of atrocities was numbed (McGuinness 2012: 26).

As Leo had warned him, the venues for “manoeuvre” in Romania were few but deep. Leo enjoyed a good life precisely because he had learnt how to navigate the cracks in the system and its parallel networks of connections, favours, smuggling, and dissent. In the city whose anthropic geography was changing faster than Leo could record it, in his book on places that were disappearing in the communist demolition frenzy, there were fissures in the spatial-temporal tissue – reminiscent of Mircea Eliade’s *La Tiganci*, through which one could suddenly accede to another world.

To such other words belong Leo, the would-be university professor, a collector of art and precious furniture from demolished houses; his collected pieces would be subsequently sold in auctions organised in the basement of the Natural Science Museum, with the tacit agreement of the Communist Party whose officials would attend them as buyers, sometimes of objects that their family used to own before nationalisation; Cilea – the daughter of a high-rank party dignitary, Belanger’s former girlfriend, with whom the narrator also has an affair, a student in the music school but also part of a State tolerated network of prostitution; she looks, dresses, smells and acts out of place in a society with which she could not identify; Sergiu Trofim, who belonged to the first generation of communists, a firm believer in the communist ideals; he had personally known Stalin and other world leaders in his former official positions, and was writing his memoirs and preparing his come-back in the political arena, through a planned revolution from inside, that would overturn Ceausescu with support from abroad; and Petru, the rock singer who tried to create a parallel communist society, based on genuine mutual support, and in which wealth would be distributed to those who most needed it.

As the novel progresses, the narrator is caught up in the destinies of people who become dear to him, for whom he feels responsible or guilty. Petre, whom he decided to support in his idealistic plans for a better society, as well as in his plans to help others who were determined to leave Romania through Yugoslavia, disappears at a given moment, and is ultimately found dead. Even more shocking than the news of his death was the discovery of the fact that he had been a Secret Service officer. He, who had seemed so radically set on changing the system, who had seemed to lead the bohemian life of an innocent dissident, was part of the system of lies, spies, and secret informers. Indeed, as the narrator noticed from the first chapter, “Life in a police state magnifies the small mercies that it leaves alone until they become disproportionate to their

significance; at the same time it banalises the worst travesties into mere routines” (McGuinness 2012: 24). To lead a double life was the mere routine of the final days of Romanian communism.

By the end of the novel, everybody seems to have played a double game, to have been a travesty: Leo, the university professor is also a smuggler, Belanger, a former university professor runs, from Belgrade, a network of human trafficking and drug dealings; Manea Constantin, originally from a bourgeois family, who had made it to a top position in the Communist Party, spies on his boss, knowing that he himself is spied upon, and schemes so as to be still in power after Ceausescu’s fall; Vintu, who had seemed to be the supporter of the libertine youth, midnight users of the House of the People, and sponsor for Petre’s idealistic initiatives, is just another Secret Service officer, working for Manea’s boss; Ionescu, the head of the English department is also a Secret Service officer, who had got his teaching position by undermining the previous head, and he also ends up by being undermined and demoted – thanks to Leo’s connections – to the happy position of librarian in the University.

3. Capitalism vs communism: parallel imaginative horizons

The novel occasions several philosophical investigations into the meaning of freedom, the nature of capitalism and of communism. In a dialogue between Petre and the narrator, the former argues that true freedom is the freedom to choose to remain in one’s own country, to assume one’s liberty and create it. If, for a Westerner, freedom means the ability to choose where to travel, or what to buy, in the East, one creates short-term liberties, pieces of life in which one can feel normal and happy. Contrary to the common-place Westerner prejudice – argues Petre – people living in the East are not destitute, brain-washed victims, but normal beings who experience the same basic human emotions as Westerners: love, death, friendship, pleasure, the taste of good food and drinks – when they are available.

Though officially, the Communist Party had instituted an economy of shortage, to pay off the national debt, the counter-economy functioned according to capitalist principles, to the balancing off of supply and demand. It is not by accident, probably, that the informal leaders of the underground economy are university professors of English literature – presumably persons of imagination – , both foreigners, who could foresee the opportunities for gains on the black market.

While the communist block had been positioned as an impermeable monolith, the novel aptly demonstrates that it has cracks that make it appealing for foreigners. The British and French characters in the novel who had planned to leave Romania (Leo and the narrator) or who had actually left it (an aristocratic woman, who had left by choice, and Belanger and the narrator, who had been forced to leave), return to it as to their home. This symbolic gesture annihilates the sharp contrasts between an optimistic, colourful West and a pessimistic, depressed East. To a certain extent, McGuiness' novel conveys the same message as Susan Buck Morss' book *Dreamworld and Catastrophy: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (2000), namely that communism and capitalism were two dream-worlds aiming at creating similar utopian forms, which cannot be posited one against the other in an absolute, lasting contrast. Communism – in its extreme form experienced in Romania, had its entrepreneurs, a working underground market, and venues for individualisation. If communism was bad for relocating people, taking away their property and demolishing their houses and churches, capitalism, as it is featured in the novel, was in no way better. The characters who manage to escape, coming from “deterritorialised milieus” hoping to find a better life in an “imaginary West” – to return to Yurchak's book on the last Soviet generation, are caught up in a system of human trafficking, coordinated, internationally, by Belanger.

What is disturbing in the novel is the implied impossibility for agency for the “common people”. The system of one secret agent on the footsteps of another secret agent, chasing another secret agent almost destroyed the possibilities of genuine human relations, of genuine conversations and of authentic intimacy. The quiet love between the narrator and Petre's sister, Otilia, is just one comforting exception. Otherwise, duplicity and foreign interests seem to continue their domination in Romania even after the televised execution of the Ceausescu's. The exercise in imagination that the reader is invited to take at the end of the novel leads precisely to this direction, that even though a new system has been – declaratively – instituted, it is still the “old guys” who are going to rule the country, probably maximizing even more the opportunities for personal gains by exploitation and illicit dealings.

4. Concluding remarks

Patrick McGuinness' novel deftly depicts the sick totalitarian society, suffering from various epidemics: corruption at all levels, secrecy, tampered intimacy, a sense of powerlessness and mute aggression, an almighty system of Party-sponsored suspicion and distrust, where one man was set on the feet of another, to follow and report on the latter's every move, an ideologically infused social machine that grinds initiative, free-will, human relations, hierarchies by personal merit, as well as the hope and chance to a better life.

Despite its occasional exaggerations, the novel manages to capture the spirit of the time and to navigate the recesses of counter-time and counter-space, the fissures in the social mechanism that survived on tolerated but closely checked on underground activities. It conveys the image of a world that was dying and refashioning itself at the same time, in which the potential for a real revolution was stiffened by interests that went beyond those of the national country and economy, by the "hidden hand" of an already expanding black/capitalist market that sold promises of escape at a high price – even one's life. The book thus both reinforces and demythologises the East – as the "civilised" West's *other*, in that it pictures Romania both as a country which made it possible for new, modern monsters to occur, and to have them executed on Christmas day, to repel (locals) and to attract (foreigners), to hope and to despair.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Buck Morss, Susan. 2000. *Dreamworld and Catastrophy. The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
2. Harding, Georgina 1990. *In Another Europe: A Journey to Romania*, London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.
3. Harding, Georgina 2012. *Painter of Silence*, London, Berlin, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury
4. McGuinness, Patrick 2012. *The Last Hundred Days*, London, Berlin, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury.
5. Yurchak, Alexei, 2005. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press