

The Rhetoric of Subversion: Strategies of 'Aesopian Language' in Romanian Literary Criticism under Late Communism

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This paper analyses the subversive strategies of 'Aesopian language' with reference to the discourse of the Romanian literary criticism written under late communism (1971-1989). The first two sections of the paper signal certain gaps and inconstancies in defining Aesopian language and in delineating its forms of manifestation; at the same time, they explain the spread of this subversive practice in the political and cultural context of Romanian communism. The following three sections analyse the manner in which Aesopian language materialized in the writings of some of the most important contemporary Romanian critics: Mircea Iorgulescu, Nicolae Manolescu and Mircea Martin. The final section of the study considers a revision of the current definitions of Aesopian language (through the concept of "triggers" theorized in this paper), a new classification of the rhetorical strategies acting globally in a subversive text, as well as a re-evaluation of the relevance of Aesopian language in the context of 'resistance through culture', which was the main form of opposition against the communist regime in Romania.

INTRODUCTION

In the *Foreword* to his famous pamphlet *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917), V.I. Lenin cautioned his readers that the paper had been written 'with an eye to the tsarist censorship'; therefore, he had found it essential to render his subversive doctrine 'with extreme caution, by hints, in an allegorical language – in that accursed Aesopian language – to which tsarism compelled all revolutionaries to have recourse whenever they took up the pen to write a "legal" work'.¹ Lenin was not the one to invent the practice of Aesopian language; neither was he the one to invent the concept itself. As a term, 'Aesopian language' was first used by Russian satirist M.E. Saltykov-Shchedrin in his *Letters to Auntie* (1881-1882), in order to designate a 'figurative language of slavery', an 'ability to speak between the lines [...] at a time when literature was in a state of bondage'.² As for the practice associated with

¹ V. I. Lenin, 'Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism: A Popular Outline', in his *Collected Works*, Vol. 22, December 1915 – July 1916, ed. by George Hanna, trans. by Yuri Sdobnikov (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), p. 187.

² Lioudmila Savinitch, 'Pragmatic Goals and Communicative Strategies in Journalistic Discourse under Censorship', in *Power without Domination: Dialogism and the Empowering Property of Communication*, ed. by Eric Grillo (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2005), p. 108.

this concept, it can be traced back to the Antiquity and, even when labeled differently or used purely intuitively, it has since represented one of the most efficient forms of resistance of the intellectuals against censorship – particularly under totalitarian regimes. Lenin’s hope, declared on several occasions, was that the triumph of communism should end this ‘accursed’ language; however, historical experience proved unerringly the opposite. Not only did the installation of the communist regime lead to a proliferation and an unprecedented diversification of Aesopian language in Russia, but this practice was to spread swiftly to the other East-Central European countries entering the Soviet Union’s sphere of influence after 1945. This has been frequently emphasized by the various theoretical and applied studies dedicated to Aesopian language, mainly during the two decades following the collapse of communism in Europe.

The researchers’ increased interest in this phenomenon notwithstanding, many of the features and manifestations of Aesopian language in the East-Central European communist societies still remain ambiguous or inadequately investigated. Thus, in his fundamental study dedicated to this elusive discourse, Lev Loseff defines Aesopian language as ‘a special literary system, one whose structure allows interaction between the author and reader at the same time that it conceals inadmissible content from the censor’.³ Certainly, we can only agree with such a description; but it does not explain satisfactorily the actual manner in which Aesopian language works. Loseff attempted to elucidate the mechanisms of this practice by delineating ‘two sets of literary devices’ – the ‘screens’, which ‘are bent on concealing the Aesopian text’, and the ‘markers’, which ‘draw attention to that same Aesopian text’ – and, at the same time, by specifying that a ‘screen’ and a ‘marker’ may sometimes be rendered by the same element, which would thus indicate the ‘dual nature of an Aesopian utterance’.⁴ However, this prescription does not clarify the conditions in which certain statements can be read ‘dually’, i.e. as ‘Aesopian language’. It is true that, in the former communist countries, political references were sometimes encoded by specialized terms or stereotypical periphrases,⁵ which promoted a double reading of the texts. Nevertheless, apart from the fact that the scope of such procedures was rather narrow, we must also consider that any Aesopian language evolves continuously; this evolution runs parallel to the evolution of censorship and, at times, as an outcome of the latter. Therefore, the progressive conventionalization of Aesopian language, meant to render the message as transparent as possible to its addressees, is accompanied at all times by an opposite movement, by a un-conventionalization meant to

³ Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature*, trans. by Jane Bobko (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1984), p. x.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

⁵ For example, in communist Romania, the appellation ‘the cobbler’, ‘the helmsman’ or the phrase ‘the people’s most beloved son’ denoted Nicolae Ceaușescu, whereas in Georgia, during the last decades of the regime, ‘drinking a beer for the president’ meant ‘Down with the president!’

render the message as opaque as possible to the censors. The consequences of this continuous transformation include not only the substitution of the already obsolete words/periphrases by new words and periphrases, but also the instrumentalization of gradually more complex rhetorical strategies, able both to provide alibis in front of censorship and to convey increasingly detailed subversive messages. Particularly in the artistic and journalistic discourse of communist regimes, those who practiced Aesopian language often avoided common language clichés, in order to be able to produce sophisticated analogies between the communist society and other types of past or present, real or fictional societies. However, rather than shed light on the specificity of Aesopian language, such observations seem to raise, in their turn, other issues: What makes us read a text as Aesopian and not as a literal reference to an immediate fact? Furthermore, when we identify a background, a deep, 'literary' level of the text, what makes us attach this level to a political context (specifically, to the determined context of communism), and not to a moral, religious or general-ideological frame of reference?⁶

Second, research of Aesopian language focuses mainly on decoding particular texts rather than on the rhetorical techniques by which the subversive meanings of these texts were generated. Thus, in a relatively recent study, Lioudmila Savinitch legitimately points out that most contemporary theories 'emphasize that "figurativeness" is the main feature of the Aesopian language, while failing to mention that there is a certain distinction between the two concepts'.⁷ However, the above-mentioned author does not clarify whether the connotations of Aesopian language could be said to be comprised by 'figurativeness' or, on the contrary, its subversive meanings may be suggested by some non-figurative rhetorical techniques. In fact, when Savinitch enumerates the discursive 'strategies' associated with this practice, not only does she limit them to certain 'methods of Aesopian "figurativeness"',⁸ but, at the same time, investigates these 'strategies' on the micro-textual level alone and then she classifies them according to the well-known linguistic levels (phonetic, lexical, syntactic,

⁶ An illustration of this situation is the verse drama *Iblisin Fajíasi* (1918) by the Azerbaijani writer Huseyn Javid, which was read by Maliheh S. Tyrrell as an anti-Soviet allegory (*Aesopian Literary Dimensions of Azerbaijani Literature of the Soviet Period: 1920-1990* (New York: Lexington Books, 2000), pp. 27-31). Tyrrell adopts Loseff's distinction between 'screens' and 'markers' and he renames these terms 'surface layers' and 'deeper layers'; then, he sets a series of analogies between the characters in the play and the political situation of the era: Iblis [Devil] – the Soviet regime; Angel – the human conscience; Ikhtiyar [Will] – the will of the nation; Khavár [East] – the Eastern nations etc. Leaving aside the fact that it seems unlikely that an author could have written such an ample satirical allegory targeting communism only a few months after the instauration of the Leninist government in Russia, Tyrrell's reading, based only on this series of analogies, leaves room for two unanswered questions: 1. Why should we see a political allegory rather than a moral-religious one in Javid's play? 2. Moreover, assuming that the political interpretation of the play is plausible, why should its reference be communism rather than imperialism, colonialism, authoritarianism or, more generally, any political regime based on the violation of democratic principles?

⁷ Savinitch, 'Pragmatic Goals', p. 108.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

stylistic etc.). Nevertheless, the question of whether and to what extent Aesopian language uses certain macro-textual strategies in order to circumvent censorship may also be raised.

Third, the cultural areas and forms of expression of Aesopian language in the former communist countries remain unsatisfactorily mapped. The crisis and, later, the dissolution of communist regimes in Europe spurred many analyses of the manner in which Aesopian language appeared in non-literary arts,⁹ in certain literatures,¹⁰ and in the creations of some representative authors, mainly Soviet, such as Osip Mandelstam, Iurii Trifonov, Vassily Aksenov, Chinghiz Aimatov, Saša Sokolov, etc.¹¹ Yet, this list foregrounds a double exclusion. On the one hand, Aesopian language was studied mainly in the cultures of former Soviet Republics – correctly deemed paradigmatic from this perspective – and considerably less in the other East-Central European cultures, although the latter, too, were in the ‘Socialist Camp’ for almost half a century. On the other hand, researchers focused particularly on the fictional discourse (poetry or prose) and only to a smaller extent on the non-fictional one, the omission of literary criticism being symptomatic in this respect.¹² Therefore, in what follows I focus on the functioning of Aesopian language in the literary criticism of a culture that has had a unique political and literary fate in the socialist bloc: the Romanian culture.

THE CONTEXTS OF ROMANIAN COMMUNISM

The study of the discourse of Romanian literary criticism must consider both “essential” and contextual factors. Owing to its “derivative” nature, this type of discourse accomplishes a double ideological articulation of the message (both at the level of decoding the “primary”

⁹ Cf. Kevin Moss, ‘A Russian Munchausen: Aesopian Translation’, in *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash*, ed. by Andrew Horton (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 20-35. Anna Wexler Katsnelson, ‘My Leader, Myself. Pictorial Estrangement and Aesopian Language in the Late Work of Kazimir Malevich’, in *Poetics Today*, 27 (2006), 67-96.

¹⁰ Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship*. Tyrrell, *Aesopian Literary Dimensions*.

¹¹ Peter Zeeman, *The Later Poetry of Osip Mandelstam: Text and Context* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1988). Seifrid, Thomas, ‘Trifonov’s *Dom na naberezhnoi* and the Fortunes of Aesopian Speech’, *Slavic Review*, 49 (1990), 611-624. Konstantin Kustanovich, *The Artist and the Tyrant: Vassily Aksenov’s Works in the Brezhnev Era* (Columbus: Slavica, 1992). Joseph P. Mozur, *Parables from the Past: the Prose Fiction of Chinghiz Aitmatov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Ludmilla L. Litus, ‘Saša Sokolov’s *Škola dlja durakov*: Aesopian Language and Intertextual Play’, *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 41 (1997), 114-134.

¹² Among the few exceptions to this state of things, we may enumerate the studies dedicated to some personalities of the international literary criticism and theory, such as Mikhail Bakhtin or Jan Kott, whose works have been read as satires of the Stalinist regime. See: Gary Saul Morson, ‘Who Speaks for Bakhtin?: A Dialogic Introduction’, *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983), 225-243. Martin Esslin, ‘Introduction’, in Jan Kott, *The Theater of Essence, and Other Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1984), pp. 1-6. M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga, *Bakhtin, Stalin, and Modern Russian Fiction: Carnival, Dialogism, and History* (Westport/London: Greenwood Press, 1995). Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

text and at the level of the critic's personal reflections), thus providing a broader context for the Aesopian strategies. Moreover, the case of Romanian culture displays a particular evolution not only in relation to Russia but also in relation to the other former communist countries in East-Central Europe. From this point of view, a defining trait exists precisely in the lack of a powerful tradition of Aesopian language in Romania. This is explained by the fact that, among the East-Central European countries that entered the communist sphere of influence after 1945, Romania had, at that time, the most powerful democratic tradition. Similarly to the 'freedom of conscience', the freedom of expression was already guaranteed by the 1866 Constitution (the first modern Romanian Constitution) and it was an inalienable right until the instauration of the royal dictatorship in 1938.¹³ Indeed, the practice of Aesopian language had spread to a certain extent to the territories under foreign domination before the First World War (particularly in Transylvania); but the leaders of the Romanian intelligentsia in the diaspora had always had the possibility to express directly their opinions in Romania's independent press. Therefore, with the exception of the period prior to the formation of the modern Romanian state, Aesopian language did not crystallize in the Romanian cultural space as a powerful tradition, marked by certain specialized terms or stereotypical periphrases.

However, this situation changed radically during the second phase of the Romanian communism, represented by Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime (1965-1989). While the previous stage, known as 'internationalist' (1948-1965), had been characterized by the absolute domination of the so-called 'wooden language', the ending of Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's regime witnessed the beginning of freedom of expression. This was inaugurated by the 'April Theses' (1964), through which the Romanian Communist Party practically proclaimed its independence from the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it is during the first years of Ceaușescu's regime that the first seeds of Aesopian language emerged. For the time being, these were represented by the so-called novel of the 'obsessive decade', i.e. a rather paradoxical narrative form, tolerated and even encouraged by the Party, which allowed writers to criticize the 1950s abuses, thus strengthening the intellectuals' attachment to the new regime and also providing it with additional legitimacy in the eyes of its own citizens. A similar process took place in literary criticism, where, due to the campaigns against 'dogmatism', the residues of socialist realism were gradually removed and the connection to the 'bourgeois', interwar literary tradition was resumed.

More significantly, as a reaction to the ideological restrictions of the previous period, a massive import of critical methods from the West was carried out and, with it, the

¹³ The only noteworthy exception to this status is 'war censorship', instituted in 1916, which extended, curiously, until the adoption of the 1923 Constitution - cf. Adrian Marino, *Cenzura în România. Schiță istorică introductivă* (Craiova: Aius, 2000), pp. 52-54. For the history of censorship in Romania, see also Adrian Marino, *Libertate și cenzură în România. Începuturi* (Iași: Polirom, 2005).

overinterpretation of works written by the ‘classics’ of Romanian literature. This is what Valeriu Cristea called ‘the archi-subtle criticism’,¹⁴ which would become the basis of the actual Aesopian language during the following decades. In Romania, this type of expression would thrive particularly after 1971, when, upon returning from a visit in North Korea, Ceaușescu issued the so-called “July Theses”, which stipulated the consolidation of the control of the Communist Party over society (including literature) and thus ended the small Romanian “liberalization” at the end of the 1960s.¹⁵ This reorientation of Party politics was accompanied not only by a tightening of censorship, but also by the suppression of any form of protest against the regime. In Vladimir Tismaneanu’s words, of all the communist countries in Europe, ‘the worst persecution of social critics took place in Nicolae Ceaușescu’s Romania’:¹⁶ not only was any form of collective opposition to the regime brutally suppressed, but the few Romanian dissidents had to leave the country during the 1970s and 1980s,¹⁷ so that the civil society was left ‘crippled and fearful’.¹⁸ Under the circumstances, the majority of the proponents of democratic principles and values in Romania felt compelled to adhere to

¹⁴ Valeriu Cristea, *Domeniul criticii* (București: Cartea Românească, 1975), pp. 30-32.

¹⁵ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 2003), p. 224.

¹⁶ Vladimir Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics: Eastern Europe from Stalin to Havel* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 116.

¹⁷ Dennis Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate: Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), pp. 277-278.

¹⁸ Tismaneanu, *Reinventing Politics*, p. 177. The distinguishing aspects of Romanian communism are given, first of all, by the lack of a civil society represented by collective actions such as ‘Charter 77’ in the Czech Republic or the ‘Solidarity’ union in Poland. The only phenomenon relatively analogous to those mentioned were the ‘Goma movement’, initiated in 1977 by the prose writer Paul Goma as a response to the Czech ‘Charter’. At the beginning of the year, Goma wrote two public letters: the first one addressed to ‘Pavel Kohout and his comrades’, by which he adhered to the Czech dissidents’ action, and another one addressed to Nicolae Ceaușescu, by which he demanded compliance with the human rights in Romania. Although the latter gathered about 200 signatures, the Securitate’s repressive measures swiftly suppressed the ‘movement’ and determined Goma to leave the country. (For details on the ‘Goma movement’, see Deletant, *Ceaușescu and the Securitate*, pp. 235-242, and *Comisia Prezidențială pentru Analiza Dictaturii Comuniste în România: Raport final*, ed. by Vladimir Tismaneanu, Dorin Dobrinu and Cristian Vasile (București: Humanitas, 2007), pp. 720-724.) Another aspect typical of communist Romania is the relatively small number of dissidents who, in fact, acted as such only toward the end Ceaușescu’s regime, in a context of ‘isolation and lack of support’ (Tismaneanu, *Stalinism for All Seasons*, p. 211); hence the joke, popular in the early 1980s, according to which ‘Romanian dissent lives in Paris and his name is Paul Goma’ (cf. Michael Shafir, *Romanian Politics, Economics, and Society: Political Stagnation and Simulated Change* (London: Frances Pinter, 1985), p. 168). Last but not least, in the Romanian literary life neither the phenomenon of *samizdat* nor that of ‘desk drawer literature’ gathered much momentum. Although the latter category was claimed by many Romanian authors after the fall of communism, in one of the few rigorous approaches to this issue, Paul Goma limited to five the number of ‘desk drawer writers’ (cf. ‘Literatura de sertar – un capitol de istorie literară’, in Paul Goma, *Scrisuri*, vol. II: 1990-1999. *Interviuri, dialoguri, scrisori, articole*, ed. by Flori Bălănescu (București: Curtea Veche, 2009), pp. 365-372).

the 'resistance through culture' as a tactic of opposition¹⁹ and to find refuge in literature and literary criticism, where they could make the best of the resources of Aesopian language.²⁰

However, it is not only its extent, but also its structure that differentiates the Romanian Aesopian language from the other East-Central European literary systems of the era. For example, while in Hungary or in Poland the sole target of Aesopian language was the Marxist-Leninist ideology and the type of society it promised, the Romanian communism during the 1970-1980s turned gradually to a nationalist doctrine.²¹ The cultural correlative of this ideology was the so-called 'protochronism', a movement launched in 1974 by the comparatist Edgar Papu and adopted as a semi-official doctrine by the Ceaușescu regime.²² As the anachronistic product of Soviet megalomania during the fifth and sixth decades, the Romanian inter-war nationalism, and, last but not least, the increasing need of self-

¹⁹ Dennis Deletant, 'Romania, 1945-1989. Resistance, Protest and Dissent', in *Revolution and Resistance in Eastern Europe: Challenges to Communist Rule*, ed. by Kevin McDermott and Matthew Stibbe (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2006), pp. 81-100. Cristina Petrescu, 'Eastern Europe, Central Europe or Europe? A Comparative Analysis of Central European Dissent and Romanian "Resistance through Culture"', in *Europa im Ostblock: Vorstellungen und Diskurse (1945-1991)*, ed. by José M. Faraldo, Paulina Gulińska-Jurgiel and Christian Domnitz (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2008), pp. 231-249. Letitia Guran, 'Aesthetics: A Modus Vivendi in Eastern Europe?', in *In Marx's Shadow: Knowledge, Power, and Intellectuals in Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. by Costica Bradatan and Serguei Alex. Oushakine (New York: Lexington Books, 2010), pp. 53-72. Since organized dissent was absent, the 'resistance through culture' represented in Romania the main form of assertion of the writers' independence from the communist regime. Civically, it materialized through the refusal to enroll in the party's propaganda machine, while artistically, it took place through the defense of the priority of the 'aesthetic' criterion in the production and reception of literary works, which generated a literature relatively autonomous from the political sphere. Nevertheless, from the perspective of maximalist ethics, the 'resistance through culture' is a deeply duplicitous phenomenon, which fits perfectly in the *Ketman* paradigm described by Czesław Miłosz. In the Polish writer's opinion, '*Ketman* means self-realization *against* something' (*The Captive Mind*, trans. by Jane Zielonko (New York: Vintage International, 1981, p. 80), which, in the case of totalitarian societies, is translated in a profound divergence between an individual's private thoughts and their public expression. Since it manifests equally as an attempt to escape the immediate reality and as isolation in the sphere of its own activity, the 'resistance through culture' can be defined, in Miłosz's terms, as a combination of the 'aesthetic *Ketman*' and the 'professional *Ketman*' (see *Ibid.*, pp. 64-70).

²⁰ According to Eugen Negrici, such a situation is confirmed by what he calls the 'historiographical function' of the Romanian literature under Ceaușescu's regime: 'The literature published by writers at that time [...] took on some of the functions of an effectively free press, of a historiography that, in the given context, could not disclose too much, of a sociology and a political science seemingly inexistent.' (*Literatura română sub comunism*, vol. I: *Proza*, (București: Editura Fundației PRO, 2002), p. 167).

²¹ As shown by Cornis-Pope, the nationalist orientation of Romanian communism is not a singular phenomenon in Eastern Europe (Marcel Cornis-Pope, 'An Anxious Triangulation: Cold War, Nationalism and Regional Resistance in East-Central European Literatures', in *Cold War Literature: Writing the Global Conflict*, ed. By Andrew Hammond (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 160-175). Yet what distinguishes Romania from the other Central and East European countries is the high degree of sanction that nationalism received under Ceaușescu's regime (Dragoș Petrescu, 'Communist Legacies in the 'New Europe': History, Ethnicity, and the Creation of a 'Socialist' Nation in Romania, 1945-1989', in *Conflicted Memories: Europeanizing Contemporary Histories*, ed. by Konrad H. Jarausch and Thomas Lindenberger (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), pp. 37-54).

²² Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 167-214. Lucian Boia, *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), pp. 79-82.

legitimation of a regime that could no longer deal with the profound economic and social crisis of its country, protochronism was a theory that proclaimed the Romanians' anteriority and, thereby, their superiority in the most diverse sectors of world science and culture. According to the most radical forms of this theory, promoted by a large part of the Communist Party elite and by the intellectuals faithful to the regime, the Romanians were not only the Romans' ancestors, but also the world inventors of the theory of relativity, of Cybernetics, of the literary Baroque, Realism, Parnassianism, and Existentialism.²³ In a broader approach, protochronism generated a profound scission among the Romanian intellectuals, reactivating, in fact, the older inter-war polemics between the 'autochthonists' and the 'westernizers', which would survive in new forms in post-communist Romania, too. Nonetheless, in the short run, the defining fact is that the Romanian Aesopian language had not one but two reference frames: both the Marxist-Leninist doctrine, which promised terrestrial paradise to its followers, and the protochronism, which praised the Romanian people's ancestral virtues. Moreover, the situation escalated after 1977, when Ceaușescu officially dissolved the institution of censorship (Direction for Press and Publishing Houses), in order to circumvent the application of the Jackson-Vanik amendment and to further benefit from the most favoured nation clause instituted by the United States.²⁴ However, rather than lead to an increase in the freedom of expression, this event allowed censors to do their worst: operating under the aegis of the Council of Socialist Culture and Education, they could now remove abusively and arbitrarily any text fragment or reject the publication of any volume. This specific convergence of factors explains the diversity and complexity of the Romanian Aesopian language in communism, traits that are obvious both in literature and in the literary criticism.²⁵ Nevertheless, the subversive strategies used by the Romanian literary critics under

²³ Alexandra Tomiță, *O istorie 'glorioasă': Dosarul protocronismului românesc* (București: Cartea Românească, 2007).

²⁴ Marino, *Cenzura în România*, p. 69.

²⁵ Apart from literary criticism, the Aesopian language has known significant dissemination in the Romanian literature under late communism both in poetry and in prose. In poetry, this practice became obvious particularly in the 1980s, being sanctioned by the mutilation of volumes such as *Urcarea muntelui* (1985) by Ileana Mălăncioiu and *Aripa secretă* (1986) by Mariana Marin, by the prohibition of the right to signature (the case of Ana Blandiana, who was accused of having attempted to caricaturize Nicolae Ceaușescu in a poem for children) and by the difficulties faced by the young poets of the time in their attempt to publish their first volumes. In prose, the procedure is older and would include two waves of subversion, corresponding to the main literary generations who manifested in the Romanian literature under Ceaușescu's regime. First of all, the Aesopian language was used by the most important prose writers of the 1960s generation (Marin Preda, Augustin Buzura, Nicolae Breban, Alexandru Ivasiuc or D. R. Popescu etc.), either in the form of the novel of the 'obsessive decade' or by designing political and moral allegories. A very useful analysis of both techniques is provided in Sanda Cordoș, *Literatura între revoluție și reacțiune: Problema crizei în literatura română și rusă a secolului XX* (Cluj-Napoca: Biblioteca Apostrof, 2002). On the other hand, the prose writers of the '80s generation (Mircea Nedelciu, Mircea Cărtărescu, Ștefan Agopian, Gheorghe Crăciun etc.) chose to question the legitimacy of the regime and of the corresponding discourse by a consistent reflection on the ways to use language and on the relations between fiction and reality. An excellent radiography of these aspects was made by Carmen Mușat in *Strategiile subversiunii. Incursiuni în proza postmodernă* (București: Cartea Românească, 2008).

Ceaușescu's regime have not yet been the object of a systematic approach. Neither the recent transnational literary histories of the East-Central European literatures,²⁶ nor the specialized studies of Aesopian language in Romania²⁷ contribute any special chapter on the resistance techniques of literary criticism against the communist regime. To supplement this absence, I analyse such strategies in what follows, exemplifying them with reference to the works of three representative Romanian critics: Mircea Iorgulescu, Nicolae Manolescu, and Mircea Martin.

MIRCEA IORGULESCU: 'THE GREAT CHATTER' AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Of the three critics under review, Mircea Iorgulescu carried out extensive activity as a literary essayist and reviewer, focusing his attention on the Romanian authors who were problematic "cases" from the perspective of the links between literature and ideology (Dinicu Golescu, C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea, Panait Istrati, etc.). In the spring of 1989, Iorgulescu emigrated to Paris, where he coordinated the Romanian office of Radio France Internationale until 2008.

However, shortly before leaving the country, the critic published, under an innocuous title – *Eseu despre lumea lui Caragiale* (1988) –, a bitter satire of Romanian communism. As recalled by Iorgulescu himself in the foreword to the second edition of his book,²⁸ *Eseu* was deemed, on its publication, 'a disguised political pamphlet',²⁹ despite the fact that the author had taken all measures in order to avoid such a reading. Writing on the work of I. L. Caragiale, an author who criticized severely the Romanian society at the end of the 19th century, Iorgulescu stated in 'Câteva lămuriri', which opened the first edition of his book, that he had tried to avoid the 'dangers of the bringing up to date': 'I did not want to turn Caragiale into [...] "our

²⁶ Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, eds., *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. I-IV (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2004-2010). Harold B. Segel, *The Columbia Literary History of Eastern Europe since 1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

²⁷ Cordoș, *Literatura între revoluție și reacțiune*. Mușat, *Strategiile subversiunii*.

²⁸ In this study, I have used the second edition of Iorgulescu's *Eseu*, published in 1994 – Mircea Iorgulescu, *Marea trăncăneală: Eseu despre lumea lui Caragiale* (București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, 1994). As compared to the 1988 edition, the new version reinstates the original title of the book (*Marea trăncăneală*), turns the foreword to the first edition ('Câteva lămuriri') into an afterword, and includes a new Foreword.

²⁹ Iorgulescu, *Marea trăncăneală*, p. 5. The reception of the book as a 'political pamphlet' could not be publicly acknowledged in communist Romania. However, there is concrete evidence, from the Romanian Diaspora, of the state of mind with which the book was received. In a review read on Radio 'Free Europe' on December 23rd, 1988, Monica Lovinescu said: 'In present-day Romania, it seems that the world can only be conceived within Caragiale's parameters, according to the pattern offered by him. Pattern and foreshadowing. [...] The same thing that happened to Kafka happens to this work: from literature it descends into history. In the beginning was the literature: history followed it, projecting into the real the most unthinkable of fictions.' (*Unde scurte V: Pragul* (București: Humanitas, 1995), pp.120-121).

contemporary”, but I did not want to disguise myself as his contemporary either’.³⁰ However, the allusion to Jan Kott’s well-known work (*Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, 1961) operates rather as an antiphrastic forewarning. By negating an *intention* – one that, in fact, no one had assigned to him –, Iorgulescu signals to his reader a *possibility*: that of reading his essay as a system of references targeting the communist reality of *his* age. In other words, the author’s statement operates as a ‘trigger’ of an Aesopian reading; by it, we are warned – and at the same time invited – to read his essay as a political parable.

Such a reading is favored by another procedure: although Caragiale’s *texts* belong to various genres (comedies, sketches, novellas, etc.) and concern different social backgrounds, Iorgulescu treats them as if they all belonged to the same text, a *hypertext* that refers to a unique and homogenous fictional territory: ‘Caragiale’s world’. In fact, according to the book’s author, the apparent diversity of this world comes down to ‘two communicating realities’: the ‘precinct’ and the ‘carnival’.³¹ To the Romanian critic, the ‘precinct’ is a symbol of political power, whereas the ‘carnival’ (and its adjunct, the beer house) refers to daily existence, which suggests that the main topic of Iorgulescu’s essay is the relationship between citizens and authorities (political, administrative, legal or military – although, in ‘Caragiale’s world’, these categories tend to blend together) in a totalitarian society. At first sight, the relationships between the two fictional spaces are opposition and subordination: ‘To the beer house you go, to the precinct you are taken; at the beer house you talk, at the precinct you tell. For the precinct supervises both the carnival and the beer house.’³² However, in reality, there is a tacit complicity between the two social bodies: the ‘precinct is vitally interested in perpetuating the carnival and in protecting the mystification mechanisms’; similarly, the carnival displays, in its turn, a powerful authoritarian ambition, if not an ‘authoritarian temptation’.³³

This vicious complicity between civilians and repression mechanisms, explained by Nelson as ‘the dialectics of developed socialism’,³⁴ impacts language first of all, as the elementary factor of social interaction, and its most visible outcome is what Iorgulescu labels ‘the great chatter’. This phrase should have been the title of the first edition of his book; but, somewhat predictably, it was removed by the censors. For, to Iorgulescu, ‘the great chatter’ is not only ‘the-art-of-ceaseless-speaking-to-say-nothing’, but a precise technique of ideological distortion of the truth, which thus comes close both to the Marxism-Leninism ‘wooden language’ and to Orwell’s ‘double-speak’. Its most perceptible features are ‘the ambiguity of

³⁰ Iorgulescu, *Marea trăncăneală*, p. 116.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

³⁴ Daniel N. Nelson, *Romanian Politics in the Ceaușescu Era* (New York/Paris/London: Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, 1988), p. 5.

meanings and clashing attitudes that are, nonetheless, coerced into coexisting', 'the fall into the elementary and even into the pathological', 'the programmatic ruining of memory under the pressure of a present strictly limited to the immediate', 'the abolition of the opposites by homogenization', and 'the transformation of language into a tool for the permanent falsification of reality'.³⁵ For this reason, the 'great chatter' indicates more than a manner of speaking; it signals a manner of thinking (or rather its absence). Up to a certain point, its purpose and manifestation evoke that practice of censoring or dissimulating one's public manifestations in the context of a private resistance to a certain authority that Miłosz called *Ketman*. However, the difference is that people in Caragiale's world seem to have abandoned even such private forms of resistance:

People in Caragiale's world tell the truth and lie at the same time, they are guilty and innocent at the same time, and such a duality is rendered best at the language level: cunning rhetoric, used extensively and in all relationships between individuals, from social to intimate ones, is a particular, very specific form of double language. This action may be a sin as well as a virtue, being at the same time one thing and the other. The structure of the lie has the astonishing capacity of incorporating everything, truth included.³⁶

For these reasons, in the world described by Iorgulescu, the 'freedom of speech' is a 'controlled, closed and regulated freedom' – even a 'tolerated and stimulated' one; as long as it 'retains no content and no tangency to truth and reality', it provides equally 'the alibi of silence on the essential things' and 'a surrogate of freedom and pluralism'.³⁷ The control of this mandatory freedom is held, of course, by the 'precinct', which, by witnessing unconcernedly or even encouraging 'all the illegal, incorrect, immoral actions', 'approves a structurally dishonest manner of living': 'In Caragiale's world, the fake and the illegal attain authority and are authorized by the authorities themselves; coexistence in illegality and fraud represents a strong factor of collective unity and social harmony.'³⁸

By revealing the almightiness of the 'precinct', the author of the book exposes more than the generalized corruption in the Romanian society of the last communist decade; he also exposes the powerful tendency to militarization of Ceaușescu's regime.³⁹ A direct consequence of this process is the diminution almost to cancellation of one's own awareness of individuality; to the Romanian critic, 'the uniform fashion [...] is a strong collective tendency toward uniformization; in fact, it is rooted in the cult of uniformity'. Another

³⁵ Iorgulescu, *Marea trăncăneală*, p. 36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-57.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

³⁹ According to R.J. Crampton, in Ceaușescu's Romania 'the 1980s were years of intensified police terror and of privation worse even than the second world war.' (*Eastern Europe in Twentieth Century and after* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 385)

outcome is the intensification of people's fear, suspicion, and aggressiveness as a proof of the regime's incapacity of managing its internal issues otherwise than by invoking an external conspiracy.⁴⁰ 'In Caragiale's world', states Iorgulescu, 'the temptation of authoritarianism is translated by a syndrome of "fortress under siege", by a state of wait and panic generated by the anticipation of an imminent attack that, however, does not ever occur. [...] Caragiale's man is made to believe that he is an endangered man.'⁴¹ However, the aggressiveness of Caragiale's world never runs against the alleged foreign enemy, but it always takes place within the limits of one's own community, by instituting fight as a 'social code', applied 'extensively and with a passion probably pertaining to the pathological vocation to degrade'. In other words, 'although it fears invasions and dreads foreigners, Caragiale's world practices a self-invasion [...]; it conquers itself relentlessly'.⁴² Thus, under the pretext of rereading the works of one of the 'classics' of Romanian literature, Iorgulescu launches a corrosive pamphlet against the communist regime, described as a regime of corruption, mystification and repression that deals with its own citizens as if they were potential enemies.

NICOLAE MANOLESCU: COMMUNISM AS A NEGATIVE UTOPIA

The description of Ceaușescu's regime does not differ substantially in the Aesopian discourse of Nicolae Manolescu, perhaps the most important contemporary Romanian literary critic and historian. However, a relevant difference is to be seen in the choice of other rhetorical techniques as tools of subversion. Thus, in his *Arca lui Noe* (3 vol., 1980-1983), Manolescu advances a historical morphology of the Romanian novel, starting from Albert Thibaudet's categories of 'Doric' and 'Ionic', which the East European theorist redefines from the perspective of structural narratology and of the sociology of literary forms, and to which he adds a third paradigm: the 'Corinthian'.⁴³ This last novel type, based on the undermining of the traditional *mimesis*, is not only the most original part of Manolescu's study, but also the one that provides the Romanian critic with the most generous premises for applying an Aesopian discourse. In fact, in the afterword to his book, Manolescu states that the Corinthian

⁴⁰ Negrici calls this ideological (meta)narrative 'the Myth of Danger': 'The dark myth of the outsider, of the one different from you by birth, of the potential adversary, of the foreigner surrounded by a halo of terrors – for he could occupy your wonderful cave – has fed, from the fearful depths of a prehistoric conscience, all the victories of Ceaușescu's propaganda and the endurance of its effects.' (*Literatura română*, p. 59)

⁴¹ Iorgulescu, *Marea trăncăneală*, pp. 94-99.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 98-102.

⁴³ This study focuses on the third edition of the book, published in one volume – Nicolae Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe. Eseu despre romanul românesc* (București: 100+1 Gramar, 1999). As compared to the first edition, the only modification made by the 1999 version is the insertion of a chapter on the novelist Petru Dumitriu, which could not be included in the 1980/1983 edition, because the writer, who had emigrated to Germany, had publicly repudiated the Romanian communist regime.

novel illustrates an 'age of irony', a 'non-homogenous, incoherent, void' world, dominated by 'a disoriented or abusive, indiscriminating, authoritarian or oppressive mentality', characterized by 'a repressive sociality' and by the assumption of 'prevalent political values'.⁴⁴ All the chapters on the Corinthian consequently include, to a smaller or broader extent, samples of Aesopian language. Nevertheless, I am going to deal here only with the first chapter of the volume on the Corinthian novel, i.e. the one that analyses Arghezi's and Urmuz's prose writings. Apart from the subversive extent and strength of the critic's Aesopian language, I have selected this chapter because the political reading of the two authors' creations is less predictable than in the case of other Romanian novelists.

Urmuz (pen name of Demetru Demetrescu-Buzău) was one of the pioneers of the Romanian avant-garde and the author of several absurdist narratives, posthumously gathered in the volume *Pagini bizare* (1930). Having analysed the writer's construction techniques, Manolescu focuses on the 'bizarre' ending of the sketch *Algazy și Grummer*, in which the two main characters literally eat each other up. In Urmuz's text, the pretext of the conflict is the heroes' desire of being fed with the 'literature of the future', and Manolescu's predecessors had read this short story as a metaliterary parody. However, Manolescu claims that such an interpretation, although 'clearly implied' in the sketch, would be merely secondary and explains the scene cited from a social-economic perspective:

This twisted bestiality [...] illustrates, at a first level, the social conflicts in a world in which the criterion of assertion is the capacity to deceive and destroy the other. However, the image is phantasmagorical. The notion of consumption is read very originally. A consumer society tends to be one in which the various Algazy and Grummer eat one another.⁴⁵

The rationale of this extravagant reading, acting in Manolescu's discourse as a 'trigger' of his Aesopian interpretation, is soon explained in the analysis of Arghezi's novel *Cimitirul Buna-Vestire* (1936). Considered to be the most important Romanian poet of the 20th century, Tudor Arghezi was at the same time the author of several non-mimetic, Corinthian narratives. Among these, *Cimitirul Buna-Vestire* reports the occurrence of a miraculous event (the resurrection of the dead) amid a corrupt and vicious society. Manolescu's statement must be understood in this context when he proposes that '*Cimitirul Buna-Vestire* expands the conflicts in Urmuz. Here, too, people eat anything they see and, in the end, eat one another. [...] Their spirituality castrated, the characters in *Cimitirul* are versions of Algazy and Grummer'.⁴⁶ Yet, Manolescu's reading hypothesis commenting on the battle between Urmuz's 'heroes', no matter how improbable, stayed within the limits of the possible, whereas in Arghezi's case his

⁴⁴ Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe*, pp. 732-733.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 548.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 548.

interpretation is based on a distortion of the data in the novel. Indeed, *Cimitirul* includes many Pantagruelian scenes; but the inhabitants of its fictional world never ‘eat one another’ – at least not literally, as happens with Urmuz’s characters. But the critic chooses to stretch the literality of the text beyond its limits, in order to transfer to Arghezi’s novel, too, the image of the ‘consumer society’, which, in fact, he had obtained in Urmuz’s case by a similar technique.

In parallel to this overinterpretation, Manolescu discusses the poetic and religious readings of *Cimitirul*, showing that ‘the resurrected dead announce both a new heaven and a new earth’ and that, in the end, ‘our interest shifts from the scandal of pure non-verisimilitude (which creates the fantastic) to the philosophical and moral allegory of a rectified, improved, superior hereafter’.⁴⁷ Then, the critic describes again this ‘new earth’ – presented by the ‘resurrected’ to those ‘still living’ as an earthly paradise inhabited by ‘new people’ – in a language that, imitating the language of propaganda, hints at the Stalinist ‘social engineering’ designs. However, the hidden reference of Manolescu’s comments is the overall communist system. For, in the opinion of the Romanian literary historian, ‘life after resurrection would have two characteristics: insensitivity and uniformity. The resurrected would lose their all too human needs and would resemble one another perfectly’.⁴⁸ In other words, the sole modality by which the communist utopia could become a working economic system would focus on the suppression of the needs and desires of the members of a community rather than on their fulfillment. Here, Manolescu places this ‘negative utopia’ against the image of the ‘consumer society’ that he had configured in the previous pages and concludes that the ‘world promised to the resurrected is yet more horrid than the old one. It holds part of the characteristics of an Orwellian society’.⁴⁹ In fact, the mention of Orwell (a taboo author for the communist propaganda) no longer leaves any doubt as to the real target of the critic’s allusions – particularly when, at the end of the chapter, the ‘ideology’ of the Resurrection is ironically described as a non-violent solution to ending the well-known ‘class struggle’:

The allegory targets a social reorganization able to obtain a complete leveling of the individuals’ reactions and desires, stripped of the right to variation. With the vanishing of individual needs, inequalities vanish, too. It is perhaps the only way of truly abolishing the [social] classes. Where there is no desire, there is no wealth either. Personal property is swallowed up, with no need of revolution, by the common property.⁵⁰

It is now clear why the critic stretches the social-economic reading of Urmuz’s sketch, as well as why he assimilates Urmuz’s vision to Arghezi’s. Only in this way could Manolescu obtain

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 550-551.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 553.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 554.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 555.

the first term of his Aesopian comparison (the ‘consumer society’), in order to oppose it efficiently to the second one and which could act simultaneously as an alibi to cover, even if partially, the real target of his pamphlet-like reading: communism as an oppressive system.

MIRCEA MARTIN: THE DECONSTRUCTION OF PROTOCHRONISM

Unlike the other two critics above, Mircea Martin did not choose as a support of his Aesopian language the fictional works of the ‘classic’ Romanian writers. His literary pretext is the critical and ideological discourse, and his polemic target is protochronism rather than Marxism-Leninism. In fact, as both author and editor, Martin has been one of the best Romanian theoreticians and critics during the last decades, and also one of the intellectuals who, by fighting against the self-sufficient cultural isolationism, has contributed the greatest extent to the spreading and naturalization of Western critical theories and methods in the Romanian academic sphere. A definite proof of this activity is his book *G. Călinescu și ‘complexele’ literaturii române* (1981),⁵¹ in which Martin examines in detail the manner in which national tradition is configured in the most important work of Romanian literary historiography, namely G. Călinescu’s *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (1941). Published during the Second World War, shortly after Romania had lost approximately half of its territory at that time, Călinescu’s *Istoria* was intended to be a ‘demonstration of the Romanian power of creation’, meant to infuse his compatriots with ‘the belief that we have a brilliant literature’.⁵² For this reason, Călinescu was, like his predecessor Nicolae Iorga, one of the critics that the protochronist movement attempted to attach as its precursors.⁵³ In fact, this is the starting point of Martin’s book, where he notes that, in current Romanian literary criticism, ‘a veritable Călinescian worship’ is practiced.⁵⁴ According to Martin, such a phenomenon is explained by the tendency of affiliating Călinescu to an ideological approach from which his commentator dissociates himself determinedly: ‘Recently, there have been attempts here, too, [...] of rereading the old literature from biased contextual perspectives. However, certain facts and data remain unyielding. [...] By adhering to the Western model, Romanian literature was set in motion at a considerable

⁵¹ My study discusses the second edition of Martin’s book – Mircea Martin, *G. Călinescu și ‘complexele’ literaturii române*, afterword by Nicolae Manolescu (Pitești: Paralela 45, 2002). As compared to the first edition, the second includes a new foreword and completes the text by including the fragments – marked in square brackets – that had been removed by the censors.

⁵² G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (București: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1941), p. 9.

⁵³ Andrei Terian, *G. Călinescu. A cincea esență* (București: Cartea Românească, 2009), pp. 567-574.

⁵⁴ Martin, *G. Călinescu*, p. 11.

disadvantage.⁵⁵ In other words, the exegesis of Călinescu's *Istoria* required Martin – as he recalls two decades later – to make a series of 'dissociations from the increasingly approved ideology of protochronism', 'naming no names'.⁵⁶

Actually, the term 'protochronism' is mentioned only once in Martin's book, in quotation marks and placed in an apparently less relevant sequence: 'we briefly note Iorga's attempt to identify in the Romanian literary space antecedent values, cases of "protochronism", as they would be called by some today. It is his manner of escaping a complex of inferiority in the name of an entire literature.'⁵⁷ However, this is a 'trigger' of the Aesopian reading, in which the two 'screens' – the adverb 'briefly' and the quotation marks – are meant to euphemize to a certain extent the categorical note of the two 'markers' in the following sentences. The first 'marker' is the placing of Iorga's (therefore, protochronism's) undertakings in the typology of cultural complexes theorized by Martin. The term 'complex' is defined as follows:

A 'complex' emerges when within or subsequent to certain adverse judgments appear exaggerations and, respectively, diminutions of the real proportions, abusive restrictions or generalizations, attempts that may compensate on other levels or simply the overthrow of levels as such, and particularly of criteria.⁵⁸

Furthermore, Martin identifies nine complexes in the evolution of Romanian literature: the 'humble origin' complex, the peripheral existence complex, the complex of belatedness in relation to the West, the discontinuity complex, the rurality complex, the complex of the perpetual beginning, the imitation complex, the complex of the absence of the 'seeded players' and the complex of the lack of an audience. The operation of all these complexes is defined by certain 'indirect, circumvented, paradoxical manifestations' rather than by their internalization: when discovering a cultural gap, several theorists or ideologues attempt to 'cover or diminish it by various artifices', by 'positive or negative compensating initiatives'.⁵⁹ Hence, the following precept: 'The presence of "complexes" is identifiable not only in their manifestations as such, but also in the attempts of concealing or overcoming them – particularly in the latter, we might add.'⁶⁰ Therefore, the most obvious symptom of the existence of a cultural (inferiority) complex is its *negation* rather than its *assumption*; it is the attempt of hiding, minimizing or even converting it in a sign of one's own creative superiority. By including the historiographical practices of Iorga and the protochronists in the

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 16-17.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 33.

category of cultural complexes, Martin implicitly acknowledges that such approaches are invalid and that they originate in a (self)mystification process.

The other Aesopian ‘marker’ present in the quote is more complex and it includes, first, the very equation of Iorga’s position with that of the protochronists’. Later, Călinescu himself is associated with this line of thinking, but not without a series of important dissociations: ‘By rehabilitating tradition, G. Călinescu replays Iorga’s global organic view of Romanian literature; however, he circumvents the mix-up of the criteria and the anti-modernist exclusivism.’⁶¹ Nevertheless, according to Martin, the dissociation of the ‘aesthetic’ from the ‘cultural’ and the receptiveness toward modernism are not sufficient in order to validate the manner in which Călinescu reads and reshapes the Romanian literary tradition. Even if in the 1941 *Istoria* there are no caricature exaggerations, such as at the protochronists – who, for instance, thought that Romanian literature began during the 5th-6th century A.D.,⁶² although the first preserved text in Romanian dates back to 1521 –, ‘Călinescu has [...] the tendency of accelerating the evolution of Romanian literature, by making appear sooner in its historical stages, if not truly valuable works, at least their prophetic signs’.⁶³ There are two procedures that the Romanian literary historian uses to this purpose. On the one hand, in the attempt to emphasize the organicity of his national literary tradition, Călinescu frequently practices what Martin calls ‘a reverse analogy’ or ‘regressive remote assimilation’, i.e. the reading of older writers through the works of more recent writers, in an attempt to modernize the former. On the other hand, Călinescu overinterprets the creations of old Romanian literature by a ‘*fragmentarist* criticism’, which allows him to ‘put aesthetic *virtualities* in relation to aesthetic *values*, to assign to them the same regime and thus to trigger a necessary conversion of his critical construction’.⁶⁴ No matter how subtle the literary historian’s techniques, however, his reviewer firmly concludes that ‘the enormous delay between the initial and the “middle” period of Romanian literature [...] is the strongest argument against the hypothesis of organic evolution’, which means that, ‘according to Călinescu, a great part of our literary tradition is *invented*’.⁶⁵ Here, the polemic and subversive aim of Martin’s demonstration becomes obvious. In the sequence Iorga – Călinescu – protochronism, he approaches Călinescu’s method as if it were a version of ‘soft’ protochronism, whose invalidation necessarily discredits contemporary ‘hard’ protochronism. For, though the critic does not render explicit the broad ranging conclusions of his interpretation and does not encode them figuratively, the relationships he establishes between the terms of the comparison lead, through their implications, to the thesis that protochronism is only an ideological fiction –

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 168.

⁶² Tomiță, *O istorie ‘glorioasă’*, p. 153.

⁶³ Martin, *G. Călinescu*, p. 185.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 188.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 189.

and even a rudimentary one as compared to its predecessors in the Romanian literary historiography.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the previous analyses, we can draw several conclusions. First, we may note that the simple isomorphism between the literal and the 'literary' (subversive) meaning of a text, inferred from the mere identification of 'screens' and 'markers', is not enough in order to justify efficiently its Aesopian reading. As proved by the examples already discussed, the adherents to the Aesopian language condition their own reception by disseminating in their texts some elements I have called 'triggers'. The triggers are discourse sequences that connect *explicitly* two reference frames – one denoting the immediate object of the text, the other one targeting a political reality protected by censorship –, thus opening the way toward a double reading. Iorgulescu dismissing the 'dangers of the bringing up to date', Manolescu overinterpreting Urmuz's sketch as an allegory of the 'consumer society' and Martin mentioning the term 'protochronism' are examples of such triggers. The triggers emerge rarely in a text, otherwise their accumulation would cancel the very 'Aesopian' quality of its language and would turn subversion into open challenge. Conversely, the triggers always occupy a strategic place in a discourse (usually, in foreword or afterword sections, at key points of an argumentation etc.); frequently, their exceptional status is signaled precisely by their apparently illogical or inopportune presence. Thus, Iorgulescu's denegation, Manolescu's overinterpretation, and Martin's mention of protochronism do not seem at all necessary in the economy of the three critics' demonstrations. However, as shown, they appear precisely in order to direct the reader toward an Aesopian reading of the texts.

Second, the cases discussed above provide us with a basis for the classification of the rhetorical strategies used in Aesopian language. Thus, we note first that Aesopian language does not depend necessarily on 'figurativeness', at least not in the narrow meaning of this term. A conclusive example in this respect is Martin's book, which does not use figurativeness at all, but appeals significantly to the resources of implicitness. Therefore, the classification of Aesopian language according to the known linguistic levels is proved incomplete and inadequate in emphasizing the particularities of its more complex rhetorical strategies. However, in keeping with an increasingly growing tendency in the humanistic research of the last decades,⁶⁶ we could assign to the term 'figurativeness' a broader scope

⁶⁶ Since the bibliography on this issue has attained, in the meantime, encyclopedic dimensions, I will mention here only the pioneering works published in the 1960s and 1970s by Bloom in poetics, White in the theory of historiography and Durand in anthropology: Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New

and consider ‘figures’ as modes of global (macro-textual) structuration of a discourse. From this point of view, the three cases analysed above are paradigmatic for the use of three different Aesopian strategies, which we could call ‘parabolic’, ‘dialectic’ and ‘ironic’. Of these, the *parabolic* strategy, exemplified by Iorgulescu’s reading of Caragiale, consists in the analogical projection of a secondary reference frame (the communist reality), which is then satirized indirectly, by caricaturing the primary reference frame (Caragiale’s world). This is the simplest and most widely spread strategy of Aesopian language, found in any epoch and in any discourse, from the simple character sketches to philosophical utopias. The second strategy is, to some extent, more sophisticated; we could call it *antithetic* (or *dialectic*) and it is exemplified by Manolescu’s interpretation of Arghezi and Urmuz. In a first stage, it involves the projection of two secondary reference frames (the communist world *vs.* another type of social organization), that are correlated with two primary reference frames engaged in a relationship of mutual exclusion. In a second stage, the user of Aesopian language cancels or overthrows the differences between the two primary worlds, which automatically will lead to the cancellation/overthrow of the value relation between the two secondary reference frames. Finally, the third type of Aesopian strategy, illustrated by Martin’s monograph on Călinescu, is the *ironic* one; it is based on the establishment of a gradual sequence (of equivalences, inclusions or comparisons) among a larger number of reference frames (e.g. Iorga – Călinescu – protochronism). In this case, the Aesopian technique resides in discrediting, either in a purely argumentative manner or in a literary one, the most inoffensive and least ideologized of these frames, so that the negative conclusions of the interpretation should then shift implicitly to the other frames as well (particularly to the taboo one, protected by censorship against criticism or satire).

Given its high degree of generality, I think that this classification of Aesopian language can apply not only to other literary genres (such as poetry or the novel), but also to other cultural codes (in music or cinematography, for instance). However, since I have not embarked on approaching such aspects in this study,⁶⁷ I am content for now to signal that these types are

York: Oxford University, 1975); Gilbert Durand, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, trans. by Margaret Sankey and Judith Hatten (Brisbane: Boombana Publications, 1999 [1960]).

⁶⁷ However, I wish to signal here a potential application of the above-mentioned categories, that is the diachronic analysis of the degree of dissemination of the three Aesopian strategies in a certain discursive practice. Although the sequence ‘parabolic’ – ‘dialectic’ – ‘ironic’ indicates, by the multiplication of the planes of reference, a progression from the point of view of the complexity of the procedures and tends to suggest, thus, a historical evolution, we need to note that, in the case of literary criticism under Romanian late communism, the distribution chart of the three strategies is configured as an arc rather than as an ascending curve. In other words, while from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1980s we witness a transition from the ‘parabolic’ technique to the ‘ironic’ one, throughout the last decade of communism we can observe a return to the ‘parabolic’ strategy. Moreover, this process is seen not only in the critical discourse (e.g., Iorgulescu’s *Eseu*), but also in the fictional one, i.e. the largest number of ‘parabolic’ novels having as object the satirization of the communist regime were written and/or published in the 1980s (e.g., *Viața pe un peron* by Octavian Paler – 1981,

also present in other works of the above-mentioned critics. Certainly, it is not mandatory that an author should use a single type of strategy. Thus, the ‘parabolic’ strategy is used by Manolescu, too, in the reading of other Corinthian Romanian novels, such as *Creanga de aur* by Mihail Sadoveanu,⁶⁸ or *Bunavestire* by Nicolae Breban.⁶⁹ The ‘dialectic’ techniques are also present in Manolescu’s commentaries on the novel *Moromeții* by Marin Preda, where the critic opposes Ilie Moromete’s ‘peasant utopia’ to his son’s, Nicolae Moromete, ‘socialist utopia’.⁷⁰ A similar strategy is deployed by Mircea Iorgulescu in the analysis of the travel notes by the Romanian boyar Dinicu Golescu, in which the West is rendered as a space of civilization and progress, whereas the Romanian feudal society at the beginning of the 19th century is described in the terms of a totalitarian regime.⁷¹ Finally, Mircea Martin used ‘ironic’ language in order to rehabilitate the cultural theories of B. Fundoianu, who, by pretending that the entire modern Romanian culture had only been a ‘colony’ of French culture, had become an undesirable author to the protochronist movement.⁷²

Third, the diversity, complexity, and subversive strength of the Aesopian language practiced by Romanian literary criticism during late communism provide us with a more detailed image of the Romanian intelligentsia’s attitude toward Ceaușescu’s regime. Although, as already shown, in communist Romania, declared dissent was a very rare form of resistance, the Romanian writers and critics signaled, by using an Aesopian language, the most severe abuses of the ‘Red Totalitarianism’: the limitation of the freedom of expression, the generalized corruption, the use of violence as a kind of ‘social dialogue’, the repression of individual thinking, the falsification of history under the pressure of current political imperatives, etc. In this manner, although it did not materialize as an extensive social movement, the Romanian ‘resistance through culture’ contributed significantly to the

Al doilea mesager by Bujor Nedelcovici – 1985 and the posthumous *Adio, Europa!* by I. D. Sîrbu – 1993). Although this phenomenon is worth a separate discussion, I believe that the critics’ return to a less sophisticated form of Aesopian language in the ninth decade must be linked to the intensification of Romanian dissent at the end of communism and, in this context, must be read as an amplification of the ‘resistance through culture’ against Ceaușescu’s regime.

⁶⁸ See Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe*, pp. 605-614, and Nicolae Manolescu, *Sadoveanu sau Utopia cărții*, afterword by Mircea Martin (București: Eminescu, 1976; repr. Pitești: Paralela 45, 2002), pp. 213-222. Concerning the Aesopian reading of this novel, Martin points out: ‘N. Manolescu relates the representation of Byzantium (in *Creanga de aur*) to the way in which Malraux or Camus envisaged China and, respectively, Algeria before the Second World War. But his subjacent reference [...] is to the vision of the literature contemporary with him. [...] In the same manner, by writing on past eras or spaces historically unmapped, at least some of the Romanian prose and poetry writers wrote, in their turn, on life during communism.’ (‘Prefață’, in Manolescu, *Sadoveanu*, p. 246)

⁶⁹ Manolescu, *Arca lui Noe*, pp. 676-698.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 262-293.

⁷¹ Mircea Iorgulescu, ‘Din vremea lui Dinicu Golescu’, in *Firescul ca excepție* (București: Cartea Românească, 1979), pp. 7-56.

⁷² Mircea Martin, *Introducere în opera lui B. Fundoianu* (București: Minerva, 1984).

perpetuation of democratic values and the undermining of the ideological bases of Ceaușescu's regime.⁷³

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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⁷³ Nevertheless, it would be wrong to infer from this that Aesopian language could ever be a satisfying equivalent of 'open' dissent against a regime. As compared to the latter, Aesopian language is characterized by at least four limits which always dilute its efficiency: 1. an *aesthetic* limit, meaning that, precisely because of its contextual marks, which attach its obscure referential item to a certain time and place, Aesopian art tends to appear outdated to the newer generations of consumers – and, in general, to all those who, not living in the totalitarian political system in which the work was produced, cannot grasp the abundance of hints included in it; 2. a *cognitive* limit, resulting from the tension between the (alleged) subversive message of the text and the encoded ('Aesopian') form in which it is wrapped: when the work displays too high a degree of ambiguousness, the risk is that the meaning communicated by the text resides in a complete ideological and moral relativism rather than in the subtleness of political subversion; 3. a *political* limit: in order to be able to pass censorship, Aesopian texts always concealed their subversive message under a series of propaganda clichés or, at least, under benevolent attitudes toward the oppressive regime; or, as suggested by Negrici, a literature of 'half-truths' is by its very nature a literature of 'half-lies' (*Literatura română*, p. 75); 4. an *ethical* limit, determined by the fact that in absolute terms, in a system relying on lie and manipulation, the courage of uttering the plain truth is preferable to the discourse of indirection.