

Liviu MALIȚA, *Heretical Literature. Politically Censored Texts between 1949-1977*, București: Cartea Românească, 2016, ISBN: 978-973-23-3140-8, 372 p.

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The Romanian post-communist critical discourse proposed a fair amount of studies and critical debates meant to methodize and synthesize the crucial impact that the totalitarian regime has had on both Romanian literature and literary criticism. While the highly aggressive anti-communist public speech of the 1990s has slowly faded and gave way to a rather distant observation of the cultural aftermath, a younger generation of scholars has managed to reset, in the past decade, the discursive formulas and clichés and open a relatively impartial dialogue on the matter. One of the most notable and thorough endeavours concerning the political censorship during the communist regime in Romania and its harsh consequences is Liviu Malița's volume, *Heretical Literature. Politically Censored Texts between 1949-1977*, an extensive study that aims to contribute with a very detailed landscaping of the censorship circuit and attempts to dissect the complex mechanisms and formulas of the literary texts that could be considered subversive literature. The author starts by defining the heretical literature, a concept employed in its demonstration as a metaphor that englobes all the autochthonous texts that have passed through a process of "purification" by way of the machinery of political censorship.

The volume's main thesis revolves around the idea of a superposition of the Communist Party's doctrine and the censorship's selection criteria. The censorship organism had only one goal: to transform artistic products into communist propaganda. Three general principles that have known some sort of continuity in what concerns the censor's activity are depicted by Liviu Malița in the very first chapter of his study. Firstly, the author speaks of a "democratic mask of censorship," a political gesture that states that the only literature that should enjoy attention is the literature of and for the people, the citizen, the proletariat, while aiming to hide the ideological purpose of literature and arts. Secondly, the "populist mask" translates the Communist Party's way of reinstating the intellectuals in a literary circuit. The two

main consequences of this shift were: 1) the urge to write a literature that addresses communal issues, thus lacking individual, subjective perspectives, and 2) the urge to write a literature that stands for national values. Thirdly, the “educational mask” finds its purpose in expelling the so-called entertainment art from the public scenes, for the only literary and artistic products that should remain accessible for the general audience should have been the moralist, pedagogically oriented ones. The volatile and rather lax characteristics of these principles represent one of the main reasons for what the author considers a lack of coherence in the censorship’s praxis.

By virtue of its far-reaching ambition to map the complex relation between the censor’s driving and the literary products of communist Romania, Liviu Malița’s volume attempts, in the second chapter, to formulate a chronological history of the literature written between 1950 and 1980 in Romania. The author’s analysis means to synthesize the dynamic flow generated by the constant challenges that Romanian writers pose to the censorship’s activity. If literature finds new ways to fight the system, censors face the urgency to change, in a very rapid pace, its own principles and methods. Such needs give rise to a whole new set of consequences. For instance, these dynamic causes, at the dawn of 1960, a state of confusion at the very core of the censorship apparatus: a re-thinking of its own purposes seems highly necessary for this already unstable institution. Thus, in the 1960s, censorship’s demarche starts to show its labilities, and from 1964 until 1971 it will manifest its most permissive phase. The aforementioned time frame will also be the most productive segment in the history of Romanian literature under communism. The author then shows how Romanian literature regains its autonomy and manages to preserve it. The solution that censors find to regain and maintain control over the literary production is a shifting from the political purposes in the purifying process of the text to the moral area. Thus, the main focus becomes the moral deviations and the representations of sexuality. A process of purging the literature of any immoral, promiscuous elements replaces the process of turning literary text into communist propaganda. What the author insists on is the fact that the censorship’s activity was not lighter in this period, but only different. What the writers were facing was not a looser, less intrusive approach of their texts, but one that, while still leaving altered versions of those texts, allowed them to be autonomous literary objects instead of ideological instruments. By mapping the literary genres and movements that were the most targeted by the censorship, Liviu Malița examines how the poor literary education of

the censors was translated into the downfall of bewildering or perplexing literary texts. The hermetic literature was sacrificed because of the constant fear that a subversive meaning could hide behind an apparently meaningless or absurd textual construction.

Furthermore, the third and probably the most notable, both qualitatively and quantitatively, chapter of Malița's volume follows another dialectic movement, this time between the censor's activity and the literary themes that have constantly changed, in order to satisfy the communist political amendments or, on the contrary, to fight back the system. Thus, a possible classification, states the author, is quite as simple as "prohibited themes" and "tolerated themes": "The very fact of cultivating the first ones or/and ignoring the propagandistic themes was an act of *(micro)resistance*" (119). This situation causes a unique kind of instability in the Romanian literary scene, one that further generates a strange paradox: in a very rapid pace, the prohibited themes and the tolerated ones become quite similar, at the point of total superposition of one another. For instance, the quite explicit propagandistic themes like history, revolution, or the current social context and the citizen's position in the communist state know a symbolic reversion: writers tend to misguide the propagandistic purposes by changing the tonality of their narratives. In other words, they choose to abandon the eulogistic affective tone while depicting communist realities or historical events, and employ a despondent discursive formula, speaking about failures instead of victories.

Religion represents another thematic challenge for writers under communism. The author examines how this particular theme has known quite an evolution – from an abusive treatment back in 1950 until around 1965, when writing about religion used to be a bold gesture because it was seen by the censors as offensive to the communist regime – a subversive act immediately banned by the censorship –, to a relative acceptance after the so-called "ideological liberation," a situation that allows a minimal amount of subversive gestures. The same kind of intolerance is manifested by de censorship towards the subjective themes. More specifically, talking about the very particularities of one's existence is not only a risky enterprise, but it also came to be a forbidden one:

The divorce between the objectives of the Center and the attributes of literature activates the mechanisms of Censorship. A suite of themes become politically

prohibited: loneliness, helplessness, lack of perspective, social isolation, uniformity, marginality, lack of communication, the absurd, the perils of liberty, individual exasperation in the face of masses, existential angst, subjective obstruction, insecurity etc. All these issues of estrangement, of failure, of miscommunication and of the absurd (fraudulently inserted in the artistic text as a kind of Trojan horse), as well as the attempts to fictionally recover (by means of theophany and hierophany) a sense of individuality that strongly opposed the optimist triumphalism of the period and showed a blatant disregard to the official image cultivated by the propaganda. That is why they were difficult to tolerate (229).

Erotic literature, literature that spoke about the great themes of humanity like love, death, or liberty was also challenged during the communist reign of political censorship. Erotic scenes were taken as sexual, promiscuous elements, so the theme was associated with pornography; death, when depicted in literary terms, became a prohibitive theme due to its subversive potential. While communist propaganda was stressing on the prosperity, health and the good life of the communist citizen, any literary representation of dissolution of life became unbearable. Liberty was, among all these risky themes, the most likely to trigger censorship, as a conversation about liberty was not only upholding a massive subversive potential, but it could display, without any filters, the oppressive character of the communist regime. The most accessible solution that writers could find was shifting this theme through other genres (such as reconverting the human possibilities of liberty in fables).

The author's well-detailed inventory is nonetheless a redeeming gesture, explicitly meant to disrupt the false idea that autochthonous literature has sacrificed itself, under the communist regime, in order to serve as propaganda, having, in the best case, succeeded to slip between the lines a minimal form of ideological resistance, while still limiting itself to the tolerated themes. Liviu Malița's volume tries to combat a widely spread misconception about Romanian literature under the communist regime and its so-called failure, arguing that the wins of this particular literary segment of Romania's history are to be found in the admirable ability of the writers to corrupt a tolerated theme and transform its very cliché elements into minor yet essential subversive acts. The creative ways of keeping literature alive while also evading the censor's interventions is what, according to the author, should be valued.

A shorter but no less notable chapter in Malița's volume is dedicated to the literary history and criticism and their most affected features by political censorship

in the aforementioned period. The author starts from a general premise: Romanian literary history and criticism have known the need to reconstruct their very own mechanism and redirect their purposes in order to satisfy the regime. “The Communist Party has narrowed the scope for both to a very precise set of tasks, and it has shown zero tolerance towards emancipatory tendencies” (285). The author outlines the main obligations of the two institutions. Firstly, the literary historians had to re-discuss the autochthonous cultural heritage, by engaging a revolutionary discourse, and ensure a privileged role for our literature in the European tradition. Secondly, literary criticism has been assigned to a rather derogatory role: to lead the writers on the good path and to make sure, by any means, that they choose to stick to the tolerated themes. The main conclusion of Malița’s study revolves around the impossible situation of the critics. While the artists had the possibilities of language in their favour, literary critics found themselves in the difficult position of totally reshaping their discourse and deliver a very clean, purified version that could stand no ambiguous or polyvalent elements.

Finally, the last segment of the volume investigates the most circulated topics related to the survival of literature under communism: dissident movements, inevitable compromise, resistance through culture and aesthetic mutations. The lens through which the author chooses to analyse the aforementioned issues aim to be rather distant or objective, as Liviu Malița himself states from the very beginning. His efforts are directed towards an investigation that can validate 1) the very existence of dissident movements in the totalitarian Romania, 2) the necessary dimension of the compromise that writers have often need to do in order to remain on the literary scene, 3) to re-think the notion of “resistance through culture” as merely a mask for a collective trauma that Romanian culture has been yet unable to surpass, and 4) the effects (the damaging or, on the contrary, the few beneficial ones) that censorship’s intervention has had upon the aesthetic value of the literature written under communism.

By mapping not only historical facts and evolutionary aspects of one of the most damaging cultural apparatus of the communist ideology that interfered in the field of literature and literary history and criticism, but the complex dialectic that existed between censorship and the literary object, Malița’s study is a most notable reading and a contribution of great interest for studies related to subversive literature. By virtue of its rigorous endeavour in terms of historical data, structure

and its theoretical openings, Liviu Malița has managed to synthesize an important phenomenon, with its ways of survival, wins, failures, and finally its inevitable death, and leave its echoes open for further investigation.