

Ștefan Baghiu, Ovio Olaru, Andrei Terian (eds.), *Beyond the Iron Curtain. Revisiting the Literary System of Communist Romania*, Peter Lang, 2022, ISBN: 978-3-631-87107-2, 273 p.

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*Beyond the Iron Curtain. Revisiting the Literary System of Communist Romania* sets out to map a territory which has remained largely underresearched in the last three decades. Romanian literature produced during communism has generally been seen through a distortive lens and routinely reduced to simplistic narratives about an evil regime, ethical absolutes like dissidence or collaboration, the myth of complete cultural degradation (with almost no literary value or meaningful innovation taking place for decades) and perfect homogeneity (communist literature as a state-controlled monolith with only a handful of exceptions) – a territory shrouded either in ignorance or moralising discourses, whose scientific, rigorous, and critical investigation has only just begun. In the introduction, editors Ștefan Baghiu, Ovio Olaru and Andrei Terian highlight the pioneering nature of the work done by the contributors, since “regarding Romanian communism, nearly every academic debate on the subject was, up until recently, laden with various myths, stereotypes, and clichés that impeded or, in any case, encumbered critical—and especially self-critical—reflection on the object of study” (10). They also point out that, in postcommunist Romania, obsessed with the indictment of the previous regime and its ramifications, certain areas and issues have been excluded from literary history and need to be explored more closely: for example, the phenomenon of translation or rurality, both of which have been addressed by the authors in previous collective volumes such as *Ruralism and Literature in Romania* (2019) or *The Culture of Translation in Romania* (2018). *Beyond the Iron Curtain* can be read as a continuation of these projects, especially given its use of the most recent and relevant methodologies and concepts in the field (from digital humanities to metahistory and post-theory), which help the authors transcend the impressionistic tradition of Romanian literary criticism, as well as the anticommunist fixation which has influenced the public discourse ever since 1989.

Andrei Terian's chapter – which stands apart from the three sections of the volume – is an eloquent example, as it makes use of Hayden White's metahistorical model to investigate the “structural anachronism” of three literary histories published after the regime change (by Nicolae Manolescu, Eugen Negrici, and Marian Popa), concluding that, although they describe the communist period as a Satire, the three historians also resort to Romance patterns having to do with heroic struggle and triumph, typical of nineteenth-century historiography. However, just like all the other articles in the volume, Terian's case study has higher theoretical stakes, arguing that, since literary historiography has ideological implications which “actually conceal two sets of often diverging criteria: a certain ‘way of functioning’ of history and a certain attitude of the historian toward this ‘mode of operation’” (39), White's system should be supplemented with another category, called “perspective”. This also goes to show that a (semi)peripheral literature can sometimes serve as the perfect ground on which to test a hypothesis, since it is often rife with tensions, (inferiority and superiority) complexes, explanatory narratives for a particular status in the world system, and contradictory attitudes towards the West (oscillating between admiration, imitation, and resentment).

The first section, Rural Sites and Socialist Topics, begins with research done by Daiana Gârdan, Emanuel Modoc and Cosmin Borza into the Romanian novel. Daiana Gârdan's work employs stylometrics and topic modelling to draw the lexical map of the socialist novel, highlighting that, while the most frequent terms are generic (and ideologically malleable), we can see the predominantly social themes of the subgenre reflected in its choice of words (physical traits, time, and the human condition being the three main categories). She also reaches a series of conclusions that are simply inaccessible through close reading. For instance, her network illustrates the very limited stylistic variety which characterises the socialist realist novel, the necessary distinction between socialist realism and *Proletkult* literature (which was rarely made in local criticism, but which can be seen in Zaharia Stancu's unique position in the network), the fact that authorial style can be more relevant (at least from a quantitative point of view) than subgenre conventions etc. Modoc's exploration of fictional geography demonstrates that, after 1947, the rural novel acquired a new function, that of depicting the great changes undergone by Romanian society: collectivisation, as well as the previous exploitation of the peasantry (and the 1907 uprising), which had rarely

appeared in fiction. As Modoc puts it, an inquiry into the structure of the communist novel – like the ones conducted in his and Gârdan’s articles - is necessary for understanding the morphological evolution of the genre itself and its function in the Romanian literary system. For example, Modoc identifies the subtle changes in novelistic form, arguing that the succession of different dominant subgenres and spatial configurations proves that the rural was ultimately a fertile ground for local literary experiments: from the early critique of the “old system” to the counter-utopias of the obsessive decade and on to magical realism.

At this juncture, it should be noted that the last few years and the advent of distant reading in Romanian literary studies have drastically changed the perspective on rurality and ruralism. While the twentieth century was often dominated by impressionistic criticism and the ideological manipulation of literary history, with critics like Lovinescu claiming that the rural was a prevalent thematic sector *and* a plague on the Romanian novel, recent research has convincingly shown not only that the rural novel was quantitatively marginal before 1947 (see Cosmin Borza and Ștefan Baghiu’s seminal work in *Ruralism and Literature in Romania* and MJCST) but also that the modernisation of Romanian literature was achieved precisely through the increased depiction of rural life and labour (although representation remained low for many decades). In this volume, Borza proposes an analysis of the collectivisation novel and the ways in which, far from simply reproducing the official ideology of their time, these narratives managed to confront political doctrine with the rural reality it was meant to alter, showing that so-called “modernisation” faced significant challenges when actually put into practice in the Romanian village. Borza also discusses the emergence of a social dimension in rural literature, focusing on two facets of rural modernity, i.e., the depiction of vulnerable social categories (for instance, women) and the bureaucratisation of the relationship between the individual and the community.

Finally, in her reading of Nicolae Breban’s canonical novels, Andreea Mironescu argues that the increasingly aggressive cult of masculinity in the 60s goes hand in hand with a belief in a natural sort of superiority or hierarchy within the social body. Thus, Breban questions dominant masculinities (the stud and the prophet) only to “ultimately consolidate hegemonic masculinity as a form of self-legitimizing himself as a writer” (103), so that the Sixties Generation actually upheld both the ideal of “aesthetic

autonomy” and the idea that great canonical literature is written by men. In short, Mironescu reveals the gendered mechanism of canon formation in the 60s and the causal link between the socialist egalitarian dogma (which nevertheless precluded any contact with Western feminism) and current gender roles in Romanian society.

The second part of the book discusses the cosmopolitan dimension of Romanian literature written before 1989, caught between the theoretical ideal of communist internationalism and the reality of Romanian nationalism and isolationism in the last decades of the regime. Once again, the authors manage to debunk the prejudice that this period only produced ideology-driven, uncreative, homogenous literature or, on the contrary, dissident writing, uncovering the many negotiations and ideological nuances captured by fiction writers. Crucially, the case studies in the volume reveal the (semi)peripheral and, what is more, subversive modulations of cosmopolitanism, a cultural ideal otherwise prone to the uncritical celebration of literary circulation and exchange, which often fails to take into consideration the “combined and uneven development” (to quote WReC) of the literary world system. The authors of the second section tackle the complicated situation of cosmopolitanism, following in the footsteps of critics like Christian Moraru, Leela Ghandi, or Galin Tihanov (among many others), who warn against the possible waning of ethical cosmopolitanism (fostering difference – including cultural difference – and mutual knowledge) when faced with either resurgent nationalisms or indiscriminate globalism.

In this sense, Doris Mironescu repurposes Homi Bhabha’s postcolonial concept of “vernacular cosmopolitanism” in his study of the Jassy group (founded in late communism), arguing that the geographical marginality of the literary circle contributed to and permitted their (more or less) subtle critique of the regime and nationalism in general: authors such as Luca Pițu combined a commitment to local, provincial, deeply-rooted canonical writers (Creangă, Sadoveanu) with imported theoretical systems like pataphysics and with a relentless irony towards the authority of the national canon. To quote Mironescu, “by revisiting the literary practices of the Iași Group, I am advocating for a specific type of imagining the cosmopolitan, which may not have exhausted its possibilities in the 1980s” (116). In a similar vein, Imre József Balázs tackles the marginal cosmopolitanism of Hungarian and German writers from Romania, whose ethnic identity allowed them to reach a different audience from the monolingual

Romanian public, while also engaging with Western phenomena which could never be fully assimilated or institutionalised by the communist system: the hippie lifestyle, rock music, Beat poetry. Balázs also argues that the countercultural attitudes and literary experiments done in the 1960s by these writers ultimately resulted in the subversive and dissident movements of the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, festival culture generated a preference for solidarity and community life rather than isolation and alienation; likewise, the left-leaning politics associated with Western counterculture (e.g., a critical stance against social elites, be they capitalist or communist) contributed to ethnic minority writers being able to evaluate the system through a Marxist lens.

Ștefan Baghiu and Costi Rogozanu discuss the “superstar” status of Marin Preda (one of the most important and well-known authors in post-war literature) through the prism of canon formation and literary politics, with the year of his death being seen as the symbolic death of the novel (as it was conceived during communism), of socialist cultural infrastructure and of the propagandistic value of literature, eventually overshadowed by the radio and television. The authors bring new and essential nuances to the understanding of the East-West relationship before 1989, arguing that the state-sponsored bohemian lifestyle and social standing of writers like Nichita Stănescu and Marin Preda could be viewed as an Eastern adaptation of artistic decadence in the West. They also demonstrate that Tariq Ali’s concept of “market realism” (selecting one’s narrative techniques with the market in mind) is paradoxically applicable to the communist world, as well, where writers combined the original aspects of their work with mainstream literary strategies in order to secure their place in the local literary system.

In her chapter, Ramona Hărșan analyses the experimental work of Mircea Nedelciu and Gheorghe Crăciun and proves that not only is their intra-fictional meta discourse a hidden autofictional strategy, but it also functions as white noise for the censors (made of unreliable narrators, irony, and dark sarcasm), a histrionic practice meant to orient the reader towards the stories in the background, including their political subtext. Ultimately, Hărșan’s article provides an opportunity to discover the changes undergone by Western literary imports (French textualism, for instance, experimental prose) when planted in a strikingly different sociopolitical context: while critical clichés would have us believe that metafictional games only hide a lack of

substance, the author underlines the real subversive potential of these techniques when read against their historical background. Similarly, Mihai Iovănel's chapter on the depiction of UFOs and extraterrestrial life in Romanian nonfiction during communism includes an analysis of the mutations suffered by Western and Soviet models when travelling to a (semi)peripheral culture: as the fascination with UFOs and extraterrestrial beings, as well as the inherent pseudoscientific explanations were borrowed from abroad and then adapted to the local communist context, the UFOs became a form of Western entertainment compatible with the official political ideology of the Romanian communist system, suggesting that capitalist governments manipulate and exploit their people, just as the American government hides the "truth" about alien life.

The last section is dedicated to the transnational connections of Romanian literature during communism and begins with Ovio Olaru's article, which draws an essential chronology of German ethnic literature in Romania, as well as its ideological implications: from the pre-communist period, defined by cultural enclosure and ethnocentrism to a second phase, during the Ceaușescu regime, when ethnocentrism was replaced by the import of Western Marxism; finally, on to a third stage, characterised by "ethnocentrism by proxy", i.e., PhiloGermanism practised by non-German anti-communist intellectuals after 1989. In Olaru's analysis, the glorifying self-representation of German ethnics (and, crucially, the racial and cultural stereotypes it conveyed) ultimately resulted in "PhiloGermanism without Germans" and self-colonial attitudes in postcommunist Romanian culture – a previously unexplored causal mechanism which speaks volumes about the ideological evolution of a (semi)peripheral literature and its ethnic milieu. It must also be mentioned that Olaru's and Balázs's articles manage to shed light on a lesser-discussed phenomenon pertaining to literature in communist Romania, namely the Marxist critique of communism conducted especially by minority writers, both Hungarian and German. While literary historiography and criticism have prioritised either dissident literature – aimed not only at the political system but leftist philosophy as well – or socialist realism – ridiculed and demonised after 1989, Olaru and Balázs reveal the actual complexities of the Romanian literary field and the ideological modulations and mutations happening throughout the communist period.

With her study of the post-Thaw translation and import of French theory in Romania, Adriana Stan participates in the ongoing debate about *world theory* and the difficulties of decentralising abstract thought and knowledge as a form of literary decolonisation, engaging in conversation with theorists such as Revathi Krishnaswamy or Galin Tihanov. On the one hand, Stan makes a crucial point regarding the impact of the Cold War on Central and Eastern European theory, which was automatically disregarded in the twentieth-century World Republic of Letters unless it permeated the centre through some sort of personal connection (like the one between Lévi-Strauss and Jakobson, which helped the cause of Russian formalism). On the other hand, the author investigates the precise adjustments of French theory to the context of communist Romania – its “ideological re-encoding” (e.g., forewords and introductory studies recommending that these volumes be read through the lens of Marxist-Leninism, criticising the “an-historical” tendencies of structuralism). Rather than being borrowed alongside its Marxist, anti-humanist roots, Stan explains, structuralism underwent a significant change in the Romanian literary system, being used as an anti-ideological form of close reading and aesthetic, decontextualised criticism.

The last two contributions – by Alex Goldiș and Costi Rogozanu – focus on the Romanian novel, which, according to the editors, seems to be the genre that best captures ideological change. In fact, Goldiș has previously addressed the interdependence between the novel and sociopolitical issues throughout modernity in his chapter from *Theory in the “Post” Era* (2021), where he also mentions the problematic disconnect between materialist and formal analysis in most theories of the novel. More precisely, he decries the fact that the novel is usually understood either from a strictly narratological point of view (Genette-style), divorcing it from historical reality, or a Marxist perspective, where the novel appears as a collection of ideas determined by politics and economy. In *Beyond the Iron Curtain*, Goldiș writes about the translation of Latin American novels into Romanian during the Thaw and liberalisation period, showing that – despite the French novel maintaining its quantitative supremacy – contact with the South American novel brought the most significant innovations in terms of ideology and narrative technique alike. Thus, the Romanian system during communism was determined by “interperipheral relations” and deeply impacted by magical realism (introducing elements such as a proclivity for

bizarre psychologies, for the implausible and lyricism, the abandonment of narrative omniscience etc.). Methodologically, the author pleads for the need to investigate the phenomenon of translation from a quantitative as well as qualitative perspective. In other words, to address the relationship between the foreign works rendered into Romanian and the “needs” of the target-culture. On the one hand, quantitative analysis can help us determine the index of modernity in each case, revealing that South American novels were generally translated into Romanian less than twenty years after their initial publication. On the other hand, Goldiș’s qualitative observations uncover the themes and ideologies that entered Romanian literature due to Latin American translations: anticolonialism, economic precarity, the situation of the Global South.

As for Costi Rogozanu’s chapter on the distinct dissident strategies of Petru Dumitriu, Solzhenitsyn, and Czeslaw Milosz, the author coins the concept of *reverse socialist realism* to explain that in Eastern Europe the instruments of socialist realism – meant to aid the regime and its ideology – often ended up being used against the political system, when writers like Dumitriu discovered that the “masses” or the “common man” could be extremely productive as themes, characters, and readers, especially as the writer became a representative of the people. Thus, Rogozanu manages to deconstruct the dichotomous understanding of literature written during communism: political power vs. the dissident writer, compromise with the regime vs. integrity and heroic self-sacrifice, socialist realism vs. “valuable” literature. He also looks at the Western reception of different dissident authors, concluding that the West was fascinated by the idea of collective and physical suffering (Solzhenitsyn’s gulag), while Dumitriu’s novels failed to succeed “at the centre” because of their focus on the inner life of the characters and their individual troubles.

All in all, *Beyond the Iron Curtain* is an undoubtedly essential contribution to Romanian literary history, as well as the most recent theoretical debates taking place across borders and academic fields: debates on world theory, narratology and critical theory in the study of novelistic production, the connection between intra-fictional gender roles and the gendered nature of the canon – to name but a few. Besides identifying and correcting the failures of recent literary history and criticism regarding the communist period – fuelled by anticommunist paranoia, self-righteousness, and a lack of scientific objectivity – the volume also brings a clearer perspective on Romanian



culture today, since its roots in the communist period are finally being explored rigorously and with the most appropriate theoretical tools. Last but not least, it shows that research into a (semi)peripheral literature can prove productive from a theoretical viewpoint and that literary historiography has a crucial role to play in the current development of the humanities.