

CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN HISTORICAL FICTION AS A MEDIATING TRANSISTOR OF THE “ZEMIPERIPHERY”

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ABSTRACT. *Contemporary Romanian Historical Fiction as a Mediating Transistor of the “Zemiperiphery”.* Historical fiction, characterized by its ambivalence between political instrumentalization and fidelity to the real referent, emerges as a vector of transnational connectivity, translating (semi)peripheral narrative scenarios into the language of the global core. In the post-1990 Romanian context, this dynamic acquires particular salience through the lens of “zemiperiphery”, which, as Stephen Shapiro contends, operates as a “transistor” (2024, 54) amplifying the subaltern voice, otherwise inaudible to the core without its mediation. Post-1990 Romanian historical fiction, through its recourse to universal historical themes – emblematic figures, conflicts, and conquests – functions as a neohermetic channel (Braga 1995) of transculturation, liberating historical discourse from past ideological constraints and integrating it into the global networks of the publishing market. This process, underpinned

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by an aesthetics of “hyperconnectivity” (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024), enables the Romanian *zemiperiphery* to negotiate tensions between the local and the global, generating a hybrid cultural memory. By transgressing national boundaries and recontextualizing narrative, Romanian historical fiction constitutes a node of cultural flow, asserting a dynamic identity in dialogue with transnational networks. The theoretical framework is applied to a diverse range of historical fictions, selected for their distinct conceptual approaches and narrative strategies. These works exemplify different ways in which authors such as Răzvan Rădulescu, Constantin Țoiu, Doina Ruști, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, Filip Florian, and Octavian Soviany interpret and reimagine history.

Keywords: *historical fiction, metafiction, zemiperiphery, model.*

REZUMAT. Ficțiunea istorică românească contemporană ca un transmițător mediator al „zemiperiferiei”. Ficțiunea istorică, marcată de ambivalența între instrumentalizarea politică și fidelitatea față de referentul real, se afirmă ca un vector de conectivitate transnațională, traducând scenarii narative (semi)periferice în limbajul centrului global. În contextul românesc post-1990, această dinamică capătă o relevanță aparte prin prisma „zemiperiferiei”, care, conform lui Stephen Shapiro, funcționează ca un „tranzistor” (2024, 54) ce amplifică vocea subalternului, invizibilă centrului fără medierea sa. Ficțiunea istorică românească post-1990, prin recursul la teme istorice universale – figuri emblematice, conflicte și cuceriri –, devine un canal „neohermetic” (Braga 1995) de transculturare, eliberând discursul istoric de constrângerile ideologice ale trecutului și integrându-l în rețelele globale ale pieței editoriale. Acest proces, susținut de o estetică a „hiperconectivității” (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024), permite „zemiperiferiei” românești să negocieze tensiunile dintre local și global, generând o memorie culturală hibridă. Prin transgresarea frontierelor naționale și recontextualizarea narativă, ficțiunea istorică românească se constituie ca un nod de flux cultural, afirmând o identitate dinamică în dialog cu rețelele transnaționale. Cadrul teoretic este aplicat unui spectru divers de ficțiuni istorice, selectate pentru abordările lor conceptuale distincte și strategiile narative. Aceste opere exemplifică diferite moduri în care autori precum Răzvan Rădulescu, Constantin Țoiu, Doina Ruști, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, Filip Florian și Octavian Soviany interpretează și reimaginează istoria.

Cuvinte-cheie: *proza istorică, metaficțiune, zemiperiferie, model.*

Conceptual Delimitations of Historical Fiction

Defining “historical fiction” entails a dual orientation: first, it involves the deployment of historical themes within literary texts, manifesting through multifaceted perspectives, whether by projecting narratives into distant or proximate epochs, employing characters grounded in documentary sources, or

engaging in fictionalizations and reinterpretations in the service of literary imagination. Additionally, a crucial distinction must be established from the outset between "historical fiction" and the "historical novel." As Alexander Manshel explains, "historical fiction" encompasses "a broad continuum of fictionalizations of the historical past," while the second "describes a specific sector of that continuum occupied by narratives primarily concerned with world historical figures and events, and that take place anywhere between one generation and several centuries before their publication" (2023, 12). Undoubtedly, György Lukács's theory in *The Historical Novel* remains a foundational touchstone for analyzing the historical novel, identifying a paradox exemplified in Flaubert's work: "The proud and bitter paradox which contends that the novel has nothing at all to do with the present, is simply a defensive paradox contending against the trivialities of his age" (1962, 189). The historical novel, therefore, is not merely a recreation of the past but a dialogic engagement with the present, serving as a lens through which contemporary dilemmas are interrogated, thus affirming literature's utilitarian function in shaping a coherent social vision. In Lukács's view, the historical novel functions as a lens for addressing contemporary issues, ordering a social vision through the reimagination of history, inherently embodies this mediatory role.

Universality without mediation is necessarily abstract. We could observe this abstraction in Erckmann-Chatrion though they kept strictly to an exact rendering of immediate reality. Their exclusion of historical determinants (mediations), which in the everyday life: average person are not, as a rule, readily perceptible, but which interacting in their totality with immediate everyday existence form the concrete, essential features of an historical situation, transformed naturalist authenticity into abstraction (215).

Contrary to Georg Lukács's assertion (1969) that realism is the sole mode capable of representing distant lives and experiences in historical fiction, we will demonstrate the limitations of such a prescriptive view. Lukács's framework assumes a direct correspondence between representation and historical reality, prioritizing a dispassionate, historian-like accuracy that disregards the affective and subjective responses elicited in readers. By integrating innovative techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and nonlinear storytelling, the authors that I will use for demonstration craft complex fictional worlds that resonate with readers through emotional depth and cultural interplay, challenging Lukács's notion that realism alone can capture the essence of the past. This affective dimension, as highlighted by Kate Mitchell and Nicola Parsons in *Reading the Represented Past: History and Fiction from 1700 to the Present*, underscores the capacity of historical fiction to evoke diverse, passionate responses, positioning it as a dynamic medium that transcends the rigid boundaries of historical verisimilitude advocated by Lukács.

We observe, as Anne H. Stevens elucidates in *Learning to Read the Past in the Early Historical Novel*, that historical fiction engenders a dialogic interplay between past and present, as well as between central and peripheral zones, by aligning congruences discerned by the universal reader: “Reading the represented past involves a new set of processes, including drawing parallels between the past and the present, reading history as a veil for contemporary scandal, and comprehending historically probable yet invented characters and situations” (Stevens 2013, 21). History and fiction do not merely converge in relations of proximity or distance but are structured through complex, often asymmetrical, dynamics of “distance” and closeness, constituting a “topography” of temporality. The temporal topography of historical fiction can be understood as a symbolic articulation of peripheral positions relative to a global historical core. Within this framework, certain events, moments, or perspectives are selectively receded or distanced, while others are foregrounded or amplified, shaped by the interplay of cultural, political, and social contexts. Consequently, historical fiction functions as a cartography of multiple temporal spirals, characterized by non-linear and uneven lines of distance and proximity. These configurations reflect disparities in power, access to historical memory, and cultural representation, offering a nuanced portrayal of how narratives negotiate the complexities of time and historical experience. Thus, Hamish Dalley notes that one may conceptualize a topography constructed upon layered temporalities:

Historical novels possess ‘temporal systems’ – multiple overlapping constructions of time organised into a more or less coherent order – that are a major part of the text’s symbolic structure. Rather than as an equation in which fiction equals proximity and history equals distance, we need to understand temporality as a kind of topography in which historical novels are structured by uneven relations of distance (Dalley 2013, 34).

In a footnote to a chapter discussing historical fiction, Mircea Muthu, citing Máté Gábor elucidates the role of literature in Central and Southeast Europe in shaping Lukács’s theory: “There is, however, the opinion that Lukács wrote *The Historical Novel* (1936–1937) with the historical novel of Central and Southeast Europe in mind. Cf. Máté Gábor, *Filozófia és regény (Philosophy and the Novel)*, Scientific and Encyclopedic Publishing, Bucharest, 1982” (Muthu 324). A model derived from the Central and Southeast European space serves to better understand authors of historical fiction from these regions. These theories intersect with Shapiro’s proposition, which discusses the use of the transistor areas as a mediating device to facilitate the exchange of cultural information between different fields. Muthu further notes and develops his theory on the idea that “the dialogue and confrontation between East and West is the other,

defining axis for the historical novel of the Southeast" (Muthu 327), to which he adds a synthesis of its three constitutive concepts: opposition, synthesis, and complementarity (Muthu 353).

The second element transfigured, sustained, and reinterpreted in post-1990 Romanian historical fiction is what Linda Hutcheon terms "historiographic metafiction" in her seminal study *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988). We reproduce here her clarification, noting the orthography employed by the author, which elucidates, to a certain extent, the relationship between historical fiction and historiographic metafiction: „Historiographic metafiction incorporates all three of these domains: that is, its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs (*historiographic metafiction*) is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past". (Hutcheon 5) and „In problematizing almost everything the historical novel once took for granted, historiographic metafiction destabilizes received notions of both history and fiction". (Hutcheon 113). Historiographic metafiction transgresses the boundary between fiction and history, radicalizing the hybridization already present in the traditional historical novel. It is neither merely self-reflexive nor a simple variant of the historical or nonfictional novel. While historical fiction presents history as a real, objective, formative force, historiographic metafiction contests and destabilizes the boundaries between fiction and history, acknowledging the ideological implications of any representation of the past. History is politicized and self-reflexive. Concurrently, another distinction lies in the fact that historical fiction may perceive the past as distinct or sharing values with the present, whereas historiographic metafiction is paradoxical: it depends on what it contests, politicizing historical realities through metafictional "games" without trivializing them, questioning authority, and challenging conventions. Traditional historical fiction treats history as a stable, formative reality, whereas historiographic metafiction deconstructs it, rendering it part of an ideological and self-conscious discourse. As a precursor genre, historical fiction sets the stage, while historiographic metafiction represents a postmodern evolution that radicalizes its inherent hybridization. Historiographic metafiction is not "merely another version of the historical novel" but a form that undermines its conventions, layering self-reflexivity and ideological contestation. Hayden White (1978) introduces the notion that historical representations bear ideological implications, paving the way for postmodern contestation. From the "metanarratives" discussed by Jean-François Lyotard to the „metafiction" proposed by Patricia Waugh, it becomes evident that, succinctly put, historiographic metafiction constitutes an evolutionary branch of historical fiction, a positioning shaped by the proliferation of postmodernism.

In this context, we also observe that the Romanian literary space has experienced a distinctive inflection of the definition of historiographic metafiction as proposed by Linda Hutcheon. We also underline this component related to the contestation of history, involving the “rethinking and reworking” of the past. Mihaela Ursa notes, in a chapter from the *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România* titled “Textualism, Postmodernism,” that “the narrative perspective on literary theory and criticism first infuses the work of certain neomodernist prose writers and critics (the Târgoviște School, onirism) to constitute a true semantic basin in Romanian postmodernism” (Ursa 2020, 364), identifying three critical stances in defining Romanian postmodernism: the first, as a “revolutionary hue of rupture from modernism” in Liviu Petrescu and Monica Spiridon; the second, as an “extension of modernism” in Nicolae Manolescu and Ioana Em. Petrescu; or the third, which views it as “a simple cultural operator” in the definitions of Mircea Martin or Alexandru Mușina. From the same perspective, Gheorghe Glodeanu remarks on the inconsistency of the concept and its non-functionality in Romanian literature. Particularly eloquent for our demonstration is the dissociation made by Corin Braga in his article from “Caietele Echinox,” which explains the fabric emerging from the analysis of the postmodern moment. For Braga, postmodernism has “two slopes: one poststructuralist, through which modernity reaches its ultimate consequences and a dissolution ‘from within,’ and another neohermetic, prefiguring the ‘full’ period to follow, barely glimpsed today” (1995). This “neohermetic” component seems essential to us in defining post-1990 historical prose. From the theoretical trajectory sketched, we conclude that Romanian historical fiction has held a distinct status compared to other European spaces, an aspect which, in my view, is linked to the semiperipheral position of the geographical area under discussion. We thus observe that the attempts at framing, categorization, delimitation, and construction of a new paradigm lead to the formation of a writing formula whose boundaries are permeable, interchangeable, and characterized by multiple relations: “Diverse in form and focus as twentieth- and twenty- first- century historical fiction has become, it seems less accurate to describe it as a single, monolithic genre than as a kind of contemporary literary mode, a more capacious term that unites multiple and increasingly porous genres of historical narratives while acknowledging their shared aesthetic, political, and pedagogical projects” (2023, 17) as Manshel observes. Contemporary American historical fiction and post-1990 Romanian historical fiction, though anchored in distinct geopolitical contexts, share common traits in recontextualizing collective memory; however, they diverge according to their positions within the world system: American fiction operates from the

global core, amplifying marginalized voices from within, while Romanian fiction, from the "zemiperiphery," mediates between local peripheries and the global core, in accordance with Shapiro's "transistor" model (2014).

Historical Fiction as the "Transistor" of the "Zemiperiphery"

It is imperative to provide further clarification regarding the (semi)peripheral status of the Romanian cultural space and the role of the "zemiperiphery" as a concept that elucidates the function of historical fiction. Stephen Shapiro associates "zemiperipheries," such as the Romanian space, with a transistor-like zone that mediates and translates "the culture and commodities" (Shapiro 2023, 49) between center and periphery. This underscores the valorization of these buffer-like cultural spaces, which nonetheless encompass a coherent ensemble of intersections, generating, through historical fiction, a response to dynamics within the global book market.

Discussions of a "historical turn" frame it as a form of literary salvation: "One way of understanding literary fiction's turn toward the historical past and the self-evident cultural significance that that past connotes is to say that, amid the ongoing assault on literary fiction's relevance to culture, falling back into history is to some extent a retreat to higher ground" (Manshel 2023, 17). An analysis of contemporary American literature reveals the persistence of postmodernist hallmarks, coalescing around anachronism, metafiction, and fabulation, yet concurrently a shift in focus not toward contestation but toward a "revisitation" of history – a phenomenon also evident in Romanian literature. The latter's case is tethered to its geographical positioning as a (semi)peripheral zone. Romanian historical prose has served as a mediator between central and peripheral literatures/cultures, operating as a transistor-like "coil of wire" in the transmission of ideas, thereby delineating a functional model for world literature, characterized as a "contemporary literary mode" (Manshel 2023, 12) and, concurrently, a "neohermetic" literature (Braga 1995, 22) that draws its vitality from "historiographic metafiction."

In the perspective of the Warwick group, the semiperiphery is conceptualized as a structural zone within the world-system, mediating between core and periphery, with economies and social structures that blend characteristics of the core (industrialization, urbanization) and the periphery (economic dependency, inequalities). These zones serve as a "buffer" in the global economy, facilitating flows of capital and labor between core and periphery. Shapiro emphasizes the concept of "combined and uneven development," wherein the semiperiphery simultaneously experiences modernization and

underdevelopment. For instance, a semiperipheral country may boast advanced industries while remaining reliant on raw material exports or cheap labor. This framework explores how literature, and by extension culture, in semiperipheral regions reflects this ambiguous position, articulating tensions between modernity and marginalization, globalization and local identity. For example, fiction from semiperipheral countries may thematize conflicts between global influences and local traditions. In this sense, literatures from these spaces can combine global aesthetics (such as modernism or postmodernism) with local themes (such as communist memory, local historical narratives, or rurality). The “zemiperiphery” is not merely a passive conduit between core and periphery but an active zone of “calibration” that facilitates interactions between the economies and cultures of the core and periphery. It “translates” and monetizes flows of commodities and people, forging new social and cultural relations. This process generates novel literary and cultural compounds through the interplay of conceptual chains and cultural flows.

The concept of “semiperiphery,” originating in Wallerstein’s theory, centers on economic dimensions, whereas Shapiro’s “zemiperiphery” identifies a function of cultural and political mediation, with literature and culture reflecting tensions between the global and the local, modernity and marginalization. The “zemiperiphery” generates novel forms of cultural representation through the collision of the periphery’s “trauma” (violence and coercion) with the core’s “speculative entrepreneurship.”

Yet the zemiperipheries are not only zones that react to pressures between the core and periphery, they are also the spheres that are highly productive of new social and cultural phenomena that often occur in advance of either the core or the periphery. These are the locations where political economy receives its greatest cultural inflection and amplification, the semiperipheries are the sites where the experience of trauma by peripheral peoples and the speculative entrepreneurship of the core collide to produce new forms of representation, especially as it receives both the oral, folk beliefs of the periphery and the core’s printed matter and institutionally consecrated notations, objects, and behavioral performances (Shapiro 2023, 49)

These regions amalgamate diverse cultural influences, such as the oral beliefs and folklore of the periphery and the narrative formulas or cultural institutions of the core, generating novel “artifacts” and “affects” that prefigure more concrete articulations in other zones of the world-system. Shapiro notes that

the "zemiperiphery" constitutes a "fertile ground" for social, organizational, and technological innovations. It is also a space where significant political movements emerge, owing to its intermediary position and the tensions it navigates.

Romanian Historical Fiction: „Thinking in old ways about new history”

The central thread of this article posits post-1990 Romanian historical fiction as a "transistor" element, continuing the legacy of earlier works. In Lionel-Decebal Roșca's comprehensive study, "Literatura română de inspirație istorică" („Romanian Literature of Historical Inspiration") from *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, three essential sources in the development of historical prose are delineated: the first pertains to "various Western poetics subsumed under the genre" (2020, 80); the second, rooted in indigenous traditions, concerns folklore, which "provides historical literature with an entire series of topoi" (81); and the third is represented by "the historical writings of chroniclers" (81). To this synthetic identification of sources, one might add an outward-looking perspective, extending beyond the poetics of Western Romanticism, for instance, as certain writers have drawn on foreign texts and sources enabled by the dissemination of information through digital media or archives, which have facilitated the circulation of inspirational elements in contemporary prose. Furthermore, many historical prose works benefit from the scholarly preparation of authors who incorporate historical references derived from readings of global texts. Additionally, to the five sets of topoi identified by Roșca, for which substantial corpora are established (protohistory, the "Dacian eon," "indigenous medievality," the "age of Phanariot solitude," and the "awakening of vital forces"), one could append another, encompassing historical prose that interweaves contemporaneity. In Shapiro's view, the „zemiperiphery" entails the amalgamation of peripheral folk beliefs with the cultural institutions of the core, generating new cultural forms. Historical fiction, by referencing folkloric roots and grafting them onto established narrative formulas, thus emerges as an innovative form. The "zemiperiphery" operates as an "arterial matrix" of the world-system, facilitating communication and flows between the core, periphery, and other zemiperipheries.

Romanian historical fiction operates on two levels: the first pertains to its intrinsic thematic value, which fosters connections with global history, as no territory can be perceived in isolation but rather through its relations with surrounding or distant regions, whether referencing proximate eras or those separated by millennia. Historical fiction navigates the permeable boundaries between historical phenomena and the writer's imagination, embodying a fragmentation driven by the existence of provinces in the twentieth century and

the influence of the Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian Empires, and it offers a potential model for understanding how communication was forged among the diverse cultural spaces that converged in the region of Southeast Europe.

Historical fiction occupies a dominant role in Romanian literature, sequentially expressing in the nineteenth century the ideal of national state formation and proposing exemplary figures for inclusion in the political paradigms of the time; in the twentieth century, it is associated with the mythologization of the past and the idealization of eras deemed “golden ages,” later with political struggles and the delineation of new social classes; and post-1990, it becomes a mode of engaging with a schizoid past – either through metafiction and occasionally excessive archival documentation from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, or by addressing temporally closer events perceived as more accessible to a diverse audience eager for rapid decoding of meaning without extensive hermeneutic intricacies. „Thinking in old ways about new history” (2023, 239) observes Manshel in his attempt to define the engagement with the past in contemporary prose. The meaning advanced by this type of contemporary fiction aligns with Manshel’s assertion: in reality, its purpose diverges from the postmodernist pursuit of novel means to transpose history and adopt divergent approaches to it; instead, the new history is engaged through traditional means derived from historical experiences. Historical prose is intertwined with the origins of Romanian-language literature, as what subjects were more compelling in the context of the nineteenth-century quest for statehood than a return to an immediate or distant past to propose models. In the article by Cosmin Borza, Alex Goldiș, and Adrian Tudurachi, “Subgenres of the Romanian Novel: The Laboratory of a Typology” (2020), the subgenre of the historical novel is examined alongside fifty others identified through an analysis of the corpus of novels in the *Chronological Dictionary of the Romanian Novel from Its Origins to 1989*. This juxtaposition underscores the significance of classification, not only from a thematic perspective but also from the viewpoint of the reader, who chooses to initiate a dialogue with a distant era to paradoxically comprehend their own contemporaneity.

The production of literature inspired by history is substantial, and post-1990, there emerges an openness to valorizing the recent past, employing innovative tools within a regained freedom. Novels emerge that draw upon diverse historical sources, engaging in a dialogue with ancient documents as well as with characters from distant or proximate eras, which bring to the present the ambiance of the past, various historical figures, or spaces reimaged through the tools of literary imagination. A distinct category comprises novels that address the traumatic past of the pre-1989 Revolution period, authored by writers such as (but not limited to) Lucian Dan Teodorovici, Dan Lungu, Florin

Lăzărescu, Marin Mălaicu-Hondrari, T.O. Bobe, Matei Florian, Marta Petreu, Cristian Teodorescu, Sorin Stoica, Radu Pavel Gheo, Liviu Radu, Bogdan Popescu, and Mircea Cărtărescu. Within the category of historical fiction with a metafictional component, works such as Filip Florian's *Zilele Regelui* [The King's Days], Ioan Mihai Cochinescu's *Ambasadorul* [The Ambassador], Gheorghe Schwarz's *Cei o sută* [The One Hundred], Răzvan Rădulescu's *Teodosie cel Mic* [Teodosie the Small], Constantin Țoiu's *Istorisirile signorei Sisi* [The Stories of Lady Sisi], Simona Sora's *Hotel Universal*, Doina Ruști's *Manuscrisul fanariot* [The Phanariot Manuscript], *Homeric*, and *Zavaidoc*, Simona Antonescu's *Hanul lui Manuc* [Manuc's Inn], *Darul lui Serafim* [Serafim's Gift], and *Fotograful curții regale* [Photographer of the Royal Court], Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu's *Evgheniții* [The Eugenians], Octavian Soviany's *Viața lui Kostas Venetis* [The Life of Kostas Venetis] and *Moartea lui Siegfried* [The Death of Siegfried], and Mircea Cărtărescu's *Theodorus*, stand out. In a recent study, Sharae Deckard proposes a classification of global novels into three categories, each underpinned by the indispensable backdrop of real historical events: „the first relates to the “deliberately homogenized magical realist novel, emptied of local specificity and endowed with insipidly uniform appeal,” dând exemplu ficțiunea lui Murakami; the second category “includes transnational ‘network’ novels (...) which ‘traverse multiple geographies and periods in an ambitious attempt to narrativize globalization,’” and the third category is composed of “novels that offer crucial perspectives situated in the zemiperiphery (...) [that] are critically conscious in content and form, even if this critique is suppressed in their marketing and reception.” Roberto Bolaño's novel, 2666, is such an example (Deckard, Niblett, and Shapiro 2024, 92) that Deckard employs to demonstrate the implications of labor relations in Mexico, reflected in literature.

Răzvan Rădulescu, in *Teodosie cel mic*, proposes a narrative style that fits within the second category previously analyzed by Deckard. Interwoven with historical references such as “the donjon of the Ottoburg fortress” and allusions to the Danube-Black Sea Canal, as well as the imaginary setting of Filiași–Our Sea, where “Green Ants” (Rădulescu 2006, 3) are at work, the novel exemplifies a transient blend of history and fiction. This blend manifests in a meteoric manner through recourse to allegorical geographies constructed from elements derived from actual mental maps. The topology of temporality, discussed earlier through Dalley's theory, is built by recording spaces overloaded with multiple temporal layers: Bucharest and its marshy counterpart – Lacul Rece – featuring emblematic buildings such as the Bulandra Theatre, Lazăr High School, Lămâița pastry shop, and Cișmigiu Park. The narrator manipulates both time and space: “And who doesn't confuse a hot breath of air passing quickly over the Izvor Bridge on Dâmbovița with the ventilation system of the subway?” (4),

bringing narrative events of the present and the past into a moment of simultaneity. The characters are hybrid and embody allegorical constructions such as Kaliopi Owl, Little Theodosie, CatDog, Otilia's Ghost, Samoil the Minotaur, the Guarding Catfish, Iorgos the Ant, the Great Little Monster, Otto, and General Căciulata. Throughout the narrative, remarks like "Ultimately, civilization and politeness distinguish us, Southerners, from the barbarism of the North" are expressed (24), emphasizing prejudices arising from imagology. Conflicts are said to be resolvable only through dialogue: "That's why words were left in the world – to negotiate and understand each other" (167).

The novel allegorically addresses history, as by setting aside the substrate, we identify different references – sometimes to the past, other times to the present. It illustrates the neo-hermetic nature of Romanian historical fiction, employing the metaphor of the "machine of history" to evoke an inevitable force, layered allegorically, as well as the plurality of historical interpretations within the "zemiperipheral" space (Shapiro 2014). This hyperconnected representation (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024) transforms Bucharest into a node of transculturation, where history fragments into narrative "geometric forms," mediating tensions between the global center and the local periphery through a relational aesthetic.

You should have said that earlier. Now it's too late. The machine of history has begun, and nothing can stop it anymore. I'm sorry. When he spoke of "the machine of history," the Sleep Protector thought, diffusely, of Otto's war machines, which were slowly advancing toward the Bay of the Whale (...) For Teodosie, "the machine of history" reminded him of Minotaur Samoil's flying apparatus, with its fragile gears and spokes, and his journey above the mushroom farm; from there, the land appeared divided into rectangular geometric shapes, all gray, but distinguished by the texture and shade of each plot. (195)

The image of "Otto's battle machines" advancing toward the "Whale Bay" alludes to an external influence – potentially a European center – acting upon a local, „zemiperipheral space" ("Whale Bay," an imaginary location with indigenous resonances). It takes local historical experiences – potentially tied to Romania's complex history of conflict, division, or marginality – and translates them into narratives that resonate with global readers. The fantastical imagery of flying apparatuses and geometric landscapes serves as a "transistor-like" mechanism, amplifying local voices within the global literary circuit. The "Violet Ants" and the "fish" that "care for" the lake's water seem to symbolize local agents facilitating this interaction, similar to the "sub-imperialist" role of the "zemiperiphery" described by Shapiro, where intermediate regions manage the influence of the

center on the periphery. The "flying device of Samoil the Minotaur" combines modern technology with local mythology. This illustrates a process where cultural elements from the center (technology) and the "zemiperiphery" (mythology, folklore) intertwine to create a new narrative form. Teodosie's aerial perspective, viewing the land "divided into rectangular geometrical shapes, all gray but distinct through the texture and hue of each parcel," expresses an integrative vision typical of the semi-periphery, which orders and "translates" the diversity of the periphery into a coherent system, connecting disparate regions into a cultural network. The panoramas generated by the text evoke an idealized vision of the past, represented by the flying machine, but also relate to the present with the tools of warfare.

The novel also features reinterpretations of fairy tales, such as *The Goat with the Three Kids*, retold in the story of the Great Monster: "The goat engaged in coal exploitation and, after a few years of underground work, became coated in a Saturnism of great beauty" (234). This retelling, where the traditional Romanian fairy tale (*The Goat and Her Three Kids*), rooted in oral folklore, is reimagined in a modern industrial context linked to the global center (coal mining – an allusion to industrial capitalism), exemplifies a clear transfer between spaces. The traditional Romanian fairy tale, with its peripheral roots grounded in oral folklore, is reimagined within a modern industrial setting associated with the global center. This reinterpretation creates a new cultural "artifact" that reflects Romania's "zemiperipheral" tensions: economic modernization (the influence of the center) overlaying a traditional society. *The Little Prince* recounts the story of a prince who arrives in Levant – a "variant for children of Machiavelli's *The Little Prince*" (234) – transposed into a local environment. Other titles and names are also mentioned, creating interactions with them, such as Dumas the Elder, Racine, Thomas A. Quincey, R. Kipling, Breban, Hippolyte Taine, Villon, Aesop, André Gide, Matei Călinescu, Radu Petrescu, Roland Barthes, Anatole France, Émile Zola, Lacan, among others. The mention of authors from different cultures alongside Romanian figures such as Matei Călinescu, Breban, and Radu Petrescu indicates a cultural mediation between the European literary center (classicism, realism, psychoanalysis) and local literary traditions. This reflects the role of the "semi-periphery" in "translating" and integrating global influences within local contexts.

Another example of historical fiction is the novel *Istorisirile signorei Sisi* by Constantin Țoiu (2006), which narrates a story of communication breakdown caused by the presence of extremes in politics, leading to a climate of terror. Spanning nearly a century of history, with reflections on the tragedies of the two World Wars and the communist terror of the 1950s, as well as the evolution

of the Legionary movement, the novel centers around the female character Sisi, a descendant of the Ghiculeștilor family. Beyond the turbulent background – featuring a family history with a father who is a potato farmer and ends up committing suicide – a complex network of histories emerges, intertwining real historical personalities and characters amidst a tumult of the times.

Sisi's marriage is marked by change, a concealment under the impossible matching of social classes. Bucharest, as a "zemiperipheral" space, becomes a setting where the modern influences of the global center meet with the traditional structures represented by Dinu's Moldavian peasant origins, for example. Sisi's marriage, described as a "true Ghiculeasă" but belonging to a "scattered" lineage, symbolizes this mediation – combining aristocratic prestige (the center) with the social ascent of a peasant son. Thus, although she marries Dinu Alucăruță, he changes his surname to Cărauțeanu. Shapiro emphasizes that the semi-periphery functions as a "manager" of the center's interests vis-à-vis it. In the fragment, Sisi – representing a declining aristocracy – imposes the name change for Dinu, suggesting a form of cultural control over the periphery (Dinu's rural origin). This act of renaming is a zemiperipheral strategy: it translates the protagonist's local, peasant origins into a form that resonates with the hegemonic cultural norms of the urban center, much as Romanian historical fiction translates local histories into globally recognizable narratives.

In fact, between us, her true family name of the Moldovan peasantry was Alucăruță; having come from Fălticeni to Bucharest, studying Law and building a brilliant career – partly thanks to his marriage to Sisi Ghica, a genuine Ghiculeasă – even though her aristocratic lineage had long been dispersed. So, it was Sisi herself, a scion of noble blood, who compelled him, even before their wedding, to change his surname, calling himself Cărauțeanu (Țoiu 2006, 24).

The choice of this text was influenced by the observation of a particular feature of hyperconnectivity, seen by Deckard as "an episodic form of these fictions that treats historical periods as a static set of interchangeable units that can be swapped as easily as the novels switch between literary genres" (Deckard, Niblett, and Shapiro 2024, 92). The episodic structure of the novel, which combines disparate historical moments (social ascent, aristocratic decline, the background of her father, gambling addicted, who ends up committing suicide) with reinterpreted fairy tales and intertextual references, reflects the nature of hyperconnectivity characteristic of Romanian fiction. Moreover, in a similar vein, Țoiu appears as a forgetful puppeteer, manipulating episodes of history on the fiction stage according to his own whim, without regard for chronology.

Doina Ruști proposes an alternative form of historical fiction in *Manuscrisul fanariot* (2015), using the turbulent atmosphere of the late 18th century as its backdrop. She imagines a character enrolled in the fleet of the Greek Lambros Katsonis, fighting against the Ottoman army of "the great Gazi Hasan." With a narrative rich in historical references – from the library of Sultan Selim III to the construction of Bucharest's fame, which "Greeks from Phanar" considered "the city where dreams come true" (Ruști 2015, 5) – the novel explores a scene rooted in historical texture.

The perspective Ruști offers is one of domination through the word: power manifests in the imposition of a language. Beyond this, however, lies an underground force created by the multitude of communities. Bucharest and Thessaloniki are portrayed as "zemiperipheral" spaces under the influence of the Ottoman center (represented by Sultan Selim III and the Phanariot administration) and populated by peripheral local communities – Vlach, Jewish, and Turkish groups. Bucharest, described as "the city where dreams are fulfilled" by Greeks from Phanar, becomes a convergence point between aspirations of modernization and the multicultural realities of the periphery. This illustrates the zemiperiphery's capacity to "translate" and integrate diverse cultural influences, creating a hybrid identity.

The "words embedded in honey" of the Vlachs, accessible only to them, suggest a peripheral cultural resistance – an assertion of authenticity in the face of Greek central influence. The dominance of the Greek language in Thessaloniki, "from morning till evening," reflects this sub-imperialist role, where the Phanariot elite mediates Ottoman control over various local communities. Yet, the persistent presence of peripheral languages (Turkish in the markets, the "whispered" Jewish language, the Vlach Romanian) hints at a cultural resistance that complicates this dominance. The depiction of Thessaloniki's multilingual society is a local narrative rooted in the historical realities of the Ottoman Empire, but its framing – through vivid, almost poetic imagery and metafictional hints – engages with universal themes of cultural coexistence and historical complexity. This aligns with Shapiro's (2023) notion of the zemiperiphery as a space that valorizes cultural intersections, amplifying peripheral voices within the global literary circuit:

It seems that the very merciful Selim turned his gaze upon our poor Thessaloniki as well, said the teacher (...). In the city, everyone spoke Greek from morning till night. Only in the white houses, under the tangled crowns of pines or among groups of market vendors, the Turks argued among themselves in Turkish, the Jews whispered in their language, which no one understood, and as soon as you entered the Cățol neighborhood, you could hear words swollen with honey, their core known only to the wise ones (34).

Ioanis Milikopu becomes Leun, a name with which he is confused by the townspeople. Boierul Dan Braşoveanu Doicescu intervenes in the character's destiny, providing an occasion to discuss the plague epidemic that had decimated almost his entire family: "Around the Courthouse Academy, then near the Zlătari Inn, the lanky silhouette of the plague slips through in search of windows" (22), illustrating Bucharest's customary attitude toward strangers: "not to cross beyond the river, into the place called Bozărie, and not to linger in conversation with the Bucharest crones, who were very skilled in the art of hypnosis" (24). Marginal communities, such as those of the Vlachs, as well as the conflict between Greeks and Turks, are brought into focus. Leun exemplifies a transitional model that produces a fusion of the two spaces it represents. Simultaneously, this model reflects how identity is not static but evolves as a process of negotiation and adaptation, in which initial values are layered and redefined within new contexts. Ioanis's preference for personal freedom, symbolized by material luxuries like "perfumes and fine clothes" and "hair oils" reminiscent of "silk from Brusa," serves as a *zemiperipheral* act:

Ioanis loved freedom and hated the Turks, as any normal person from Săruna would, but life under someone's command – on a ship threatened by cannons – removed any patriotic interest from him. He wished all Greeks to be free, but even more he loved his own freedom, which at that moment was made of perfumes and fine clothes. [...] He liked pockets, as many as possible, camouflaged by buttons and intricate embroidery, which few knew how to appreciate. Apart from that, he also valued hair oils, which made his black curls look heavy and supple, like the silk from Brusa (45)

The identified historical spaces, such as the Hanul Greci, Hanul Roşu, Hanul Zlătari, and Lipscani Street, define a zone of transit – a network connecting centers and peripheries. The inns and Lipscani Street, as commercial and social spaces, become convergence points where merchants, travelers, and locals (from Phanariots to Vlachs) interact, mediating between the global center (the Phanariot elite, Ottoman trade) and the local periphery.

Bucharest, for those who do not know, is a city that devours words – a hole fed with whispers, a repository of hissings and songs. It is a sapping city. It doesn't matter where the words come from, whether they are Germanic, Greek, or even from a dead language. Every word is a spark, a fuel that keeps the city alive. Anyone wishing to dig up lost words, anyone obsessed with the charm of those sweet antiquities must definitely start with Bucharest. Within its fabric, all the words spoken freely or involuntarily within the city's territory circulate like the strip of a luxury display case. (Ruşti 33)

Words serve as a catalyst, embodying social energies and cultural identity, while the city is shaped through the interplay of ideas, narratives, and languages. Historical spaces transcend mere geographical locations; they encapsulate the identity framework of Bucharest as a center-periphery nexus – a site of migration, memory, and social discourse.

Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, in *Evgheniții* (2006), reconstructs an atmosphere emblematic of early 19th-century Bucharest, employing the tools of the historian enriched by the writer's imagination. The narrative begins at the end of 1826, a period when the echoes of the 1821 revolution had yet to fade: "You mean it was better with Tudor's rabble? He only brought the Turks back into the country and stirred the waters, and he died a fool, betrayed by his own army. Some thieves and bandits," (Vintilă-Ghițulescu 2006, 37) states a character observing a transistor-like fusion of two different stages: "the frontispiece and the collarbone merged with the umbrella and the fan" (37).

The historical figure of Tudor Vladimirescu is portrayed through pejorative terms such as "reckless" or "thieves and bandits," perpetuating a subordinate narrative that diminishes the revolutionary agency of subaltern groups or the "lower classes." This framing casts their actions as chaotic disruptions, posing a threat to imperial stability and order. Concurrently, references to "the frontispiece and the collarbone," alongside symbols like the umbrella and fan, evoke an orientalized lifestyle, where adornments such as jewelry and clothing serve as markers of cultural and social alterity. The voices of the marginalized are thus reduced to stereotypes, while the dominant discourse, in its bid to legitimize power, constructs an image of "the others" as inferior, disorderly, and dangerous. This narrative reinforces an orientalized imaginary, positioning the culture, values, and actions of subjugated groups as exotic, feeble, and dysfunctional, in stark contrast to the civilized, orderly image projected by Western "elites." Within the zemiperipheral context of Bucharest, this dynamic underscores the city's role as a liminal space, navigating tensions between center and periphery, where local identities are both shaped and marginalized by the interplay of global and regional power structures.

Against this social backdrop, the story of a marriage unfolds between an older nobleman and a young woman, which culminates in her betrayal. The Bălăceni manor is situated between "Mahala Colții" and "Mahala Sărindar," belonging to Alecu Bălăceanu, married to the young Catinca Filipescu. The voice that speaks the truth belongs to Stanca, the Romani woman, representing the voice of the subaltern who articulates what others dare not say:

I see that only your ego matters and the gossip of the neighborhood, that pride is greater than a man's life, that the whispers of the mahala are more important than the soul and heart of a girl, that all the old and foolish nobles have joined together to condemn what they themselves did in youth. The same gossip that separates and kills you today did the same thing in your time. None of you has a clear conscience or peace. None of you can say you've never made mistakes or that you are now as pure as a tear, capable of judging with an open heart. (155–156).

The voice of the marginalized – here represented by Stanca – becomes one of protest and a yearning for truth within a landscape dominated by hypocrisy, corruption, and expressions of patriarchal and aristocratic power. Her perspective is not merely critical; it is a revealing critique of the hypocrisy and opportunism of those in authority, who engage in moral judgments to justify their own past mistakes and hide their youthful guilt. The described social setting, with its neighborhoods and mansions, underscores a stratified, corrupt society where class differences – nobles, Romani, peasants – represent various levels of subjugation and mutual domination. The voice of the Romani woman becomes a symbol of outsiders to the elites who can speak plainly without fear of retaliation, even though they are often ignored or discredited. Her speech calls for a collective conscience, a reflection on human nature, and a recognition of ongoing divisions and conflicts. Stanca's capacity for critical revelation illuminates the falsehood and hypocrisy of the ruling class, warning that true moral purity lies in honesty and responsibility for past sins.

Filip Florian's novel proposes a meta-historical perspective on royalty. *Zilele Regelui* (2008) constructs a fictionalized character – the crown initially proposed for Philip of Flanders is seen as “a small thing, resembling a turban” (Florian 2008, 6) – and explains the situation of the Romanian Principalities under Ottoman rule in 1866. The event is documented historically, including through the presence of notable figures of the time such as Lascăr Catargiu and Ion Ghica. Florian imagines the moment of a toothache as an acceptance of the throne, expressed through the question posed to the dentist: “if perhaps he would follow it to Bucharest, forever.” The imaginary map the character envisions is that of a space “somewhere in the colonies” thousands of kilometers away (11). Accompanied by the cat Siegfried, Dr. Joseph Strauss traverses Europe, on a journey partly geographer, partly culinary.

Beyond the postmodern irony employed by the writer in a rebours, we observe narrative hybridization through the inclusion of letters. This serves to explain the situation of the “former patient”: “Karl Eitel Friedrich Zephyrinus Ludwig, now sitting on the throne of a country with five million souls, had sent him a pipe tobacco pouch, in which he had hidden so many ducats, gulden, and

florins that Joseph was dizzy, along with a map of the continent in which he had drawn a red-ink itinerary and marked some key points with brown crosses." (15). This sequence highlights an ironic-critique perspective on the geopolitical and social situation of the Romanian lands, seen as zemiperipheral space under Ottoman domination and in transition toward a modern state form, as symbolized by the allegory of the crown. The postmodern irony, characterized by subversion, employs a skeptical outlook on the "glory" and noble symbols, such as the crown described as a turban.

The narrative hybridization, through the inclusion of letters, contributes to the consolidation of a multiperspectival outlook, creating a bridge between political, historical, and personal discourses. It allows the reader a deeper understanding of the "former patient" turned monarch's situation. Displaying a certain irony toward symbols of authority and inherited values, the text suggests that these gifts – the pouch of tobacco, the map drawn with red ink – are testimonies of a tumultuous transition, in which old power structures and former bonds of loyalty become mere artifacts, while the new rulers have established their positions and influence pragmatically – sometimes symbolically, sometimes materially.

Thus, the narrative evolves into a subtle yet incisive critique of the identity and legitimacy of monarchical-political authority, as well as of the complexities of power relations within the European space². In the context of the "upheaval of Wallachia," the text hints – ironically – at the image of a leader in flight, ready to abandon his position and betray national interests. The motif of stirring, ciphered letters and the preparation to cross the ocean with wealth hidden in hundreds of chests symbolize an escape or flight from responsibility amid political chaos. Simultaneously, the protagonist's infatuation with a young Lyonese woman and his complete trust in her to keep military documents secret serve as a sharp irony about his vulnerability and immaturity in the face of great problems:

Similarly, during the upheaval in Wallachia, it was said that Bismarck, the chancellor, was close to losing his mind; that he had begged for forgiveness and mercy from Gambetta and Trochu through stirring and ciphered letters; that he was preparing to cross the ocean to America with wealth stored in hundreds of chests; and that he had fallen in love in his old age with a shameless Lyonese girl, a young flirt, to whom he had entrusted all the existing military secrets from Berlin – hidden in her palms and between her breasts. (139)

² See more details about centers of power and fictional cartographies in Romanian fiction in Alina Bako's studies.

The threat of King Carol's abdication on the night of March 10–11, 1871, becomes the climax of this transformation – a moment of overturning the established order, symbolizing the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. Temporality is perceived at different rhythms: "time (...) no longer flowed like a lazy, foul-smelling river, but acquired a different cadence, suddenly, similar to the gallop of a team of horses" (150). The small, local history gives way to the grand narrative, which involves unprecedented and major events for a regional space. The abdication moment is seen as such an event: "Prince Carol, furiously angry, smoking incessantly and on the verge of boiling over, decided to abdicate. He initially requested Ion Ghica's resignation" (151).

The scenes of the three empires – the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Russian – intertwine throughout the narration³. The journey he undertakes to the sultan's court, alongside the king, becomes a pretext for observing the Orient. Dolmabahçe Palace, the meeting with Sultan Abdul-Aziz, the Bosphorus, and Istanbul serve as pretexts to explore the seduction these places exert on the king. Interspersed with small poems by the feline Siegfried, the text is rich in historical references. *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius is the work the doctor reads during a studied *mise en abyme*.

The progress is recorded at the level of urban transformations "in the great city's effort to shed its Turkish attire," as the writer describes. He categorizes these changes as "style" modifications – shifts made to follow fashion trends – such as the street *Işlicarilor*, which takes on the name of *Rue Franceză*; *Hanul lui Manuc* becomes *Hotel Dacia*; *Otelul Oteteleşeanu* turns into *Hotel Frascatti*; *Casa Slătineanu* appropriates the name *Capşa*, after the confectionery brothers; while the church of Saint John the Great, originally built by the treasurer Preda Buzescu and reconstructed by Brâncoveanu, was razed with axes and pickaxes along with its cells, stables, and ancillary buildings (123). Replacing traditional street names and historic monuments with Western or commercial names (e.g., *Rue Franceză*, *Hotel Dacia*, *Hotel Frascatti*) symbolizes a form of hegemony – an infiltration of a central culture into a "zemiperipheral" space – and marks the beginning of an instrumentalization of the urban space for interests of a new social class. Describing these "transformations" as "style" changes refers to imposed modernization – often superficial – aimed at fashioning the city according to current trends, replacing traditional values with borrowed ones. Simultaneously, the destruction of the church of Saint John the Great and the convent cells, alongside the construction of sophisticated greenhouses, symbolizes an implicit conflict: on the one hand, the dismantling of conservative, traditional

³ See details about the interimperial concept in Parvulescu, A., & Boatca, M. (2022). *Creolizing the modern Transylvania across empires*. Cornell University Press.

landmarks; on the other, the emergence of an expanding social class that consolidates power through investments and capital accumulation, often at the expense of cultural patrimony.

From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, urban changes and renamings are not merely aesthetic or administrative modifications – they are acts of revendication and reaffirmation of prestige, power, and social recognition by those beginning to amass wealth and forming a new social elite. The use of Western-origin names and the replacement of old patrimony with symbols of modernization and economic prestige (luxury hotels, greenhouses, restaurants) serve as strategies through which these classes legitimize their position, assigning cultural and symbolic value to the new urban landscape shifts. For them, this symbolic capital becomes a tool of social differentiation, marking belonging to the economic and cultural elite, while the destruction of traditional patrimony can be seen as a symbolic loss for local communities. These transformations are not only physical or aesthetic – they constitute acts of "symbolic capitalization," where new symbols and names are used to consolidate status, legitimize the new social order, and symbolically exclude traditional values and collective memory.

Historical fictions, resistance through literature

I chose two novels by Octavian Soviany that are part of this interstitial corpus of historical fiction, where narrative functions as a „heterobiography” richly intertwined with complex cultural references: *Viața lui Kostas Venetis* [*The Life of Kostas Venetis*] (2011) and *Moartea lui Siegfried* [*The Death of Siegfried*] (2015). Lucia Boldrini discusses, from this perspective of first-person narration in historical fiction, the paradoxical status that involves a visionary projection turned backward toward the past. The question posed by Shapiro about the voice of the subaltern (from zemiperiphery also) is realized in Soviany's novel as a voice of history that has fallen silent. Lucia Boldrini's observation⁴ (2012, 57) that heterobiographical novels restore voice to the historically silenced through a testimonial, autobiographical form underscores their role as resistance literature. In the context of Romanian historical fiction, such as Soviany's novels, this framework highlights how zemiperipheral narratives amplify subaltern perspectives, mediating local histories within global literary discourses to challenge marginalization and assert cultural agency. History here functions as a background that contributes to reconstructing moments

⁴ "Heterobiographical novels, through an autobiographical form that gestures towards the testimonial, give back a voice to the historically silenced, and can in this sense be seen as a form of 'resistance literature,' to use Barbara Harlow's expression (1987)" (Boldrini 57).

from social descriptions of meticulously documented epochs – the European society of the second half of the nineteenth century – through a periplus across Bucharest, Paris, Vienna, or Venice: “... I started to reconstruct Kostas Venetis’s story. I strove to reproduce entirely, without leaving anything out or adding anything from myself, his words, although sometimes I felt that in the thread of history some foreign fragments were mixing in, and that, by telling Kostas’s story, I was also telling my own...” (Soviany 2011, 12). Violence, cruelty, and the defilement of reader expectations combine to form ingredients of a world molten from Dostoevsky’s, Sade’s, or Mateiu Caragiale’s magma, as the author himself admitted in an interview. I will recount a single episode that hints at the beginning of the *slavery* of the main character, won in a card game: “I later learned, directly from the prince’s own mouth, that his entire estate – and that of his family – had been acquired through theft and plunder. The toil of serfs, who could not even earn their cold lumps of polenta, the widow’s coin, and the orphan’s inheritance – slaughter, either with a dagger or poison, treachery, and cunning – stood as the foundation of boyar Mihalache’s wealth” (45). Emanuela Ilie notes the *cratyism* in the novel, as well as the “cultural memory and consciousness of descent,” which permeates a space evocatively named “an absolute Sodom, flawless in its wickedness.” The crises traversed by the character become successive layers of a history proposing convulsive images of humanity. The use of first-person discourse is notable because “adoption of the heterobiographical first person often reflects this interest in representing how historical conditions directly touch individual lives” (Boldrini 150). The historical phenomenon is not merely an abstract notion but penetrates everyday life, shaping choices, traumas, and aspirations of individuals. Concurrently, this perspective highlights the role of personal experience in understanding and contesting social order, illuminating how historical and social conditions become an integral part of each person’s biography.

In his novel *Moartea lui Siegfried* [*The Death of Siegfried*] (2015), Octavian Soviany engages with the pervasive socio-historical phenomenon of serfdom, exploring its implications for the formation of society in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Southeast Europe. The protagonist’s lament - “I probably looked like a madman at boyar Mihalache, while I was forcing myself to understand that I am only a poor peasant boy, a servant of a clerk from the Calici neighborhood, and I have no way to play for so much money” (Soviany 2015, 34) - underscores the rigid hierarchy that subordinates the peasant class. Money emerges as the sole arbiter of social relations, dictating the characters’ fates. The boyar Mihalache, derisively compared to a “calf from Podul Calicilor,” exploits a card game to ensnare the young man into servitude. This process of enslavement, marked by a stigmatizing sign akin to those used on livestock - “He

told me I would now have to bear on my body the sign with which he marked his horses and cattle, for I had become his slave, and I would remain so until death" (35) - evokes ancient practices of branding and dehumanization. The protagonist's reduction to a slave, equated with draft animals on Mihalache's estate, highlights the commodification of human life within the socio-economic structures of the period. Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) elucidates this dynamic through the intersection of two conditions: "the plight of the discredited," whose stigma is visibly marked, and "the discreditable," whose stigma remains concealable yet pervasive (Goffman 1963, 4). This framework applies to Soviany's protagonist, who is simultaneously discredited by the physical mark of enslavement – likened to livestock branding – and discreditable, bearing the enduring shame of his marginalized status as a peasant-turned-slave within his community throughout his life.

In Soviany's novel, characters are not depicted in black and white but solely in black, representing a narrative that explores extreme and borderline situations, such as the community of Jews and the Holocaust during World War II. The text contains an implicit critique through the augmentation of evil – presented as a natural, inescapable aspect – by imagining a condemnable character, ultimately judged through the act of reading. Kurt, the antisemite, does not receive a direct reply from Friedrich but a remark designed to deceive: "Such hollow phrases are good for the ignorant, in reality the Jews are one of the most valuable assets of the Reich – like any wealth, it must be managed wisely and prudently" (355). The exploitation and marginalization of a community are unquestionable elements tied to Nazi persecutions. Friedrich explains the distinction between "poor Jews" and "wealthy Jews," exposing how persecution and marginalization are stratified and manipulated according to economic and social differences within the Jewish community. He emphasizes that exploitation is not only ideological or moral but also strategic: the poor Jews are used as cheap, resilient, and adaptable labor, while the wealthy ones become targets and sources of capital, mobilized for the war effort or financial resources. This stratification underscores that exploitation extends beyond ideological motives, becoming a strategic element embedded within social and economic hierarchies, further emphasizing the complex layers of marginalization – both in the novel's narrative and in broader historical contexts – where the zemiperiphery acts as a liminal space for the negotiation and reinforcement of social boundaries. The description confirms the brutality of persecution and suggests a pragmatic behind the antisemitic measures, where discrimination becomes a tool for control and economic accumulation. Friedrich's awareness of the Jews' increasing realization of a lack of future in Germany underscores their union in the face of oppression and imminent emigration; it also highlights how subsequent

emigration regulations serve a dual purpose: controlling the flow of emigrants and maximizing material gains for the state. The protagonist's claim of obedience driven by the desire for social ascent reveals an ambivalence that reflects an internal struggle under social and moral pressure – maintaining a certain image for acceptance or hiding true feelings. Deep contempt for subservience and social conformism reflects an identity crisis and an awareness of the compromises made for survival or benefits: "Therefore, I forced myself to visit ladies with intellectual pretensions who read philosophy books or participate in upper-class gatherings, sometimes even managing to mimic a veneer of sociability" (383).

The protagonist's concluding reflection articulates a stark nihilism that challenges the fundamental illusions of social, class, or status distinctions. He perceives these differences as transient constructs – illusions that dissolve in the face of the unyielding reality of mortality and the inevitable end that awaits all human beings. The metaphor of "worms" becomes a potent symbol of this universal dissolution, representing the unavoidable process of decay that reduces all social distinctions to insignificance. This imagery underscores a core philosophical insight: regardless of one's position in society, the trajectory ultimately converges towards the same fate of exploitation and annihilation. The worms, as a symbol of natural entropy, serve to deconstruct notions of social justice or moral progress, revealing them as ephemeral illusions perpetuated by human vanity. Furthermore, the imagery of "the glass of French cognac" introduces a layer of irony, highlighting the superficiality of notions of refinement, superiority, and control. The act of savoring a luxurious drink becomes a poignant symbol of human complacency – an attempt to project power and distinction in a transient world destined for decay. The protagonist's reflection that "worms are the same in Berlin and Bucharest, working just as efficiently everywhere, and in two or three years, from this hand which holds the glass of French cognac to my mouth, only some bony, disgusting remains will be left" (363) poignantly encapsulates the universality of decay and the futility of social distinctions rooted in material and cultural superiority. In the end, all that persists is the inescapable biological truth of mortality, reducing both the opulence and the societal hierarchy to mere impermanent appearances.

The time machine and the production of knowledge. Instead of conclusions

Historical fiction has proposed a multifaceted relationship with the epochs it incorporates into the literary endeavor. As the "spatial turn" was discussed in the later half of XXth century, today it seems that we are witnessing a new phase - the "historical turn." The engagement with the past is mediated

through literature, with a clearly defined purpose: the production of knowledge. Bringing characters, events, settings, and major occurrences into the present equates to a form of learning, but also a means of reconnecting with grand history. Every period traversed by historical fiction – regardless of the forms it takes – has maintained a direct connection with political, social, and economic phenomena: from the realization of national aspirations in the 19th century to issues related to language, social movements, revolts, revolutions, economic reforms, and the reintegration of key moments along Romania’s historical trajectory.

Fiction shapes our collective memory, personifies key events and periods, reveals the deeper roots of contemporary crises, unsettles neat chronologies, challenges the historical record, exposes its lies and gaps, recovers marginalized stories, and conjures others to replace those that have been entirely lost. Not only contemplating the past but also simulating an encounter with it, historical fiction transforms the reader into a kind of time machine (Manshel 2023, 242), summarizing its utility for the reader as well.

This study involved clarifying the concepts from which the discussed historical fictions evolved, proposing a model that positions the Romanian space as a “zemiperipheral” node of transnational cultural flows. This model integrates Lukács’s (1962) classical theory of historical prose, historiographical metafiction (Hutcheon 1988), the concept of “zemiperiphery” (Shapiro 2014), hyperconnectivity (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024) and heterobiography (Boldrini), to observe how these function within central and peripheral spaces. The model, based on contradictions in relation to history, allegorical recourse, and selective fictionalization, recontextualizes collective memory within a global framework. Thus, we have found that the “zemiperiphery” functions as an onto-epistemic mediation vector. The analysis proceeded from theorization toward the examination of specific historical fictions, such as those written by Răzvan Rădulescu, Constantin Țoiu, Doina Ruști, Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, Filip Florian, and Octavian Soviany. Another conclusion emerging from the analyses is that Romanian historical fiction, conceived as a “contemporary literary mode” (Manshel 2023, 17), articulates a neo-hermetic aesthetic (Braga 1995) that transcends postmodernity and narrative univocality. It stratifies historical references with allegorical and intertextual tropes, turning “zemiperipheral” spaces into *loci* of transculturation – thus creating dynamic epistemic archives that engage the reader in a transnational interpretive dialectic. The third conclusion conceptualizes hyperconnectivity as a porous narrative topology. Post-1990 Romanian historical fiction employs history as a

series of what can be described as “interchangeable units” (Deckard, Niblett & Shapiro 2024, 92), crafting porous narrative frameworks that integrate elements of realism, the speculative, and allegory. The “contemporary literary model” developed by Romanian historical fiction over the past thirty-five years is characterized by two primary components: firstly, an evolutionary trajectory that eschews a definitive postmodern phase marked by distinct features, instead favoring a gradual dilution of benchmarks proposed by Hutcheon. Secondly, there is a notable reliance on traditional narrative tools to establish connections with a “new history” – a form of historiographical discourse that communicates across temporal boundaries and engages with multiple layers of epochs simultaneously. Central to this model is the “revisiting” of cultural spaces within Romanian literature, a process that often takes place in the *zempiperiferia* of cultural and political influences – areas or zones that are neither fully central nor entirely marginal but serve as liminal spaces where different centers of power intersect and mediate the cultural discourse. Additionally, this framework is shaped by the reader’s experience, who appears to engage with a “time machine” during the act of reading historical fiction. This act effectively enables the production of knowledge for the contemporary reader, serving as a mechanism that bolsters the coherence of literature’s role in the present-day cultural and intellectual landscape.

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