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THE POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIAN NOVEL – NAVIGATING THE POLITICAL AND SOCIOGRAPHIC DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT. ***The Post-Communist Romanian Novel – Navigating the Political and Sociographic Dimensions*.** The transition from communism to capitalism in Eastern Europe has been profoundly destabilising, reshaping economic, social, political, and ideological structures. This upheaval not only amplified the uneven development of the Soviet era but also replicated its harshness through neoliberal economic shock therapy, underscoring systemic inequalities between Western centres and Eastern peripheries. Drawing on Wallerstein's world-systems theory, this relationship symbolises an unequal structural power relationship, with the periphery's cultural and economic output subjugated to the demands of the centre (WReC, 2015). In literature, these dynamics have triggered a significant genre shift, particularly in the Romanian novel. The memorial and biographical forms increasingly dominate, marking a dissolution of traditional novelistic structures in favour of fragmented, introspective, and hybrid narratives. These forms align with broader trends of precariousness and cultural commodification, mirroring the destabilising effects of transition (Adriana Stan, 2020). Before Romania's 2007 EU accession, post-communist

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novels primarily adopted a historiographical approach to document systemic trauma (Vasile Ernu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici, Dan Lungu). Post-accession, these works shifted to a commodified exploration of (post)communist memory, with narratives addressing economic disparities and minority identities (Tatiana Țîbuleac, Liliana Nechita, Adrian Schiop). This shift reflects the master-slave dynamic of centre-periphery relations, where the West's exoticisation of communist experiences reinforces systemic inequalities. The dissolution of the Romanian novel into memorial and biographical forms symbolises a dual response: a critique of transitional instability and a capitulation to Western frameworks of cultural consumption.

Keywords: *(post)communist memory, nostalgia, transition, the post-communist Romanian novel, sociographic dimensions, world-systems theory.*

REZUMAT. *Romanul postcomunist în România – reconfigurări ale politicului şi paliere sociografice*. Tranziția de la comunism la capitalism în Europa de Est a fost profund destabilizatoare, privitor la impactarea structurilor economice, sociale, politice şi ideologice. Această bulversare de tranziție sistemică şi-a replicat duritatea prin terapia de şoc neoliberală, subliniind inegalităţile dintre centrele occidentale şi periferiile estice. Pornind de la teoria sistemelor-lume a lui Wallerstein, această relație simbolizează un raport de putere structural inegală, arătând cum producția culturală şi economică a periferiei e subjugată cerinţelor centrului (WReC, 2015). În literatura română, aceste dinamici au declanşat schimbări semnificative, în special în roman. Resuscitarea biografismului şi autenticismului domină din ce în ce mai mult, marcând o disoluție a structurilor romaneşti tradiționale în favoarea narațiunilor fragmentate, introspective şi hibride. Aceste forme se aliniază tendinţelor mai largi de precaritate şi comodificare culturală, reflectând efectele destabilizatoare ale tranziției (Adriana Stan, 2020). Înainte de aderarea României la UE în 2007, romanele douămiiste au adoptat în principal o direcție istoriografică pentru a documenta trauma sistemică (Vasile Ernu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici, Dan Lungu). După aderare, poate fi observată o comodificare a memoriei (post)comuniste, fiind preferate narațiuni care abordează disparităţile economice şi identităţile minoritare (Tatiana Țîbuleac, Liliana Nechita, Adrian Schiop). Această schimbare reflectă dinamica stăpân-sclav a relațiilor centru-periferie, în care exotizarea de către Occident a experienţelor comuniste consolidează inegalităţile sistemice.

Cuvinte-cheie: *memoria (post)comunistă, nostalgia, tranziție, romanul românesc postcomunist, dimensiuni sociografice, teoria sistemelor-lume.*

Introduction

"Why did Neoliberalism Triumph and Endure in the Post-Communist World?" is one of the central questions explored by Hilary Appel and Mitchell A. Orenstein in their article of the same name. The authors observe that, across the former communist bloc, there was an extraordinary eagerness to adopt the new neoliberal capitalist order—an enthusiasm largely unmatched in societies without a totalitarian past (Appel and Orenstein 2016, 313). This attitude can be explained, on the one hand, by the revolutionary fervour and the collective hope for systemic transformation that followed the collapse of communism and, on the other hand, by the growing economic competition from East Asia and the ideological consolidation of neoliberalism itself. These factors exerted considerable pressure on Eastern European countries to rapidly integrate into the dominant global structures emerging in the age of globalisation (327).

The phenomenon has become almost obsessive—not only in terms of its chronic persistence and far-reaching consequences but also within academic discourse, where scholars from various disciplines interpret infrastructural transformations in their respective fields as symptomatic of globalisation. In this context, Marius Babias identifies three *topoi* of globalisation, demonstrating how it subversively and persistently reshapes the key dimensions through which a society is represented: the economic, the geopolitical, and the cultural. At the economic level, the first *topos* refers to the intensified logic of competition driven by global stock markets—an enthusiasm that conceals the failures of neoliberalism while simultaneously reinforcing Western political hegemony over Eastern Europe and perpetuating precarious labour conditions in the Global South (Babias 2024, 17–18). Secondly, the erosion of geographical boundaries in favour of a centralised global market—and the accompanying geopolitical restructuring of nation-states—has been justified through the instrumentalisation of ideals such as equality and fraternity, drawn from the French Revolution. These principles were invoked in support of dismantling hierarchies and eliminating differentiation; however, the outcome has been quite the opposite (Babias 2024, 18). On the cultural front, Babias notes that the increasing dominance of certain forms of the visual—such as commercial imagery and media representations—over other modes of cultural expression has fundamentally altered the role of art and culture, which are now subordinated to the global market and compelled to respond to its demands (20). This dominance refers not to the visual nature of art itself but to the growing influence of visual forms driven by the market logic, which shape and often limit cultural production.

It is true that literature no longer functions solely under the banner of direct political engagement as it did in communism; rather, it operates within a tension shaped by the infrastructures of the global market. Nevertheless, it retains the capacity to reactivate dormant cultural and social conflicts through aesthetic and narrative strategies. In this light, it seems essential to renew the dialogue between the political and the aesthetic—a relationship long interrogated by thinkers such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Slavoj Žižek. These theorists have rightly questioned how one might avoid reinforcing political conflicts or legitimising oppressive ideological positions (such as fascism) through aesthetic means which, once absorbed into the artistic field, risk being absolved of critique or responsibility (Kornbluh 2019, 2–3). This concern is taken further by theorists such as Jacques Rancière, for whom the artistic act is inherently political, insofar as it imposes an ethics upon social realities, granting visibility to those voices that are typically marginalised or ignored (3). This is why I find Anna Kornbluh's preferred framework particularly compelling—namely, the concept of mediation, which she recuperates from the Marxist tradition and rearticulates as a tool for a dialectic specific to aesthetics. More precisely, her intervention moves beyond Rancière's comparatively passive model, which merely highlights ruptures within the shared social order by rendering them perceptible. In contrast, Kornbluh offers a projective model in which the identification of tension is insufficient unless accompanied by a search for formal mechanisms to resolve it—through figuration, design, and construction—all of which she situates under the rubric of mediation (Kornbluh 2019, 6).

Last but not least, in light of the ongoing revalorisation of the political as a constant feature of both social and aesthetic structures—yet one that must be continuously redefined in relation to context—I turn to Fredric Jameson's perspective. According to Jameson, the contemporary orientation of ideological analysis, that is, the way in which we interpret the cultural reverberations of ideology, dissolves traditional dichotomies between the political in its institutional form and the political as expressed aesthetically. Whereas the former was once confined to official discourse, and the latter relegated to the realm of art and culture, Jameson contends that all symbolic activity is political. Every form of social or cultural practice carries an ideological subtext, whether explicit or latent (Jameson 2009, 349–350). Even at the risk of conflating a transitive, classical conception of politics with a subversive, implicit one, such an analysis enables a form of symbolic resistance—literary discourse being a case in point—against the reification and privatisation of contemporary life. The only viable path through which the individual might liberate themselves from the constraints of late modern society lies in relinquishing the belief that anything

stands outside the social and historical apparatus. Even the most intimate or private gesture is shaped by practices naturalised at the macrostructural level, and the very impulse to attribute meaning to it is, in itself, political: "The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical – indeed, that everything is «in the last analysis» political" (2002, 4).

Building on the methodological framework outlined above, this paper examines the evolution of the Romanian and Bessarabian post-communist novel before and after the pivotal year of 2007—marking Romania's accession to the European Union. More specifically, I argue that the contemporary novel in both Romania and Bessarabia, prior to 2007, tends to favour narrative discourses centred on nostalgia, understood as a response to the fervent anti-communism of the neo-Western period and to the uneven and ultimately failed transition from communism to capitalist democracy in the local context. After 2007, while this nostalgic tendency remains detectable, it is increasingly accompanied—if not replaced—by the commodification of (post)communist memory. In this later phase, narratives foregrounding economic inequality emerge either in alternation with or alongside a heightened interest in marginalised and minority identities. This shift signals a sociographic rather than mnemonic or historical investment in the political, with literary attention turning toward themes such as the Romani and queer communities, Romania–Moldova geopolitical relations, gender hierarchies, mass migration, and the representational politics of the body. From this perspective, the alignment of Rancière's position—emphasising the re-legitimation of unheard voices through the redistribution of the sensible (Rancière 2000, 12)—with Kornbluh's focus on the literary-aesthetic mediation of such voices offers a productive theoretical framework. Kornbluh's approach is particularly attentive to the formal mechanisms through which literature addresses these dynamics, including the narrative privileging of the first-person voice via autofiction or by assigning such a voice to a fictional character. This convergence opens the way for a broader discussion on the significance of reparative writing as a political and aesthetic strategy.

Thus, the contemporary novel operates within a dual dynamic: on the one hand, it internalises the instability inherent in the post-communist transition, particularly as it manifests in economic and social spheres; on the other, it becomes enmeshed in a process of (symbolic) capital accumulation by aligning itself with the logic of the Western cultural market. Within this market, the narrativisation of (post)communist experience is not approached as documentary testimony but rather consumed as a form of exoticism—despite the thematic heterogeneity advanced by the authors themselves. For this reason, before turning to the primary texts under analysis, I will first offer a brief contextualisation

of (Romanian) post-communism, considering its economic and sociological dimensions, alongside the transformations undergone by literature and its institutional frameworks.

Postcommunism in Eastern Europe. Economic and social-mental aspects

The transition from communism to capitalism in Eastern Europe has been characterised by profound economic, social, political, and cultural transformations. These shifts were not merely destabilising because they dismantled discredited communist structures but because they fractured previously established developmental models, seeking to replace them with distorted frameworks largely incompatible with the socio-material legacies of the communist era. The dehumanising violence of the former regime was matched—and in some respects even surpassed—by the neoliberal reconfiguration that sought to impose market democracy through a form of economic shock therapy (WReC 2015, 119). Within this context of structural dissonance between transitional objectives and the material and historical conditions of former communist societies, Grigore Pop-Eleches and Joshua A. Tucker identify three dimensions through which the legacy of both communism and the transition itself can be differentiated. Firstly, they observe that in several post-communist states, including Romania, the collapse of communism took on a highly symbolic—even mythologised—character, insofar as it embodied a belief in protest as a sufficient and legitimate means of influencing political change. Secondly, the transition also contributed to a social cleavage—not necessarily along generational lines, but rather between perceived "winners" and "losers" of the post-communist era. This division emerged between those who continued to defend the values or perceived securities of communism and a younger, post-transition generation more attuned to the promises of capitalist democracy. Finally, a distinct temporality has come to define the collective experience of these historical phases. While communist memory is typically relegated to a closed and conclusively "past" episode, the experience of transition is perceived as dynamic, fragmented, and continually shifting. It is seen less as a completed stage and more as an ongoing process, whose meaning is plural and subjectively inflected at the individual level (Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2011, 380).

In this context, Juliet Johnson identifies two principal theoretical orientations concerning the interpretation of the post-communist experience. On one side stand agency-centred approaches, which maintain that the legacies of the past can be effectively overcome, provided that the appropriate institutional

and policy mechanisms are in place. On the other side are structure-based theories, which view such optimism as overly radical and potentially hazardous, arguing instead that enduring structural constraints significantly limit the scope of transformation: "Agency-centered theorists express optimism that correct policy choices can overcome the legacies of the past, while structure-based theorists believe the legacies trump choice and bar radical change" (Johnson 2001, 254). Accordingly, agency-centred theories tend to be favoured by neoclassical economists, who assign a central role to economic elites in driving a society's developmental trajectory. In contrast, structure-based approaches are typically advanced by scholars working within evolutionary or sociological frameworks, where institutional change is understood to follow a path-dependent logic shaped by historical patterns of development (254). Although Romania's adoption of neoliberal capitalist ideology was initially more measured than that of the Baltic States or Poland, this was due to Romanian leaders' early attempts during the neo-Western period to reconcile elements of the traditional developmentalist model—namely, a strong state with an active economic role—with market-orientated transitional measures (neo-developmentalism). However, under mounting pressure from international economic actors, Romania abruptly embraced neoliberalism in the late 1990s, subjected to similarly stringent and disheartening transition policies (Ban 2014, 154–155). In terms of economic relations, a semi-peripheral state such as Romania finds itself at a distinct disadvantage compared to peripheral states, as it occupies an intermediate position—caught between the influence exerted by core states and the monopoly it must maintain over more disadvantaged states to remain viable (Wallerstein 2004, 29–30). This predicament is further compounded by the partial nature of such relationships, as exemplified by Romania's ties with the Republic of Moldova, thus complicating its enduring state of transition.

In tandem with these economic challenges, a socio-psychological phenomenon emerged during the post-communist transition: anti-communism became the prevailing ideology. This stance was chiefly advanced through moral arguments designed to irrevocably expunge the communist legacy by identifying and emphasising faults that would justify and reinforce such a resentful perspective (Poenaru 2017, 141). In the absence of a coherent plan for the future to address the irregularities of a society in economic, political, cultural, and ideological disarray, the propagation of anti-communism functioned as a pernicious strategy to sidestep the real issues facing transitional society by focusing exclusively on a (distant) past. As Florin Poenaru observes, "Anticommunism had nothing to say about the present of the transition. While being occupied with transitional justice (directed against former communists),

anticommunism overlooked the injustices caused by the transition to the most vulnerable segments of society" (141-142, my translation). Furthermore, the adoption of transitional neoliberalism "inspired the change of history in the former Eastern Bloc" (Ban 2014, 88), since, as Cornel Ban argues, it reinforced the hierarchical control exerted by the state, combined with private capitalism, over the working class—stripped of its socioeconomic rights and further weakened by diminished employment opportunities under this new dynamic (89). Thus, anti-communism distilled these economic transformations into clearly delineated political class interests, with the objective—through the criminalisation of the communist experience—of legitimising processes of "re-appropriation, restitution, and privatisation, driven not solely by an ideological conviction in the merits of private property but also by tangible material class interests" (Poenaru 2017, 143).

Concurrently, many of the economic deficiencies encountered during the transition period were rooted in the socialist system itself, which had left a significant proportion of the population economically illiterate. As a result, large sections of society were ill-equipped to grasp either the micro- or macroeconomic context, being unfamiliar with the instruments and mechanisms characteristic of a modern economy (Murgescu 2010, 465). Furthermore, the surge in consumption after 1990—facilitated by the disintegration of state authority (466)—together with the consolidation of a "predatory economy," centred on the emergence of new economic and political elites through primitive capital accumulation, contributed to the marginalisation and even dissolution of the proletariat. This was largely due to the ascendance of a new privileged class drawn from the former ranks of party officials and members of Ceaușescu's Securitate (466–467). Moreover, the destabilising effect was compounded by the emergence of contradictory positions in post-communist Romania: on the one hand, severe criticism of the new capitalist class as corrupt, and on the other, unwavering support for the market economy and privatisation—policies which, in practice, had served to benefit this very class (Pasti 2006, 200). Vladimir Pasti interprets this paradox as stemming from the simultaneous internalisation of both Marxist and Leninist doctrines. More precisely, this dynamic entailed framing capitalism as an inevitable good, yet one that must be enforced through coercive means—via unpopular reforms and the marginalisation of particular social groups. Within this logic, a politically legitimised "reformist" elite claimed the right to control, and even repress, the population, while simultaneously exhibiting pronounced hostility towards the new capitalists, who were at times perceived as adversaries of their own system (202–203). In this context, the Romanian intelligentsia constructed and sustained an ideology largely divorced from global economic realities, advancing three central tenets: (1) the glorification

of the "small owner"; (2) the disregard of the role played by large capital and international corporations in modern capitalism; and (3) the portrayal of capital solely in negative terms, rather than recognising it as a global economic phenomenon (211).

To conclude this section—where I have sought to contextualise conditions beyond the aesthetic, precisely because my interest lies in a political reading of the novels analysed in the subsequent chapters—it is important to emphasise that the failure of the transition cannot be attributed to a form of colonialism exercised by the USSR over the countries of the former communist bloc. Rather, this notion serves as a convenient justification employed by neoliberal capitalism to legitimise its unsuccessful reforms. As Boris Buden elucidates, it is inaccurate to speak of colonialism in the former communist states, given the absence of a distinct colonial centre; notably, even Russia was among the countries advocating for the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Buden 2020, 43). As previously discussed, the root causes reside in the inherent contradictions of the transition process, which pursued primarily political rather than economic objectives, thereby complicating the adaptation of Eastern European nations to a neoliberal market economy. This challenge was compounded by their marginal position "with the forms of communication and lifestyle of advanced capitalism" (44) and by systemic infrastructures that proved incompatible with Western intervention—a dynamic that also reverberated within the literary sphere.

From this perspective, the observations outlined by Andrew Baruch Wachtel prove particularly insightful, as he identifies three principal limitations faced by post-communist authors, structured along thematic, ideological, social, and formal lines. On the thematic front, I return to Mihail Iovănel's earlier observation regarding writers educated under communism: while the literary field was officially shaped by the partisan constraints of socialist realism, it also included forms of opposition, substitution, and strategies for circumventing censorship. Once the political framework that promoted socialist realism collapsed, authors who had developed their voices—whether within, against, or alongside this official model—were compelled to devise new thematic approaches that could not be exhausted simply by the regime's disappearance. At the social level, there is a loss of the symbolic, almost messianic role that writers once held; following communism's fall, they became a less prominent social class. Finally, from a formal standpoint, post-communist writers grapple with questioning the novel's suitability as a form to represent post-communist realities, given the instability of social conditions and the absence of stable reference points within the neoliberal world into which they were abruptly thrust. For these writers, the fictional realm seeks a gravitational centre

grounded in representations of the real; yet, within an alienating, fragmented, and disorienting reality, the laws governing imagined worlds become similarly compromised (Wachtel 2006, 166).

Thus, when Iovănel discusses the literary forms explored in the post-communist era, he frames them as part of an ongoing struggle to confront "the destructured cultural market of post-communism, which is in the process of neoliberalisation" (Iovănel 2021, 275, my translation). The distinction between communism and post-communism is sharply drawn: under the totalitarian regime, points of resistance were largely imposed by the dogmatic nature of the system, enforced centrally through censorship, whereas in post-communism, writers must identify these points of resistance independently and adapt them to new social realities—often without the financial backing previously provided by the state (273). Nevertheless, despite this anarchic positioning—which attempts to mitigate the fragmented backdrop of the transition, the principal site for the aggregation of the precariat—the postcommunist prose of the early 2000s becomes permeated by a discourse that aligns with neoliberal ideology, notably through its conformity with the dominant anti-communist narrative (Stan 2020, 4).

Naturally, this tendency arose from the fact that intellectuals who had identified as dissidents during the communist period found themselves largely overshadowed by authors and critics advocating (neo)liberalism, often simultaneously amplifying conservative agendas to their fullest extent (Poenaru 2017, 146–147). The centrality of the concept of 'memory' within anti-communist discourse carried a dual function, constructed along two axes: one emotional, tied to the victims of communism; the other moral, somewhat consequent upon the former, aimed at establishing a didactic framework intended to prevent the repetition of past errors. In this context, I consider it crucial to highlight Marius Babias's observation that, during the neo-Western period, the cultural sphere has progressively shifted towards the right, promoting ostensibly democratic values designed to consolidate neoliberal capitalist democracy as the sole legitimate political form in which the individual can truly be free, especially when contrasted with the former communist regimes. This politics simultaneously seeks to sensitise society through the continual invocation of a demonised past on every possible occasion (Babias 2024, 40).

This distribution was thus designed to render anti-communism permanent (Poenaru 2017, 150–151), functioning as a salvific practice alongside neoliberal ideology, which presents itself as the best of all possible worlds—often without the cognisant subjects fully perceiving these underlying ideological manipulations. As Mark Fisher, following Žižek, explains, this evasion of transitive discourse represents one of the perversities of neoliberal capitalism: even when individuals

recognise this dynamic and attempt self-distancing, they ultimately reproduce it endlessly through their actions (Fisher 2009, 46). Such discourse challenges the reductive treatment of communism and cultural memory as little more than a handful of clichés, thereby allowing for a more nuanced re-examination of recent history: "Therefore, the understanding of the communist past was reduced to a few easily identifiable and reiterable clichés, to a few commonplaces that produced, through repetition and successive citation, effects with the epistemic character of truth" (Poenaru 2017, 150, my translation). It is only in the latter half of the 2000s that prose discourse undergoes restructuring, re-centring fictional scenarios as mechanisms for revisiting the past (Stan 2020, 5). The most effective means of achieving this is through characters enabling what Alex Goldiș terms mnemonic pluriperspectivism, following Astrid Erll's framework (Goldiș 2020, 385). As Adriana Stan observes, following 1989, Romania witnessed a pronounced yearning for cultural realism. Films, literature, music, and television began to depict life "as it is," reflecting the lifting of communist censorship. Literature turned towards truth and authenticity, even at the expense of fiction and lyricism, marking a significant departure from previous trends (Stan 2021, 3). Yet, although Romanian literary realism experienced a notable moment at the turn of the millennium, it proved a short-lived phenomenon and failed to firmly establish itself within the local cultural landscape, which remained shaped by the legacies of socialist realism and the ideological ambiguities of the period. After 2008, literature largely returned to fiction, with critical realism persisting only in isolated projects. While limited in scope, these works continued to offer a trenchant critique of the economic and social consequences of the transition (10), thus underpinning the sociographic orientation of the post-2007 novel, as I will demonstrate below.

The Contemporary Novel Pre-2007: Communist Nostalgia – The Decompression of the Neoliberal Shock and the Facilitation of Capitalist Discourse within the Unconscious of Form

Building upon the theoretical considerations and the contextualisation of post-communism—economic, socio-mental, and literary—outlined in the preceding section, I argue that one of the foundational premises for any discussion of communist nostalgia is that the phenomenon itself functions as a decompression of the neoliberal shock experienced by the countries of the former communist bloc. In line with this idea, the Romanian literature of the 2000s published prior to 2007 employs a bidirectional nostalgic discourse. On the one hand, it seeks to decentralise the predominantly anti-communist

discourse characteristic of the 1990s, beneath whose surface the inadequacies of the transition were concealed or minimised through their juxtaposition with the horrors of Soviet realities. On the other hand, nostalgia is refracted through the exoticisation of Eastern Europe by the West, coming to operate as a mechanism of naturalisation—and even internalisation—of capitalist neoliberalism. This refraction occurs via melancholic attitudes towards the past, which are projected and imposed by the West, always constructed in comparison with the East. The fragmented and fissured reality it proposes can only expose its landmarks through a dialectical relationship, thereby reinforcing its articulatory mechanisms.

In this regard, the context that established nostalgia as a reaction—initially socio-mental—in the countries of Eastern Europe, and specifically within the local sphere, was the onset of a professionally rooted alienation naturalised chiefly among the working class. This was primarily due to unemployment, compounded by precarious wages, deindustrialisation, and an education system detached from the vocational demands of the industrial sector, instead orientated towards business initiation and foreign language acquisition to facilitate integration with the West (Todorova 2010, 5–6). This dynamic, driven by the need to align with Western rhythms, did not originate solely in the post-communist period but also has its roots in the retroactive legacy of interrupted modernity within East European spaces. The transition from communism to neoliberalism presented a new opportunity for resynchronisation with the West, whose supposed tolerance in fact entailed a demand for universalisation, underpinned by a policy of inclusion of the former communist states, without which their survival would be untenable (Buden 2020, 82). Dominic Boyer insightfully observes that the valorisation of an image of Eastern primitiveness—educated only in relation to the prerogatives of Western neoliberal culture—already constitutes an attitude of marginalisation rather than inclusion (Boyer 2010, 22). The West feels compelled to issue this diagnosis of the slowed economic, political, and cultural development of former communist societies precisely to position itself as the future for these nations, infantilising them in the process as a historical justification for colonising, civilising, or dominating them—a post-imperial symptom (22–23).

At the literary level, these aspects have been formalised through an exploration of the biographical dimension, employed both as a means of authentication and as a means to lay bare an unjust reality. Thus, the socially fractured atmosphere of the 2000s is documented, where nostalgia functioned alternately as a platform for the revival of nationalism and as an encouragement of consumerist practices or integration into the European Union. The preferred actantial typology is that of the young person marked by profound existential crises, whose condition often corresponds with the squalid living conditions of

the capital or provincial areas—a tableau emerging from the new, bankrupt realities (Stan 2020, 3). Consequently, the novels I will analyse in this chapter are of interest not only thematically—since all address communist nostalgia, the divide between the Soviet and neoliberal worlds, and the responses of individuals or collectives to infrastructural changes wrought by transitional society—but also formally, as I find it compelling how the chosen narrative procedures reflect on and represent processes of memory.

As noted in the introductory section, this approach is underpinned by the theoretical frameworks advanced by Anna Kornbluh and Fredric Jameson, who harmonise psychoanalytic coordinates with formal analyses as mechanisms for restoring political representations within the symbolic structures of social life (Kornbluh 2019, 140). In this context, social structure is not external to effects but rather immanent to them; this does not necessarily entail a strict transitivity but, on the contrary, must be continuously decoded within the implicit meanings of the discursive forms employed (Jameson 2002, 9). This emphasis on procedural aspects also reflects Jacques Lacan's modification of the Saussurean relation between signifier and signified, disrupting their equivalence. For the French psychoanalyst, the primacy of the signifier is crucial, as it possesses the capacity to organise the unconscious, whose form may retroactively intervene in the subject's meaning-making processes (Kornbluh 2019, 145). The novels I propose to analyse in this section are therefore: *Născut în URSS* [*Born in USSR,* 2006, my translation] by Vasile Ernu—a testimonial novel with a monologic form; *Circul nostru vă prezintă:* [*Our Circus Presents,* 2001, my translation] by Lucian Dan Teodorovici—a novel that dialogues with the narrative voice within an alienating context, ultimately restoring it to the hegemonic narrator; and *Raiul găinilor* [*The Paradise of the Chickens,* 2004, my translation] by Dan Lungu—a polyphonic, heterodox novel. I will consider them in turn.

Camouflaged behind a narrative voice that is often serene and naïve (Iovănel 2021, 43-44), Vasile Ernu does not hesitate to emphasise that the glorification of Soviet childhood functions as a driving force that exposes the shortcomings of the new post-communist order, which employs similar discursive forms to manipulate the masses (Goldiș 2020, 387), thus revealing the new form of repression that has supplanted the communist one: "If the world I lived in was based on political repression, the world I entered is based on economic repression. They are two sides of the same coin. Both are forms of repression and control" (Ernu 2020, 243, my translation). The context of the novel's publication is also significant, as it does not simply respond to the anti-communist discourse of the 1990s but emerges as a cultural reflex following President Traian Băsescu's 2006 condemnation of communism. Ernu thus feels justified in criticising the paternalistic anti-communism that had become quite

entrenched in recent years, despite the fragility of the arguments on which it was founded (Iovănel 2021, 44). Formally, with regard to the monologic nature of this testimonial and mnemonic novel, *Născut în URSS* [*Born in USSR,* 2006, my translation], Ernu's narrative voice is hybrid. On one hand, the analyst's discourse predominates—explained by Jameson through Lacan's schema as a position legitimised by an interdependent relation between subject and object of desire, yet balanced by a dialectical distance, where the analyst seeks to distinguish between the object of desire itself and the immediacies of the subject's experience of desire, suggesting a politically demanding and egoistic equivalent (Jameson 2008, 117-118). This voice prevails throughout the volume as it calmly inventories the cultural specificities of the Soviet world (music, films, books, etc.). On the other hand, there is an affinity for the discourse of the hysteric—namely, a mode of enunciation concerned with representing symptoms and points of tension that provoke anarchic attitudes against a perceived inadequate authority (117). This latter voice is unveiled at the novel's conclusion, denouncing systemic metamorphoses and categorising individuals into three types: the Cynic, the Opportunist (who would readily revert to communism if necessary), and the Sceptic—the most vulnerable figure under the neoliberal order (Ernu 2020, 239-241). The monologic narrative structure of *Born in USSR* serves as a crucial site of psychoanalytic mediation (Anna Kornbluh), articulating the fractured subjectivities shaped by post-communist neoliberal trauma. The narrative voice oscillates between the analytic position—aiming to dissect and make sense of collective memory—and the hysteric position—expressing resistance and symptomatic anxiety towards the imposed socio-political order. This formal interplay reveals how trauma is not simply recounted but mediated through the form itself, as the narrator negotiates tensions between past and present, repression and economic control. Through this hybrid discourse, the novel enacts a decompression of neoliberal shock, demonstrating how the unconscious of form reflects the complexities of memory and ideological contestation in transitional Eastern Europe.

With regard to Lucian Dan Teodorovici, *Circul nostru vă prezintă:* [*Our Circus Presents,* 2001, my translation] formally explores a form of internal dialogisation. Although the dominant discursive position is held by a first-person narrator, this voice lends itself to other actants, whose positions are subsequently interrogated through the lens of the narrator-character, who either validates or rejects them. What strikes me as particularly noteworthy in this novel is that, despite the absence of a specific chronotope, the motley community of apartment-block neighbours, the narrative vector consistently orientated towards the periphery and identities of the precariat—the predominant typology of the disillusioned subject—allows one to intuit a society in (post)transition.

This is marked by the usual clichés: increasing prostitution rates and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases; begging as a new cultural practice in transitional Romania, where children are exploited by parents to beg; economic instability portrayed as an alienating and disruptive force in social order; and so forth. Linking these social markers, which form the structural fabric of the novel, with formal analysis, I argue that Teodorovici's work can be firmly situated within Jameson's ideological critique concerning the representation of history. The theorist contends that cultural discourse always contains both a synchronic dimension—seen as a closed unity—and a diachronic one, the historical narrative flow. He explains that synchronic sequences, often read as a plurality of narratives associated with multiple individuals, ultimately convey a subsidiary diachronic historical narrative when they communicate among themselves, sometimes implicitly (Jameson 2002, 13). In this respect, the opaque or absent chronotope in *Our Circus Presents:* permits this void to be filled by the protagonist's identity crisis—an hysterical subject—which converges with the collective crisis of the characters he interacts with, projecting the shape of history and transition into the implicit form and alienating atmosphere of the novel.

The entire prose experiment centres on the protagonist's repeated inability to commit suicide, despite daily attempts. This creates space for each character to narrate their story, fostering the illusion that they have saved him from death. The internal dialogisation of the novel unfolds through the sharing of the narrative voice. On one side is the hanged man, whom the narrator rescues and whose suicidal impulse fascinates him, even as he knows the man will be saved by the station staff. On the other side, the dialogical construction occurs via the relationship with the former theologian, who shifts to economic studies in order to afford the sexual services provided by prostitutes. His discourse mobilises three key themes: desacralisation of society—not necessarily in a religious sense but as a sign of a pathological spirituality; the commodification of sexual acts; and the normalisation or obsession with suicide as an artistic act. Internal dialogisation functions as long as the narrator permits it within the text's symbolic economy, ultimately invalidating both discourses in turn. A telling moment is the novel's final scene, where the dissolution of dialogical formalisation and the restoration of monological order is signalled by the contrast between the narrator's continuous, clear laughter and the fragmented, intermittent laughter of the hanged man, which accompanies, in a muted fashion, the central narrative voice: "A few moments later, in this so quiet overnight triage, only our laughter was heard. Mine, a prolonged burst, for which, if necessary, I could find no explanation. His, a companion laugh, tortured, faltering in repeated fits of coughing" (Teodorovici 2020, 194, my translation).

I conclude this section by casting a brief glance at the polyphonic novel, constructed as a mechanism for the democratisation of actantial voices, which Bakhtin defines as a narrative universe governed by "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" (Bakhtin 1984, 6). In the post-2000 Romanian novel, these principles are deployed in a particular way, reflecting the centripetal forces of capitalist structures. Drawing from Dostoevsky's oeuvre, the Russian theorist explains that in a polyphonic narrative, characters are not mere discursive objects of authorial positioning; rather, they autonomously assert their own consciousnesses within the novel, liberated from the hegemony of the omniscient narrator, thereby subjectivising their appearances within the story (7). An additional ideological observation Bakhtin makes, following Otto Kaus, is that narrative polyphony is characteristic of the capitalist world-system, which cannot find a more conducive systemic order for its coagulation. This arises because capitalism claims credit for dispersing the social unity characteristic of other forms of representing reality, which, now fragmented, can no longer respond to a single, individual voice. Instead, it becomes polyvocal and plural against the backdrop of intensified class struggles and ideological dysfunctions that formerly operated in a monologic fashion with a clearly defined vectorial direction (19-20). This is the very source of the hybridisation between hysterical and analytic discourses that are dispersed within the multifaceted narrative universe. The novel's internal dialogisation functions as a psychoanalytic mechanism that mediates the fragmented and alienated post-communist subject. The shifting narrative voices, controlled yet allowing marginal perspectives to surface, mirror the hysterical subject's struggle to represent and process social trauma under neoliberalism. The formal tension between multiplicity and the eventual restoration of a monologic order reflects a dynamic unconscious negotiation: the desire for dialogue and inclusion contends with dominant ideological forces that silence or absorb dissent. This dialogical form thus mediates the historical and psychic fractures of post-communist society, embodying the decompression of the neoliberal shock within the narrative's symbolic structure.

A pertinent example is Dan Lungu's *Raiul găinilor* [*The Paradise of the Chickens,* 2004, my translation], where I found it symptomatic how polyphony is here both remixed and, to some extent, heretical. Although diffuse, the narrative voice continues to direct the storytelling, sliding smoothly into the pluralised actantial universe. This narrative partitioning, as deployed by Lungu, operates on two levels: first, the narrator lends his voice to all characters wishing to appropriate it, acting as the organiser of all conversations, thereby imparting a sense of paternalistic tenderness. According to this underlying stance, the actants cannot attain discursive autonomy without him; hence the

notion of a heretical/remixed polyphony where narrative hegemony remains concealed. Democratisation of the narrative discourse occurs through actantial interpolations, behind which the narrator dilutes his superior position by inserting into his own discourse certain verbal tics or phrases specific to a particular character, faithfully reproducing and addressing them through quotation marks and the name of the respective actant in parentheses: "After a while, the 'skinny ones' (Mrs Stegaru) would come out and continue, with an increased mischievous glee, the stone-throwing into the foul water or some other improvised game" (Lungu 2012, 45, my translation).

Second, narrative sharing also occurs internally whenever a character recounts a story, such as Milica's visit to the Colonel's house or the stories about the communist era marked by the humanisation of the Ceaușescu figure by the character Mitu. Thus, a subjectivisation of collective memory takes place, framed informally and restored by those who lived it more or less directly, often with characters allowing themselves to interfere with others' stories if their coordinates have changed since the last telling. Furthermore, the narrator clearly empathises with the nostalgic communist discourse, despite maintaining a balance between depicting the shortcomings of the last decade of the Ceaușescu period and the problem of transition, intensified by the awareness and sharpening of class struggle. The latter is best expressed through the hatred shared by all characters towards the Colonel, whose story is diffuse and who never receives the narrator's direct voice. At the opposite pole stands Relu Covalciuc, the most privileged actantial position in the novel, granted the greatest expressive space within the narrative economy, including moments of introspection filtered through free indirect style, such as his dream sequence spanning several pages, which functions both as a legitimating instrument for the nostalgic discourse and as direct irony aimed at the transition. This is yet another reason why polyphony in some post-2000 Romanian novels does not resonate with the strict theoretical sense theorised by Bakhtin, since even the characters are not equal amongst themselves and cannot therefore claim an egalitarian status with the central narrative position. The novel employs a remixed polyphony that enacts a complex psychoanalytic mediation of post-communist memory and trauma. While the narrator retains control, the plural voices of characters reveal the fragmented, contested nature of collective subjectivity under capitalism's centrifugal pressures. This hybrid narrative form embodies the tension between the hegemonic narrative voice and marginalised perspectives, reflecting the ongoing struggle for discursive autonomy in a society marked by class conflict and ideological dysfunction. Through this polyphonic yet hierarchical structure, the novel formalises the mediation of unconscious social processes, illustrating how trauma and memory are negotiated within and through the literary form itself.

The Post-2007 Novel: Reintegrating the Political through Sociographic Perspectives in Contemporary Literature

With the exhaustion of the nostalgic discourse—and by this, I do not mean its disappearance but rather its decentralisation after 2007 (Romania's accession to the European Union)—the contemporary post-2000 novel in both Romania and Moldova undergoes a significant reconfiguration. There is a marked shift in the way the past is reclaimed, towards the commodification of memory. By this, I refer to the transformation of personal and collective recollections into cultural products with an exchange value in local and transnational markets, where their appeal often lies in their perceived authenticity or exoticism. Authors no longer approach this at an absolutist level but rather mobilise the frames of communist trauma and the shortcomings of transition to sharpen the sociographic dimension of their writing, reflecting the alienation wrought by capitalism. Thematically, the exploration of marginality types intensifies, with increased representation of characters from communities discriminated against or exoticised based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, locality, and so forth. In this post-2007 context, the commodification of memory and the turn towards marginality become intertwined phenomena: the market valorisation of certain historical and identity-based narratives encourages writers to present both the past and social otherness as part of a marketable repertoire. Thus, while the nostalgia-centred phase engaged with capitalism primarily through the lens of loss and longing for the pre-1989 order, the later configuration responds to it by reframing memory and marginality into products for cultural consumption, simultaneously shaped by and resisting the very market forces that enable their circulation.

This tendency is also discussed by Alexandre Gefen in the context of contemporary French literature, who dispels speculation about its demise into 'postliterature'. Instead, he proposes a discussion on the therapeutic values of such discourse within a neo-humanist framework, seeking to (re)functionalise literature precisely through its capacity to articulate certain contemporary social realities that other discourses cannot encapsulate (Gefen 2017, 9–10). Gefen's stance resonates with the 'resocialisation' of literature — a paradigm he terms 'clinical' — in which literature becomes a mouthpiece for society's forgotten and marginalised, enabling a redefinition of both the individual and the collective, an expression of the political in Rancière's sense (11). Formally, although the aforementioned elements could be achieved through an objective narrative using appropriate devices such as free indirect discourse, contemporary Romanian literature post-EU accession shows a clear predilection for dialogising the self, manifested either through first-person novels or autofiction. The latter

aligns most closely with the idea of a shared sensibility, as it dissolves the hegemonic narrator's position, and alongside the characters, the narrative voice becomes vulnerable, non-canonical, and often a victim of invisibility. Consequently, this frequently involves the use of violent and visceral language registers.

In this regard, I propose an analysis of three novels: *Grădina de sticlă* [*The Glass Garden,* 2018, my translation] by Tatiana Țîbuleac, *Cireșe amare* [*Bitter Cherries,* 2019, my translation] by Liliana Nechita, and *Soldații: Poveste din Ferentari* [*Soldiers: A Story from Ferentari,* 2014, my translation] by Adrian Schiop. In these texts, the invocation of communist or transitional experiences is either gradually assimilated into more urgent contemporary issues or employed as a formal pretext to reinforce systemic deadlock within the local context, filtered through the repression of communism rearticulated from the perspective of the oppressed. This contextual preference justifies the continued centrality of such positions today. What these novels have in common is their treatment of marginality, defined through two articulated vectors in a chronological framework that enacts two operations from the knowing subject: awareness and reactivity. Thus, the peripheral status of the subject is initially experienced as an uncertainty of identity, theorised by Janet Marie Bennett as *encapsulated marginality*, and subsequently as a necessary mechanism for defining individual and collective identity, termed *constructive marginality* (Bennett 2014, 274). This does not preclude the possibility of failure in this configuration process. At this critical juncture, there emerges a pressing need for responsibility and understanding of otherness.

In Tatiana Țîbuleac's *Grădina de sticlă* [*The Glass Garden* 2018, my translation], the subjectivisation of the narrative discourse is complemented by diaristic insertions penned by Lastocika in her own handwriting, alternating with the main body of the novel's text. The choice of first-person narration aligns with the portrayal of the protagonist's marginality within the two forms theorised by Janet Bennett, namely *encapsulated marginality* and *constructive marginality*. Lastocika's identity is fractured by her orphanhood, a crisis further compounded by her development in an environment dominated by marginalised women — targets of abuse by a subversive or quasi-invisible masculine patriarchy that dictates their fates, confining them to a precarious universe deprived of opportunities (Vîrban 2024, 118). From a formal perspective, it is noteworthy that throughout the narrative, the discursivisation of Lastocika's voice — divided between the handwritten fragments and the main narrative text — implies a discursive hybridisation. On the one hand, the analyst's discourse is configured through the guise of diary entries, which recalibrate the object of desire: the desubjectivisation of writing as a form of resistance only intensifies the formal unconscious that underlines the protagonist's alienation and uprootedness:

"I no longer have dreams. I dream dreams written by a foreign hand." (Ţîbuleac 2022, 43, my translation). On the other hand, this clashes with the "hysterical"[2] discourse propelled by the protagonist's revolt against her parents who abandoned her without explanation, producing a sensation of exoticisation that she experiences from Romanians upon migrating to Bucharest to study (27). In this latter instance, the object of desire is liberation from the trauma of orphanhood and the re-signification of the master signifier, which is no longer defined by the fate of Eastern European people within oppressive systems but by personal memory — far more destabilising than the grand narrative of history (157). As Lastocika increasingly internalises the world she enters, framed by a community of women who reproduce patriarchal structures, including sexist attitudes, the first-person narrative voice, isolated in the handwritten passages, becomes impersonalised, reflecting poverty, exploitation, selfishness, and hierarchies. Marginality, in all its forms, is traced from moments of solidarity in crises (such as Ekaterina's abortion or Lastocika's rape) to attitudes such as the monstrous codification of Tona for being a lesbian, the exoticisation of Moldovans by Romanians (as experienced by Lastocika in Bucharest), as well as material causes like poverty or emergencies specific to dysfunctional families (Lastocika's failed marriage and her child's health problems). In this respect, the backdrop of perestroika functions merely as a pretext intended to create the framework for these marginal typologies (Vîrban 2024, 117–118), offering relevant sociographic dimensions regarding the protagonist's biographical, historical, dialectical, and teleological evolution within the symbolic economy of the narrative. Her writing combines a panorama of Soviet-era Chişinău with the visibility of a voice detached from the grand narrative of history, which simultaneously decentralises and pluralises. In this regard, literary discourse, like political discourse, seismographically maps the levels of individual and collective sensibilisation projected onto the real (Rancière 2000, 62). Furthermore, the exoticisation of Lastocika by Romanian society following her migration to Bucharest can also be read as a formal indication of the evolving relationship between the two literary systems after 1989. Andreea Mironescu observes that most literary critics have noted an obsession in Bessarabian literature with synchronising itself to Romania, driven by a fear of being left behind after the collapse of the communist regime. This has generated a pressing need for the Republic of Moldova's cultural field

[2] The term is employed by Jameson, drawing on Jacques Lacan, though without retaining its clinical connotations. When discussing hysterical discourse, Jameson refers to the disruption of the signifying chain, which produces a schizoid subject in contemporary society—one capable only of existing through fragmentation and a lack of cohesion. This condition stems from an inability to organise temporal perspectives—past, present, and future—resulting in a forced existence lived solely through the immediacy of the present moment.

to seek validation from Romania, regarded as the central authority within these dynamics (Mironescu 2016, 23). From the perspective of the theoretical frameworks defined by Kornbluh, Tatiana Țîbuleac's novel employs a fragmented, diaristic first-person narration to vividly capture the protagonist's encapsulated and constructive marginality within post-Soviet and patriarchal contexts. The hybrid narrative voice, divided between handwritten diary fragments and the main text, reflects the protagonist's fractured identity shaped by orphanhood, abuse, and social invisibility. This formal duality intensifies the novel's exploration of trauma and alienation while exposing how memory and personal suffering are commodified and socially marginalised. Ultimately, Țîbuleac's work foregrounds the intimate interplay between individual trauma and broader systemic oppression, revealing the complexity of identity formation in transitional Eastern European societies.

Regarding Liliana Nechita's *Cireșe amare* [*Bitter Cherries,* 2019, my translation], the volume harmonises the hysterical discourse with the monologic formalisation typical of the autobiographical testimonial novel analysed in the previous section. What I want to emphasise, however, is the effect of this approach within a writing more interested in sociographic layers; Nechita's novel becomes the site of a paradox. The text critiques the effects of migration and the ensuing identity short-circuiting, which the narrator experiences as a consequence of this phenomenon, firstly through alienation and culturally internalised forms of abuse in the Italian context, and secondly through the uprooting articulated by her separation from her children following her departure abroad. Yet, the discourse slides into a nationalist dimension, a re-legitimisation of the Romanian space and traditional values, precisely because alterity has disappointed: *"I am once again proud to be Romanian. God is at the table with us. And do you know what's very strange? Only when I no longer had a church, I missed it. For me, that is the Resurrection!"* (Nechita 2019, 41, my translation). What becomes truly problematic in this volume is the overemphasis on class struggle as the central issue in the fight against the capitalist world-system, while other struggles (ethnic, gender-related, etc.) are minimised, even subsumed under the materialist framework, with the idea of racism itself being reduced to these concerns (170). Hence, the figure of the emigrant is centralised as the most marginal among the marginalised (177). The above observations are not intended to undermine the author's claim to the authenticity of her experience but to show that the political unconscious of the autobiographical form, in this particular case, articulates a discourse where the figure of the poor emigrant competes with, and marginalises, other axes of oppression. A final example in this regard is that the narrator also recounts her experience as a woman oppressed by masculine domination in the Italian space, yet the gender difference criterion

remains implicit, as she internalises her vulnerability primarily through the material conditions of the emigrant: the need for accommodation during her stay and financial constraints, which dictated her self-exile, suppressing any other types of trauma. As Mihnea Bâlici notes, the novel depicts how poverty, unemployment, and the decline of industry in Romania's small towns compel individuals to emigrate in search of better opportunities, even when they previously held a relatively secure social status (Bâlici 2024, 22). Concurrently, Liliana Nechita, while critical of social conditions and migration myths, nonetheless succumbs to conservative and nationalist perspectives shaped by the Romanian ideological climate dominated by anti-communism and neoliberalism. Consequently, rather than advocating a left-wing internationalist approach, she tends to endorse nationalist and isolationist policies (30–31). Liliana Nechita's novel articulates a paradoxical discourse where the autobiographical voice merges hysterical and testimonial modes to critique migration's alienating effects while simultaneously reaffirming nationalist sentiments. The novel's sociographic focus reveals the emigrant's marginality as primarily class-based, with other axes of oppression—such as gender and ethnicity—subsumed under economic hardship. Through this lens, Nechita's narrative highlights the tensions between material vulnerability and cultural identity in post-2007 Romania, exposing the limits and contradictions of political consciousness shaped by displacement, loss, and the persistence of traditional values amid global capitalism.

I conclude this section by reserving a discussion for autofictional discourse, articulated both as reparative writing and as political engagement. Throughout the evolution of the genre, its theoretical framing has become increasingly difficult due to its dynamism and constant shifts in defining coordinates (Baillargeon 2019, 4), a fact that is relevant in the context of the analysed novel, *Soldiers: A Story from Ferentari* by Adrian Schiop. Although its conceptual fluidity and floating nature marginalise it from critical and theoretical interest, autofiction's success with the general public is undeniable (2). Thus, one of the genre's particularities is a kind of formal subversiveness, which refuses academic integration. I say this because, most often, when a discourse enters and becomes centralised within institutional frameworks, it risks becoming so abstracted that it no longer produces the intended effects regarding the tensioning of societal layers. In this sense, the difficulties in defining autofiction, beyond general frameworks (hybridisation of biography and fiction, use of the first person, fragmentariness, and dispersed temporalities, etc.), become primarily a form of legitimising the genre as political writing, since it defies dogmatic forms of first-person narration theorised over time. Secondly, by highlighting the traumatic experiences specific to a certain knowing subject, it undermines social structures (3) that have enabled the traumatic event (patriarchy, heteronormativity, etc.).

In the context of Adrian Schiop's novel, the narrative's continuous anchoring in an intermediate space — between the Ferentari neighbourhood and Bucharest — with the protagonist and Alberto constantly oscillating between the two worlds, represents a narrative strategy to delineate a symbolic space of marginality. This space is formed both economically and in order to destigmatise the homosexual couple (Vancea 2017, 25–31), forms of racism against the Romani community, and certain cultural clichés (the scientific legitimisation of Adi's PhD on *manele* — a musical genre that hybridises Oriental forms and is often considered subcultural in Romania because many performers are claimed by the Romani community; the relationship between two characters from different classes, where the socially outraged one appears to dominate Adi — a condition indispensable for integration into Ferentari, etc.). In this sense, the spatiality suspended between two distinct universes reveals a bi-directional exoticization woven into the narrative: on one hand, the narrator-character acknowledges his own unconscious tendency to exoticize the neighborhood compared to other parts of Bucharest, since he survives under a different cultural sign, considered inferior to that of the capital: *"Going through cheap pubs is part of my job, I'm doing a PhD on manele and that's why I stay in this neighborhood — to stay close to the object of my work, because Ferentari is the last neighborhood in Bucharest where manele still rules, and people don't look at you weird if you listen to it"* (Schiop 2017, 15, my translation). On the other hand, the inhabitants of Ferentari fetishise the Bucharest community based on its financial stability/superiority, despite the strong economic divisions within the neighbourhood itself.

Another form of cleavage revealed by autofictional discourse is the lack of adherence between the knowing subject — Adi — and the object of desire — Alberto, both in terms of sexual orientation and as a form of temporal lag within capitalist structures. Regarding homosexuality, an important aspect of the dysfunctional relationship between the two characters, beyond class difference, is rendered by Adi's observation. He notes that there is a distinct appropriation of homosexuality in the city centre, where it is divided between its local, regional manifestation (where the protagonist fits) and its attempted Western reproduction. On the other side, in Ferentari, homosexuality, without certain eccentricities, paradoxically signals an internalised homophobia, as in Alberto's case, who identifies it as a form of amplifying his power and masculinity. In this respect, one sociographic layer identified by Adi is that Alberto's aggressive and violent attitude stems from sexual abuse suffered in prison, which he, as a hysterical subject, re-signifies as a phantasmatic sexual performance, with three warning signals: 1) the lack of protection for minors in prisons and correctional homes; 2) the reintegration of prisoners into society; 3) the exacerbated conservatism of Romani families amid precarious inclusion policies. Last but not

least, the problem of temporal dissonance between the two characters lies in Alberto's maladaptation to post-transition society, both economically and socio-culturally, being constructed rather as an anachronistic subject. This is the bridge through which Adi unveils the systemic shock and destabilisation reflected on individual and collective levels, set against the backdrop of the 1990s. Thus, the autofictional discursivity of Adi's experience in the Ferentari neighbourhood, as well as his toxic relationship with Alberto, is justified by an ethical motivation to give voice to a marginal subject by blurring the boundaries and hierarchies between subject (the narrative voice — Adi) and object (Alberto), thereby redistributing visibility and audibility within the text. Adrian Schiop's novel deploys autofictional techniques to navigate the complex spatial and social margins of Bucharest's Ferentari neighbourhood. The novel's hybrid narrative reveals layered exoticisations, internalised homophobia, and systemic violence through the protagonist's fractured relationship with Alberto, symbolising temporal and cultural dissonances shaped by post-communist transition. Schiop's work challenges hegemonic narratives by making visible the intersecting oppressions of class, ethnicity, and sexuality, and by destabilising dominant forms of subjectivity through a vulnerable, politically engaged voice. This autofictional discourse thus functions as both a therapeutic articulation of trauma and a critical intervention into contemporary Romanian social realities.

The comparison between the novels written before and after 2007 reveals a profound transformation in the psychoanalytic mediation of narrative form, shaped by the shifting socio-political landscape and the commodification of memory. Earlier post-1989 literature often foregrounds nostalgia and trauma through a deeply introspective, sometimes melancholic engagement with personal and collective loss, using narrative forms that internalise and ritualise psychic wounds. The narration tends to focus on identity fragmentation and memory as sites of trauma that resist assimilation into capitalist structures. However, after Romania's EU accession in 2007, there is a noticeable shift towards the externalisation and commodification of memory, as personal and historical recollections become cultural products shaped by market logics. This evolution prompts a more dialogic and socially engaged narrative form, where psychoanalytic elements are intertwined with sociographic concerns—particularly marginality in its multiple dimensions. The post-2007 novels adopt autofiction and first-person narration not only as sites of individual psychic negotiation but also as platforms for political visibility and social critique. Thus, the psychoanalytic mediation of form transitions from a primarily inward, trauma-centred process to a dynamic interaction between subjectivity and social otherness, reflecting how memory and identity are continuously reshaped within capitalist and post-communist realities.

Conclusions

The ideas outlined throughout this article are not meant to be absolute but rather are constructed through an inductive approach based on a series of specific examples (a characterological profile of the Romanian contemporary novel published before and after 2007) in order to allow for a certain manner of generalising the aspects that define the evolution of contemporary literature, both formally and thematically. Starting from a methodological and conceptual platform informed by the theorisation of Fredric Jameson (the political unconscious), Anna Kornbluh (the psychoanalytic mediation of form), and Jacques Rancière (the distribution of the sensible), complemented by the analysis of the selected textual sample, my aim has been to elucidate what has generated the transition from communism to neoliberal capitalist democracy in the context of the contemporary novel. This dynamic has led to a reconfiguration of thematic options, framed by a formal unconscious capable of expressing the tensions of social structures as they are transposed into literature.

The shift from a nostalgic, testimonial and documentary discourse characteristic of the pre-2007 period to the accessing of sociographic platforms, formalised through autofiction and first-person narratives after 2007, reflects precisely the kind of political engagement. Of course, the temporal boundary that separates these two periods is flexible, meaning that, for instance, the autobiographical novel structured around a monologic voice may persist after 2007, but it is reformulated within an expanded ideological framework. My observation in this respect is that contemporary literature undergoes a functional transformation in the transition from one temporal interval to another, moving beyond the nostalgic discourse constructed as a reaction to the anti-communism of the 1990s. Thus, the post-2000 novel, particularly after Romania's accession to the European Union, is instrumentalised as a mechanism for legitimising various marginalised identities, thereby contesting the dominant symbolic order through the subversiveness of its forms (autofiction, first-person narration mediated by free indirect style, etc.) and through the transitivity of its themes (discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation).

In the pre-2007 period, nostalgia was configured as a reparative function for the individual alienated by the deficiencies of the transition, with the revalorisation of the communist past serving as a means of exposing these shortcomings through various monologic formalisations (Vasile Ernu), internally dialogised monologues (Lucian Dan Teodorovici), or polyphonic structures (Dan Lungu). Later, following Romania's EU accession, the curative value of nostalgic discourse is diminished by the understanding of nostalgia as also a mode of rejecting alterity, a stance no longer aligned with the needs of contemporary

society. In this sense, literature repositions itself in dialogue with communist memory, now fractured by the personal histories of the knowing subject (Adrian Schiop, Tatiana Țîbuleac, and Liliana Nechita), with fiction, in all its variations, becoming an active sociographic instrument that critiques both the shortcomings of the transitional society and those of the neoliberal space: precarity, various forms of marginalisation, social division, economic instability, the increasing rate of emigration, and more. In conclusion, the shift in the signified (from nostalgic discourse to sociographic layers) and in the signifier (from autobiography and polyphonic narration to autofiction and self-dialogisation) does not imply an abandonment of the relationship between the political and the aesthetic, but rather its redefinition as a formal and symbolic tension, fostering a space in which the current social order can be interrogated. Literary discourse is thus negotiated between a (re)assessment of its ethical dimension (the visibility of the oppressed subject) and its circulation within the global logic of entertainment, which remains faithful to the capitalist world-system it seeks to subvert — with writing and reading now taking on a reparative function in the process of the self's (re)discovery and identity formation (Alexandre Gefen).

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