

## *Narrating the Communist Prison: An Interpretive Model of Some Romanian Case Studies*

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### Abstract

After the fall of the communist regime in Romania (1989) an impressive number of books, diaries, memoirs that recorded the prison experience of the '50s and early '60s were published. These books were authored by very different individuals, representing almost all the social classes of the time, with a diverse educational background, or intellectual level, not to mention the quality of their writing. Several studies on this literature were published (Ruxandra Cesereanu, *Gulagul în conștiința românească. Memorialistica și literatura închisorilor și lagărelor comuniste. Eseu de mentalitate/ The Gulag in the Romanian Conscience. Communist Prison Memoirs and Literature. An Essay of Collective Mentality*, 2005; Mihai Rădulescu, *Istoria literaturii române de detenție. Mărturisirea colaborării/ History of the Romanian Political Detention Literature. The Confessing of Collaboration*, 1998; Ion Bălan, *Regimul concentraționar din România. 1945-1964/ The Concentrationary Regime in Romania. 1945-1964*, 2000, to mention only the most significant). Their purpose was generally informative and

evocative. Though many typologies and groupings were suggested, a poetics of the genre was not yet elaborated.

The present paper attempts at proposing an interpretive model of the ‘prison literature’ genre that situates it at the crossroads of history and autobiographical literature. It also tries to adapt Michel Foucault’s analysis of the prison (in *Surveiller et punir*, 1975/ *Discipline and Punish*, 1977) to the context of the communist epoch and to study the narrative devices employed by the writers in order to ‘tame’ this unthinkable – yet also very real – life experience.

Key Words: prison literature, communism, ethics, narrative, thematic approach

## 1. Introduction. Critical response to the prison literature in post-communist Romania

Soon after the fall of the communist regime in Romania (December 1989), a large number of books, articles, testimonies of the carceral experience between roughly 1948-1989 were published. These records could be classified into various types as they were authored by very different individuals, representing almost all the social classes of the time, with a diverse educational background, or intellectual level, not to mention the quality of their writing. Yet their original motivation was common and unique: the need to finally tell the truth about what happened, to let everyone know all that could be remembered about the darkest side of the communist years – the secret police (the *Securitate*) and the political prisons.

The readership’s curiosity for this new category of writings was immense. For a while this was the only literature that attracted the public interest, from the common readers, to historians, literary critics, and the intellectual circles at large. They represented a rich documentary source especially for historians and political scientists. They also challenged the system of representations in use for the literary historians and critics, as the latter were suddenly confronted with a large corpus of writings that could not be dealt with simply by adapting the analytical tools that were applied so far. The expectations for an underground, self-published/

*samizdat* literature were high, especially since the Romanian literati could not boast enough examples of this kind during the communist dictatorship, in comparison with their colleagues from other countries in the Eastern bloc. The quantity of confessional, autobiographical writings definitely overshadowed the fictional pieces that eventually came out. In general, the object of these memoirs, diaries, interviews, etc. was the traumatic experience of their subject(s) in the toughest period of the communist rule: 1948-1964. As the historian Marius Oprea, who studied the Romanian secret police, argues in his notorious book “*Banalitatea răului*”. *O istorie a Securității în documente, 1949-1989*, 2002 (“The Banality of Evil”. Documentary History of the *Securitate*, 1949-1989), the evolution of this institution can be analyzed by considering its two main stages: the *first* one extends from 1949 – the year of its founding, or better put, reorganization –, to 1964, the year of the largest amnesty of the political prisoners and beginning of the so-called Thaw Era; this period was characterized by an extreme brutality in the secret police practices, while the *second* period employed more ‘subtle’ forms of surveillance and took advantage to a larger extent by the population’s fears and memories of what had happened in the first stage.

During the first period of the *Securitate*’s activity, a ‘performance’ that stands out in a negative way is the *Pitești experiment* or *phenomenon* (see Virgil Ierunca, *Fenomenul Pitești/ The Pitești Phenomenon*, 1990): a unique case of systematic torture in a political prison that developed between 1949-1952. Many prison memoirs deal with this terrifying experiment that has haunted Romanians’ collective imaginary for decades.

The most cited and studied examples of prison literature<sup>1</sup> that testify to the organization and daily life in the Romanian communist penitentiary system<sup>2</sup> were obviously approached quite differently by researchers. Generally speaking, two main reception paradigms stand out: the historical field treated prison literature as a documentary source whereas for the literary studies it usually represented another instance of literary writing to be dealt with by using the specific tools of the literary historian or critic. The historians display a certain degree of skepticism when

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<sup>1</sup> Ion Ioanid, *Închisoarea noastră cea de toate zilele* (Our Everyday Prison), 5 vol., 1991-1996; N. Steinhardt, *Jurnalul fericirii* (The Happiness Diary), 1991; George Tomaziu, *Jurnalul unui figurant* (The Diary of a Dummy), 1995; Oana Orlea, *Ia-ți boarfele și mișcă!* (Take Your Rags and Move!), 1991; Lena Constante, *Evadarea tăcută* (The Silent Escape), 1992, etc. For an extended bibliography see Cesereanu, Ruxandra, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> According to *Memoria* (The Memory) historical magazine, the map of the Romanian *Gulag* included 5 types of institutions: great centers of extermination, extermination prisons, extermination labour camps, deportation camps, psychiatric asylums.

discussing the information provided by these memoirs, and they check them against the documents consulted when the official archives were at last opened to researchers; for instance, Ion Bălan writes: “Literatura memorialistică, atât cea apărută înainte de anul 1989 în străinătate, cât și cea publicată cu începere din 1990 în țară, are cel puțin câteva carențe: se manifestă o anumită doză de subiectivism a celor care și-au publicat memoriile, în plus, s-a așternut uitarea peste unele din momentele prezentate, fenomen firesc dacă avem în vedere regimul dur pe care deținuții l-au cunoscut în diferitele forme de detenție și vârsta înaintată la care autorii și-au scris memoriile [;] apar, apoi, unele păreri partizane și câteodată afirmațiile lor sunt infirmate de documentele din arhivă.” (Bălan, Ion, 2000, 7) (“The memoirs, both those that were published abroad before 1989, and those published in Romania starting with 1990, display at least several weak points: one can notice a certain degree of subjectivity as far as their authors are concerned; moreover, some of the events that are presented are not clearly remembered, which is understandable if we think about the harsh conditions of detention and the age when the authors began writing their memoirs [;] then, partisan opinions are sometimes expressed and their assertions are contradicted by the documents in the archives.”, my trans.<sup>3</sup>)

Needless to say, this attitude is perfectly in accordance with the research techniques and objectivity requirements valid for that particular field. What interests us here is the perception of the members of the literary studies field. Although more than 20 years have already passed since the publication of the first diaries and memoirs recording prison experiences, the literary historians’ and critics’ approaches to it are still confusing.

Dan C. Mihăilescu, who reviewed many of these books, and then collected his chronicles in the first volume of his *Literatura română în postceaușism. I. Memorialistica sau trecutul ca re-umanizare*, 2004 (Romanian Literature during the Post-Ceausescu Era. I. Memoirs, or the Past as Re-Humanization), mainly brings together impressionistic comments and scattered ethical opinions about some of the most literary valid memorialists (N. Steinhardt, Ion Ioanid, discussed in the chapter “Exerciții de supraviețuire”/ “Exercises of Survival”, in order to separate them from other types of memorialistic/ autobiographical literature). He undertakes no theoretical or systematic study of the particularities of this literature as a distinct corpus that cannot be thought of as either history or fiction, as traditional categories of writing.

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all the other translations from Romanian into English are mine.

In his *Istoria secretă a literaturii române*, 2007 (The Secret History of Romanian Literature), Cornel Ungureanu briefly discusses *Jurnalul fericirii* (The Happiness Diary) by N. Steinhardt from the perspective of its author as an instance of *homo religiosus*. The carceral poetry is looked upon in 2 and a half pages that lack the slightest attempt to propose criteria for analyzing it.

The literary historian Dumitru Micu, author of a comprehensive and documented *Istorie a literaturii române. De la creația populară la postmodernism*, 2000 (History of Romanian Literature. From Folklore to Postmodernism), does not even include a distinct chapter for the prison literature, looking only into the canonical genres. In this work, Steinhardt (the only prison memorialist to be discussed more extensively) falls under the “Essay. General culture” category. Several other authors of prison memoirs are all crowded in a paragraph from a brief chapter on postwar memorialistic literature, itself under the heading “Descriptive and Lyrical Prose. Subjective Memorials.”

This is because their main validation criterion is still the modernist, aesthetical one. Its champion is Nicolae Manolescu, the most important literary historian and critic of Romanian contemporary literature. A large chapter of his *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură*, 2008 (Critical History of Romanian Literature. 5 Centuries of Literature) is dedicated to the memorialistic literature yet with no classification according to a thematic criterion. What is striking in Manolescu’s analysis is the prevalence of the aesthetic judgment; he values stylistic traits, rhetorical constructions, narrative talent or canonical propensity of this or that memorialist. Here are a few examples: “Uneori formulările sunt norocoase”/ “Some phrases are well put” (Manolescu, Nicolae, 2008, 1422); a diary seems “evacuat de istorie, politică, legionarism, război”/ “outside history, politics, legionarism, war” (ibid., 1425); *The Happiness Diary* is definitely a “capodoperă a memorialisticii noastre de la sfârșitul secolului XX”/ “masterpiece of our memoir literature from the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (ibid., 1426) but its construction is somehow chaotic and unraveled; Ioanid’s *Our Everyday Prison* has some “artistic features” close to the formula of the adventure or detective novel (!); Adrian Oprescu, another author of prison memoirs, “are mână sigură de prozator adevărat”/ “has the confident pen of a true prose-writer” (ibid., 1438) and his book presents the atrocities of a communist labor camp as in a “veritabil roman, captivant, cu scene înspăimântătoare, dar și cu altele pline de umor”/ “true novel,

captivating, with frightful scenes but also with some humorous ones” (ibid., 1438). The author of *Tortura pe înțelesul tuturor*, 2001 (Torture Explained to All), Florin Constantin Pavlovici, is praised for his immense literary talent that makes his book “o extraordinară operă de referință” (“an extraordinary reference book”), together with *The Happiness Diary* and *Our Everyday Prison*. One can infer that this status is valid within the corpus of prison memoirs, although the historian has not clearly delineated nor defined it. Nevertheless, whether this canonical value is due to the persuasiveness of the story, to the impact of authentic human suffering upon the reader, or to the stylistic qualities of the discourse remains unclear: Manolescu salutes Ioanid’s work for being “monumentul care se cuvenea ridicat în memoria miilor de nevinovați uciși în temnițele comuniste”/ “the monument who had to be raised to the memory of the thousands of innocents that were killed in the communist prisons.” (Manolescu, Nicolae, 2008, 1437)

More often than not, Manolescu’s approach to this literature is definitely the aesthetical one. In many other contexts the consistent use of the aesthetic principle would be salutary; when applied to such a corpus it looks inadequate, even indecent.

At the other end of the spectrum of critical approaches is Ruxandra Cesereanu’s *Gulagul în conștiința românească*, 2005 (The Gulag in the Romanian Conscience). Hers is the most powerful account of the Romanian prison literature. It discusses first the Russian models (Al. Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*<sup>4</sup> and other instances of the genre), then Romanian memoirs and novels that focus on the concentrationary universe. Cesereanu dismisses the literary-oriented approach to these writings and underlines instead their ethical regime, their value as confessions and historical documents. Although the subtitle of the volume promises *An Essay of Collective Mentality*, the main theoretical frame employed here is not that provided by the history of mentalities, as one might expect, but the analytical tools of archetypal criticism (following Gaston Bachelard or Gilbert Durand) and cultural anthropology.

Ruxandra Cesereanu reads the history of the Gulag – in its symbolic, overarching meaning – as a confrontation between two civilizations: the European/ civilized one and the Near Eastern/ tribal one, since the Gulag is a Soviet invention (Cesereanu, Ruxandra, 2005, 254). Using this narrative she explains the trauma of the political prisoner as a catabasic journey of the

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<sup>4</sup> “Gulag” is the acronym for “Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps and Colonies” in the USSR.

initiativ type. The archetypal scenario that she recognizes in these prison memoirs is *descensio ad Inferos*, following a rich European literary tradition that includes *The Odyssey*, *the Eneid* and *the Divine Comedy*. The latter work also provides the thematic criterion that organizes the Romanian communist prison memoirs: the infernal limbo, the Inferno as such, and the Purgatory (which refers to the state of apparent freedom when coming out of prison, actually a state of interdictions and various constraints). Especially in the chapter “Schiță pentru o ‘eshatologie’ a detenției” (Sketch for an ‘eschatology’ of detention) the author investigates the analogy between the Gulag and ‘the other realm’ referred to by the Romanian folk tales, and she inventories the subterranean bestiary of death.

Another interpretive scenario resorts to the Christian image of the Crusade warrior whose two main types are represented by the political prisoners Paul Goma (the offensive one) and N. Steinhardt (the imitator of Christ). The prison cell reiterates the function of the monk’s hermitage, an analogy she considers to have been validated by Michel Foucault in his *Discipline and Punish*, 1977; yet Foucault finds similarities between these two institutions – the prison and the monastery – with respect to their oppressive function.

Another important line of analysis comments upon the aquatic imagery employed in these writings: for instance, “viziunea esențială a scriitorului se fixează pe ideea imperiului apelor tenebroase. Gulagul este ‘tărîmul celălalt’ și țara subterană unde valurile de arestări creează o vastă ramificație de conducte de scurgere, canale și tunele, lichidele expulzate fiind sîngele, sudoarea și urina”/ “the writer’s essential vision is based on the idea of an empire of tenebrous waters. The Gulag is ‘the other realm’ and the subterranean kingdom where the waves of arrests lead to a vast network of pipes, channels, and tunnels, and the drained liquids are blood, sweat, and piss.” (Cesereanu, Ruxandra, 2005, 20). One can easily recognize here the language of Gilbert Durand’s *Les Structures anthropologiques de l’imaginaire* (1960).

Though Cesereanu refers to major writers of the European modern literature such as Dostoievski, Kafka, or Aitmatov, her approach is not aesthetical but ethical. Her tone is resonant of *the Bible* or of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, as odd as this comparison may sound: “Schingiuește ca să nu fii schingiuit, iată maxima închisorii moderne de la Pitești, loc unde, nu doar nietzschean, între anii 1949 și 1952, Dumnezeu murise.”/ “Torture your fellow so that you

won't be tortured yourself, this was the slogan of the modern prison of Pitești, a place where God had been dead, between 1949-1952, and not only in Nietzsche's sense." (Cesereanu, Ruxandra, 2005, 227). The message she discovers after a careful and thorough reading of the prison memoir corpus turns the prison into a school of ethics and will where human character is forged. The ethical system of analysis pervades not only the prison writings as such, but also the discourse of their interpreter.

I will conclude this section by referring to the moderate position assumed by Mircea Angheliescu, a literary historian who also studied this literature. He remarks that "Însemnările și memoriile deținuților politici dintre 1948-1964 (...) produc un material literar și uman de o noutate și varietate care schimbă în mare măsură datele literaturii române într-un fel care nu mai poate fi ignorat : literatura de după 1990, chiar aceea care nu are nici o legătură cu personajele sau universul acestui coșmar al detenției comuniste, nu mai poate semăna cu aceea dinaintea ei pentru că scriitorii și cititorii ei au descoperit, deopotrivă, adâncimile îngrozitoare ale suferinței și ale terorii adevărate."/ "The notes and memoirs of political prisoners between 1948-1964 (...) make up a literary and human corpus of such a novelty and variety that changes to a great extent the picture of Romanian literature, in a way that cannot be ignored any longer: the literature after 1990, even the one that has no connection with the characters or the universe of this nightmare of communist detention, cannot look in any way similar to the one before it because the authors and their readers alike have discovered the terrible depths of true suffering and terror." (Angheliescu, Mircea, 2008, 36)

## 2. Brief theoretical remarks. How can one write a prison memoir

When confronted with the corpus of contemporary prison literature, the researcher, busy as s/he might be with interpreting and organizing it, cannot help feeling its tragic dimension on a personal level. Relegating it to the field of historical research will not wear out its immense communicative power (despite pathetic notes or exaggerations of various kinds). Treating it as an instance of narrative and finding its place among the literary order of things will certainly not be a more appropriate solution.

The theme of these memoirs is the confrontation of their subjects with a liminal experience of a traumatic kind. In most cases, the memory of this experience had been repressed for a long time, as these books were written and published long after the time of the actual events. A psychoanalytical reading of them would of course be interesting, but I propose to look rather into the conditions of possibility for their writing process, to explain the device through which the victim became the author of a narrative that is historical and literary at the same time.

Ruxandra Cesereanu refers to Paul Ricoeur's comments on the Holocaust (Shoah) in *Temps et récit* as a *horrific* event that triggered the duty of remembrance. "L'horreur s'attache à de tels événements qu'il est nécessaire de *ne jamais oublier*" (Ricoeur, Paul, 1985, 273), writes the French philosopher. And further on: "La victimisation est cet envers de l'histoire que nulle ruse de la Raison ne parvient à légitimer et qui plutôt manifeste le scandale de toute théodicée de l'histoire." (ibid.) The same holds true for the prisoners of the Gulag, Cesereanu argues. I think that Ricoeur's category of *l'horreur/ the horror* can be discussed in this context as an *analogon* of Michel Foucault's *l'impensé/ the unthought*. To Foucault, this means the double of human rationality (the Cartesian *cogito*, or *la Raison* to which Ricoeur points out) that also represents the latter's limit and challenge, especially in the framework of modernity<sup>5</sup>. Thinking this relationship (between the Cogito and the Unthought) has become unavoidable, even compulsory from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards as it marks the modern evolution of human knowledge. Foucault suggests that such an endeavor does not have any ethical relevance: modern thinking cannot put forward an ethics since it has always been a kind of practice, not confined to the realm of traditional philosophical speculation.

How can one then deal with the Unthought when it takes the form of physical and psychological terror? The different survival solutions invented or discovered by the victims of the Gulag will be discussed later on. As to their historical method, so to speak, it shows a striking similarity to Foucault's analysis of the disciplinary system (see the chapter "Panopticism" in *Discipline and Punish*), but employing its function to a different end.

Let us first remember Foucault's description of the "disciplinary device": "This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place,

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<sup>5</sup> See especially Foucault, Michel, 2002, chapter 9. "Man and His Doubles", V. "The 'Cogito' and the Unthought."

in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism.” (Foucault, Michel, 1977, 197). In order to reconstruct such a monstrous device for oneself and for others, this permanent control had to be reduplicated by a similar one from the perspective of the former detained who has become a narrator of his/ her ordeal. This is why every single detail had to be recorded and remembered, every name, date, location, a.s.o. A circularity that fulfils several functions: the ethical duty of remembrance, the one of psychological support, the conversion of the immeasurable time of detention into the closed picture of a place – the prison.

Jeremy Bentham, the inventor of the panopticon (1791), designed a circular structure from the centre of which a hidden observer could constantly supervise those located on the circumference. The prisoner “must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.” (Foucault, Michel, 1977, 201). Similarly, by reaction to this total vision of the guardian, the writers of prison memoirs generally adopt a narrative angle that is also omniscient, though only in retrospect. All details are important, yet not for the creation of a *reality effect* (R. Barthes), but for the precise reconstruction of a terrifying reality<sup>6</sup>. This principle of narrative construction that could be relegated to a certain realism is commented upon by Mircea Angheliescu: “realismul trăirii și puterea de a îndura impune realismul scrierii și forța de a pune în cuvânt cele trăite sau văzute.”/ “the realism of experience and the power to endure trigger the realism of writing and the force to express in words the things lived or seen.” (Angheliescu, Mircea, 2008, 37). And further on: “Lucrurile încep aproape prozaic, cu luarea în posesie a unui domeniu practic ignorat anterior, acela al degradării omenești, al dorinței cuiva de a-ți face rău, de a te face să suferi.”/ “Everything becomes almost prosaically, with the writer taking possession of a domain that has been practically ignored before, the domain of human degradation, of somebody’s wish to harm the other, to make him/her suffer.” (ibid., 37). The narration also facilitates the survival of the

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<sup>6</sup> The most impressive and effective recording device is Ioanid’s. The author of *Our Everyday Prison* is constantly concerned to mentally register all the places he is transported to during his prison years, and to leave traces behind. Especially the walls of the transit prison cells are covered with messages written by those who had passed by; these messages usually contained names and dates, number of years they were convicted to, and their destination prison.

narrator, in the tradition of *the Arabian Nights*. This eventually becomes a distinct type of historical writing – the place where personal history meets history as such, not very different from Foucault’s technique in his *Histories*.

### 3. Case studies. A thematic analysis

In the beginning of *The Happiness Diary*, the future monk N. Steinhardt inventories 3 escape solutions for those who are daily confronted with a totalitarian regime: 1) act as if you were already dead (Solzhenitsyn’s solution); 2) live the life of a tramp/ fugitive/ marginal (inspired by a character of Alexander Zinoviev’s book *The Yawning Heights*); 3) energetically fight back, as Churchill or Bukovski did. The wage is, in all cases, the preservation of one’s dignity, or moral being.

Nonetheless, different strategies are required when the survivor has to account for this traumatic experience in narrative form. We have previously remarked the tendency to spatialise the years spent in prison as the figure of the prison as such, so as to make time bearable; another strategy<sup>7</sup> involves the taming of the carceral period through cultural or religious scenarios.

The most frequent scenario is the rite of passage (Christian or pre-Christian). Like Ulysses or Dante, the memorialists represent their experience as a journey through Hell. By doing this, they assign meaning and value to an absurd sentence (since the political prisoners are innocent victims, in the majority of cases). For Teohar Mihadaş, the infamous Aiud prison is like a ship navigating on the infernal Styx river (see Cesereanu’s analysis in the above-mentioned “Sketch for an ‘eschatology’ of detention”). N. Steinhardt describes the cell where he was baptized into the Christian orthodox church: “Celula 34 e un fel de tunel întunecat și lung, cu numeroase și puternice elemente de coșmar. E o hrubă, e un canal, e un maș subpământean, rece și profund ostil, e o mină stearpă, e un crater de vulcan stins, e o destul de izbutită imagine de iad decolorat. În locul acesta aproape ireal de sinistru aveam să cunosc cele mai fericite zile din toată viața mea.”/ “The cell no. 34 is a kind of dark and long tunnel, with numerous and strong elements of nightmare. It is a cave, a channel, an underground gut, cold and profoundly hostile, a sterile

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<sup>7</sup> I employ this term here in its military meaning, that of a fighting technique, not as an aesthetic/ narrative device.

mining, an extinct volcano's crater, a pretty good image of a faded hell. In this almost unreal, sinister place I would live the happiest days of my entire life.” (Steinhardt, N., 1991, 30). Ion Ioanid narrates his arrival at the Văcărești transit prison in dark tones: “Spectacolul, încă de la intrare, era demn de Infernul lui Dante. O scară cu nenumărate trepte. Pe fiecare din primele 7-8 trepte, în stînga și-n dreapta, se afla cîte o tinetă cu conținutul la limită sau revărsat pe scări pînă jos și formînd un fel de mocirlă de fecale și urină. Mirosul era îngrozitor. (...) Halul în care arătau acești oameni era de necrezut: majoritatea slabi și nerași și toți cu hainele zdrențuite și peticite, cum nu mai văzusem vreodată, nici măcar un cerșetor.”/ “Just as you arrived, the spectacle was comparable to Dante's Inferno. A staircase with uncountable steps. On every one of the first 7-8 steps, to the left and to the right, there was an overbrim toilet, the content of which sometimes flooded the stairs to their end and formed a kind of slime made of excrements and piss. The smell was awful. (...) The bad plight of all these people was unbelievable: most of them were skinny and unshaven, their clothes ragged and patched as I had never seen before, not even with beggars.” (Ioanid, Ion, 1991, 47). What is tested in this initiation scenario is the faith and/or moral endurance of the victim.

Perhaps in order to create a more powerful contrast between the outside and the inside perspective on the carceral space, many writers invoke the imprecations used by their guardians (which make up an infamous bestiary – worms, lice, beasts, etc.); and insist in turn on the human values that are the true reward of these lost years: “închisoarea n-a fost nici clădirea, nici gardienii, nici tratamentul, ci pușcăriașii. Cei care au parvenit să facă abstracție de cele mai concrete lucruri cu care a vrut să-i înconjoare regimul (gratii, ziduri, foame, frig, suferințe de tot felul și chiar moartea). Cei care în închisoare au fost mai liberi decît afară.”/ “the prison was not the building, or the guardians, or the treatment, but the inmates. Those who managed to ignore the most concrete weapons that the regime employed against them (bars, walls, hunger, cold, suffering of all kinds, even death). Thus who were more free being in prison than outside.” (Ioanid, Ion, 1991. Recited from Mihăilescu, Dan C., 2004, 160).

Although the human population of the communist prison resembles the tower of Babel (a cultural image again!) because of its diverse social/ political/ cultural backgrounds, no confusion on the ethical level is possible. The available roles are reduced to three clearly delineated categories: the detained, the collaborators, and the guardians (see Ioanid, Ion, 1991). The first

usually follow a strict though unwritten moral code. The painter George Tomaziu refuses to become an informer of the secret police in exchange for his release from prison; his difficult decision is truly liberating: “Din acel moment închisoarea nu m-a mai strivit, hăul a încetat să-mi pară nesănătos și plin de întuneric. Nu-mi mai era impus de un joc stupid al întâmplării: îl alesesem, era prețul adevăratei mele libertăți. Respiram mai ușor...”/ “From that moment on the prison ceased to crush me, the abyss stopped looking unhealthy and full of darkness. It wasn’t imposed on me by a stupid game of chance any more: I had chosen it, it was the price of my true freedom. I was breathing more easily...” (Tomaziu, George, 1995, 235).

Another refuge that was rapidly discovered by the political prisoners was the cultural world as such, a world that could legitimate the suffering and the horror of the prison years. Tomaziu survives because he paints imaginary canvases and composes poems that are recited and learnt by his cellmates. The atmosphere in the terrible prison of Aiud has the spiritual quality of a university, as many writers confess. Steinhardt tells how the presence of a writer recreates in the others’ minds wonderful poetic images that manage to project them “outside time and space” (Steinhardt, N., 1991, 64). This suspension of the habitual carceral chronotope, an event in the course of which the private-public space of the prison cell acquires cultural, spiritual functions is also evoked by Florin Constantin Pavlovici in these words: “Baraca înlocuia biblioteca, salonul, amfiteatrul, spațiul de reculegere și rugăciune. (...) Trăiam într-un calendar nou, al unei lumi noi.”/ “The barracks replaced the library, the salon, the amphitheatre, the prayer room. (...) We were living by a new calendar, of a new world.” (Pavlovici, Florin C., 2001. Recited from Manolescu, Nicolae, 2008, 1441)

Despite this effort of ‘taming’ the horror and transforming it into a spiritual experience (be it cultural, religious, or both), the effect of these prison narratives is often devastating. Their function may be therapeutic<sup>8</sup> or cathartic, since their theme generally is “the richness and diversity of suffering”, as N. Manolescu terms it (ibid., 1436). Yet there is also an important truth value that defies any fictionalizing. Manolescu cites the historical motivation of Ioanid’s writing: “Eu n-am făcut decât să le reproduc pe cele pe care le-am reținut din povestirile lor și nădăjduiesc că alții vor aduce amănunte suplimentare care să ajute reconstruirea datelor, faptelor și numelor, pentru a restabili cândva întregul adevăr.”/ “I just wrote out the details that I had

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<sup>8</sup> See Morand, Bernadette, 1976.

remembered from their stories and I trust that others will bring more information to help restoring the dates, the events, and the names, in order to re-establish someday the whole truth about this.” (ibid., 1436); and the critic adds: “Oribilele experiențe carcerale au adesea un aspect brut, dar cu atât mai impresionant cu cât orice adaos ‘expresiv’ le-ar dăuna. Sunt lucruri care nu pot fi privite în perspectivă ficțională. Acumularea de fapte și prezentarea lor detaliată, adesea tehnică, fac o impresie mai puternică decât orice romanțare.”/ “The horrible carceral experiences have sometimes a rough character which is very arresting to the reader, all the more so as any ‘expressive’ addition would be harmful. There are things that cannot be treated in a fictional perspective. The amassment of facts and their detailed, often technical presentation make a stronger impression than any romancing of them.” (ibid., 1437).

#### 4. Conclusions. Generic status of prison literature.

##### An ethical and historiographical perspective

This brings us to the conclusion of our brief analysis: which is the generic status of these writings? I have discussed only nonfictional prison memoirs; there is also a rich fictional literature that employs themes and *topoi* which are specific to this corpus; yet the intention of their use is primarily aesthetic, even though it often shapes into a moral debate.

Even N. Manolescu hesitates when it comes to assign them a certain place in the general corpus of Romanian literature. As different from the aestheticising attitude we have noticed and discussed in the first part of this paper, sometimes the critic seems to value the documentary quality of such memoirs; for instance, Dina Balș writes “o mărturie de închisoare, dar și de viață cotidiană din România de la începutul anilor ‘50” / “a prison confession which also testifies to the daily life in Romania at the beginning of the ‘50s” (Manolescu, Nicolae, 2008, 1419). And Ion Ioanid offers “prima mărturie directă, și încă una de mare amploare, despre detenția politică românească”/ “the first direct testimony, also a very extensive one, about Romanian political detention” (ibid., 1436); whereas the writer Paul Goma’s “memorialistica p-zisă (...) este impură, viciată de veleități literare”/ “memoirs are impure, vitiated by literary ambitions” (ibid., 1438).

The critic's intuition of the separation between the ethical and the aesthetical principle in the prison memoirs case is definitely valid. Their status is a heteronomous one: neither history nor literature, though often displaying the qualities and the discursive regime of both. Not history because they lack its documentary criteria and its objective claims; not literature because they are not gratuitous, not always efficient in terms of composition or style, and their authors do not picture themselves as writers, in many cases. Rather they could form a distinct corpus, on the ground of their thematic specificity, inside autobiographical literature. I am talking of a literature and not a genre, because of their obvious generic diversity: memoirs, (pseudo)diaries, essays, interviews, etc. Very important is their ethical concern (again a sign of their heteronomous composition). We could discuss, in this case, of an ethical canon – to borrow Sorin Alexandrescu's phrase (with a different meaning) from an essay where the theorist was trying to provide a more complex image of Romanian literary modernity (*Privind înapoi, modernitatea/ Looking Backwards, Modernity*, 1999). The epic quality and the ethical principle are perhaps the main features of this literature, a literature that also fulfils a historical function. The reader of prison memoirs could think of the legend (as M. Anghelescu suggests), or the epic (as Paul Ricoeur implies, in relation to the Holocaust memoirs), as a relevant *genus proximus* for this literature. What is constantly intriguing, in terms of historical explanation, is that both these reference points actually belong to an archaic universe that has been brought to light again at the peak of European modernity.

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