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**THE INTERRUPTED COMMUNITY:
NEW IMAGES OF THE NATION IN POSTCOMMUNIST
ROMANIAN LITERATURE**

What Can One See through a Hole in a Flag

The 1989 Romanian Revolution brought to the forefront one of the most powerful and suggestive images of the interrupted community: the hole in the flag. Cutting out the national emblem of the former Socialist Republic of Romania could have been a purely contextual and defiant action during the insurrection against Ceausescu's oppressive regime, but it had immediate and large echoes. Andrei Codrescu, a reputed Romanian-American writer who travelled back to Romania in December 1989 to relate the revolution as a radio commentator for ABC's Nightline, was one of the first to speculate upon this image in his homonymous book published in 1991: "suddenly there, under the cold moon, there it was, the Romanian flag with the socialist emblem cut right out of the middle. [...] It's through that hole, I thought, that I am returning to my birthplace"¹. Codrescu connects the hole in the flag not only with a maternal tunnel through which he returns in his homeland, but also to the motif of the empty space which featured recurrently in Romanian theories of national culture ever since the interwar period, as Bogdan Ștefănescu suggests². However, a more transparent connection to the interrupted community, as Jean-Luc Nancy defines it in his celebrated book *The Inoperative Community*, is to be found in Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of the hole in the flag. For the Slovenian philosopher, the Romanian hollowed flag is a "sublime image" of a suspended and open historical situation: "the rebels waving the national flag with the red star, the Communist symbol, cut out, so that instead of the symbol standing for the organizing principle of the national life, there was nothing but a hole in its centre"³. Žižek confuses the emblem on the Romanian flag, a cliché image of socialist prosperity based on natural resources such as grain, petroleum and green forests, with the communist red star, but his observation remains a valuable one. The emblem on the flag is a metonymy of the nation, and its removal is equivalent to the interruption or to the

¹ Andrei Codrescu, *The Hole in the Flag – A Romanian Exile's Story of Return and Revolution*, New York, W. Morrow & Co. Inc., 1991, p. 67.

² Bogdan Ștefănescu, "Voices of the Void: Andrei Codrescu's Tropical Rediscovery of Romanian Culture in *The Hole in the Flag*", *University of Bucharest Review*, X, 2008, 2, p. 12.

³ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative. Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1993, p. 4.

suspension – using Jean-Luc Nancy’s terms – of a particular national and politically organised group.

Let us return for a moment to Codrescu’s book. The hole in the flag through which the author metaphorically returns to Romania frames an image and predetermines the point of view. What does the exile actually see when he looks at his own people through a hole in the national flag? Codrescu’s semi-fictional reportage describes a nation in the process of creating a new collective oral mythology, centred on two figures: the December Revolution and Ceaușescu. In fact, these two figures lie at the centre of a conspiracy imaginary which will blossom during the 1990s and will be kept into public attention by the mass-media and vocal nationalist groups. This new type of (national) communion, based on the death of the young men and women murdered during the insurrection and on phantasmagorical stories about the Ceaușescu couple, stays at the core of Codrescu’s story of return and revolution. Not only sacrificial death, but also unbelievable rumours, jokes and secret information which everybody knows keep the people together and, at the same time, make them extremely suspicious towards each other. This confused image of the community will be a constant feature of the “transition novels” of the following decades.

So how can one think of community after 1989? The fall of the totalitarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in the same tumultuous year led not only to the interruption of the myth of communism *stricto sensu*, but also to a systematic analysis of the public representations of the communist era⁴. But, in philosophy and political science, the critique of community myths was articulated even earlier. As Pieter Vermeulen shows, since the 1980s, the traditional concept of community undergoes a radical rethinking, thanks to the seminal works of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Maurice Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, both published in 1983, Jean-Luc Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* (1986), or Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community* (1990). Despite the inherent differences, these authors denounce the community understood as *Gemeinschaft*, a key concept in German Romanticism that fostered the rise of nationalism in nineteenth century Europe, snowballed into the National Socialist doctrine and survived even in Ceaușescu’s National Communism of the 1970s and 1980s. As an alternative, the philosophers mentioned above theorize other different, democratic and ethical forms of togetherness⁵. But where are these

⁴ In the last decade, Maria Todorova co-edited several collective volumes which aim to recuperate the everyday memory of communism and to forge a postcommunist community founded on nostalgia. See, for instance, Maria Todorova, Augusta Dimou and Stefan Troebst (eds.), *Remembering Communism. Private and Public Recollections of Lived Experience in Southeast Europe*, Budapest – New York, CEU Press, 2014.

⁵ Pieter Vermeulen, “Community and Literary Experience in (Between) Benedict Anderson and Jean-Luc Nancy”, *Mosaic*, XLII, 2009, 4, December, p. 96.

alternative spaces of communion to be found? Benedict Anderson, as well as Maurice Blanchot and Jean-Luc Nancy claim that literature allows the possibility of imagining and experiencing other ways of being-in-common, either essentialist and immanent, or non-essentialist and non-immanent.

Starting from these premises, this article aims to question the role that literature plays in the construction of a certain image of community in postcommunist Romanian culture. My approach benefits from Benedict Anderson's and Jean-Luc Nancy's statements on the function of literature in the many-sided process of rethinking both the nation and the ideal forms of community. The similarity between Anderson's *imagined community* and Nancy's *inoperative community* was more recently elaborated by Pieter Vermeulen⁶, while previous suggestions in this direction are made by Jonathan Culler⁷. Of course, literature and the novel in particular do not envision an imaginary, i.e. fictionalized, version of a particular national community. Instead, literary works project, through various narrative strategies, a textual space which can be conceived as an *analogon* of the nation (but not of a *particular* nation), and at the same time construct an implied reader which becomes himself/ herself a part of the fictional community⁸.

In what follows I will analyse the textual construction of various literary images of community in several Romanian novels published at the beginning of the 2000s by authors of the so-called young prose wave. I will focus especially on three novels which deal with smaller or larger communities from the postcommunist transition period: Dan Lungu's *Raiul găinilor* [*Chicken Paradise*] (2004), Bogdan Suceavă's *Venea din timpul diez* [*Coming from an Off-Key Time*] (2004), and Florina Ilis's *Cruciada copiilor* [*The Children's Crusade*] (2005)⁹. My thesis is that the above mentioned writings can be seen as nation-imagining novels¹⁰, because they frame a fictional space which is explicitly presented as postcommunist "Romania". As the author of *Imagined Communities* implies in his

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 95-111.

⁷ Jonathan Culler, "Anderson and the Novel", in Jonathan Culler and Pheng Cheah (eds.), *Grounds for Comparison: Around the Work of Benedict Anderson*, New York – London, Routledge, 2003, pp. 29-52.

⁸ This observation was made by Culler in Jonathan Culler, "Anderson", p. 44.

⁹ Titles and excerpts are given in my translation. Foreign translations in English and French are also available for some of these authors: Bogdan Suceavă, *Coming from an Off-Key Time*. Translated by Alistair Ian Blith, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2011; and Dan Lungu, *Le paradis des poules*. Traduit par Laure Hinckel, Paris, Editions Jaqueline Chambon, 2005.

¹⁰ Culler uses this paraphrase of Benedict Anderson's thesis in Jonathan Culler, "Anderson", p. 38. The Romanian scholar Sanda Cordoş proposes, in her 2012 book, the term *identity novel* to describe the novels published in the 1990s and the 2000s, which present community images of postcommunist Romania. See Sanda Cordoş, *Lumi din cuvinte. Reprezentări și identități în literatura română postbelică* [*Worlds Made of Words. Representations and Identities in Romanian Postwar Literature*], București, Cartea Românească, 2012, pp. 133-134.

later book *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World*, not only “old-fashion novels” have a powerful national content, but also postmodern fictions, notably Salman Rushdie’s or Mario Vargas Llosa’s works. However, unlike nineteenth-century realist fictions, postmodern nation-imagining novels lack the capacity and desire to legitimate the nation: what they are proposing, claims Jonathan Culler, is a community without unity¹¹. To put it in Jean-Luc Nancy’s words, these novels “do not complete a figure or a figuration”¹² that could be attributed to the nation(al) myth. Instead, they create a textual space in which authors and readers re-imagine nation and community after the interruption of their own myths.

The Community Under Scrutiny

Collectivity and community were two core notions in the communist regime, and both presupposed an intimate connection between politics and literature. The “socialist democracy”, as one of the numerous books published under the signature of Nicolae Ceaușescu is entitled, imposed a particular relation between individual and collectivity, essentially based on forced collaboration, reciprocal surveillance and even voluntary denunciations. At the same time, the socialist communion was celebrated in public holidays such as The Workers’ Day on May 1st or at national artistic festivals such as *Cântarea României* (literally *Song [of praise] to Romania*), where both professional and amateur artists were competing¹³. Literature itself plays an ambiguous role in the communist regime, while film and fiction become media of political propaganda¹⁴. Romanian literature at the time was far from being unitary and homogenous, but, undoubtedly, literature in general and the novel in particular proposed figures of collectivity and communion which the readers related to. During the 1950s and even afterwards, socialist realism promoted a class-conscious literature, especially through novels written by well-known and even respected authors such as Eugen Barbu or Petru Dumitriu. They explored the life of the emerging proletarian communities (Barbu’s short stories),

¹¹ See Jonathan Culler, “Anderson”, p. 44.

¹² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Minneapolis – Oxford, University of Minnesota Press, 1991, p. 79.

¹³ For further details on the making of the socialist community see Dragoș Petrescu, “Communist legacies in the New Europe: History, Ethnicity and the Creation of a ‘Socialist’ Nation in Romania, 1945-1989”, in Konrad H. Jarausch, Thomas Lindenberger (eds.), *Conflicted Memories: Europeanizing Contemporary Histories*, Oxford – New York, Berghahn Books, 2011, pp. 37-54.

¹⁴ Insightful details regarding the relation between literature and political propaganda are to be found in Eugen Negrici, *Literatura română sub comunism: 1948-1964* [*Romanian Literature under Communism: 1948-1964*], București, Cartea Românească, 2010. A short version of the book is available also in English: Eugen Negrici, *Literature and Propaganda in Communist Romania*, București, Editura Institutului Cultural Român, 1999.

but also the irreversible disintegration of the great Romanian aristocratic families (Dumitriu's *Cronică de familie* [*Family Chronicle*]). At the same time, Marin Preda's acclaimed *Moromeții* [*The Moromete Family*] (1955) gained a wide recognition for its far from idealistic presentation of the rural community before World War II. However, despite its violent inner conflicts, the world depicted in *Moromeții I* still resisted as a representative community image.

It is also important to note that, during the communist period, literature catalysed a specific type of *interpretive community* (Stanley Fish)¹⁵. At the universities of Bucharest, Iași and Cluj student literary groups functioned, which largely became open spaces for the circulation of ideas. At the same time, the emerging neomodernists of the 1960s undermined the clichés that stood for class struggle and class solidarity by activating a secret author-reader complicity, based on “double language” and shrewd dissident allusions. *Animale bolnave* [*Sickly Animals*] and *Bunavestire* [*The Annunciation*] by Nicolae Breban, *Vânătoarea regală* [*The Royal Hunt*] by D.R. Popescu, *Racul* [*The Crab*] by Alexandru Ivasiuc, *Delirul* [*The Delirium*] and *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* [*The Most Beloved Man on Earth*] by Marin Preda were not just complex novels of the time, but also very popular works. This type of literary solidarity relied on a subversive political message encapsulated in these novels, a message that was supposedly embraced by a wide readership. However, Monica Lovinescu repeatedly argued that aesthetic dissidence, manifested through ambiguity and double-entendres, eventually led to the failure of the civil society both in communist and postcommunist Romania¹⁶. For Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca, who introduced the concept of *East-ethics* in Romanian literary studies, the political complicity between the writer and his readers constructed in fact a false solidarity, since it annihilated the possibility of a real revolt against totalitarianism.

Consequently, after the fall of communism in East-Central Europe, both the concept of community and the structure of interpretive communities faced radical changes¹⁷. During the 1990s, the large amount of trauma literature which came out into the public space encouraged new, ethical forms of national solidarity, based

¹⁵ Stanley Fish, *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge – London, Harvard University Press, 1980, pp. 171-172. For Fish, readings are governed by particular interpretive strategies and expectations that one learns in his/ her community, as the text itself is “produced” by the common interpretive strategy.

¹⁶ See Magda Cârneci, „Scriitorul trebuie să vegheze la mersul lucrurilor în cetate. Un interviu cu Monica Lovinescu și Virgil Ierunca” [The Writer Must Watch over the Course of Things in Society. An Interview with Monica Lovinescu and Virgil Ierunca], apud. E. Simion (coord.), *Cronologia vieții literare românești. Perioada postbelică* [*Chronology of Romanian Literary Life. The Postcommunist Period*], III, București, Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române, 2014, p. 388.

¹⁷ See Marcel Cornish Pope, John Neubauer (eds.), *Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. IV. *Types and Stereotypes*, Amsterdam – Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004, pp. 561-562.

on empathy with the repressed memory of the others. But the 1990s were a time of disunion and of radical national(ist) debates¹⁸. The resurrection of interwar nationalist ideologies, such as orthodoxism and “Romanianness”, revealed an active process of re-defining a collective “Romanian” identity. In his satirical-intellectualist novel *Coming from an Off-Key Time*, Bogdan Suceavă reveals the falsity of all these doctrines, be they nationalist, mystical or rationalist, reality-based or fictional. In doing so, Suceavă also questions the possibility of existence for non-ideological communities after the failure of the communist mythology of national and human solidarity. Alongside the concurrent media discourses, literature deals in its own particular, radical way with several much debated issues, for instance national identity, the communist past or Romania’s historical rebirth. Is there a particular stylistics at work in the post-1990 Romanian novels dealing with community representations? If so, does it have an intrinsically political or ethical dimension? Finally, can literature be considered not only a space for imagination, but also a medium of circulation for collective representations and, consequently, the space for establishing a new community connection?

In the late 1990s and at the beginning of the 2000s a new generation of writers comes into the public arena. Authors such as Petre Barbu, Bogdan Suceavă, Dan Lungu, Florin Lăzărescu, Filip Florian and Florina Ilis, to name but a few, focus on the postcommunist transition period and to the ways in which people fit into this brave new world. For instance, Barbu’s *Blazare [Tedium Vitae]* describes the extraordinary quotidian life of a family in a proletarian quarter of a Romanian city where everyone is obsessed with bringing back to life the *Alimentara*, an abandoned local commercial complex, and also an emblem of their community. Lungu’s *Chicken Paradise* narrows in on a colourful zone, the Acacia Street, at the edge of an anonymous town where, just like in Barbu’s novel, curious things are happening. Florian’s *Degete mici [Little Fingers]* elaborates on the mystery of a common grave discovered by chance in a small mountain town. The discovery will set in motion various social actors, such as the police, archaeologists, reporters, former political prisoners, and Orthodox monks, while the local community seems to majestically ignore the event. Finally, in Florina Ilis’s *Children’s Crusade*, a train is hijacked by children going on holiday, while the people on it come spontaneously together, fervently debating Romania and romanianness. Eventually, because of the crusade, Romania becomes for a brief moment the centre of the world media buzz. Despite inherent differences, what all these novels have in common is their intention to create satirical or realist narratives about the collective feeling of instability shared by people in a transition period, when old community symbols are lost or exposed as deceitful. These authors’ preference for

¹⁸ An overview of the debates around national identity in the cultural press of the 1990s can be found in E. Simion (coord.), *Cronologia*, I-VII.

satire and other “minor” narrative formulae, such as slang (Barbu, Lungu, and to some extent Ilis), journalistic clichés (Suceavă, Ilis) or parodic aulic speech (Suceavă, Florian), suggests that people are no longer finding a common language, or a shared sentiment of communion.

The three novels I have chosen for closer reading – Lungu’s *Chicken Paradise*, Suceavă’s *Coming from an Off-Key Time* and Ilis’s *Children’s Crusade* – tell the story of the making and unmaking of postcommunist communities. The community in the first novel is made of the neighbours living on a peripheral street in a symptomatically provincial town. The second novel circles several groups (religious sects, political parties, countercultural movements) in Bucharest, coming together in the end at a spontaneous street celebration. Finally, Ilis’s novel presents a polyphony of dissonant voices: obedient pupils and tough street kids, pedagogues, politicians, representatives of state authority, journalists, popstars, men and women participate, some of them without knowing it, to the making of history. Probably no social group of postcommunist Romania is absent from Ilis’s narrative fresco. Actually, all three novels are imagining, on various scales, the same national community, using the *pars pro toto* mechanism of metonymy. Lungu depicts a local, fixed community, which ultimately dissolves under the pressure of social and economic changes. Suceavă imagines a fluid and carnivalesque community, while Ilis scrutinizes a community without unity. Ultimately, all of them bring the concept of postcommunist national community under literary scrutiny.

Textual Strategies for Imagining Communities

For a better understanding of the connection between literature and the process of imagining communities, we must return to Benedict Anderson’s seminal book published in 1983. All communities, as Anderson points out right from the beginning, are in some sense imagined, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion”¹⁹. This is a statement that points in two directions: the nation is a sovereign and limited (both numerically and spatially) community, but it is also an imagined community. Further on, Anderson argues that nationality, nation-ness, as well as nationalism are “cultural artefacts of a particular kind”, which develop within the modern paradigm of space and time, based on the concept of simultaneity. The imagined community of a nation presumes the existence of a large number of individuals who are simultaneously involved in similar actions, such as the daily reading of the

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition, London – New York, Verso, 1991, p. 6.

newspaper, each of them being aware that “the ceremony he performs is being replicated [...] by thousands (or millions) of others, of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion”²⁰. Consequently, the particular form of political imagination which is the nation relies on a temporal horizon “measured by clock and by [daily] calendar”. It is a perception of time radically different from the mythical temporality which Jan Assmann, a philosopher whose influential theories on cultural memory have benefited to some extent from Anderson’s ideas, associates with the sacred or ritualised forms through which a group “imagines” and performs its collective identity²¹. However, one must note that the *imagined nation* is proper to the (European) modernity of the 19th century, whereas the *imagined community* designates much older forms of representing collectivity. In his pioneering book *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*²², Assmann draws attention to the very different ways in which the great ancient cultures “remember” their past. Each type of remembering engenders a particular mode of projecting the community and its future survival. The cultural identity of a group, as well as the idea of community, is articulated through various media, such as monuments, texts, images and even places, which vary across different times, spaces or cultures. Returning to Anderson, his nation-imagining cultural model also relies on the media and their expansion in the 19th century: the heroes’ monuments (in particular the cenotaph), the press, and, last but not least, the arts and literature.

Needless to say, Anderson’s approach puts great emphasis on the crucial role that literature, and particularly the novel, plays in the emergence of a new thinking about the nation. Still, as Jonathan Culler observed in 1999, “there has been surprisingly little discussion of Anderson’s claims about the novel and of the possible ramifications of its characteristic structure of narration”²³. Culler’s intervention on the subject summarizes three elements of the novel in its relation to nations as imagined communities: 1) the formal structure of the narrative point of view; 2) the national content of the novel; and 3) the construction of the reader. I will discuss these aspects in the novels of Lungu, Suceavă, and Ilis, but first let us have a closer look at Anderson’s ideas. In the *Cultural Roots* chapter of his book, Anderson claims that the novel and the newspaper “provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation”²⁴. What do the novel and the newspaper have in common? Firstly, they are both modern media

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

²¹ Jan Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory”, in Astrid Erll, Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin – New York, De Gruyter, 2008, pp. 109-110.

²² Assmann’s book was originally published in 1992 and translated in English in 2011.

²³ Jonathan Culler, “Anderson”, p. 32. The situation has not changed very much since then, either.

²⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined*, p. 25.

of circulation for collective representations within a particular (national) community or regarding a particular national community. It is the case of Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*, which Culler shrewdly characterizes as *La Comédie française*. Secondly, both the newspaper and the novel use a model of spatial representation of the "world", by presenting side by side events which seem to happen simultaneously. Simultaneity is then a key-concept for the narrative structure of 19th century great fictions. These novels' particular narrative perspective – the so called omniscient narration – calls for an "omniscient reader" who, „like God, watches A telephoning C, B shopping and D playing pool all *at once*. That all these acts are performed at the same clocked, calendrical time, but by actors who may be largely un-aware of one another, shows the novelty of this imagined world conjured up by the author in his reader's mind"²⁵. The narrative structure of the novel, more than its national content, is thus the focus of Anderson's thesis. Anderson's linking of novel and nation allows two readings. In one reading, it radically asserts that "the novel would always be capable of representing, at different levels, the reality and truth of the nation"²⁶. In the other, it suggests that the novel, and especially a particular type of novel, can function as an *analogon* of the nation. Both readings are discussed by Culler, who concludes that "the novel offers a particular formal structure, involving what can be called 'the space of a community'"²⁷. Such an observation opens the way to a more relativist definition of nation-imagining fictions, and also to a re-examination of the role literature plays in imagining various forms of social and cultural interaction.

Three Community Spaces: a Neighbourhood, a Capital, a Country

What kind of communities, then, implied in the novels which are the subject of my discussion? One must observe that many of these fictions fit very well with Anderson's observations regarding the narrative form, the content and the implied reader specific to nation-imagining novels. Firstly, what Lungu's *Chicken Paradise*, Suceavă's *Coming from an Off-Key Time* and Ilis's *Children's Crusade* have in common is a similar narrative structure, which connects the events through the rhetoric pattern of *meanwhile*. By presenting simultaneously the characters' actions, be they interconnected or just coincidental, the novels delineate a community precisely bounded in time and space. In Lungu's *Chicken Paradise*, the narrator's overview of the first chapter present a string of simultaneous, non-related actions: "misses Milica enters the Colonel's house, miss Veronica

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 26.

²⁶ Jonathan Culler, "Anderson", p. 47.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

Geambașu comes into possession of an illegitimate embryo and in the garden of mister Relu Covalciuc strange things happen”²⁸. However, if in the small community on Acacia Street there is a sense of intimate togetherness, in Ilis’s novel, the narrative structure of simultaneity expands on more than 600 pages, connecting very many characters that never come into direct contact. Secondly, the “national content” of the three novels reveals itself through direct allusions to the extra-textual reality. The time and space are precisely fixed: it’s Romania at the middle of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, which is also the period when these novels are written and published. Thirdly, the novels under discussion often seem to be aimed at an audience with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Romanian realities of the time. Consequently, the reader projected by such texts is an involved reader, which is invited to become an empathetic member of the fictional community.

A brief analysis of the texts will provide concrete examples of how narrative strategies summon the idea of community in their very first paragraph. This is how Lungu’s novel begins:

All along Acacia Street, in only half a day the story went around all the house yards, with only two exceptions: the Colonel’s yard (as people called it), protected by a wall of river rock with bright black wrought iron spears, where only the postman, of all the strangers, entered confidently, and the Socoliuc’s yard, where people treaded lightly and spoke softly because of the sick woman who was lying in the good room for a long time, that all things in it seemed frozen²⁹.

The first paragraph of the novel, with its swift panorama of people discussing the news simultaneously evokes the idea of a small, gossipy community, where everyone knows one another. The chronicle continues with the story of Milica, which seems to be the first person on the street who ever entered the Colonel’s house, and her description of the domestic interior grows hyperbolically with every new listener. In fact, what Lungu imagines is an oral community held together through story-telling, nea Mitu’s unbelievable personal recollections of the communist times, local jokes, rumors and inventions. With the picturesque street and its inhabitants Lungu resuscitates the topos of the *mahala*, a unique mix of rurality and urbanism traditional for classical Romanian literature, and also a

²⁸ „doamna Milica pătrunde în casa Colonelului, dra Veronica Geambașu devine posesoarea unui embrion nelegitim, iar în grădina domnului Relu Covalciuc se întâmplă lucruri ciudate” (Dan Lungu, *Raiul găinilor* [*Chicken Paradise*], Iași, Polirom, 2010, p. 211).

²⁹ „Cât de lungă era strada Salcânilor, într-o jumătate de zi întâmplarea făcu ocolul tuturor curților, cu două excepții: cea a Colonelului, cum îi spune lumea, străjuită de un gard de piatră de râu și sulițe de fier forjat vopsite într-un negru strălucitor, unde – dintre cei străini casei – doar poștaşul intra fără sfiială, și cea a familiei Socoliuc, unde se pășea pe vârfuri și se vorbea în șoaptă din pricina femeii ce zăcea bolnavă de mai multă vreme în camera cea bună, astfel încât toate lucrurile păreau încremenite” (Dan Lungu, *Chicken*, p. 9).

sociological reality which definitively disappeared with Ceaușescu's systematization projects and later because of the postcommunist middle-class migration to the suburbs³⁰. Of course, Acacia Street is Romania itself, on its way to capitalism and pluralist politics.

In the beginning of his novel, Bogdan Suceavă choses a more metatextual approach, that produces a different perspective on the national community:

The narrator is me. Even then, you knew the end of this story, like a bird watches from above the anthill and sees the torrent coming towards it, while the ants still enjoy the beautiful sun, you knew everything that was about to happen, from the minute he entered Bucharest to his last prophetic breath. [...] We were all expecting for a miracle. Do you remember the nineties, with all their secrets and their untold history? Here is the time for their real chronicle to be written³¹.

The choice of a narrator who comes to the fore in the very beginning to proclaim his identity and also to directly address the reader as “you”, is strikingly original. Suceavă plays on the dialectical relationship between the *I*, the *you* and the implicit *us*, each having a different perspective on the events. In an interview, Suceavă explains his narrative option as a deliberate one, since it is meant to be the voice of an uncoagulated community: “My narrator says ‘I’ and ‘We’ in an interchangeable manner because that was the state of mind after the 1989 revolution”³². Calling to mind the conflicting ideologies that surfaced in the public space in the 1990s, Suceavă employs a particular poetics which mixes literary satire and the intertextual memory of Romanian nationalism. The communities in Suceavă’s novel spontaneously configure around a prophet or another, such as Vespasian Moisa, the man with the map of Bucharest imprinted on his chest since birth. Ultimately, Suceavă’s brilliant satire hints to the salvationist narratives, which proliferate in times of political and social change. *Coming from an Off-Key Time* conjures up a joyful anarchy, which suggests the impossibility of an operative community who can affirm itself by saying “us”, because, as Suceavă claims, this “us” is in fact an “ideologically generated illusion”³³.

³⁰ Acacia Street incidentally appears in Lungu’s later novel *Sînt o babă comunistă!* [*I’m an Old Communist Biddy!*], as a changed place, well advanced on the road to urbanization.

³¹ „Povestitorul sunt eu. Tu știai încă de pe atunci sfârșitul istoriei, așa cum o pasăre privește din văzduh furnicarul și zărește torentul venind către mușuroi, pe când furnicile se bucură de soare, tot ceea ce avea să urmeze, din prima clipă a intrării sale în București și până la cea din urmă suflare a profetilor sale. [...] Cu toții așteptam o minune. Mai ții minte anii nouăzeci, cu toate tainele lor și cu toată istoria lor nespusă? Iată că a venit acum vremea să li se scrie adevărata cronică” (Bogdan Suceavă, *Venea din timpul diez* [*Coming from an Off-Key Time*], Iași, Polirom, 2014, p. 7).

³² Andrei Simuț, *Despre romanul “Venea din Timpul diez”*. *Un interviu cu Bogdan Suceavă* [*About the Novel ‘Coming from an Off-Key Time’. An Interview with Bogdan Suceavă*], <http://atelier.liternet.ro/articol/9010/Andrei-Simut-Bogdan-Suceava/Despre-romanul-Venea-din-timpul-diez.html>, accessed June, 1st 2016.

³³ *Ibidem*.

Finally, Ilis's novel begins *ex abrupto*, with the impersonal, ethereal voice of the station loud-speaker announcing the trains:

Watch out for lane three! Please keep off lane three! [...] In the hot summer air, the Bucharest express, that the station radio had announced a couple of minutes before the special interregional train, was slowly starting to form on lane two, Pavel gazed at it intently, To an immobile observer the Brownian movement of the travellers would seem chaotic and apparently meaningless, just as meaningless as the madness in the first minutes of the universe [...] but as that gaze, uninterested in distances unfit for the human visual scale, manages to adapt to examining isolated states of the big cosmos, cutting out portions from reality whose perception may be adjusted, like a camera, to the perceptive horizon of the human senses, the picture of reality gains [...] meaning and consistency, offering itself with elementary simplicity to the senses and to conscience³⁴.

In the fragment above, the moving camera-eye progressively expands its spatial horizon to a planetary scale and even further, as the Brownian movement of the travellers calls to mind the Big Bang. Back on earth, the coincidental intersection of two trains – the Bucharest express and the interregional train with pupils and teachers going to the seaside – is the *primum movens* of the action. Changing plans at the last minute, Calman, a homeless child, climbs in the holiday train and triggers a spontaneous, postmodern Children's Crusade against grown-ups and the way they rule the world. As in the other novels discussed so far, the events narrated are happening simultaneously, a fact which gives Ilis the occasion to switch between characters, points of view and individual stories, all connected in a puzzle-like structure. This way, postcommunist Romania is reflected through a multitude of antagonistic perspectives and conflicting narrative voices: school pupils, street children, teachers and parents, businessmen, politicians, and journalists. Consequently, the national community no longer appears as a monad, like in Lungu's and even in Suceavă's novels, but as a Rubik cube. It is an image mirrored by the articulation of the novel, where episodes are part of a moving structure which shifts and realigns in ever-changing series. With *The Children's Crusade*, one of the last fictions on Romanian transition published before the 2007

³⁴ "Atenție la linia trei! Vă rugăm feriți linia trei! [...] În aerul fierbinte de vară, rapidul de București, anunțat la megafon cu câteva minute înaintea acceleratului special, se forma cu încetineală pe linia doi, Pavel urmărindu-l lung cu privirea, Unui observator imobil mișcarea browniană a călătorilor i-ar părea haotică și, aparent, lipsită de sens, așa cum, fără rost, aceluiași ochi exterior, i s-ar părea până și nebunia din primele minute ale universului [...] dar pe măsură ce privirea, dezinteresându-se de distanțele neprevăzute de etalonul vizual uman, reușește să se adapteze examinării unor stări izolate din marele tot, decupând din realitate porțiuni a căror percepție poate fi reglată, asemenea unui aparat de filmat, în funcție de orizontul de cunoaștere al simțurilor umane, tabloul realității dobândește [...] sens și consistență, oferindu-se cu simplitate elementară simțurilor și conștiinței" (Florina Ilis, *Cruciada copiilor [The Children's Crusade]*, Iași, Polirom, 2005, p. 7).

accession to the European Union, the nation-imagining novel reaches both its apogee and its closure.

Voices of the Interruption: Eminem, Ceaușescu and the TV Camera

By coincidence or not, each of the three novels under discussion ends with a funerary scene. In Florina Ilis's *Children's Crusade*, we are witnessing the death of Remus, a schoolboy accidentally murdered by another child during the internal fights between the "crusaders" who had taken over a holiday train. The novel's closing scene presents Remus's funeral ceremony in the central square of Cluj-Napoca. The final chapter of Dan Lungu's *Chicken Paradise* recounts mister Milu's imaginary projection of his own death and the probable impact the event would have on the Acacia Street community. Finally, in Bogdan Suceavă's *Coming from an Off-Key Time*, the murder of the self-proclaimed prophet Vespasian Moisa is immediately followed (apparently with no direct connection) by an unusual mass ceremony, something between a carnival and an Orthodox funeral procession.

Reading closely, the novels reveal the intent behind these funereal tropes. Needless to say, death is a key concept both in Anderson, and also in Blanchot and Nancy's works. The idea of community reveals itself through the death of the other(s), as it allows a particular experience of the impossible communion. In *The Children's Crusade*, the final scene brings together, as participants to the funeral ceremony, the main characters of the story and the anonymous inhabitants of Cluj-Napoca. The narrative perspective „from above”, which is also the readers' perspective, is the same as that in the beginning of the novel, only now it mirrors a community forged through somebody's death, and not just a group of strangers intersecting on the railway station's platform. However, this community reinforced by death is unexpectedly interrupted,

...because the air had filled suddenly with black clouds which darkened the sky at an amazing speed, the first rain shots falling randomly on the giant horse of Matei Corvin, on the king's rocky face, on the rocky shoulders of his brave soldiers, on the red petals of the carnations in the wreaths, on the roofs of the buildings, on the white silk fringes of the funeral adornment [...] a summer rain attacking with liquid bullets the square, the city, setting the whole mass of people in an undisciplined movement, to search for the protective walls of the buildings that surrounded the square, the bank, the arches of the Town Hall [...] the threatening rain creating among those present at the ceremony [...] a space that grew wider as the rain drops were falling heavier and heavier...³⁵.

³⁵ „...văzduhul se umpluse pe neașteptate de nori negri care întunecară, cu o rapiditate uluitoare, cerul, primele împușcături de ploaie nimerind la întâmplare uriașul cal al lui Matei Corvin, chipul împietrit al regelui, umerii de piatră ai bravilor lui oșteni, petalele roșii ale garoafelor din cununi, acoperișurile clădirilor, faldurile de mătase albă ale veșmântului funerar [...] o ploaie de vară atacând

Ilis's use of gun metaphors as *the rain shots* or *the liquid bullets* brings into the reader's memory not only the accidental shooting of Remus by a schoolfellow, but also the Romanian Revolution, when hundreds of young people were killed while protesting in the main city squares of Bucharest or Timișoara. In fact, the analogy between the crusade and the 1989 Revolution is present throughout the novel. But the real focus of the fragment is on the widening empty space at the centre of the crowd, as it disperses under the rain. The empty space fills up with a stranger's voice – the rapper Eminem's on a tape – which is neither the voice of the community, nor the one supplanted by the omniscient narrator or by the main *reflecteur* of the events, the journalist Pavel Caloianu.

Mister Milu's funeral daydream in Dan Lungu's novel involves two antithetic visions of his own burial ceremony. Milu pines for a socialist type of funeral ceremony, as he would have had during the Ceaușescu's defunct regime, when there was a strong sense of solidarity and human respect. The other, more probable, image that comes to Milu's mind asserts the irreparable loss of the sense of community:

Now nothing was like in the old days! [...] Were he to die now, a few neighbours from Acacia Street would have come to the wake, or maybe all of them, scrambling afterwards from the ceremony to catch a movie or the news, but no one from the factory where he had worked for thirty years, where form a total of a few thousand only several hundred and the guard had remained, and in no way would the whole town have heard of it, as they should have. Not even the working people came together anymore, as did his chickens when they looked for warmth; they ran in all directions looking to „privatize” themselves. This is why he had once prayed to end up in a chicken paradise. A lukewarm feeling of sadness came upon him, and his eyes welled up³⁶.

Just like in *The Children's Crusade* ending scene, Lungu brings together the neighbours on Acacia Street as virtual participants to a wake. But what should have been an occasion to reaffirm community and to ensure its survival turns into a tragi-comical picture of people running about like confused hens with very short attention span. Since after 1989 the communist paradise is lost, Milu ends up praying to arrive in a chicken paradise, where he could recuperate a sense of

cu gloanțele de apă piața, orașul, punând întreaga masă de oameni într-o mișcare dezordonată, căutând zidurile protectoare ale clădirilor care înconjurau piața, sediul băncii, arcadele primăriei [...] amenințarea ploii creând între cei prezenți la ceremonie [...] un spațiu gol care se lărgea pe măsură ce stropii de ploaie își înteteau vertiginoasa cădere...” (Florina Ilis, *Cruciada copiilor*, p. 484).

³⁶ „Acum nimic nu mai era ca înainte! [...] Acum să fi murit el, s-ar fi strâns câțiva vecini de pe strada Salcânilor, poate chiar toți, ștergând-o de la priveghi să prindă filmul sau știrile, dar nici gând să se audă până la întreprinderea unde muncise treizeci de ani, unde din câteva mii de muncitori mai rămăseseră câteva sute și portarul, și cu atât mai puțin să se audă în tot orașul, cum poate ar fi meritat. Acum nici ei, oamenii muncii, nu se mai strâneau unii în alții, cu căldură, ca puicuțele lui, ci fugeau care încotro să se privatizeze, de aceea poate se rugase cândva să ajungă în raiul găinilor. O tristețe călduță îl copleși, înlăcrimându-l” (Dan Lungu, *Raiul găinilor*, p. 195).

warmth and intimacy. His mock-metamorphosis into a chicken after death is indicative of his longing for community at least among animals, if human togetherness fails.

Ultimately, Suceavă's *Coming from an Off-Key Time* ends with a carnivalesque celebration in the centre of Bucharest, occasioned by the investiture of a new "national prophet". In describing the procession, which is broadcast on television, the unnamed narrator invokes several funerary decorations which recall to the reader's mind an Orthodox burial ceremony, complete with hearse, funerary wreaths and vexilla:

...everything looked, when attentively filmed from a helicopter, very similar to the Carnival in Rio, with the obvious difference that on the Dâmbovită Quay there was no parade of samba scholls, but of philosophical schools, each with its own dances and vexilla, with its exoticism and metaphors, with its allegorical platform, onto which subtle ikebanas were combined in postmodern fashion with funerary wreaths in honour of our dead in the battles of Tapae, Posada, Podul Înalt, Calugăreni, Mărăști and so on³⁷.

At a closer look, the parade turns out to be a sort of philosophy festival, since Suceavă alludes to the various nationalist doctrines of "Romanianess" that circulated in the 1990s. However, the presentation of this postmodern *Symposium* is suddenly interrupted for what seems to be technical reasons. The novel ends with a suggestive figure of distorted communication, as the camera suddenly "fell down and started filming the sky, while on the TV screens a tricolour band in red, yellow and blue incessantly proclaimed: TRANSMITTING LIVE"³⁸. By turning to the sky and focusing on something that could mean the absence of God, Suceavă suspends all judgement on the philosophical melee parading through Bucharest. Without an identifiable centre, the image mirrors the interruption of the myth of national community in the early 1990s.

In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean Luc-Nancy understands the interruption of the myth of community as a denunciation of a specific foundational and authoritative narrative, which is actually the essence of the myth, since "the mythic speech is always a communitarian speech"³⁹. That is why myth is inherent to community and, at the same time, it enforces the myth of community. However, Nancy makes clear that "the myth of communion, like communism [...] is myth,

³⁷ "...totul arătând, la o atentă filmare din elicopter, foarte asemănător carnavalului de la Rio, decât că pe Splaiul Dâmboviței nu defilau școlile de samba, ci școlile de gândire, fiecare cu dansul și prapurii ei, fiecare cu exotismul și metaforele ei, fiecare cu carul ei alegoric, pe care subtile ikebane se amestecau postmodern cu coroane mortuare în memoria morților noștri din bătăliile de la Tapae, Posada, Podul Înalt, Călugăreni, Mărăști și așa mai departe" (Bogdan Suceavă, *Venea din timpul diez*, p. 237).

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 238.

³⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative*, p. 50.

absolutely and rigorously...”⁴⁰, and it is exactly in the acknowledgement of its “mythical” essence when the interruption of myth takes place. Since the interruption of myth is equivalent to the interruption of the *operative community* which was founded on it, the voice of interruption can no longer be a community voice, nor can it be a new authoritative, foundational voice. In Nancy’s exact words, the voice of interruption

...consists in *allowing to be said* something that no one – no individual, no representative – could ever say: a voice that could never be the voice of any subject, a speech that could never be the conviction of any understanding and that is merely the voice and the thought of community in the interruption of myth. At once *an* interrupted voice, and the voiceless interruption of every general or particular voice⁴¹.

The three novels discussed in this article bring to the fore voices of interruption which signal the failure of the myth of community itself. In Lungu, Ceaușescu’s spectral voice, embodied in nea Mitu’s anecdotes gathered in separate chapters, operates an insider critique to the myth of communist solidarity, so much longed-for by the characters in the novel. In Suceavă, the camera which points silently to the sky interrupts the voice of the fake prophets, be they mystical, like Vespasian Moisa, or rationalist, like dr. Arghir. Finally, in Ilis, Eminem’s rhythms, resounding from a closed coffin where the brother of the dead child had put a walkman, are interrupting all the other voices of this polyphonic novel.

At the end of this article, one final observation should be made in regard to the ethical dimension of the literary reflection on community. One shared opinion on this issue seems to be that literature refuses all common categories and articulates itself on the subversion of the authoritative forms of enunciation, *écriture* or communication. In my view, this is a somewhat presumptuous idea. Literature is not inherently engaged in the deconstruction of myths, since there are many cases when it actually enforced and perpetuated political myths, for instance in totalitarian regimes. Nancy himself suggests that the opposition between *myth* and *literature* is actually inoperative, since literature does not simply invalidate myth by pointing to its foundational and authoritative structure. Ultimately, literature and myth are different ways in which a community conceives of its narratives. The Postcommunist Romanian novels analysed in this article emerge in the breaking point of the community myth, and question its very possibility through the techniques of literature. However, there is nothing intrinsically benign or democratic about literature, and the exigence of an ethical reading always belongs to the individual reader.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 80.

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THE INTERRUPTED COMMUNITY: NEW IMAGES OF THE NATION IN
POSTCOMMUNIST ROMANIAN LITERATURE

(Abstract)

This article aims to question the role that literature plays in the construction of a new, critical image of the nation after 1989. The communist regime was the catalyst for a particular type of interpretive community and also of particular figures of the collectivity and representations of interactions between individual and community. After 1989, these figures seemed to fade out in the public and literary discourse, and community itself, as a concept, met with crisis. However, even if the failure of communism definitively interrupted the myth of community, the idea of community could not simply disappear, and instead generated new representations of its fractured reality. Is there a particular stylistics at work in the Romanian novels after 2000 dealing with communitarian representations? If so, does it have an intrinsically political or ethical dimension? Finally, can literature be considered not only a space for *imagi-nation*, but also a medium of circulation for collective representations and, consequently, the space for establishing a new community connection?

Keywords: imagined communities, the nation in postcommunism, Romanian literature, Dan Lungu, Bogdan Suceavă, Florina Ilis.

COMUNITATEA ÎNTRERUPTĂ: NOI IMAGINI ALE NAȚIUNII ÎN
LITERATURA ROMÂNĂ POSTCOMUNISTĂ

(Rezumat)

Articolul își propune să urmărească rolul literaturii în construirea unei noi imagini critice a națiunii după 1989. Regimul comunist a fost, în România, un catalizator al unui anumit tip de comunitate interpretativă și al unor anume figuri ale colectivității și reprezentări ale raportului individ-comunitate. În discursul public și literar de după 1989, reculul acestor figuri este vizibil, comunitatea fiind ea însăși un concept în criză. Totuși, chiar dacă eșecul comunismului întrerupe definitiv mitul comunității, aceasta din urmă nu dispare pur și simplu, ci cunoaște noi forme de reprezentare scripturală. Există o stilistică a figurilor comunității, decelabilă în literatura autorilor care debutează în al doilea deceniu de postcomunism? Dacă da, care este încărcătura estetică, politică, etică a acestora? În cele din urmă, este literatura un spațiu în care pot fi imaginate noi forme ale comunității, un mediu de circulație a acestora și un nou liant comunitar?

Cuvinte-cheie: comunități imaginate, națiunea în postcomunism, literatura română, Dan Lungu, Bogdan Suceavă, Florina Ilis.