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## **THE NOVEL OF MEMORY AS WORLD GENRE. EXPLORING THE ROMANIAN CASE**

The novel of memory is a subgenre with an impressive spatial and cultural range: it manifested itself in numerous countries in all parts of the world, and it emerged only some four decades ago. However, its existence remains troubling in many respects: it was theorized in the academia before being canonized in the national literary histories. Moreover, it thrived in the discourse of recent cultural studies, rather than in that of literary studies. While the phrase became commonplace in some countries such as post-Francoist Spain, where academics embraced it and numerous writers illustrated it, the novel of memory does not seem to spread from one country to another. One may speak of polygenesis, noticing how the subgenre flourishes in different countries simultaneously, indebted to a similar or related political and historical climate maybe, but not really to a decisive, towering literary influence. That is because the novel of memory springs from a concern with political identity, not with form, so it is not essentially influenced by mimetic aspirations to replicate international commercial success, but instead it is fuelled by national and local stakes and conditions. Still, this doesn't mean that the novel of memory is destined to remain a mere local phenomenon, or a branch of some local phenomena, uninteresting from the viewpoint of a systematic research of world literature or quantitative analysis on a global scale.

In this article, we set out to delineate the general traits of the subgenre in order to propose a definition that we will then use to speak of the Romanian novel of memory in the last four decades and to highlight its transformation from a subversive memory novel during the communist regime, to a traumatic, (n)ostalgic and, ultimately, agonistic memory novel in post-communism.

### *The Challenges of a World Genre*

The novel of memory should first be acknowledged as a world genre simply because of its size. Examples of novels of memory may be found in Spain, Great Britain, Germany, Romania, the U.S.A., India, Rwanda, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and so on. It is true that the label was first coined in the 1990s for Spanish post-Franco era novels that dealt with trauma and the polyphony of

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historical narratives, but it is fully compatible and should also include other “local” sub-subgenres that otherwise fail to embrace their truly global reach. Post-dictatorship novels emerging in Eastern Europe after 1989 and in Argentina after 1983, post-genocide novels such as those written in the wake of the Rwandan Civil War of 1994, or neo-slave narratives and Native American Renaissance novels of the 1980s in the U.S.A. make up some of the national canons which should, in our opinion, be regarded as part of the same world genre. From Spain’s Luis Goytisolo and Carmen Martín Gaité to Argentina’s Laura Alcoba, and from the Americans Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko or Sherman Alexie to the British/ Indian Salman Rushdie, Germany’s Thomas Brussig, Romania’s Gabriela Adameșteanu and Norman Manea, including the Rwandan Gilbert Gatore, the novel of memory flourished starting from the late 1970s, with an understandable delay in the Argentinian case (the 1990s) and in Eastern Europe (after the fall of dictatorships) and even later in Rwanda (in the wake of the 1994 genocide). It heralds the advent of an age of ethically-driven return to history, of processing collective trauma and turning literature into a venue for debunking historical mythologies. It is not a coincidence that this happened after several of the world’s most cruel dictatorships (Francisco Franco’s in Spain, the military junta’s in 1970s–1980s Argentina, Augusto Pinochet’s in Chile) crumbled and after the chain system of socialist dictatorships in Eastern Europe broke down, prompting commentators to speak of a necessary coinage for a new cultural paradigm, cemented by ulterior technological progress, economic world crisis, political convergences and even pandemics<sup>2</sup>.

The atomization of the numerous “national” brands of novels of memory should not make one overlook the fact that they have emerged rather recently, in a multiply connected world and, above all, at a time when world literature has become an institution, not just a political metaphor. Local novels of memory are being absorbed into a world genre not only by the similarity of the conditions of their appearance, but also by their shared international readership. By being read in multiple cultural spaces simultaneously, novels of memory are being metaphorically relocated, and their initial belonging to a particular novelistic sub-subgenre is renegotiated in view of the relatability of the trauma narrated.

For instance, several Romanian novels, among which Varujan Vosganian’s 2009 *Cartea șoaptelor* [*The Book of Whispers*] and Norman Manea’s 2012 *Vizuină* [*The Lair*] (2012), singled out by Romanian critics for their inspection of the experience of Romanian communism, were advertised in their English translations as novels of genocide and, respectively, post-9/11 novels, highlighting the mutability of genre in the age of world literature. It also goes to show that, sometimes, a subgenre is a matter of perception and that “local” sub-subgenres such as the novel of Romanian communism, American neo-slave narratives and the

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Moraru, *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2011, p. 3.

novel of genocide may very well function as parts of the same world literary genre. Indeed, the novel of memory may be described, following Mariano Siskind, as a “new generic formation”, a “constellation [...] of texts whose identity is defined in accordance with new needs and new critical and aesthetic desires translated into new organizing principles”<sup>3</sup>. The very fact that the subgenre was put together after the fact, by academics who ventured to group novels based on their shared concern with processing the recent past in a traumatized collective memory, is therefore not a shortcoming, but rather a consequence of their belonging to the age of world literature, of transnational literary institutions and of social activism in the academia.

Another difficulty in discussing the novel of memory from a genre-based perspective concerns the way in which Cultural Studies relate to the very concept of genre and its functions. The culturalist approach challenges the traditional aesthetic perspective which sees literature as falling into clear-cut categories defined by formal constraints and thematic lineages which are in turn subverted by the exceptional creativity of artists who, instead of breaking the generic mold, only enhance its canonical power for the generations to come. On the contrary, for cultural studies scholars, genre is to be defined and used “to examine dynamic relations between literary texts and historically situated social practices and structures”<sup>4</sup>, which means that (in)fidelity toward a convened set of aesthetic traits is not essential. The situation is made probably clearer by the very existence of a complex, hybrid subgenre such as the novel of memory. A culturalist approach is very appropriate for this subgenre which engages sensitive matters having to do with collective remembrance and reckoning, and has real consequences in actual policies of memory promoted and enacted in a social landscape at least partly shaped by the canonizing force of literature. Bawarshi makes it clear that culturalist approaches to genre work by “examining how genres reflect and participate in legitimizing social practices and recognizing how generic distinctions maintain hierarchies of power, value and culture”<sup>5</sup>.

The emergence of the memory novel in the aftermath of slavery, colonialism, dictatorship or genocide, through an intricate political, cultural and literary process not only demonstrates that this (sub)genre was selected at the expense of others, but also proves the utility of a genre-based approach to ethnic, national or collective memory.

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<sup>3</sup> Mariano Siskind, “The Genres of World Literature: The Case of Magical Realism”, in Theo D’haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, Oxon, Routledge, 2012, p. 347.

<sup>4</sup> Anis S. Bawarshi, Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre. An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*, Indiana, Parlor Press, 2010, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 25.

*Defining the Novel of Memory: the Spanish Context*

Surprisingly enough, although the phrase “novel of memory” was used at least once in world literary scholarship in reference to the authors mentioned in the previous chapter and to many others, there are very little attempts to pinpoint this subgenre conceptually, in a more precise manner. This is because the phrase was initially launched by Salman Rushdie, who used it to explain his own novel *Midnight’s Children* in a famous 1982 essay, “Imaginary Homelands”, and then entered the postcolonial Anglophone critical mainstream in reference to other authors<sup>6</sup>. Besides the conceptual elusiveness, the essential challenge is to identify the formal characteristics of this subgenre while acknowledging its spatial dispersion and lack of direct connectivity between national chapters. Following Franco Moretti, the crux of genre is plot, and the textual devices that serve the plot best make up the standard version of it<sup>7</sup>. But memory cannot constitute a plot by itself, although Marcel Proust’s “mémoire involontaire” functions as a generative textual device not only in his multi-volume masterpiece *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–1927), but also, as Samuel O’Donoghue argues, in the novels of several Spanish authors from the (post-)Franco era<sup>8</sup>.

To further define the subgenre of the memory novel, we will first rely on the distinctions made by its main theorist, David K. Herzberger, who wrote about Spanish post-Franco literature in 1991, and then extrapolate from there. Novels of memory are, he says, “in the largest sense, those fictions that evoke past time through subjective remembering, most often through first person narration”, immediately adding that the past he refers to, the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and Francisco Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975), is a timeframe that was “eschewed and appropriated by Francoist historiography”<sup>9</sup>. As a result, we have to consider this subgenre as related to the political and the historical novel, but differing from each, first by its subjectivity or the personal implication of the narrative voice(s) as compared to the relative detachment of the narrator in the political novel, and secondly, by the challenge brought to the mono-tonality of the historical novel by the polyphony of individual voices engaging in dialogue with each other and (in effect) with History.

The features of the subgenre in Herzberger are explored while drawing a distinction between two types of novels dealing with memory. The early memory

<sup>6</sup> Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands”, *London Review of Books*, 1982, 18, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v04/n18/salman-rushdie/imaginary-homelands>. Accessed September 1, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Franco Moretti, “The Slaughterhouse of Literature”, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61, 2002, 1, pp. 207-227.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel O’Donoghue, *Rewriting Franco’s Spain: Marcel Proust and the Dissident Novelists of Memory*, London, Bucknell University Press, 2018, p. xiv.

<sup>9</sup> David K. Herzberger, “Narrating the Past: History and the Novel of Memory in Postwar Spain”, *PMLA*, 106, 1991, 1, p. 35.

narrations, written from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, belong to novelists he calls “social realists”, authors dealing with censorship and the obligation to conform to state orthodoxy. They respond to the “mythical mode” of official Francoist historiography by portraying, in an experiential and mock-heroic mode, “a specific present that suggests a specific past [...] necessarily divergent from the one trumpeted by the official historiography of the state”<sup>10</sup>. On the contrary, the next generation of memory writers, the novelists coming up in the latter half of the 1960s and onwards, bring along a temporal awareness largely absent from the social realists’ reconstructions of the past. For these authors, “to know the historical is to mediate and to narrate it with the voice of a subject in the present, who is also positioned within history”<sup>11</sup>. The distinct and oppositional elaboration of the notions of self and state, or of memory and history in the novels of the social realists is replaced, in the 1970s novels of memory, by “the individual self (most frequently, but not exclusively, through first-person narration) seeking definition by commingling the past and present in the process of remembering [...], either voluntarily or involuntarily”, thus prompting a “bimodal correlation: the self in search of definition; the definition of self-perceived always within the flow of history”<sup>12</sup>. These definitions lead up to considerations regarding technique. Herzberger mentions a subjectivity that may or may not involve first-person narrative, an ambiguity regarding the narrative voice (“indeterminate essence of the subjective”), a superpositioning of the individual and the collective self (since “history shapes and is shaped by the private affairs of the self”<sup>13</sup>), fragmented composition, sometimes temporal uncertainty (“teleogenic plot”), polyphony and dialogism (“dialectical propositions” regarding history), and embracing the text’s hybridity as a means to enhancing its authenticity.

But what is more important is the great relevance Herzberger attributes to form in the novel of memory. For him, what makes novel-form remembrance an actual novel of memory is the acceptance of the co-presence of multiple discourses on memory both in society and in the individual self, the result being a predilection toward elaborate form and metanarrative: “the novel of memory reveals (and asserts) the determinants of its own form, and thus lays bare the contingencies of narration as a way of knowing the past”<sup>14</sup>. While this definition might seem somewhat tributary to the 1990s vogue of postmodernism, Herzberger’s insistence on awareness with respect to the consequences of choosing one voice or another, one montage technique or another, hints at a dominant concern with the ethics of narration which will shape the subgenre in the following years. This far-reaching insight will make possible, in the coming decades, the inclusion of new concepts

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<sup>10</sup> David K. Herzberger, *Narrating the Past*, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 38.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 37.

and theory frames in the discussion of memory novels, such as trauma, affiliative memory and agonism<sup>15</sup>.

Another Spanish critic, Gonzalo Sobejano, refers to the drive to write narratives of remembering after the death of Franco as “a will to distance oneself from those events”<sup>16</sup>, echoing the complex psychological mechanisms involved in these literary choices: “Once completed, the past called for a kind of recapitulation, a view from a new vantage point, a view long desired and so patiently awaited”<sup>17</sup>. Sobejano also highlights the dialogic aspect of many Spanish novels from the 1970s up to the 2000s, detailing the ingenious narrative frames used by authors such as José-María Vaz de Soto, Carmen Martín Gaité or Luis Goytisolo to suggest inner debate, “phantasmagoric identities” or even “phantom-like interlocutors”. Later still, Sarah Leggott and Ross Woods invoke Cathy Caruth’s reworking of Freud’s theory of cultural traumata by discussing (quite generously, in our opinion) novels of memory from the whole postwar period in Spain<sup>18</sup>. More recently, Hans Lauge Hansen quotes Marianne Hirsh’s concepts of post-memory and affiliative memory to refer to the most recent developments of the subgenre after 2000, in the memory novels of a new generation of Spanish authors such as Benjamin Prado, who now contribute to

...a typical subgenre of post-memory or inter-generational memory, characterized by a strong hybridization of genres in an artistically elaborated discourse that blurs the distinctions between essay, biography and/ or autobiography, historiographical discourse, journalism, and novelistic fiction, and in which docu-fiction, auto-fiction and meta-fictional comments are combined<sup>19</sup>.

These novels of post-memory focus not so much on the processes of individual remembering (as the already canonical novels of memory did), but instead “depict the social processes that contribute to the construction of cultural memory”<sup>20</sup>. So, what at one point was primarily a novel of trauma and self-investigation seems to turn, in the most recent examples of Spanish novels of memory, into analytical metanarratives, playing with nostalgia rather than pursuing traumatic closure, and reaching out to other places filled with memory for a confrontation of the mechanisms of community-building.

<sup>15</sup> See Hans Lauge Hansen, “Modes of Remembering in the Contemporary Spanish Novel”, *Orbis Litterarum*, 71, 2016, 4, pp. 265-288.

<sup>16</sup> Gonzalo Sobejano, “The Testimonial Novel and the Novel of Memory”, in Harriet Turner, Adelaida López de Martínez, *The Cambridge Companion to the Spanish Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 185.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 191.

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Leggott and Ross Woods, *Memory and Trauma in the Postwar Spanish Novel: Revisiting the Past*, London, Bucknell University Press, 2013, p. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Lauge Hansen, *Testimony, Documentary, Fiction: The remediation of Stolen Children*, in Lars Saetre, Patrizia Lombardo, Sara Tanderup Linkis (eds.), *Exploring Text, Media and Memory*, Aarhus, Aarhus University Press, 2017, p. 318.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

### *The Romanian Chapter*

We have analyzed in greater detail the Spanish critical theory on the novel of memory because it presents one of the most complex perspectives on the subject matter and it can therefore offer an analogy which may help us plausibly reconstruct the Romanian case. In general, critics speak of a Romanian “novel of memory” when discussing novels that appeared in post-communism. Indeed, after 1989, the concern with collective identity after the fall of communism, the need to process past trauma and an unrealistic trust in the clarifying and healing force of literature fueled expectations for the emergence of a vindicating and monumental “novel of communism”. The critic Dan C. Mihăilescu was only half-jokingly decrying the absence still, in the 2000s, of a “Great Novel of Our Suffering under Ceausescu”<sup>21</sup>, and his anxiety foreshadowed the drive to memory felt by many actors in the literary field, readers and writers alike. In a similar manner, another established critic, Nicolae Manolescu, complained that the 2000 generation of writers was “presentist [...], selfish, self-centered, sensuous, superficial”<sup>22</sup>, uninterested in the past and therefore endangering the continuity of literature’s mandate to embody the “historical conscience” of the nation. Indirectly answering this plight, Sanda Cordoș focused on the prose published after 2000, discerning two distinct waves: one constituted by “artists of memory” who write “novels of identity”, the other by writers positioned “against memory”. While the first are concerned with the phenomenon of leaving one world and entering another, namely from dictatorship to post-communism, the others move away from these crucial obsessions and propose new themes, polemical toward the former<sup>23</sup>. Finally, Claudiu Turcuș also writes about novels of memory that he locates primarily in post-communism, although novels of memory are to be found, in his opinion, also before 1989<sup>24</sup>; his criteria for identifying such novels are, however, imprecise<sup>25</sup>.

But the novel of memory in Romania is not only a post-communist phenomenon. Keeping in mind the timeline of the Spanish novelization of memory,

<sup>21</sup> Dan C. Mihăilescu, *Literatura română în postceaușism [Romanian Literature after Ceaușescu’s Regime]*, vol. II, Iași, Polirom, 2006, p. 147.

<sup>22</sup> Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură [The Critical History of Romanian Literature. 5 Centuries of Literature]*, Pitești, Paralela 45, 2008, p. 1451.

<sup>23</sup> Sanda Cordoș, *Lumi din cuvinte. Reprezentări și identități în literatura română postbelică [Worlds Made of Words. Representations and Identities in Postwar Romanian Literature]*, București, Cartea Românească, 2012, p. 132.

<sup>24</sup> Claudiu Turcuș, *Împotriva memoriei. De la estetismul socialist la noul cinema românesc [Against Memory. From Socialist Aestheticism to the New Romanian Cinema]*, București, Eikon, 2017, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> See also Andreea Mironescu, “Konfigurationen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses im postkommunistischen rumänischen Roman”, in Michèle Mattusch (ed.), *Kulturelles Gedächtnis—Ästhetisches Erinnern: Literatur, Film und Kunst in Rumänien*, Berlin, Frank & Timme, 2018, pp. 251-275.

we maintain that memory was one of the main concerns of Romanian authors also during communism, beginning with the end of the 1960s.

In discussing the novel of memory before and after the fall of communism, we first surveyed the novels indexed under the category “novel of memory”, “memory novel”, “novel of affective memory”, “autobiographical novel” and other related critical formulas in the two volumes of the *Dicționarul cronologic al romanului românesc* [*Contemporary Dictionary of the Romanian Novel*], 1844–1989 (DCRR) and 1990–2000 (DCRR 1990–2000), respectively. A second step was to discriminate between proper novels of memory (following the conceptualization of this subgenre in the literature on the Spanish case) and different instances of political, psychological or sentimental novels that dealt marginally with the problematic of memory. A third essential step was to complete the list of memory novels for the interval 2001–2020, which is uncharted by the lexicographical instruments available at present for Romanian literature<sup>26</sup>. For this reason, we had to work with a list of titles released by the main publishers of the period, selecting those books which enjoyed critical success and multiple editions, received extensive reviews, gained literary prizes and nominations. With these limitations, the 50 novels presented in the following sections (5 from late communism and 45 from post-communism), constitute a “canonical list”<sup>27</sup>, inasmuch as it is made up of books selected by the market and by other canonical instruments. The criteria used to delimit them were both thematic – i.e. memory is a key theme, and the concern with collective identity has to be present – and formal, since memory novels are so tightly connected with ambiguity of voice, fragmented composition, temporal uncertainty, polyphony, subjectivity, dialogism and hybridity. Given that the subgenre is active and sprawling as we write, it is understandable why we could not provide a more detailed quantitative research on it.

### *The Novel of Memory under the Communist Regime*

For the purpose of this discussion, one should note that Romanian communism is not a culturally and politically homogeneous period. There are times of pressure and times of detente, rough beginnings (the first communist government in 1945; the proclamation of the Republic and the ousting of king Michael I in 1947; the political repression of the 1950s), moments of apparent “thaw” that quickly return to freezing again (1953; 1956; 1958), and long decades of self-congratulatory dominance over any form of dissidence (1965–1989, the Nicolae Ceaușescu years). Also, the dynamics of the literary field is ever changing, with the literati first competing politically for positions of institutional authority, and later weaponizing

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<sup>26</sup> Still, attempts to gather exhaustive data for this timeframe are in progress. See Andrei Terian, “Big Numbers. A Quantitative Analysis of the Development of the Novel in Romania”, *Transylvanian Review*, 28, 2019, 1, pp. 55-71.

<sup>27</sup> With a few exceptions located mainly in the traumatic memory novel category.

aesthetic performance in the service of either political immunity or active opposition. While in Spain a first wave of memory novels manifests itself at the beginning of the 1960s with the generation of the so-called social realists, we can speak of such a wave in Romania toward the end of the next decade. Taking advantage of the cultural liberalization brought about in 1965 by the change of guard at the helm of the Communist Party<sup>28</sup>, many writers turned to what began to be called, euphemistically, “novels of the obsessive decade”<sup>29</sup>. The novel of the “obsessive decade” was a local version of the political novel that helped exorcise the demons of early communism without in any way stirring its current demons. It dealt with the half-acknowledged political crimes perpetrated after the war and in the 1950s by the communist chiefs in their initial reckless and vengeful exercises of power, but it had to handle past histories with increased precaution, given the politically sensitive nature of the subject<sup>30</sup>. We do not recognize all such novels as novels of memory because many of them are absorbed by moral reflection of a disingenuous nature, or by considerations about “power”, without giving much thought to the processes of remembering and forgetting, or to the collective identity that is formed through shared remembrance.

However, the Romanian novel of memory in communism grew in the shadow of the “obsessive-decade” novels, especially since the 1950s presented the kind of generational trauma needed for a memory boost to take place<sup>31</sup>. Paul Goma, a champion of the opposition to the dictatorship, published in 1981, while in exile, his novel *Patimile după Pitești* [*The Passion of Pitești*] illustrating the horrors of a torture episode in Pitești political prison in the 1950s, by using split identities,

<sup>28</sup> Eugen Negrici, *Literatură română sub comunism* [*Romanian Literature under Communism*], 3<sup>rd</sup> revised and completed edition, Iași, Polirom, 2019, p. 266.

<sup>29</sup> The phrase was borrowed from an essay by Marin Preda (“Obsedantul deceniu” [“The Obsessive Decade”], *Luceafărul*, 1970, 23, pp. 1, 3), himself one of the main representatives of this local subgenre.

<sup>30</sup> Some of the most remarkable novels of the “obsessive decade” are, in almost all critical accounts, Marin Preda’s *Intrusul* [*The Intruder*] (1969), Dumitru Radu Popescu’s *F [F]* (1969) and *Vânătoare regală* [*A Royal Hunt*] (1973), Alexandru Ivasiuc’s *Păsările* [*The Birds*] (1970), Augustin Buzura’s *Fețele tăcerii* [*The Faces of Silence*] (1974), Constantin Țoiu’s *Galeria cu viță sălbatică* [*The Wild Grapevine Gallery*] (1976). But even authors obedient to the regime wrote “obsessive-decade” novels in a complacent vein, adding some sort of love story background to a trip down memory lane made by a former party activist: see Corneliu Leu’s *Patriarhii* [*The Patriarchs*] (1979), Corneliu Sturzu’s *Ianus* [*Janus*] (1983), or Grigore Zanc’s *Cădere liberă* [*Free Fall*] (1976).

<sup>31</sup> The novel of memory should also be distinguished from the psychological novel that happens to focus on remembering. Examples are books written by minor authors, usually indexed by the DCRR and DCRR 1990–2000 as “novels of affective memory”. They all lack the necessary preoccupation with collective identity in our subgenre. This is the case with novels that present characters with some kind of cognitive and neurological impairment: Anda Raicu, *Fiul luminii* [*The Son of Light*] (1983), Diana Turconi, *Legăți-vă centurile de siguranță* [*Fasten Your Seatbelts*] (1988), Traian Liviu Birăescu, *Pomul cunoașterii* [*The Tree of Knowledge*] (1983), Florin Bănescu, *Tangaj* [*Pitching*] (1980); or with sentimental novels that dwell on past events, for example Ștefan Damian, *Pisica de Eritreea* [*The Eritrean Cat*] (1986) and Alex Rudeanu, *Corabia de piatră* [*The Stone Boat*] (1988).

playing with the narrative voice in a manner typical of the subgenre and professing a durable commitment to memory: “memory, our mother and protector (as much as she can), memory, our mother, our savior”<sup>32</sup>. A novel in essay form about the artistic education of a young man in the 1950s is Norman Manea’s *Anii de ucenicie ai lui August Prostul* [*August the Clown’s Years of Apprenticeship*] (1980), which subversively mixes diary entries and paper clips from newspapers to render the confrontation between individual formation and public lies. A masterpiece of the subgenre is Gabriela Adameşteanu’s *Dimineaţa pierdută* [*Wasted Morning*] (1984), a generational novel that connects the trauma of losing the first part of the First World War by Romania in the autumn of 1916 and that of persecution in the first decade of the communist regime, and makes the high-class memories of Ivona Scarlat, filled with considerations on temporality and family life dysfunctions, intersect dialogically with those of Vica Delcă, the stronger, funny and sturdy working-class woman who comes to comfort her former employer. But we also have to include here Sorin Titel’s *Melancolie* [*Melancholy*] (1988), the semi-autobiographical coda to a great novelistic work dedicated to nostalgic family memory, now focusing on the moral pain and confusion of a student from the 1950s, expelled from school for political reasons. And, of course, mention must be made of Mircea Nedelciu’s *Zmeura de câmpie* [*The Field Raspberry*] (1988), subtitled “a novel against memory”, theorizing the need to cut off roots and live in the present, but making its heroes orphans with an interest in etymology, that is, personally invested in searching the past to find out causes and sources for the present-day situation.

*Post-communism: Traumatic, (N)ostalgic, Agonistic*

While novels of memory written before 1989 faced censorship and even repression and therefore had to use complicated plot and contorted diegesis, after the fall of communism such challenges disappeared. Still, such novels had to compete with the ample “memory wave” that swept the 1990s, including mostly memoirs by prominent victims of the communist regime giving testimony on violence, torture and abuse at the hands of the state. At the same time, the muted memory of the Holocaust came to life, especially the participation to the extermination of Jews by the Romanian state throughout Ion Antonescu’s military dictatorship (1940–1944). The co-presence of these two different slices of national memory supplementary hindered the possibility of constructing a unified national mythology of memory, so one of the main “memory battles” of the 1990s was fought, as some could only see these memories in competition with each other. This is why memory novels in post-communism had to adopt a hermeneutic, analytical and comparative disposition, since the past at their disposal seemed more

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<sup>32</sup> Paul Goma, *Patimile după Piteşti* [*The Passion of Piteşti*], Bucureşti, Cartea Românească, 1990, p. 5.

complex than might have been assumed. As a result, by contrast to the Spanish case, where the novel of memory has a well-delimited historical referent, the Romanian novel of memory should not be restricted to the so-called novel of communism.

In *Table 1* we have distinguished between three categories of novels in post-communism, namely *traumatic memory novels*, *(n)ostalgic memory novels*, and *agonistic memory novels*.

TRAUMATIC MEMORY NOVELS	(N)OSTALGIC MEMORY NOVELS	AGONISTIC MEMORY NOVELS
Teohar Mihadaș, <i>Pe muntele Ebal</i> (1990)	Ovidiu Verdeș, <i>Muzici și faze</i> (2000)	Norman Manea, <i>Întoarcerea huliganului</i> (2003)
Paul Goma, <i>Din Calidor. O copilărie basarabeană</i> (1990)	Ștefan Baștovoi, <i>Iepurii nu mor</i> (2000)	Ioan T. Morar, <i>Lindenfeld</i> (2005)
Mircea Nedelciu, <i>Zodia scafandrului</i> (2003)	Mircea Cărtărescu, <i>Orbitor II. Corpul</i> (2002)	Filip Florian, <i>Degete mici</i> (2005)
Gabriel Chifu, <i>Visul copilului care pășește pe zăpadă fără să lase urme</i> (2004)	Filip și Matei Florian, <i>Băiușei</i> (2006)	Gabriela Adameșteanu, <i>Întâlnirea</i> (2007)
Doina Ruști, <i>Fantoma din moară</i> (2008)	Iulian Ciocan, <i>Înainte să moară Brejnev</i> (2007)	Norman Manea, <i>Vizuina</i> (2009)
Varujan Vosganian, <i>Cartea șoptelor</i> (2009)	Dan Lungu, <i>Sînt o babă comunistă!</i> (2007)	Lucian Dan Teodorovici, <i>Matei Brunul</i> (2011)
Alexandru Vlad, <i>Ploile amare</i> (2011)	Radu Pavel Gheo, <i>Noapte bună, copii!</i> (2010)	Cătălin Mihuleac, <i>America de peste pogrom</i> (2014)
Florin Irimia, <i>O fereastră întunecată</i> (2012)	Doru Pop, <i>O telenovelă socialistă</i> (2013)	Radu Pavel Gheo, <i>Disco Titanic</i> (2016)
Filip Florian, <i>Toate bufnițele</i> (2012)	Mara Wagner, <i>În spatele blocului</i> (2017)	Daniel Vighi, <i>Trilogia Corso</i> (2018)
Ruxandra Cesereanu, <i>Un singur cer deasupra lor</i> (2013)	Alina Nelega, <i>Ca și cum nimic nu s-ar fi întâmplat</i> (2019)	Alexandru Potcoavă, <i>Viața și opiniile unui Halle</i> (2019)
Adrian Alui Gheorghe, <i>Urma</i> (2013)	Diana Bădica, <i>Părinți</i> (2019)	Lavinia Braniște, <i>Sonia ridică mâna</i> (2019)
Varujan Vosganian, <i>Copiii războiului</i> (2016)		Simona Sora, <i>Complezență. Înălțarea la ortopedie. Musafir pe viață</i> (2020)
Nicolae Avram, <i>Mame</i> (2016)		
Diana Adamek, <i>Adio, Margot</i> (2017)		
Viorica Răduță, <i>Orașul închis</i> (2017)		
Doina Jela, <i>Efectul fluturelui</i> (2018)		
Lucia Dărămuș, <i>Convoiul mieilor</i> (2018)		
Liliana Corobca, <i>Capătul drumului</i> (2018)		
Andreea Răsuceanu, <i>O formă de viață necunoscută</i> (2018)		
Florina Ilis, <i>Cartea numerilor</i> (2018)		
Cătălin Mihuleac, <i>Deborah</i> (2019)		
Nora Iuga, <i>Hipodrom</i> (2019)		

*Table 1. The Novel of memory in post-communist Romania. A very short list*

Some preliminary observations can be made on the novels short-listed above and also on the three columns we have delineated in the frame of the subgenre. As the table above shows at first sight, the three novelistic categories largely succeed each other chronologically, and also on a generational basis, although, of course, authors from different age cohorts are present in all three novelistic subgroups. Before proceeding to a narrower presentation of the three novelistic branches, we should emphasize that the various traits regarding the main theme, plot and narrative mode we used to exemplify the range of the three categories are not necessarily cumulative, nor limited to just one of the categories. Rather they migrate for one subgroup of novels to another, are taken up critically, reinterpreted and recycled intertextually. It is precisely for this reason that the demarcation lines between the three subgroups are extremely thin, even blurry.

There is no surprise that the first category, *traumatic memory novels*, amasses a number of novels equal to the other two subgroups (the (n)ostalgic and the agonistic), since this sub-subgenre emerged first, in the early 1990s. Traumatic memory novels usually refer to collective tragedies and focus not on the individual, but on entire categories of victims of a dramatic situation. These novels highlight a real event that they either narrate directly or indicate unmistakably by their allegorical treatment. Many of them are anticomunist novels, either because of the inevitable political positioning of the author-protagonist as victim of the regime, or through the strong personal conviction of the monographer.

The severity of trauma requires commitment, so the *testimonial* quality of an entire line of such novels is reflected by their autobiographical nature (Teohar Mihadaş, *On the Mountain of Ebal*, and Paul Goma, *The Calidor*).

Next to testimonial novels, there are *documentary novels*, such as Ruxandra Cesereanu's *A Single Sky above Them* or Viorica Răduță's *The Imprisoned City*, but also Lucia Dărămuş's *The Lambs' Convoy* and Liliana Corobca's *The End of the Journey*. They imply the passing of a duty of memory onto the survivors or next-generation descendants, which may be assumed by writers with a stronger sense of historic responsibility.

Thirdly, there are *allegorical novels* such as Mircea Nedelciu's *The Sign of the Diver*, Alexandru Vlad's *The Bitter Rains*, Florin Irimia's *A Dark Window*, and Varujan Vosganian's *Children of the War*. Here, a collective trauma (the 1941 anti-Semitic pogroms, the birth of bastard children after the war, or the psychological pressure of dealing with menacing figures of authority) is taken on by a contemporary writer, who uses the hazy referentiality of allegory (outstanding fantastic elements, unreliable narration) as a means of indicating the fictional status, unmistakable given the distance in time.

Nicolae Avram's *Mamé* has a special status, as it has a testimonial value, justified by the author's personal experience as a resident of the derelict, overcrowded, abusive orphanages in the 1970s–1980s, and also an allegorical profile, constructed through metaphor, poetic style, and temporal ambiguity. We concluded that the allegorical component is more prominent, as it serves the

function of exploring horror without exploiting sentiment, something that belongs more to the province of the testimonial and documentary novels of trauma. A particular line of traumatic memory novels deals with post-memory<sup>33</sup>, as trauma is passed down in the family or inherited by means of voluntary affiliation.

Sometimes a contemporary writer would appropriate and rework an individual or family trauma. This is what happens in Doina Ruști's *The Phantom in the Mill* or in Nora Iuga's *Hippodrome*, but probably the most compelling case of memory being assumed later in the line and responsibly conveyed by descendants is Vosgianian's *The Book of Whispers*, which describes the Armenian genocide and the plight of Armenians in the Diaspora, especially in communist Romania after 1945. The author makes use of a plethora of techniques, invoking personal biography, commenting on photographs and, most of all, maintaining a dialogue with the elders of the family whereby their memory is kept alive. The particularity of the post-memory discourse is its fleeting quality, its lack of authority, supplanted by an emphasis on senses, as well as documentary memory props, which Vosgianian provides abundantly. Also, the intersectionality of a collective trauma of the magnitude of the Armenian genocide spans continents and contributes, in the end, to a global reach of memory by means of an affiliative memory no longer restricted to the national tribe<sup>34</sup>.

While traumatic memory novels were the first to spring up after 1989, often through means of semi-autobiographic narratives by former victims of persecution, the (n)ostalgic memory novels took longer to present themselves as a well-defined category that requires attention. They are generally published after the year 2000 by a new generation of authors who spent their childhood and adolescence in late communism, which is also their main thematic focus. By referring to the daily life under communism of anonymous people, these authors seek to challenge the idea that everything then was "tainted" and the lives of the commoners, impregnated as they were by the ubiquity of communist symbols, needed increased political scrutiny to reach deliverance. Indeed, this Romanian wave of rejection directed against the anticommunist discourse of the 1990s was echoing a widespread feeling in post-communist societies, canonized through a German portmanteau word: "Ostalgie", or the feeling of nostalgia toward the communist times (and, in Germany, toward the former German Democratic Republic, "Ost Deutschland"), when for many life was simpler than in the troublesome transition period. Taken up in German novels such as Thomas Brussig's *On the Shorter End of Sun Avenue* (1999) or films like Wolfgang Becker's *Good Bye, Lenin!* (2003), (n)ostalgia – as we decided to call it – was a daring aesthetic proposition, but also a critique of the anticommunist discourse that was used to make dissenters from the triumphalist

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<sup>33</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2012, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup> Andreea Mironescu, "Quiet Voices, Faded Photographs. Remembering the Armenian Genocide in Varujan Vosgianian's 'The Book of Whispers'", *Slovo*, 29, 2017, 2, pp. 20-39.

discourse of free-market capitalism feel guilty for clinging to a condemned past. But the growing mass of dissenters, and probably also the quality of the artistic reflection on the phenomenon in these years led to the conceptualization of “post-communist nostalgia” as the reverse of post-communist trauma, although in some of the novels discussed above nostalgia and trauma are strictly imbricated<sup>35</sup>.

It is noteworthy that (n)ostalgic memory novels are experiential in nature and that they often assume an auto-fictional character or otherwise play with the limits of (auto)biographical discourse, as it happens with Radu Pavel Gheo’s *Good Night, Children!*. For most of the novels in this category, humor is the guarantee of an unprejudiced approach to the past, refusing to forge idols from figures of memory, no matter how impressive these are. One recurring device is the unreliable narrator, usually a child positioned as the reflector of the story, which also helps the novel acquire the inquisitive, fresh, ethical perspective of somebody who doesn’t understand compromise. The *naivety*, the wide-eyed curiosity of the narrator is a guarantee of sincerity and a strong comic device in Ovidiu Verdeș’s *Musics and Antics*, Filip and Matei Florian’s *The Baiut Alley Lads*, or Mara Wagner’s *Behind the Apartment Building*. Probably the key (n)ostalgic memory novel in Romania is Dan Lungu’s *I’m an Old Communist Biddie!*, based on the real life story of a working woman who remembers her youth in the 1970s and 1980s. Through the figure of Emilia Apostoaie, the author pleads for the necessity to illustrate the plight of unhappy characters that were refused even the status of victims at a time so enthusiastic for change that it ignored all those left behind.

While humor is characteristic for many of the artistic products included in this novelistic subgroup, there is also a feeling of loss and pain in (n)ostalgia which allows for a more introspective dimension, sometimes accommodating personal trauma in political history, as in Alina Nelega’s *As if Nothing Had Happened* and Diana Bădica’s *Parents*. In these novels, one may speak of an *interpretative* type of memory that delivers not just the contents of remembrance, but also reflections on false self-representations, on hidden personal motivations behind politically influential collective representations and on the life-changing importance of the peculiar, the quirky and the idiosyncratic. The feminine condition in a totalitarian society which ignores its own misogyny is, because of that, even more heartbreaking.

This introspective trend in (n)ostalgic memory novels may turn to the fantastic in order to accommodate personal trauma by transferring it to a metaphysical level, as in Mircea Cărtărescu’s *The Body*, the second volume of his acclaimed trilogy *Blinding*. Cărtărescu’s trilogy mixes in almost equal proportion elements from all three novelistic subgroups, but we chose for this article the volume which seemed to us the most autobiographic. *The Body* is also the most anecdotal book of

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<sup>35</sup> Maria Todorova, “Introduction”, in Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (eds.), *Post-communist Nostalgia*, New York, Berghahn Books, 2010, pp. 1-5.

Cărtărescu's acclaimed trilogy, following a child-hero with his songs and games, who unassumingly acquires the power to conjure up protective forces that confound the secret police, thereby prompting a mythological interpretation of history.

Traumatic and (n)ostalgic memory novels set the tone for a lively memory landscape in Romania in the 1990s and 2000s, with anticommunism and nostalgia keeping each other in check. However, starting with the first half of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new tone of memory and a new type of novel emerged. We call this the *agonistic memory novel*, following Hans Lauge Hansen's research on the Spanish memory novel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hansen invokes the 2013 work of the Belgian political theorist Chantal Mouffe on social identity. The latter tries to go beyond the aspirations nourished by European Union bureaucrats for a utopian equilibrium and maybe even synergy between adversarial memories on the continent. Instead, what she promotes is the idea of a rational contest conducted through "agonism", or respectful disagreement, and a will to cohabit the same political space, since common identities are inevitably constructed with an "other" in mind<sup>36</sup>.

Agonism might well be the political call of a (new) generation, and indeed some writers we are locating in this category are clinging to a vision of the present at the edge of time. For them, getting the past straight is not a matter of rightly constructing a common identity of all parties, something they come to believe is unachievable. As a result, they refrain from participating in memory battles, which they prefer to evade by highlighting the manipulative outlook and the constructed character of memory. Essentially, they embrace the perspective of an impassioned witness of history, a seasoned traveller through diverse cultures or a latecomer to a debate already consummated, that (s)he shares almost nothing with ideologically, and this perspective serves the agonistic position well. Several narrative modes and devices are helpful for expressing this stance toward the available past(s).

First, the *satirical* mode must be considered one of the first signs of the coming of the agonistic age. Writers around 2005 started using humor to highlight the frailty and mystifying nature of collective memory, stemming as it does from a plurality of opposing group remembrances. Of course, there exists a strong satiric vibe in other memory novels from postcommunism, particularly those in the (n)ostalgic camp, which feel obliged to contest narrations of the immediate past by harnessing the subversive force of humor. But satirical agonistic novels are usually more far-reaching in their retrospective look, and their satire foreshadows a distrust of history across several historical ages, and even a satirical outlook on history as a whole. Filip Florian, in his acclaimed *Little Fingers*, employs a mystery plot with far-reaching historical implications, by conjuring around a trove of unidentified

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<sup>36</sup> Hans Lauge Hansen, "Modes of Remembering in the Contemporary Spanish Novel", *Orbis Litterarum*, 71, 2016, 4, pp. 274-275.

bones many opposing interested parties: former communists, anticommunist activists, religious hierarchs, who want to see it confirm their identity myths. But they are all frustrated in their expectations, and this gives the narrator – an archeologist, therefore a professional of hermeneutics and “depth” – the satisfaction to celebrate his independence of thought, which guarantees his lucidity. Another novelist, Alexandru Potcoavă, in *Life and Opinions of a Certain Halle*, ventures into the much-disputed memory of the interwar period in the Banat region to see different recollections of different people with multiple ethnic backgrounds fail at the precise moment when they fall back on nationalistic mythologies.

Another perspective into an agonistic kind of memory is reached by means of *dialogism*. Some novelists, among them Gabriela Adameşteanu, Norman Manea, and Gheo, are in the habit of letting past traumas mirror each other, and thus measure up their relative amplitude. The goal of such dialogic memory mirrors is not a competition, but a study in transnational, often transcontinental solidarity. Their “multidirectional”<sup>37</sup> novels express an appetite for memory spanning a plurality of cultures, either in the course of one character’s life (as in Manea’s *The Lair*) or in people with different memory legacies intersecting, making them contextualize their own trauma (for instance, in Adameşteanu’s *The Encounter*).

Finally, there is a strong and recent direction of agonistic memory novels that are exposing a *post-ideological* stance. Novels such as *Sonia Raises Her Hand* by Lavinia Branişte or *Complacency* by Simona Sora express a distrust of both anticommunist memory and the ironical memory of the (n)ostalgics. They cautiously inspect the claims to truth of both parties and in the end reclaim the right to memory of more recent things or of personal pasts that have no connection with the formats of the previous memory modes. They flaunt a rejection of the ideology of memory itself, in that they affect disinterest toward the way in which memory constructs community, while they are actually contesting the contents, not the circuits of memory.

#### *To Conclude: Future Perspectives*

Our article is the first attempt to map the novel of memory both as a world genre and as a Romanian subgenre, drawing consistently on the theoretical grounds already established for the Spanish case. Although we worked on a rather limited list consisting of fifty memory novels published in the Romanian areal both before and after the fall of communism, we maintain that the three categories we delineated may very well function in other literatures, especially in post-communist cultures. Another important feature of this subgenre in its Romanian version is its strong transnational potential. While most critics and the main archives, among

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 11.

which DCRR and DCRR 1990–2000, restrict their area of investigation to novels published in the national areal or in Romanian, the novel of memory challenges this methodology. On the one hand, that is because many memoirs or memory novels by Romanian authors were first published abroad, in foreign translation (most notoriously those of Paul Goma). On the other hand, because important authors born in Romania and writing in languages other than Romanian, such as Aglaja Veteranyi in *Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht* [*Why Is the Child Cooking in the Polenta*] (1999), Andrei Codrescu in *Messiah* (1999), György Dragomán in *A fehér király* [*The White King*] (2005), and Herta Müller in *Atemshaukel* [*The Hunger Angel*] (2009), address topics like local communism, the Holocaust, postwar deportations to the Soviet Union and so on, and in this way participate in the same “Romanian” memory continuum. In their novels one finds the same historical mix filtered by the same critical and self-critical memory, with temporal and narrative identity games. This goes to show that the novel of memory subgenre goes beyond the linguistic margins of a particular literature, demonstrating the fluidity and permeability of these borders.

In an article about memory, it might be interesting to wonder what the future might hold in store for the subgenre we discussed. A phenomenon that can already be noticed is the shrinking of the testimonial variety of the traumatic novel, caused by the authors’ passing, and the growth of the novel of post-memory. The (n)ostalgic novel of memory is also a generational novel and it is only sensible that it too, in time, will wither. Given that it seems to be so much connected to a specific generation whose members were the last to experience childhood under communism, the emergence of newer generations born after communism, for whom that period is history, and not a part of their affective memory, post-communist (n)ostalgia will probably lose its literary attractiveness. Finally, we predict that agonistic memory novels will gain momentum in the next decade, provided that other memory waves wash over them and make them history.

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THE NOVEL OF MEMORY AS WORLD GENRE. EXPLORING THE  
ROMANIAN CASE

*(Abstract)*

In the last four decades, the novel of memory has gained momentum on the world scene, taking advantage of the collapse of colonial and/ or dictatorial regimes around the globe. Romania was not an exception, so after the fall of Communism in 1989, and more prominently at the beginning of the new millennium, this subgenre blossomed. Based on quantitative and qualitative research of a selection of fifty novels published in the Romanian space both before and after the fall of the communist regime, this article is the first attempt to map the Romanian novel of memory from a genre-based perspective. Our approach follows the evolution of the novel of memory in the course of four decades, from a thematic, formal, and generational perspective. Relying on these operators, as well as on the culturalist approach to literature in memory studies, we distinguish between a traumatic, a (n)ostalgic and an agonistic novel of memory.

*Keywords:* novel of memory, world genre, national subgenres, traumatic memory, (n)ostalgia.

ROMANUL MEMORIEI CA GEN MONDIAL. O EXPLORARE A  
CAZULUI ROMÂNESC

*(Rezumat)*

În ultimele patru decenii, romanul memoriei s-a impus pe scena globală, în parte și datorită căderii unor regimuri politice coloniale și/sau dictatoriale. România nu reprezintă o excepție în acest scenariu, prin urmare, după prăbușirea comunismului în 1989, dar în special odată cu debutul noului mileniu, acest subgen a erupt în arena publică. Având la bază o analiză cantitativă și calitativă pe marginea unei selecții de 50 de romane publicate în spațiul românesc atât înainte, cât și după înlăturarea regimului comunist, acest articol reprezintă o primă încercare de a cartografia romanul memoriei dintr-o perspectivă centrată pe genul literar. Abordarea noastră urmărește evoluția romanului memoriei pe parcursul a patru decenii, sub aspect tematic, formal și generațional. Îmbinând acești operatori cu abordarea culturalistă a literaturii din câmpul studiilor despre memorie, propunem trei categorii în interiorul subgenului: romanul memoriei traumatice, romanul memoriei (n)ostalgice și cel al memoriei agonistice.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* romanul memoriei, gen literar mondial, subgen national, memorie traumatică, (n)ostalgie.