

LAURA PAVEL

A FICTIONALIST OF THE 1960s–70s – THE “TOTAL” NOVELIST

Nowhere else, perhaps, has the broad modernist definition of “aesthetics as anthropology” found a more vivid social illustration than in Communist Romania of the 1970s and 80s. In any case, nowhere in the European Communist East has there been such a widespread propensity towards aesthetics.

Mircea Martin, “Despre estetismul socialist”
[“On Socialist Aestheticism”]¹

This “superiority” of fiction in relation to reality explains the existence, in Romania and in the East, of a phenomenon that has, in the meantime, disappeared in the West: the writer’s role as a master of thought. While in the West it is journalists and politicians who question social reality and create public opinion, in the East the writer does so within the sealed, yet widely admired and discussed world of his fictional text.

Sorin Alexandrescu, “O cultură a interstițiului”
[“A Culture of Interstice”]²

A Theoretical Narrative

In the 1960s, as the literary ideologists of socialist realism in Romania were becoming less and less vocal, and as liberalizing discourse was gaining momentum, some of the canonical novelists appreciated by the public and critics alike acquired a privileged social and aesthetic position. Addressing such a position, various theories that emerged were meant to go hand in hand with some fictional texts and explain them, but also to promote the writers’ prestige, their “aura”, to perpetuate a form of – largely, albeit not exclusively – aesthetic power. The *total novel* was one such theoretical narrative, circumscribed to a literary genre and to a form of public recognizability associated with it. Although it had a considerable semantic span, which apparently sanctioned its wide applicability, the notion was used to refer to novels that were published, by and large, in the 1960s

¹ Mircea Martin, “Despre estetismul socialist” [“On Socialist Aestheticism”], *România literară*, 2004, 23, p. 19.

² See Sorin Alexandrescu, “O cultură a interstițiului” [“A Culture of Interstice”], in *Identitate în ruptură. Mentalități românești postbelice* [Identity in Fracture. Post-war Romanian Mentalities]. Translations by Mirela Adăscăliței, Sorin Alexandrescu and Șerban Angheliescu, București, Univers, 2000, p. 196.

and 1970s, after the dogmatic years of socialist realism. Some of the critics who invoked the notion of *total novel* were Lucian Raicu, Nicolae Balotă, Eugen Simion, and some of the novelists who accepted its relevance to their literary works were Marin Preda, Nicolae Breban, George Bălăiță and Constantin Țoiu. The term itself is fundamentally ambivalent: it partly endorses the idea of aesthetic autonomy, appearing to refer to a dedogmatized fictional formula, untouched by realist-socialist ideology. On the other hand, the ambition of totality comes from a bovarist willingness to acquire discursive power not entirely aesthetic in nature, to acquire a powerful position in the community and, broadly speaking, in society, and thus to challenge the political decision-maker's position of control.

An analysis of this theory dating back to the 1970s, and of some rhetorical and characterological construction strategies from self-entitled "total" novels, can be made today through a recuperative type of critical approach. This will combine an essentially "suspicious" ideological stance towards the discourse of power associated with this aesthetic phenomenon with a reconstructive, aestheticizing tactic (in the relatively recent sense of the post-critical "new aestheticism").

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In an article published in *România literară* in 1968, entitled "Romanul total" ["The Total Novel"], Lucian Raicu includes under this canonical, prestige-conferring umbrella four novels that were published that year: *Animale bolnave* [Sick Animals] by Nicolae Breban, *Îngerul a strigat* [The Angel Cried Out] by Fănuș Neagu, *Intrusul* [The Intruder] by Marin Preda and *Ce mult te-am iubit* [How Much I Loved You] by Zaharia Stancu. What these novels had in common was, according to Raicu, "a convergence of attempts, a solidarity of effort and a one-sided, obsessive creative ambition (that of producing the literature of the century) to reach an essential, irradiating core of the human condition, of human nature". What was, therefore, fascinating to both the critics and the novelists themselves was a universalistic perspective on canonical humanity, on a general human essence ("core") that the contemporary novel encompassed as an aesthetic and moral necessity: "Whichever point of reading we find ourselves in, the perspective that opens up to us includes a homogeneously oriented totality. The novelist lures us into the pathetic quest for a universal "key" that will allow him free access to wherever life is to be found"³.

Ion Simuț made a short genealogical foray into the idea of the Romanian total novel in issue no. 513 of the *Cultura* magazine dated May 1, 2015, in the article called *George Bălăiță – 80. Proiectul romanului total* [George Bălăiță – 80. The Total Novel Project]. Here, the critic highlighted the importance of the fact that, in 1968, R.M. Albérès's *The History of Modern Novel* was published, translated by Leonid Dimov and with a theoretical foreword written by Nicolae Balotă. In his

³ Lucian Raicu, "Romanul total" ["The Total Novel"], *România literară*, 1968, 11, p. 1.

foreword to the Romanian version of Albérès’s book, entitled “Marginalii la o istorie a romanului modern [“Marginal Notes on a History of the Modern Novel”], Nicolae Balotă analysed “the intention of the novel to embrace everything, to become a sum total”. It emphasized the “cosmotic propensity” of the narrative genre. The novels of modern authors such as Faulkner, Kafka or Beckett no longer revolved around social entities but around ontological entities, argued Balotă, the modern narrative conveying thus the “essentiality of Being”⁴. Ion Simuț remarked that “liberation from dogmatism made possible this theoretical fantasy, which imagined the possibility of a novel with no thematic and narrative constraints”⁵.

But what, apart from the natural desire to dedogmatize the novel, is the explanation for this theoretical obsession? It appears to have become a personal myth for several novelists and critics in the 1970s, shared within the microcommunity of writers who had newly emerged from the ideological coercion of Stalinism and of the Jdanovist cultural doctrine. However, the idea of novelistic totality cannot be perfectly explained in terms of the willingness of some authors (and the critics who validated their aesthetics) to include a broad thematic sphere and a variety of typologies in their writing.

The prestige enshrined in the epithet “total” was justified only up to a point by the vocation for building a large-scale narrative, by the relevance of the plot, by the consistency of the theme, or by the solidity of the characters in which archetypal human categories are reflected. Achieving narrative totality is an ambition that goes beyond the sphere of aesthetics or, more precisely, the limited sphere of artistic, literary projects. An interpretation of the idea of totality will, therefore, entail not only finding arguments pertaining to the aesthetics of the novel, but also analysing the social, communal position developed by the novelist who aspires to be “total”.

The ideological and anthropological approach should supplement the narratological perspective, since the writer’s position or the novelist’s place within the literary field is defined in relation to their own texts, to their diegetic structure and stylistic options, but also in relation to their exteriority, to their social relevance, and to the possibility of assuming a role in the literary community.

Aesthetic-Ideological Ambivalence

The period between 1965 and 1975 (or rather 1978) was imbued with the cultural ideology of “socialist aestheticism,” as demonstrated by Mircea Martin in a well-known and much-quoted text. The critic used this theoretical phrase to

⁴ Nicolae Balotă, “Marginalii la o istorie a romanului modern” [“Marginal Notes on a History of the Modern Novel”], in R.M. Albérès, *Istoria romanului modern [The History of Modern Novel]*. Translated by Leonid Dimov, with a theoretical foreword by Nicolae Balotă, București, Editura Pentru Literatură Universală, 1968, p. 6.

⁵ Ion Simuț, “George Bălăiță – 80. Proiectul romanului total” [“George Bălăiță – 80. The Total Novel Project”], *Cultura*, 2015, 15, pp. 16-18.

describe a counterpoint to the doctrine of socialist realism, suggesting its aesthetic-ideological ambivalence. The phrase *socialist aestheticism* is related to the idea of “aesthetic autonomy” ostensibly cultivated at the time (in fact, this was an aesthetic ideology, a counterpart to the official one), but it also refers to the immersion of the literary in the political in such a way as to, paradoxically, emancipate the literary from prescriptive and reductionist ideological interferences. The term also implied a series of disobedience modes, or some of the writers’ tacit compliance acts with the demands of the regime: a tendency to ignore, as far as possible, contemporary reality, to resort to general human parables, to forge an escapist imaginary universe and to avoid didacticism and forms of complicity with propaganda texts. It also encompassed a moderate subversiveness and a covert, slanted criticism of the regime, which after 1965 had lost its Stalinist-Zhdanovist dogmatic intransigence allowing art and literature to assert their autonomy, provided that these forms of aesthetic “play” did not blatantly contradict the “party line”.

Theoretised by Mircea Martin, the concept of socialist aestheticism made a career in Romanian literary criticism, even when (or, maybe, especially when) it was polemically contested⁶. All in all, it has emerged as a supple and versatile instrument of historiographic and cultural anthropology. However, as Andrei Terian shows, the concept was, in fact, the creation of Serbian critic and theorist Sveta Lukić, who invoked socialist aestheticism with reference to the literature of the Eastern European socialist countries in the 1960s-70s, when they had largely shed the doctrine of socialist realism⁷. Moreover, Terian proposes another concept that could more adequately describe the literary paradigm in Romania (and in other Eastern European countries) in the period from 1960/1965 to 1980, namely “socialist modernism”, arguing that it should have greater currency than those of neomodernism and socialist aestheticism. According to Andrei Terian, the concept promoted by Mircea Martin is marred by the semantic imprecision of the noun aestheticism and by the fact that it concerns any work that had a non-propagandist aesthetic stake at the time. By contrast, the phrase *socialist modernism* is relevant, first of all, for literary works deemed canonical in the 1960s-70s due to their modernist poetics. Moreover, the concept is coterminous with the typically modernist “ideology of progress”:

Romanian literary criticism of the 1960s and 1970s did not canonize all literary works, limiting this privilege to those works that followed the characteristic patterns of modernist poetics. Secondly, this is not only a matter of form, but also of ideology: specifically, the ideology of progress and of the succession of generations that lies at

⁶ See also Cosmin Borza, “Trei concepte ‘socialiste’: realismul, postmodernismul, estetismul” [“Three ‘Socialist’ Concepts: Realism, Postmodernism, Aestheticism”], *Caietele Sextil Pușcariu*, 2015, II, pp. 535-541.

⁷ Andrei Terian, “Socialist Modernism as Compromise: A Study of the Romanian Literary System”, *Primerjalna književnost*, 42, 2019, 1, pp. 133-147.

the very heart of the definition of modernism, of which aestheticism makes no mention⁸.

Given the specific alliance between form and its ideological function and considering the “Jamesonian” meaning of the “logic” shared by late modernism and socialist modernism, the latter can be seen, as Terian argues, as a “variant of late modernism”⁹.

Still, to Mircea Martin the concept of *socialist aestheticism* carries anthropological weight and is not relevant only as artistic ideology emancipated from the propaganda of the times. In the period from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, it was less important (and, perhaps, impossible) for the supporters of aesthetic autonomy to separate the artistic from the ideological. What mattered was to embrace writing assumed as an existential solution. Besides, such an attitude is associated with a manner of moulding both one’s artistic, authorial existence, but also one’s everyday life, however banal it may be, in keeping with some aesthetic patterns and attitudes (I referred more broadly to some of these aesthetic patterns transferred as modes of being into day-to-day life in the chapter dedicated to the local literary-artistic bohemian ethos of the 1960–70s):

By avoiding political engagement in his literature (and, less often, his own political engagement), the Romanian writer accepted a form of existential commitment premised on the understanding that writing itself was existence. This meant, without a doubt, that writing, art, and literature were taken very seriously, but also that life itself could (essentially) be given aesthetic meaning. The aesthetic that becomes a mode of existence is not so much a way of living literature, as of living life according to the model of literature, of actually living in an alternative world¹⁰.

In addition, the importance of the national criterion grew in the party’s ideological documents of the early 1960s, including in those related to culture, at the expense of the class criterion. Writers could now discover an opportunity for expanding their stylistic repertoire and their freedom of imaginative creation. Therefore, emphasis was laid on criteria of competitiveness and creative emulation within the aesthetic field, once this was seen as representative for national literature and culture:

By establishing a national form of representation (rather than a social, class-bound one), a different competition was launched, regulated by criteria that all those inside a specific field knew they had to obey: while the ideological demands (institutionally imposed and controlled) had been felt as constraints, the aesthetic requirement was accepted naturally¹¹.

At the same time, while the revival of the idea of national culture offered a

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 44-45.

¹⁰ Mircea Martin, “Despre estetismul socialist”, p. 19.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

framework for the (re)professionalization of authorship, the thesis of artistic autonomy became, as Claudiu Turcuș shows, an appealing ideology from an ethical perspective, as well as a form of micropolitics about the right to privacy:

Thus, besides the aesthetic justification of the world Martin talks about, we could say that the post-war Romanian novel was driven both by a political aspiration and by an existential project. Socialist aestheticism turned, at one point, into an ethical ideology, the plea for the autonomy of art being, in fact, a plea for a social and private life¹².

This is the ideological-aesthetic context in which it is worth discussing whether the notion of *total novelist*, derived from that of *total novel*, can be relevant to the analysis of the authors' self-image in the national-socialist era, to self-insertion into their own fictions, and even to the expansion of the field of fiction into social molecules that outgrew the community of artists and writers.

Socialist Fictionalism

The author who proposes himself as a *total novelist* resorts to a series of fictionalizing strategies, so to speak, which are identifiable both within the literary text and outside it, in the common ideology of literary life, in the aestheticization of everyday rhythms and in the construction of his self-image. In order to unravel the pattern used by Romanian writers in the 1970s to construct the myth of the total novel and to nourish the phantasm of becoming a total novelist, I will use the ideological reading grid of art critic and aesthetics professor Boris Groys. Referring to the postutopian Soviet art and literature (*soț-art*) of the 1970-80s, Groys passes a demystifying verdict on how the artist could see his own social position in relation to the politician:

The artist could detect an *alter ego* in the Soviet leaders who aimed to change the world – or at least their own country – according to a total artistic plan; he could inevitably notice a specific complicity with whatever oppressed and rejected him and could see that his own inspiration, and soulless power, sprang from common roots¹³.

On the other hand, a landmark for discussing the writers' fascination for *totality* can be found in Jérôme Meizoz' literary anthropological perspective, as outlined in *Postures littéraires*¹⁴ and in *La Fabrique des singularités*¹⁵. Meizoz' use of the notion of authorial posture has the advantage of transcending the old dichotomy between intra- and extratextual approaches, as the Swiss novelist and

¹² Claudiu Turcuș, *Împotriva memoriei. De la estetismul socialist la noul cinema românesc* [Against Memory. From Socialist Aestheticism to the New Romanian Cinema], Cluj-Napoca, Eikon, 2017, p. 198.

¹³ Boris Groys, *Stalin – opera de artă totală. Cultura scindată din Uniunea Sovietică* [Stalin – the Total Artwork. The Divided Culture in the Soviet Union]. Translated by Eugenia Bojoga and George State, Cluj-Napoca, Idea Design & Print, 2007, p. 11.

¹⁴ Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*, Genève, Slatkine, 2007.

¹⁵ Jérôme Meizoz, *La Fabrique des singularités. Postures littéraires*, II, Genève, Slatkine, 2011.

theorist is interested in those “conduits *énonciatives et institutionnelles*”¹⁶. Studying a posture (*une posture*) means, for Meizoz, approaching “the conduct of the writer, the ethos of the inscriber and the acts of the person”¹⁷.

A prisoner of his own phantasms of demiurgical power in and beyond the aesthetic realm, the *total* writer is the author of a kind of literature that no longer wants to be subdued, but aims to run parallel to or even become emancipated from the ideological discourse of power. Although duplicitous (and complicitous) with “whatever oppresses” him – to borrow a phrase from Groys’s interpretation of the ideologically suspicious – the *total* novelist of the period of socialist aestheticism cultivated a compensatory bovarism. Whether consciously or not, he rivalled the political decision-makers of the time and their ideological fiction.

In relation to previous periods – of the Zhdanovist doctrine¹⁸ and socialist realism – the literature of the 1970s fulfilled the authors’ phantasm of power. The nationalism and authoritarian centralism of political dictate were reflected by the centralism of the will to authorial power, a power that was all-encompassing and totalizing. The 1970s novelists mentioned so far, including Marin Preda, Nicolae Breban, Constantin Țoiu, George Bălăiță, did not approach their own fictions self-reflexively (as the authors of the 2000s would generally do), but preferred to project themselves into a conglobating “total” fiction, in a depersonalized, transubjective, or more precisely, oversubjective manner.

This type of *fiction-making* (I am using a different term from *fictionalization*, which would suggest the fictional transformation of biography) tends to extend into the author’s life, into his ways of organizing and structuring his everyday life. This results in the aestheticization of life, not in the “authenticity” of self-fictionalization. What could be called “socialist fictionalism” includes a set of such rhetorical strategies of fictional construction, but also of standards of public behaviour and expression within the literary-artistic world (even on the scene of confrontations with political decision-makers at the national Conferences of the Writers’ Union, whose last meeting allowed by the regime takes place in 1981)¹⁹. There is, in this accentuated, ostensibly escapist fictionalism, a certain dose of

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 84: “les conduites de l’écrivain, l’ethos de l’inscripteur et les actes de la personne”.

¹⁸ See, in this regard, Sanda Cordoș’s clarifications about Zhdanovist ideology in the chapter on *Rezistența în literatură* [*Resistance in Literature*] of her book *În lumea nouă* [*In the New World*], Cluj-Napoca, Dacia, 2003, p. 16: “Remaining a dominant feature of the communist period (no matter what alliances it formed along the way and what strange ideological aggregates it could be found in), Zhdanovist ideology no longer succeeded in subduing or shaping Romanian culture entirely, as it had in the 1950s. Even though (with the aforementioned exceptions from 1971) there was no explicit or open disagreement with party politics on the part of writers, they tried to evade such politics (with the exception of those who, because of blindly obeying the propaganda directives, ceased to exist artistically) and to promote in their works not the directives of power, but the universal values of art and humanity”.

¹⁹ Referring to this Conference, Norman Manea wrote about “how surprised he was to see how vigorously and frankly writers spoke about the crippled Romanian cultural life”, in *Despre clovni: dictatorul și artistul* [*On Clowns: the Dictator and the Artist*], Cluj-Napoca, Biblioteca Apostrof, 1997, p. 29.

subversiveness, but also a paradoxical agreement with the centralizing, totalizing dictates of politics.

Among such strategies that can be associated with socialist fictionalism as stated above, what is essential is the creation of seemingly autotelic fictional worlds, in accordance with the totalizing, maximalist propensity. One could go so far as to say that these novels, called total by the novelists themselves or by their critics, resort to an intense decontextualization of the narrative imaginary and of the broader, generally human “message”. Nevertheless they are often, as in the case of Marin Preda’s *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* [*The Most Beloved of Earthlings*] (1980), Constantin Ţoiu’s *Galeria cu viță sălbatică* [*A Gallery of Wild Vine*] (1976), or George Bălăiță’s *Lumea în două zile* [*The World in Two Days*] (1975), also political novels of the “haunting decade”, because they critically render or allegorically transfigure (for instance, Ţoiu and Bălăiță) the Stalinist period of the 1950s. In Constantin Ţoiu’s *Galeria cu viță sălbatică*, for example, some characters espouse a universalist, essentialist philosophical vision (Chiril Merișor himself, or Isac, or the collective character that is mildly ironically called “The team we travel through life with”), and do not criticize the ideological excesses of the Stalinist era. However, subversiveness strategies²⁰ are used to build characters and narrative situations of timeless, archetypal validity. The inner alchemy of Chiril, the suicidal man in Ţoiu’s novel, and the metonymic shift of meaning between the fictional present and the present in which the novel is written can only partly be read as subtle ways of demystifying the ideological manipulation of the 1950s.

By contrast, in terms of the sheer amount of subversiveness, *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* ranks supreme among the novels of the “haunting decade”, as Alex Goldiș shows:

Preda’s novel is the most subversive novel of this type, exhausting, to some extent, its possibilities, largely because Petrini’s critical vision of the system is not counterbalanced by the vision of the other characters, nor is it amended by the narrator’s authoritarian position²¹.

This plausible argument for considering Preda’s novel as belonging to the prose of the “haunting decade”, and in particular the fact that Victor Petrini’s perspective (and the viewpoint of the novelistic fiction itself) is not challenged by some naratorial over-perspective, can be seen as a counterargument to including *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* in the category of total novels. Since it is clearly a

²⁰ As Eugen Negrici remarks in *Literatura română sub comunism* [*Romanian Literature under Communism*], București, Editura Fundației Pro, 2003, p. 309: “Regarding the *Gallery*..., I would say that C. Ţoiu has embarked on a subversive mission of boycotting communist techniques of manipulation through oblivion, circumvention, embellishment or, more clearly, through the direct and cynical rewriting of the past. It’s his personal struggle with the Ministry of Truth”.

²¹ Alex Goldiș, “Pentru o morfologie a romanului ‘obsedantului deceniu’” [“For a Morphology of the ‘Haunting Decade’ Novel”], *Caietele Sextil Pușcariu*, 2017, III, p. 500.

subversive political novel which delves into ideological criticism, *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* seems to remain confined to its own prose formula, unable to lay claim to a “total” narrative universe with all its thematic, stylistic-discursive and naratological features. Still, at the time of its publication in 1980, Eugen Simion pleaded for including it in the canon of total novels and gave several arguments why it should be considered a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, such as its manifold registers, the coexistence of several genres, styles and discourses (political novel, romance novel, moral novel, the novel of “a great conscience”), the way in which a particular destiny, Petrini’s, became metonymic for History, and even the way it condensed an entire philosophy of history:

The Most Beloved of Earthlings, Marin Preda’s new novel, can be defined as a **total novel**. Neither a **roman-fleuve**, where the unfolding of the plot is horizontal and the chronology is quite vast, nor a **cyclical novel**, where themes and destinies are strung like beads on a thread, but a **total novel**: the novel of a destiny that assumes **history**, the novel of history that lives through a **destiny**²².

The constraining socio-political context of the era was meant to be ignored in totalizing fictional worlds, whose epic visionarism had universalistic and generalizing overtones. In the case of Marin Preda, the urge to build a transindividual, non-subjectivist narrative perspective, which also strengthened the writer’s “posture” (in the sense advocated by Jérôme Meizoz) as a *total*, omniscient artist, also appears in the nonfictional first-person discourse of his autobiographical novel *Viața ca o pradă* [*Life as a Prey*] (1977):

When I realized that nature and I had no common fate, that I would eventually disappear and it would stay, *I saw it* and started to like it not because it was beautiful, but because it would live on and, just like I was born and nurtured, for a long time, the thrill of eternity, others would be born, too, and *would see it* as I do. [...] It wasn’t until much later, when I read Tolstoy, that I realized that not only words express the human soul, but also the outside world into which it projects itself or which covers it like a veil, and so nature and the social environment in which he leads his life, the objects and animals belonging to him, even his own appearance, the mustache he grows, the clothes he wears (in a certain way) represent him, hide or express him according to the same – sometimes mysterious, at other times clear and rational – impulse underlying his utterance of words²³.

Discursive Strategies, Fictional Types

Besides the above-mentioned thematic options and narrative structure formulas, there is a number of discursive-rhetorical strategies that are specific to a

²² Eugen Simion, “Romanul total” [“The Total Novel”], *România literară*, XIII, 1980, 13, p. 10, 15. Resumed in Marin Preda, *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* [*The Most Beloved of Earthlings*], second edition. Foreword by Eugen Simion, I–III, București, Cartea Românească, 1984.

²³ See Marin Preda, *Viața ca o pradă* [*Life as a Prey*]. Foreword and curriculum vitae by Nicolae Bârna, București, 100+1 Gramar, 1999, pp. 29–31.

total novel. Mystifying discourse is one such strategy, derived from a paradoxical cult of falsehood, which is positively seen as a parody of the official ideological “truth”. For example, in *Lumea în două zile* [*The World in Two Days*] (1975) by George Bălăiță, Felicia believes that Antipa, the soothsayer of death, could ingeniously turn the truth into a lie. Antipa himself, as a dual character, hesitates between his “domestic” and infernal selves and praises the “necessary” and liberating lie as a form of tolerant truth, always adaptable and adjustable to concrete situations:

My lie takes on monstrous proportions and, given its zealous effort to defend me, I can easily get crushed. But I would tell another lie right now if I did not talk about the intense state and obscure joy, about the pleasure exuded by my lie, an impulse that I gave but that acquired a life of its own, an independent development. [...] Lying is fantasy, independence, immeasurable freedom²⁴.

When he describes his own method of narrative creation, Nicolae Breban comes close to making a eulogy of the ability to “falsify”, mystify and anamorphosize reality, much like the mannerists do. The act of fiction is based on a *false* statement, “capable of withstanding tons of real slag and surviving through time”²⁵, a statement around which slivers of reality later gather: “I could not change this angle, its slant on the real, because it was my very structure. And so I loaded it with reality, and my own world began to revolve around... this slightly tilted and false spindle”²⁶. *Deception* and *falsehood* (with affective, existential consequences) may become modes of emancipation from the lies proffered as truths by the officially proclaimed ideology. For example, the specific atmosphere of the bohemian literary-artistic life in the 1960s and 1970s, which Breban invokes in one of the best chapters in his autobiography *Viața mea* [*My Life*], was a Quixotic way of “social dreaming”, since it was used to create “real and false histories”, sometimes “real or false citations”, or even “books and false biographies”²⁷, all of these evincing, in self-ironical manner, a special kind of „imposture”. Significant, in this respect, is Paul Sucuturdean, the protagonist in Breban’s *Animale bolnave* [*Sick Animals*] – a work described by Lucian Raicu as a *total novel* in 1968 –, who reinvented his past as “a right of his own and not a truth”, according to the dictate of his own phantasms.

On the other hand, the protagonist of Matei Călinescu’s essay-novel *Viața și opiniile lui Zacharias Lichter* [*The Life and Opinions of Zacharias Lichter*] (1969)

²⁴ George Bălăiță, *Lumea în două zile* [*The World in Two Days*], third edition. Foreword by Eugen Negrici, chronology by Marilena Donea, Iași, Polirom, 2009, p. 109.

²⁵ Nicolae Breban, *Literatura, cultura este ea însăși o zonă majoră (și nu anexă) a existenței morale și sociale* (Interview by Ioan Groșan), in Aurel Sasu, Mariana Vartic (eds.), *Romanul românesc în interviuri. O istorie autobiografică* [*The Romanian Novel in Interviews. An Autobiographical History*], I, București, Minerva, 1985, p. 442.

²⁶ See Aurel Sasu, Mariana Vartic (eds.), *Romanul românesc în interviuri*, p. 431.

²⁷ Nicolae Breban, *Viața mea* [*My Life*], Iași, Polirom, 2017, p. 411.

also denounces the hypocrisy and illusions underlying social norms. To the hero, lying becomes a metaphorical, sometimes redeeming truth: “The only lucidity we are left with is that we lie constantly, that we ‘say what *is* not’ by saying anything”²⁸. I am mentioning Matei Călinescu’s micronovel as a possible contrasting landmark in relation to the typology of the total novel. In effect, *Viața și opiniile lui Zacharias Lichter* can be included, alongside *Matei Iliescu* (1970) by Radu Petrescu, in an alternative canon of Romanian prose. By contrast with fictional worlds defined by their polyphonic narrative totality, the narrative formula of these novels relies on the eccentricity and “partiality” of some atypical, idiosyncratic, seemingly non-narrative and non-representative typologies. However, the protagonist Zacharias Lichter, inspired the Bucharest bohemian Genu Ghelber (called by Cioran a “unique nothingness”), is a marginal individual who is nonetheless capable of conveying the Idea, or a certain “hard” ontological vision. Lichter, the cynical prophet, assumes a stance similar to that of the Nietzschean AntiChrist, but nevertheless less a Christian one (“I myself was *chosen* – God *chose* me – to answer for all the past, present, and future errors of my fellows”²⁹). The genuine “Zacharias Lichter psychosis” caused by Matei Călinescu’s micronovel, lasting from the year it was first published, 1969, to the year of the author’s self-exile, 1973, is the sign that fiction tended to expand its sphere of influence beyond its conventional, literary borders.

The total novel also focuses on themes associated with fictional types that can function as behavioral (anti)models which could be exported outside narrative fiction, with subversive, destabilizing and critical effects: the *prophets* of a new myth of (metaphysical rather than political) power and their position as *masters* who create disciples, even without engaging in overt acts of proselytism, as in the case of the characters Grobei and Farca in Nicolae Breban’s *Bunavestire* [*The Annunciation*] (1977) and of Antipa in George Bălăiță’s *Lumea în două zile* (1975); the *self-destructive*, the suicidals who are averse to moral ambiguity, such as Chiril Merișor in Constantin Țoiu’s *Galeria cu viță sălbatică* (1976); the *losers*, whose failure (psychosocial or erotic) carries an aura of heroism, like Victor Petrini in *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*, who undermines the authorities of the “era of villains” (the title of an essay Petrini writes), or like Ovidiu Minda in Breban’s *Îngerul de gips* [*The Gypsum Angel*] (1973), who socially fails of his own accord and whose existence defies and hijacks the mechanisms of social power; *ambivalent figures*, serene Apollonians one moment, demonic the next, like Antipas in Bălăiță’s *Lumea în două zile*, or Grobei, a dual character, the “first” Grobei being a humble, mediocre specialist in commodities, while the “second” is a man who is “possessed” by his Idea, a mythographer, as he appears at the end of the novel; the prototype of the *failed new man*, derailed from his “mission”, like Călin

²⁸ Matei Călinescu, *Viața și opiniile lui Zacharias Lichter* [*The Life and Opinions of Zacharias Lichter*], București, Humanitas, 2016, p. 134.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

Surupăceanu in Marin Preda's *Intrusul* [*The Intruder*] (1968); later, the disappointed, bovarist misfits in the novels of Dana Dumitriu (which lend themselves to the definition of "total" narrative universes), *Masa zarafului* [*The Usurer's Table*] (1972) and *Întoarcerea lui Pascal* [*Pascal's Return*] (1979); the *archivers* of reality, of imagined reality nonetheless, who preserve the myths of their community: Breban's Grobei (who archives the testimonies of exemplary existence, for instance, Farca's), or Harry Brummer and Isac in Țoiu's *Galeria*....

All four novelists whose novels I have mainly referred to, Preda, Breban, Țoiu and Balăiță, enjoyed, of course, the status of celebrity writers in the 1960s and later. The author of *Moromeții* [*The Moromete Family*] became, in 1970, the director of the Cartea Românească Publishing House. In 1974 he was elected a correspondent member of the Romanian Academy, and in 1980, the year he published *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*, just a few months before his death (subject to many speculations and controversy), Preda became a deputy of the Great National Assembly. Because it re-focused attention on the problem of the "haunting decade," *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni* was considered to be so subversive that, despite the author's fame and his clear critical and public success, Preda's books were removed from bookstores and libraries shortly before his demise under mysterious circumstances (something his family hinted was connected precisely to the publication of this novelistic trilogy). Typical of the novelist's self-projection in his own fiction and of the fabrication or *fictionalization* of an aura surrounding Victor Petrini, his *alter ego*, is the irony of the title *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*, containing, as critics noticed, a rhetorical syllepsis associating literal with figurative meaning, or more precisely with false meaning, a counter-meaning, in one and the same ambiguous phrase.

As for Nicolae Breban, he has been defined by critics as a canonical author and has achieved public success. The author of *Francisca* did not embrace Stalinist ideology, nor did he make any concessions to socialist realism in his books, but in his autobiography called *Viața mea*, he admits without hypocrisy that he was *happy* during his short-lived political career under communism. In 1969 he was elected an alternative member of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. In 1971, Breban fell out of grace with the Communist authorities when he decided to attack the dogmatism of the cultural policy endorsed by the July "theses", of Maoist inspiration, and to resign from the position of editor-in-chief of the *România literară* journal. The tone of his recollections in *Viața mea* is bitter-ironic at times, since he experiences ethical dilemmas, disappointment with several iconic figures of the Parisian diaspora, with the ideological compromises and inconsistencies in the careers of fellow writers (Petru Dumitriu), as well as with his own "concessions" to his often excessive, ridiculous social posture. In fact, Breban theorizes, in the pages of the essays inside his novels, the Quixotic ridiculousness of Paul Sucuturdean, Rogulski, and Farca.

There is a strange nostalgia, but also some disappointment with the inevitable amount of *kitsch* in this record of his own existence (which also marked the

existence of those around him, be they friends or detractors). He assumed, and then immediately denounced, that *kitsch* (like the one afflicting Grobei, the mediocre commodity specialist, Lelia-Haretina Crăiniceanu, the provincial diva, and Rogulski, the charming prankster in *Don Juan*) in a way that was both self-flagellating and subversive. In *Literaturile române postbelice* [*The Post-War Romanian Literatures*], Ion Simuț classifies Breban’s texts as “subversive literature”, recalling the furious attack that Titus Popovici, the former official writer of the 1950s, launched against the novel *Bunavestire* at the 1977 Plenary of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party. However, for Breban, it is precisely the option of living inside a certain form of fiction – one that is *alive*, vibrant, transformative – which becomes a subversive way of existence, undermining mortifying platitudes and compromises. The novelist and his characters such as Castor Ionesco, in *Drumul la zid* [*Back to the Wall*], praise the living, the state of being *alive* acquired after a fundamental “break” – Breban has extensively theorized on the idea of narrative and typological *rupture* – and of self-reinvention by way of some sophisticated inner alchemy.

The total novelists reveal their obsession with self-construction and with the discovery of their calling, of a *destiny* (Breban theorizes upon the Nietzschean *amor fati*), through various forms of visionarism, but also of narrative histrionism: in the self-flagellating attitude of some of their characters, in the subtle forms of proselytism advocated by protagonists like Chiril in *Galeria cu viță sălbatică*, or Grobei in *Bunavestire*, in the mix of registers and aesthetic categories where the farcically grotesque and the tragic live side by side as in the works of George Bălăiță, in the overflowing eloquence of Breban’s characters, in the gloomy aura of a failure assumed as victory (in Preda’s Victor Petrini), in the way of acknowledging the major authors who inspired them (for Preda, these were Faulkner and Tolstoy; for Breban, Dostoevski, Thomas Mann and Nietzsche), but also in an aesthetic of stylistic excess or redundancy (Nicolae Breban, Constantin Țoiu and George Bălăiță). On the one hand, the paradox of the totalizing and ostensibly autonomous narrative is to be found in the prose writers’ need to escape political-ideological pressures and to build a horizon of autonomous aesthetic existence, structured and lived according to artistic rhythms. By sometimes living like his own characters, the total novelist ultimately offers himself as a character.

At the same time, the total writer holds on to a bovarism of power. Tempted to exercise his symbolic authority beyond the boundaries of his own texts, he resorts to discursive modes of aestheticizing and fictionalizing his exceptionalist, demiurgical phantasms. The ambivalence of fictional discourse in the total novel comes from the way in which narrative situations, fictional typologies, conflicts, narrative nodes and rhetorical formulas break down parodically and then recompose the discursive mechanisms of ideological power.

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A FICTIONALIST OF THE 1960s–70s – THE “TOTAL” NOVELIST

(Abstract)

A prisoner of his own phantasms of demiurgical power in the aesthetic realm, and not only, the total writer is the author of a kind of literature that no longer wants to be subdued, but aims to run parallel to or even become emancipated from the ideological discourse of power. Although duplicitous (and complicitous) with “what oppresses” him – if I were to sponge here a phrase from Groys’s ideologically suspicious interpretation, the total novelist from the period of socialist aestheticism cultivated a compensatory bovarism. Whether consciously or not, he rivalled the political decision-makers of the time and their ideological fiction. In relation to previous periods – of the Jdanovist doctrine and socialist realism – the literature of the 1970s fulfilled the authors’ phantasm of power. The nationalism and authoritarian centralism of political will were reflected in the centralism of the will to authorial power, a power that was all-encompassing, totalizing.

Keywords: total writer, total novel, posture, bovarism of power, socialist aestheticism, socialist fictionalism.

UN FICTIONALIST AL ANILOR '60–'70 – ROMANCIERUL „TOTAL”

(Rezumat)

Captiv al propriilor fantasme de putere demiurgică în plan estetic, și nu numai, scriitorul total este autorul unei literaturi care se vrea a nu mai fi subsumată, ci paralelă cu sau chiar emancipată în raport cu discursul ideologic al puterii. Deși duplicitar, căci complice cu „ceea ce îl oprimă” – dacă este să reiau o formulare din interpretarea ideologic-suspicioasă a lui Groys, romancierul total din perioada estetismului socialist își cultivă un bovarism de compensație. El rivalizează, conștient sau nu, cu postura decidentului politic al vremii și cu ficțiunea sa ideologică. În raport cu perioadele anterioare – a doctrinei jdanoviste și a realismului socialist –, literatura anilor '70 a împlinit o fantasmă de putere a autorilor ei, naționalismul și centralismul autoritarist al voinței politice regăsindu-se într-un centralism al voinței de putere auctoriale, atotcuprinzătoare, totalizante.

Cuvinte-cheie: scriitor total, roman total, postură, bovarism al puterii, estetism socialist, ficționarism socialist.