Magical realism and the othering of the academic in three Romanian postcommunist novels

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DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2025.17.1.6

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Academic novels. Magical realism. The *other*. Postcommunism. Romanian literature.

This article discusses three academic novels by the Romanian authors Anton Marin, Alexandru Mușina, and Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru. Their novels pertain to the third and most recent "magical realist" stage in the development of the Romanian postcommunist academic novel, coming after what I have elsewhere identified as the "realist" and "metafictional" phases. In this phase, the Romanian academic novel evinces extreme instances of othering, as academics variously morph into grotesque creatures, ranging from Kafkaesque cockroaches to mythical vampires, from stand-alone eyes to gorillas. The article explores these practices of othering with an eye to the ways they were shaped by postcommunist experience. In the process, it considers the links between postcommunism, postcolonialism, and magical realism.

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The novels to be discussed in this article, Anton Marin's *Eu, gândacul* (I, the bug, 2009), Alexandru Mușina's *Nepotul lui Dracula* (Dracula's grandson, 2012), and *Scriptor sau Cartea transformărilor admirabile* (Scriptor or the book of admirable transformations, 2017) by Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru, pertain to a recently emerged genre within Romanian literature: the academic novel. In the Anglo-American literary continuum, this genre is generally regarded as having emerged in the early 1950s on both sides of the Atlantic. One of the theorists of the genre, Jeffrey J. Williams, distinguishes between academic novels as faculty-centered and campus novels as student-centered (2012, 561–562), a distinction that has been widely adopted by other scholars. Elaine Showalter retains the criterion for the distinction, but occasionally reverts to German terminology: "*Professorromane*" and "*Bildungsromane*" (2005, 2). In Romania, the student-centered novel goes back at least to the 1930s, when several campus novels were published (Mudure 2020, 79–80).

The faculty-centered novel, however, was slower to emerge. Mihaela Mudure does not mention any pre-1990 academic novels, and only two have been previously identified (Selejan 2021, 148), both published during the communist period. One of these, Alexandru Piru's *Cearta* (The quarrel, 1969), revolves around a university professor's love affair, and the other, Andrei Brezianu's *Castelul romanului* (The novel's castle, 1981), is so densely allegorical and cryptic that a coherent interpretation of its academic elements is extremely difficult. Nonetheless, the Romanian academic novel flourished after the fall of the Iron Curtain. In his novel *The Last Hundred Days*, Patrick McGuiness briefly sums up the situation of Romanian academics under communism: "[e]x-professors haunted the university buildings, minimum-wage ghosts who dusted their old lecture rooms or polished floorboards on all fours as their ex-colleagues stepped over them. […] [I]t was in the janitorial strata of Romania's universities that you found the real intellectuals" (2013, 31). Thus, only two categories of academics existed in communist Romania: the collaborationists, whose defection came to be called "the betrayal of the intellectuals" in the postcommunist public sphere, and the uncompromising intellectuals, who either ended their lives in poverty or died in prisons across Romania after fabricated trials conducted by the *Securitate*. After the first and most oppressive decades of communism, overcoded fictions made their way into print by dodging censorship, as Cristina Șandru states: "The oasis of fiction was tolerated by the communist authorities – it was censored, but ultimately, if intricate and symbolic enough, allowed a relatively free terrain of manifestation. The dexterity in maneuvering allusion was the ticket to publication" (2012, 94). Brezianu's novel clearly falls into this category. The first overtly and recognizably academic novels were published after 1989. They were either drably realist or blatantly slapstick satires that sometimes dispensed with any attempts to use fictional names for their characters. This realist phase in the early 1990s – mid-2000s was followed by a brief period of academic metafiction from the mid-2000s to the early 2010s, which was then superseded (or rather continued) by a neighboring literary mode, i.e. magical realism, from the early 2010s to the present (Selejan 2019, 2021).

According to Christopher Warnes (2006, 488), the oxymoronic term "magical realist" dates back to circa 1798, when it was first used by the German Romantic poet Novalis in his notebooks. Novalis never got to elaborate on magical realism, as he focused on the related term "magical idealism" (488), but his insistence on *Wunderwahrheit* (magical truth) rather than *Naturwahrheit* (truth of nature; 489) prefigures the tension between "natural and supernatural, realist and fantastic" (490) in 20th-century magical realism. In the 1920s, the term resurfaced in Germany and Italy, and starting in the 1940s, it was widely used in connection to Latin American fiction. Currently, it relates to a global literary phenomenon (Warnes 2009, 6), as the term was brought to bear on postcolonial literatures by Homi K. Bhabha: "'Magical realism' after the Latin American Boom, becomes the literary language of the emergent postcolonial world" (2000, 7). Thus, magical realism is a highly malleable literary mode exhibiting a "cyclically recurring spirit as opposed to a 'historical style' frozen in time", as Kim Anderson Sasser states (2014, 2–3). According to Șandru, the East-Central European strand of magical realism – as opposed to its Latin American counterpart – favors "the playful and the intellectual over the sentimental, the magical and the archetypal" (2012, 152). The novels discussed here illustrate this argument, as they are all playfully metafictional, albeit to different extents and in different ways. They also display several elements identified by central European scholars in their analyses of the kinship between South American and central European magical realism in a 2016 issue of *World Literature Studies* journal, which unites contributions on Slovak, Serbian, Czech, Hungarian and Romanian literature: the use of genealogies and family trees, the presence of repetition, excess and the rapid pace of the storytelling (N. Tóth and Petres Csizmadia 2016, 99–100), the integration of myths and dreams and a Baroque richness of narrative details (Gvozden 2016, 68), and the regional and areal contexts of the multicultural spaces constituted by peripheral territories formerly belonging to the Habsburg monarchy (Passia 2016, 32).

Since 2012, the year that saw the publication of Bogdan Ştefănescu's *Postcommunism/Postcolonialism: Siblings of Subalternity* and Cristina Şandru's *Worlds Apart? A Postcolonial Reading of Post-1945 East-Central European Culture*, the interest in approaching Romanian postcommunist literature through the postcolonial framework has intensified. For some East-Central (and Western) European scholars, such as David Chioni Moore, Alexander Kiossev, and Monica Bottez, the postcolonial approach is appealing due to its explanatory potential with regard to postcommunism. Others resist making any link between the two or regard such a link warily, not least because postcolonialism is often perceived as "a dominant research paradigm where western high theory is applied to local material" (Tlostanova 2012, 134) or in other words, postcommunism is perceived as being "the poor relative, the *other* of postcolonialism" (Bottez et al. 2011, 235). Dobrota Pucherová and Róbert Gáfrik, on the other hand, apply the postcolonial label to Central and Eastern Europe: "*all* of Europe is postcolonial, *but* in different ways" (2015, 14, italics in the original) but use it in a qualifying and nuanced manner by identifying new theoretical vocabulary such as postcommunist Gothic, mutant coloniality, and self-colonization (13). For

the novels discussed here, Romania's postcolonial relations to the Kingdom of Hungary, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and the USSR bear limited significance, as there are sparse allusions to Romania's late medieval and early modern history of subordination (in particular in Alexandru Mușina's novel). With regard to the postcommunist period, Romania's neo-colonial (Pucherová and Gáfrik 2015, 22) link to Western Europe on the one hand and its proto-colonial (Kovačević 2008, 2) relation to the European Union (EU) on the other are highly relevant. Like other East-Central European countries, Romania is plagued by the ruthless exploitation of its "human and natural resources" by West-European investors and the phenomenon of brain-drain, while its internal colonization of ethnic minorities like the Roma (to be discussed in connection with Mușina's novel) continues (Pucherová and Gáfrik 2015, 22). Its proto-colonial relation to the EU manifests itself as a "uni-directional flow of directives and their acceptance as necessary for emancipation from economic or cultural 'inferiority'" (Kovačević 2008, 2). It is evident by now that East-Central Europe emerges as Western Europe's post-/neo-/proto-colonial *other*.

Each of the three Romanian postcommunist academic novels considered in the present article showcases a different kind of magical realism and different practices of othering. In all three novels, the Romanian academic world is presented as a microcosm,[1] a small-scale copy of Romanian postcommunist society, ridden as it is with corruption, inequality and the ideological clashes inherent in a society transitioning from communism to capitalism, as Romanians' attitudes range from nostalgia for the financial and social stability of the communist period (Todorova 2010, 5–6) to a ready and opportunistic embrace of capitalism and even comprador-like behaviors. While the fictional worlds of these novels suggest a continuity between Romanian academia and Romanian postcommunist society, they simultaneously present the academic as *other*, thereby distancing the academic world from society at large. Thus, the academic is portrayed as a Kafkaesque cockroach, a modern-day vampire, a stand-alone eye or a gorilla. In effecting this extreme form of othering, the Romanian academic novel departs from the Anglo-American bedrock of academic fiction, which comprises novels like James Hynes's *The Lecturer's Tale* (2001), in which the protagonist is temporarily endowed with an infallible power of persuasion, yet preserves all his human attributes.

The three novels discussed here are by authors coming from the three historical Principalities – Moldavia, Wallachia, and Transylvania – that became united (in 1859 and 1918, respectively) to form contemporary Romania, a relatively recent creation as countries go. Each Principality boasts a rich history of subordination to imperial powers (Transylvania to the Kingdom of Hungary and the Habsburg Empire, Wallachia to the Ottoman Empire, Moldavia to both empires just mentioned and to the Russian Empire, with occasional attacks from Poland). Thus, Anton Marin is from Wallachia, Alexandru Mușina is from Transylvania, and Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru is from Moldavia. This history of imperialism further nuances the practices of othering at work in the novels, a fact that is particularly visible in Mușina's novel, which problematizes the fact that Dracula is a product of Western European culture.

KAFKAESQUE COCKROACHES AND ANTI-ESTABLISHMENTARIANISM

Marin's novel *Eu, gândacul* is a first-person reworking of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), a masterpiece of magical realism *avant la lettre*. The former's protagonist, Dan C. Mihăilescu,[2] is a chemistry lecturer at the University of Bucharest who contemplates writing a novel about a man turned cockroach and who also muses over being turned into a cockroach himself. Eventually, he is granted both wishes: he turns into a cockroach after drinking holy water and Marin's novel reads like a metafictional, work-in-progress account of the protagonist's adventures in the insectile world. Mihăilescu almost instantly becomes the "*Șefu*'" or "boss" (2009, 59) of almost 20 million cockroaches, inmates of the University of Bucharest. The fact that the protagonist takes to calling himself "The Great Civilizing Hero – GCH for short"[3] (2009, 65) might allude both to Romania's colonial relationship to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and to its current "neo-colonial" subordination to its Western European investors and its "proto-colonial" status within the EU. The number of cockroaches roughly equals the population of Romania, suggesting that the cockroach community is a micro-representation of Romanian society. Elsewhere, the lecturer turned cockroach calls himself "el lidero maximo" (84), pointing towards the authoritarianism of a communist leader like Fidel Castro. He also compares himself to Hanibal, Caesar and Napoleon (93). In short, while leading the cockroaches, the protagonist experiments with every power structure known to humankind. Heroically, he manages to avert a catastrophe by preventing pest control from killing the entire cockroach population, but he also – rather conveniently – uses them for his own, human, ends, i.e. for purging the university of its most corrupt members by exposing their dealings. Mihăilescu manages this by communicating with his academic peers through the bodies of the cockroaches that literally write accusations on the wall for the academics to read. This is another deliberate allusion to communism, as the formations of cockroaches moving in unison evoke the massive parades that used to be organized for communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu (198). However, the protagonist seems to be impervious to communist-style megalomania, as he declares in a self-congratulatory aside, by retaining a sense of the ridiculous and a sense of proportion in spite of his notoriety and authority allegedly reaching positively stratospheric levels (186).

Characteristic of academic fiction, then, the community of cockroaches living within the University of Bucharest is seen as a microcosm of Romanian society at large. It is arguable whether this society is a utopian-communist or a "neo-colonized" capitalist one. If anything, it seems to be a hybrid, mongrelized form. The protagonist's "others" are both his fellow academics, whom he despises for their moral atrophy, and the community of cockroaches, upon whom he looks down for their lack of human intelligence. The former attitude is redolent of communism, while the latter suggests capitalist colonialism. Nonetheless, the protagonist is part of both communities, a possible allusion to the transitional, in-between, hybrid state of post-communist societies.

Given the lecturer's lack of power and authority in his initial and in his final form, i.e. as a human, his time spent as a cockroach-cum-superhero smacks of escapism, but

it also illustrates the antibureaucratic position of magical realist texts, which means, according to Wendy B. Faris, that they "use their magic against the established social order" (1995, 179). His academic integrity renders him a misfit within the academic community and, arguably, within Romanian society at large, a fact he has clearly internalized, since he is musing on becoming a cockroach in order to enjoy a quieter, simpler life. It is only from his vantage point as an insect that the protagonist can be turned into a spy, a secret observer not just of his fellow academics, but also of other characters. In this, the story differs greatly from Kafka's. The adventures of Mihăilescu the cockroach place the novel's reader in a sort of panopticon from which heavily and deliberately stereotyped people from all walks of life are seen in action: poorly qualified journalists, ruthless real estate speculators, cleaning ladies who steal, porters who drink, university professors who are bribed by students as well as politicians, nurses who traffic internal organs, etc. The author's deftness in seemingly effortlessly switching between linguistic registers is remarkable. Obscene and offensive language is alternated with elevated idioms and academic jargon (especially in the metafictional asides to the reader), with incorrect grammar as a marker of a working-class status and with untranslatable regionalisms. A special idiom is dedicated to cockroach language, which is the most ungrammatical of all. Thus, language becomes a potent othering technique in Marin's novel, which, to a higher degree than Mușina's, abounds in stereotypes.

MODERN-DAY VAMPIRES AND ANTI-EU ATTITUDES

In the same denunciatory vein, Mușina's novel *Nepotul lui Dracula* – whose title translates as "Dracula's grandson" or "Dracula's descendant" – holds up an inconvenient light to Romanian postcommunist corruption, both within and outside academia. Other processes of othering are at work in this novel, which self-reflexively recycles the transnational Dracula myth, as if "to reclaim a space of otherness by appealing to myths of difference", as Christopher Warnes argues (2009, 5). One of the academics in Mușina's novel asserts that the Dracula myth says more about its creators than it does about its object: "Dracula is their [i.e. the West's] cultural product, not ours… Anthropologically, it's a common occurrence: you project the evil in yourself onto the Other, the foreigner" (2012, 149). This statement mirrors Șandru's assertion that the Balkans have been

> the repository of the West's forbidden desires and anxieties – in Freudian terms, the unrepressed part of the continent's psychic life. Hence its association with violence, primitivism and excess (whether political-revolutionary or sexual), all traits that an "enlightened" Europe sought to drive out of its psychic constitution and project outwards, on an Other that would thus be both part of the self, and at the same time different from the self, that which the self rejects or suppresses. (2012, 36)

The protagonist of Mușina's novel is a young academic, an assistant lecturer in French literature who discovers that he is actually a vampire and a descendant of Wallachian voivode Vlad Țepeș, i.e. Vlad the Impaler, also known as Vlad Dracul, i.e. Vlad the Devil. Bram Stoker (among other British Gothic writers) superimposed his own fictional creation, Dracula the vampire, on the historical figure

of Vlad the Impaler,[4] a fact that most Romanians resent and deplore, while enjoying the fruits of the region's intensified tourism; after all, Dracula has become a national brand. Mușina playfully merges the myth with history in his protagonist, Florin Angelescu Dragolea, whose oxymoronic name resembles that of "magical realism", as it alludes to both angel and devil. The students call him FAD, using an acronym that also means "dull" in Romanian, alluding to his tedious lectures and to the drab outfit he wears every day. In academically dishonest fashion, his lectures heavily rely on his hopelessly recondite doctoral thesis on Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which he teaches in each of the three years of study, under different course titles. However, starting with the moment he discovers steak tartare (and the blood contained therein), he and indeed his lectures become much more animated and he is re-branded as "Fifi", a name meant to underscore his newly-found "coolness". The novel hyperbolically and humorously traces Fifi's way to a highly unlikely life of glamour (as he becomes King Fifi Dracula I) and thereby effects, in Șandru's words, "a visionary transformation of the drabness of the real through the defamiliarizing, transfigurative powers of art" (2012, 149), which is specific to the original European version of magical realism. Throughout Mușina's novel, vampirism is relentlessly defamiliarized and unveiled as existing everywhere: in the university, where students drain their professors of energy and knowledge (2012, 126); within the EU, an institution very deft at depleting the natural resources of certain member states (409), etc.

Seen as an opportunity for Romanian scholars to get grants and funding by accommodating vampires in a politically correct manner, vampirism is comically described as a "new minority to be acknowledged, to be protected, positive discrimination, special parking lots, [admission quotas] in universities, dimmed lights in the lecture or seminar room so their eyes won't hurt… the whole thing" (143). The leading philology professors consider establishing an institute for the literary research of vampires that could boast a certified vampire among its researchers and would therefore surely be unique worldwide. The flamboyant humor employed by this kind of tongue-in-cheek discourse is subverted by serious undercurrents, however. Thus, the academics note that Bram Stoker's version of the Dracula myth was developed in full decadence, i.e. in late 19th-century London. They comment on Dracula's being a modern Robin Hood, one who sucked the blood of upper middle-class girls in a sort of retaliation to this social class for sucking the blood of the British colonies (139). Significantly, Dracula is placed at the very margins of the civilized world, i.e. in Transylvania. In the Transylvanian academics' interpretation (Mușina's novel takes place in Brașov, Transylvania), Stoker's novel does not so much revolve around vampirism as it is meant to unmask the *other* who has to be eliminated for being different and therefore dangerous by default. The current state of the transnational Dracula myth is also analyzed and parallels between postcolonialism and postcommunism are constantly suggested. Thus, recent portrayals of Dracula in Western European and American culture attempt to humanize Dracula, similar to the way Western Leftist intellectuals of the 1950s–1970s attempted to humanize communism (140). Significantly, these debates between the scholars from Brașov extend over 50 pages, taking up more than ten per cent of the novel's length. The members of this overtly elitist club which calls

itself COI, an acronym standing for the "Club of Intelligent People" in Romanian, are all men, which correlates to the literal meaning of the acronym, i.e. testicle. Nonetheless, the unofficial head of the School of Letters who exceeds the dean in power is neither an academic, nor a man, but the chief secretary, Enikö Trăistaru, a former Securitate member, a woman, an ethnic Hungarian, and a Protestant in a predominantly Orthodox country – in short, the epitome of a minority, but at the same time a reminder of Transylvania's colonization by the Kingdom of Hungary and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As is evident from the discussion on pro-vampiric affirmative action above, political correctness is mocked ad infinitum in the novel, in an attempt to shake off contemporary Western cultural colonization.

The same holds true for postmodernism. This may seem paradoxical, given that magical realism is generally regarded as an important strand of postmodernism. However, this is yet another point of resistance in which Romanian literature and criticism depart from the Anglo-American center. In Romanian writing, the relevance or applicability of postmodernism to Romanian culture is a controversial subject and Mușina's own view illustrates this point, as he coined an autochthonous term (the new anthropocentrism) as a counterpart to Western postmodernism. Consequently, *Nepotul lui Dracula* repeatedly sports terms like postmodern, postmodernity and postmodernism, to seemingly indiscriminately describe any current cultural developments and fashions: "A huge broken toy, with a PhD in Proust's semiosis, and a bacchant, the girlfriend of a sheik from the Gulf, dancing to *Rock Around the Clock* at 10 p.m., on the 3rd floor of a block of flats on Victory Boulevard – that is the quintessence of postmodernity" (89). Similarly, Fifi is a civilized, postmodern vampire who does not kill his victims for their blood, but asks his students to kindly donate it and awards them good grades in return. Bubu and Lulu, the alluring female undergraduates he teaches are postmodern fairies (27) of trendy, postmodern femininity (11), whereas the young scholar and ladies' man Remus Durac is euphemistically refashioned into an eternal lover, the likes of Tristan, Dante and Petrarch: "A sincere and devoted one, but also a postmodern one, i.e. a multiple one: he loved women, all women. He was rhizomatically looking for Woman in, through and amongst women. Seven to eight at a time […]" (2012, 199). The Faculty of Letters is a postmodern tribe with unpaid research quotas (145), led by a postmodern and eternally busy dean. Mușina – who was a poet, a critic and a creative writing professor – voiced his qualms vis-à-vis postmodernism, which he considered to be essentially a mannerism. This explains the many repetitions that parodically dapple the novel, such as the description of Fifi's fangs: "a row of cavity-free teeth, only slightly tobacco-stained, with the two upper canines somewhat longer than normal, in his deeply red, chili-colored gums" (5) and of the way he speaks French: "A distinguished, 19th-century French with a slight unrolling of the 'r', the way it used to be spoken in aristocratic circles in interwar [Romania]" (5). All these parodic features (the ironic overuse of "postmodern", repeated ad nauseam) are meant to underscore the novel's subversiveness, which is essential to both magical realism and metafiction.

Naming the Other is a pervasive othering strategy in the novels discussed here. Florin Angelescu Dragolea is rarely called by his name, as the novel's text is replete

with "Professor FAD" and "Fifi", the former denigrating his teaching abilities, while the latter is meant as a term of endearment. His succinct description by the novel's narrator is very telling: "Professor FAD was [...] a freak, a misfit within postcommunist society" (2012, 72). Another instance that illustrates the power of naming in Mușina's novel relates to ethnic minorities in Romania and the political correctness that the EU promotes with regard to them. On a trip to a conference at Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu, the protagonist meets Elvis Boboieru, a rich Romani chief who is struck by Fifi's resemblance to boyar Atănasă Drăculea, Boboieru's grandfather's master before the advent of communism. Boboieru's ostentatious residence is endowed with postmodern charm, as its architectural style with 28 turrets is a combination of the Taj Mahal, the US Capitol, and a Russian cathedral (379). Boboieru – whose name is derived from "the boyar's ox", since his grandfather regularly gave blood to the boyar – refuses to call himself a Romani instead of gypsy. He traces the politically correct name's origins to what he perceives as the perfidious, capitalist West: "Roma is a word invented by slick Americans and Germans so they can better exploit us, cut us off from our roots, so we forget our traditions and they can do whatever they like with us. Make us their servants. Only the stupid ones are Roma, the clever lads are all gypsies" (181). The gypsy servants who had provided generations of vampiric Drăculea boyars with blood metaphorically and ironically illustrate what Ștefănescu calls the "internal colonization" of the Romani population, a colonization achieved by means of "infantilization and denigration" (2012, 54).

Like Marin, Mușina sees the "fog" of postcommunism as a mere continuation of the "darkness" of communism: "After the Red Plague of communism came the Yellow Plague of generalized theft, reckless consumption, of impudence and bare-faced lies" (2012, 408). The novel triumphantly ends with Fifi crowned king of Romania and expected by his subjects to be an "honest" vampire literally sucking the blood of his certified donors (students and Romani people) instead of the figurative blood of an entire country. Here, the text alludes to the complicity between corrupt Romanian postcommunist politicians and the EU, especially in the often scandal-provoking privatization of massive state-owned companies:

> For 'tis a greater sin to take the blood and skin of an entire people, to cut down its forests, to sell for peanuts to foreigners its corn, petroleum, salt and marble, its gold, silver, uranium and methane gas, the honey of its meadows and the fruits of its orchards, its water and air, and to hide the dirty money in off-shore bank accounts in the Bahamas, the Seychelles or Switzerland, than 'tis to drink, like the next man, the wine, the plum, pear or grape brandy made in one's own household. Or, as a borderline case, the blood donated by those who hold you in high regard and love you. Each to their own metabolism, their peculiarity and their habits of consumption. (409)

The grotesque humor of this passage is typical of the novel's dream-like sections. As if the mythical and magical elements of modern-day vampirism were not outrageous enough, each of the novel's chapters is divided into several sections, the last of which consists of the protagonist's dreams, though this is rarely stated as such. The quotation above is taken from what the reader takes to be Fifi's last and most extravagant dream. In this, Mușina's novel illustrates magical realism's propensity

to make the reader hesitate between what Faris terms "understanding an event as a character's hallucination or as a miracle" (1995, 171).

GORILLAS, STAND-ALONE EYES AND ANTI-ACADEMIC FEELING

As degenerate and decadent as Mușina's novel sounds, given the brevity of this description, the colonialism-as-vampirism of *Nepotul lui Dracula* is not macabre, but buoyant and hilarious. By contrast, Cuțitaru's novel *Scriptor sau Cartea transformărilor admirabile* (Scriptor or the book of admirable transformations) seems to enact the shift from the European version of magical realism to its subsequent versions by pointing to what Șandru calls "the unrepresentable at the heart of the real – the horrific, the grotesque, the macabre" (2012, 149). The narrative voices are now dark, restrained and very similar to each other, as opposed to the irreverent and playful voices of the other two novels. *Scriptor*'s leitmotif is "*pleasure in pain*" (Cuțitaru 2017, 21), a phrase similar in its oxymoronic quality to magical realism. This expression is repeated throughout the novel and it is often commented upon in terms of its paradoxical and oxymoronic character.

The novel's introductory section, its epilogue and two brief interludes are printed in a different type font than the bulk of the book, which consists of five sections entitled "Confusio" (62), "Vigilia" (116), "Solitudo" (213), "Conversio" (218), and "Substitutio" (229), each having a different character as its declared author, who does not always coincide with the section's narrator. The Latin titles conspicuously allude to the Latinity prized by all Romanians and underscore Romania's borderline identity. As Bogdan Ștefănescu claims, Romania is a "prime candidate for ambiguity neurosis", as its "elites have traditionally defined their nation as a mongrelized cross between Greek Orthodoxy and linguistic Latinity" (2012, 110). One of the two main characters, Boris Mercuti, has an Italian Catholic father and a Romanian Orthodox mother. When his father dies, he is torn between the two religions, and although he lived in Romania all his life and was submerged in Romanian culture, his Italian roots are foregrounded: "He felt he was tied through deep, intricate and subtle channels, to that ancient culture, to which he had always belonged, despite the irony of fate" (2017, 46). Incidentally, one of Mușina's characters, Professor Teodor Cossiga, is also Italian. Both novels point towards what is traditionally seen as the genesis of the Romanian people, i.e. the Roman conquest of Dacia in 101–106 AD, while also foregrounding contemporary hybrid identities.

Mercuti is repeatedly described as a man who was crushed by the 1989 revolution. He had been a promising academic when he decided to go into politics, a decade before the fall of communism. Unlike his comrades, who cynically re-enter politics as recycled socialists after 1989 (52), he returns to academia, but he feels alienated from both faculty and students. Eventually, he gives up social life altogether and is finally shown to have mysteriously disappeared – into a transcendent world – through a mirror,[5] from where he is still able to observe the "real" world he left. The story of Mercuti's metamorphosis is appropriately told in "Conversio", which is ostensibly penned by Petronel Normanu, but contains a first-person narrative from Mercuti's point of view.

Before his disappearance, Mercuti morphs into a gorilla and is variously described as a massive, furry monster, "Yeti", "Bigfoot" (226), and, significantly, a vampire: "I thought I saw a vampire ready to hiss, idiotically, through his teeth" (225).[6] The *Doppelgänger* motif is prevalent, suggested by repeated references to Edgar Allan Poe's short story *William Wilson*, first published in 1839, but also by Mercuti's final disappearance through a mirror. At the onset of his transformation, Mercuti wonders whether its cause is the radical change brought about by the fall of communism in December 1989. He realizes that he had misread himself when he had gone into politics under communism: "I had not been ready for the political experiment, I know that now, but what was happening to me (as a punishment?) was decidedly too much! […] I was, undeniably, a pedantic, sophisticated bookworm. Therefore, I clearly didn't belong in politics. I was wrong. *I misinterpreted myself*" (222, italics in the original). The trauma caused by his "oxymoronic" life – the word "oxymoronic" is frequently used in the novel – is never resolved and the novel's last section, "Substitutio", set a century later, in the year 2098, features a stuffed gorilla. In this section, Petronel Normanu mirrors Mercuti's transformation into a gorilla and becomes himself one. Like Mercuti, Normanu had been unable to adapt to postcommunist reality: "Oh well, I have always been out of sync with the accelerated progress of *my* world!" (239, italics in the original) A century earlier, he had feigned senility while being a university professor because he could no longer make sense of the world. Like Mercuti, Normanu suspects that his transformation into a gorilla might be a punishment for his earlier act of falsehood: "He *knew* he had exaggerated in miming early senility within the community, but what he went through now (a punishment for his previous social 'histrionics'?) was too much by any coercive or punitive standard" (237, italics in the original). Both Mercuti and Normanu are writers and academics who at some point give up on academia, in different ways. Their transformations into primates can be interpreted as a punishment for that defection or, as "Solitudo" and "Conversio" suggest, a gradual death of the writer as a human and a birth of the Scriptor. In "Solitudo", the act of living is seen as a search for the Transcendent and the act of writing as a translation of the Transcendent for the others. The Scriptor would then be the fusion of the two: "an entity capable 'to connect' *directly* to the Transcendent. An impersonal (trans-personal and, simultaneously, trans-corporeal) entity" (217, italics in the original). In "Conversio", the writer is seen as a donor of intellectual and spiritual chlorophyll, in the sense that the writer needs to die in order for the literary work to be able to survive.

Victor Olescu, Mercuti's best friend and simultaneously the dean who enabled Mercuti to return to academia after the fall of communism, is reduced to a standalone eye by successive amputations he has to undergo because he suffers from peripheral artery disease. Hyperbole and paranoia permeate this section of the novel, appropriately entitled "Vigilia", and the watchful eye that used to be Victor Olescu recalls the kind of paranoia induced by Ceaușescu's secret police (Securitate) during communism. In the end, Victor's wife succumbs to madness and the eye is swallowed by Victor's dog, Beșleagă, who, like Victor's son, has become increasingly inimical to him. Paranoia also permeates the novel's first section, "Confusio", which

tells the story of an academic scandal occasioned by a student's lurid campus story in which many university professors recognize themselves and their own questionable affairs. As a result, the student is expelled, only to be re-enrolled later and to eventually become the promising Petronel Normanu.

This novel is the most disturbing of the three, due to the backward-looking morbidity that pervades its plots, as well as its ominously restrained style, which varies but little across the different sections with ostensibly different authors. As both the title and references to Roland Barthes's 1967 essay "Death of the Author" suggest, the novel's author is turned into a quasi-Barthesian *scriptor* who obliquely collects the work of others. Cuțitaru's *scriptor* is, however, Barthesian with a twist: while Barthes conceives of the *scriptor* as an entity whose "hand, detached from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression), traces a field without origin" (1986, 52) and the text is "a fabric of quotations […] a tissue of signs, endless imitation" (53), Cuțitaru's *scriptor* is the reader's link to the Transcendent and is characterized as being "gigantic, dazzling and seductive" (2017, 217). This description of the prophetic *scriptor* (albeit ironic) would probably elicit a frown from Barthes, who took such pains to dismantle the notion of the Author as some kind of genius.

CONCLUSION

The three novels discussed above illustrate various strands of magical realism, with different structures of othering. While Marin's cockroach and Cuțitaru's various creatures are deeply disruptive to their social and academic surroundings, Mușina's vampire is less a disruption and more a diversion. The attentiveness to alterity displayed by these novels could be read as a postcommunist backlash, as "totalitarianism is radically impervious to otherness – that is, it denies the existence of a *thou* that is comparable to an *I*…" because "it treats 'difference' as 'opposition'" (Todorov 2003, 34). Marin's and Mușina's novels create a distinct sense of relief and of freedom, while Cuțitaru's novel is more restrained. Nonetheless, all three novels use language extravagantly, in a carnivalesque spirit that is perhaps most visible in Mușina's novel.

The academic is othered "from within", as the three authors are academics themselves, yet there is a lingering sense that, at least in part, this self-image is an internalized one, an image hailing "from without". All the novels discussed here portray, to different degrees and in different ways, a self-image of the Romanian (indeed Balkan) postcommunist academic that seems to result from internalizing a Western European image of Eastern Europeans as corrupt and chaotic, or as perpetrators of despotism and nepotism, named by Șandru as "the savage within" (2012, 36). Nonetheless, the novels' subversiveness rebels against both East and West, against the Soviet/Communist legacy and its trauma, as well as Western cultural and economic neo-colonizers.

NOTES

[1] The "microcosm" argument has become a commonplace in academic fiction criticism, as David Lodge (2006, 5) and Terry Eagleton (1988, 94) illustrate.

[2] Dan C. Mihăilescu is also the name of a contemporary Romanian literary historian, critic and essayist. The three novels can also be read as *romans à clef*, particularly because Marin and Mușina set their novels in two real Romanian universities. However, a reading of the novels as *romans à clef* goes beyond the scope of the present article. An example of a thinly-disguised academic is Andrei Terian of Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu, who is mentioned in Mușina's novel as Professor "Ternian" of the same university (2012, 199).

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Romanian are by the present author.

[4] Ironically, Vlad the Impaler (1431–1476) was a ruler of Wallachia who has gone down in the collective Romanian imaginary as a voivode who kept the Ottoman Empire at bay and did not tolerate any form of dishonesty or theft in Wallachia.

[5] The mirrors encountered in Cuțitaru's novel quite literally embody a feature of magical realist fiction, in which according to Faris, "repetition as a narrative principle, in conjunction with mirrors or their analogues used symbolically or structurally, creates a magic of shifting references" (1995, 177).

[6] Metamorphoses are also common in magical realism (Faris 1995, 178).

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