

LSD: LIFE AS SOCIALIST DREAM



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I. Introduction

The present paper, *LSD: Life as Socialist Dream*, tries to enlarge upon the notion of post-communist nostalgia and under what circumstances do we encounter this feeling amongst the inhabitants of former socialist countries. As an analysis of the entire Eastern Bloc would have proven to be, if not extensive, at least time consuming, I have directed my attention towards Romania's case inside the historical context of life after World War Two.

After the fall of Communism in '89, more and more people became confused in their rendering of past events. The central issue of romanticizing the past and surrounding it with an aura of melancholy has been dealt with especially by writers from Eastern and Central Europe, who have tried to offer a more detailed account of the Age before the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Theoretical implications arise from the theme of radical transformation at the start of the communist era; individuals perceived this shift in socio-economical conditions but found their subjective reality altered beyond recognition. The forced re-interpretation of social constructs led to a destructive ideology that threatened the micro-cosmos of each individual under such leadership. Romanian writers in particular, but not only, addressed the issue of facilitating the identification to socialist models, as well as stressing the importance of literature during and after the communist ideology. *Nostalgia* in this case has been seen as a possible outcome due to the incapacity of an individual to come to terms with two divergent realities: the Romanian state seen as one "big happy family" where everybody is equal versus the Stalinist-like society that ruled with the help of terror and advocated the use of violent repercussions.

I plan on using Katherine Verdery's theories on identity and cultural politics in Eastern European countries, those of Paul Gilroy, and Renato Rosaldo's understanding of post-imperialist nostalgia. Even though the last two scholars dealt with a different aspect in melancholia I believe that the resemblances between a post-communist country such as Romania and other post-colonial spaces should not be ignored.

In order to make this argument I will also enlarge upon Romania's historical background explaining the differences between the early years of Communism, its initial ideology and the outcome that shocked the entire world. For this I chose the works of Archie Brown, Robert Service and Romanian sociologist Peter L. Berger.

Furthermore, I also plan on using Maria Todorova's suggestion of including this country within the *Balkanist* discourse and Boyer's theories when analyzing the society portrayed in Dan Lungu's novels.

Literature that places an emphasis on coming to terms with one's traumatic past after living under a totalitarian regime, has experienced a greater public interest in the last two decades. However, present day Romania could still provide researchers in the humanist or sociological field with enough food for thought concerning human life before and after the '89 Revolution. One can only hope that an increase in publication numbers of such criticism is not mere wishful thinking. This is, in part, one of the motivations that have influenced me in choosing this particular topic.

As research on Eastern European writers is scarce nowadays, except of course for the most *famous* intellectuals who have either emigrated to Western countries or managed to get recognition and publish in the West¹, I suggest that Romanian writers have much to offer in this field of study and it is because of this that I have chosen to analyse Dan Lungu's *I am a communist Biddy!* and *Hen's Heaven. False novel of Hearsay and Mysteries*.

The main question seeks to enlarge upon such themes in two of Dan Lungu's novels, while linking them to the specific academic framework. From my point of view, Lungu's value for an accurate rendering of a troubled past is of great importance. Even though most of his works have not been translated in the English language, limiting their accessibility to a wider audience, I believe he has much to offer to those interested in Communism and should be granted more attention.

The role of the writer has changed from the 20th century and this is also something worth taking into account as we can nowadays rely on literary works

¹ As it is the case of Herta Müller, who won the Nobel Prize in Literature (2009), after translating and publishing her book in English, entitled *Everything I possess I carry with me* or, in the US version: *The Hunger Angel*.

such as Lungu's to offer us a different perspective of what it meant to live during that time. By presenting in a detailed manner the micro-cosmos of different individuals, the readers can better understand and relate to the Romanian private identity that was deeply segregated from the national one. Nostalgia can only be the result of such conflicting realities.

The scholarship that addresses this issue of a melancholic post-communist society is not extensive as Verdery herself claims in *National Ideology Under Socialism* and that this is still a difficult topic for national intellectuals to touch. I share her belief that there is still more that could be said on this subject and that the criticism developed so far barely manages to scratch the surface of such a topic. I therefore plan on focusing on the nostalgic aspect that was manifested after Communism while making a close reading of Lungu's two novels and pointing out how this melancholia can be observed within the characters' behavior.

The present thesis consists of two chapters, each having two and three subchapters each, to better delineate the critical theory from the close readings of Lungu's novels. In order to extract specific conclusions, I will address the issue of post-communist nostalgia amongst the Romanian inhabitants and try to demonstrate that the role of the writer bears some importance aiding history in depicting accounts of both an objective and subjective nature. The approach will be made in a chronological manner but will focus more on explaining the grey area of memories and personal interpretations of past authoritarian leadership.

II. The Light shines from the East

The emergence of what later became known as one of the worst epochs in the history of Eastern and Central Eastern Europe, Communism, spread faster than any disease, infecting without exception every country it touched.

This chapter will focus on the rise and fall of Communism in Romania, laying a greater emphasis on the damage inflicted by Nicolae Ceaușescu upon the minds and bodies of his fellow countrymen.

I begin by presenting the socio-historical context in which the former dictator's reign was able to blossom, and will try afterwards to give an accurate account of how society presents itself nowadays, within a country that is still struggling to find its balance and come to terms with its past, although in very diverse manners.

In chapter 2, I will also expand on the concept of *nostalgia*, analyzing the scholarly framework that has dealt with this subject, while also trying to make clear my own opinions and beliefs on the matter. I propose a more in-depth approach that does not focus solely on feelings of longing for obsolete socialist ideals, but also on the aspect of transforming individual narratives into counterhistories endowed with both authenticity and capacity to alter the outsider's vision of what living in pre-1989 Romania was really about.

II.1. Communism, Transition Years and what comes next

Starting with 1945, Romania found itself under Soviet rule. This was a consequence of the resounding triumph of Russian troops over Nazi Germany during World War II. Being the only remaining power apart from the United States of America, the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) began acquiring new territories thus expanding and controlling most of Eastern Europe and Northwestern Asia. Once King Michael I was forced to abdicate and leave the country, Romania quickly became known as a People's Republic in 1947.

The title alluded to the Marxist-Leninist governments that focused on creating a link between the needs of the people (in this case the Romanians), and

the official rulers of the country. Seeing how the Soviets were one of the two most powerful forces to be reckoned with after World War II, it is understandable why the change from kingdom to a communist state happened at such a rapid pace within Romania.

The People's Republic lasted from 1947 until 1965. During this time leadership within the state also underwent restructuring, as not every government official seemed to share just one belief about what is the best path that the country should choose economically and politically.

With the USSR now controlling the political sphere within Romania, the country found itself in the position of not being able to decide which financial relationships to refuse and which to support. This is how the SovRom enterprises came into being.

The half Romanian, half Russian companies appeared in all public spheres such as agriculture, transport and industry. The aim was to consolidate Soviet-Romanian relationship by means of bilateral aid; however, the bilateral soon became the unilateral. Every year, more and more merchandise shipments going to the USSR would drain the now communist state to the point of crippling the economy. "Big Brother", the popular denomination for the Soviet Union, seemed to care less and less about what these joint ventures were doing to their younger siblings. Around 85% of Romania's resources were being shipped to Russia every year, in order to pay the war reparations debt (reported to have been close to 300 million dollars) after the defeat of Nazi Germany, to which Romania had offered its support before.

Moreover, 1948 saw the implementation of the *nationalization* law that required that all private businesses go under the ownership of the State. Apart from this, agriculture too suffered the cost of new governmental policies; *collectivization* started in 1949 and although it was a gradual process it left private companies and small agriculture owners on the outskirts of the so-called progress. The idea however, was not all bad. What collectivization accomplished was the dissolution of class divisions, as wealthy peasants (the *chiaburi* or *kulaks*) could no longer own larger properties than any other farmer in the country.

Neither of these measures happened over night, nor did they benefit from national support. Reports of brutal clashes between peasants and the Miliția¹, or sometimes even the Securitate², led to an increase in the number of imprisonments and feelings of disbelief regarding the legitimacy of this new socialist state. According to Brown, the terms *socialism* and *communism* were being used more or less interchangeably in the 19th century as they “had some common roots, and initially shared a belief in the need to introduce universal public ownership of the means of production” (Brown 26).

The implemented system was not named communist but rather *socialist*. Brown explains: “‘Communism’ was to be a later stage in the development of society – the ultimate stage – in which the institutions of the state would have ‘withered away’ and would have been replaced by a harmonious self-administering society” (Ibid. 11).

The nationalization and collectivization processes lasted up to early 1960s when the General Secretary Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej announced that the outcome was a success. The last of the SovRom companies did not survive 1961.

However, not all of Romania’s inhabitants were content with these arrangements; no compensation was ever given to those who found themselves in the position to have to accept institutionalization for fear of being considered an *enemy of the state*. This reign of terror that materialized itself between the late 1940s and early 1960s caught Romanians by surprise. There was no saying “no” to the Securitate as Romanians later found out. The numbers of imprisonments grew alarmingly, up to the point that prison facilities could no longer accommodate either imagined delinquents or real ones.

But as the people’s lifestyle started to deteriorate, Romania’s relationships with the Soviet Union also began to weaken. In 1958 the State convinced the USSR to withdraw their armed forces from Romanian soil and this could be observed as the first step towards an independent and autonomous government.

¹ The name that the National Romanian Police used to go by during Communism

² The Secret Police



Portrait of Nicolae Ceaușescu³

Nicolae Ceaușescu⁴ was already a member when he was elected General Secretary of the Communist Party in March 1965. He followed his predecessor's tactical measures of slowly withdrawing Romania from the USSR's tutelage. Gheorgiu-Dej's 'barons' (Mauer, Emil Bodnăraș, Chivu Stoica and Gheorghe Apostol) "encouraged a violation of the new restrictions against holding more than one top office and permitted the secretary-general of the Romanian Communist Party to become president of the State Council as well (1967)" (Georgescu V. 249).

During 1969-1972, we can observe that some measures of modernizing the country were being taken, especially where the cultural domain is concerned. Innovative changes were also permitted in the social sciences within which sociology blossomed alongside history. "Several histories of the country appeared during this period, as well as many studies in which recently taboo subjects were discussed and debated fairly freely, without either the Marxist

³ Image source: Wikipedia

⁴ One of the most important and contested figures in Romanian History during the Communist regime, he was born on the 26th of January 1918 in Scornicești, Olt, son of a peasant and never a graduate of the Romanian Educational System, and died on the 25th of December 1989

dogmatism of the preceding era or quotations from the work of the Party's head" (Ibid. 251).

Ceaușescu quickly gained support and recognition both at home and outside the borders. This could also be explained thanks to the open policy he seemed to propose as a path worth choosing when it came to Romania's future and his refusal to take part in the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, which had served as an inspiration in changing the name of the country to The Socialist Republic of Romania.

Furthermore, his initial inclination towards cultural development and the interest he was showing in the educational system, quickly helped him become an individual of great character and determination, who was thought to be able to save the country from its backwardness and lead its people to infinite progress. As his family background was less than humble, the common man found it easier to identify with this great ruler, but the intellectuals also showed their love for Ceaușescu, dedicating poems and songs to the nation's savior.

This appreciation from the intelligentsia proved to be of great importance seeing how, according to Katherine Verdery, intellectuals had always been seen as "persons playing a particular role in society, as advisers or critics of power, shapers of values, legitimators of social order, guardians of morality, self-appointed defenders of their nations" (1991: 15).

Andrew Baruch Wachtel also talks about the role of the writers within the borders of Eastern Europe in the past and how, over time, their function within particular socialist or communist countries changed. Therefore the role of the artist was "not to build socialist culture from scratch, but rather to do so by making use of past achievements under the active guidance of a party that held a top-down cultural view" (28). This sort of propaganda would be a common feature within Romanian society after the election of Ceaușescu as President of Romania in 1974. After this election, many officials from his original group were cast aside, as the case of Ion Iliescu, who would end up succeeding him after the Revolution in '89.

Once Ceaușescu's leadership had been secured, he started the process of systematization, trying to make Romania one of the biggest and most independent countries within the Eastern Bloc. In order to do so, however, he

needed people he could rely on; this led to mass restructuring within the Government and Ministries: “This dynastic socialism, without a precedent in the history of Romanian politics, was strengthened by a curious obsession with cultural prestige” (Georgescu V. 257).

As outsiders looked towards Romania they could see it flourish into a new and bright state. More and more books were being published each year, the national writer’s union had a spectacular increase in the number of its members and researches in various domains seemed to be flowing. This sort of propaganda was not only meant for the Western countries or the United States, but also for its people. This cultural development and astounding liberty were, according to Boia, “limited and controlled” (Boia 75). The Securitate became an everyday presence in the lives of the Romanian people, going after whoever did not approve of the manner in which the country was being run.

The rapid economic growth and foreign credit faded away, making room for a harsher reality to set in: “Ceaușescu’s attempt at alleviating the economic situation of the country by way of ‘systematization’, i.e., by moving people into urban settlements from villages that were to be destroyed with bulldozers, also had its roots in his extreme nationalism” and by denying “women’s abortion rights, he also attempted to double the population of Romania to make it into the largest nation of the Soviet Bloc” (Fejes 338-339). Fortunately, such an outcome never materialized.

People soon discovered that *Geniul din Carpați*⁵ was not what he had appeared to be. The limitations and restrictions imposed on the inhabitants of the country contributed in transforming their previous adoration feelings into those of revolt and hatred, but, no matter the impositions, dissent was scarce. Gilroy explains:

Authoritarian modes of belonging to the national collective supply the norm, and with the constraints and strengths of national identity and the national state system plainly visible, anyone who objects to the conduct of their government is likely to be identified as an enemy within and bluntly advised to go and live elsewhere. (26)

⁵ The Genius of the Carpathians

In Ceaușescu's Romania however, people were more likely to find themselves imprisoned or even killed according to the gravity of the *threat* that each posed for the ruling apparatus; the latter's explanation for such brutal measures was simply the need to protect the *nation* from enemies, both outside, and within the state. "In the 1979 United Nations yearbook Romania led the world in suicides, with 66.5 per 100,000 inhabitants" (Georgescu V. 264). With such impressive figures, it is not surprising that this love-hate relationship between the *Conducător*⁶ and the people ended up in a bloodbath.

Starting with 1971, the year of the Romanian "cultural revolution" as Boia calls it, we can observe a pattern that follows the lines of extreme nationalism, "cultural megalomania" and isolationism from everything foreign (77-80). This shift in mentality, no matter how confusing, proved to function as a symbolic blindfold for all the parties involved: foreigners, including the USSR, pretended not to see and did not interfere with Romania's internal politics, while inhabitants of the country pretended to understand why such a measure would be necessary, since their Leader was constantly speaking of reports of spies and enemies of the State. Thus conditions worsened.

By the beginning of the 80s everything was different. Cultural and educational development came at an end as censorship laws were becoming more and more absurd. It had become illegal to own a typewriter and not register it with the police, as well as to have a conversation with a foreigner. Some writers chose to benefit from the Party's protection, while others refused and therefore found themselves facing trials for treason or suffering great physical harm. Nonetheless, there were some intellectuals such as the poet Ana Blandiana, journalist and poet Mircea Dinescu, and philosopher Constantin Noica, who managed to make their voices heard by publishing anti-communist literary works or pamphlets and still be alive. Considered to be dissidents, thus *enemies of the state*, their income hardly compared to any of the other Party writers.

There was a massive anti-dissidents campaign, led by the Securitate, during the 1980s. The aim was to stifle revolutionary voices all over the country

⁶ The Ruler

through maneuvers, use of lies and fabrications, persecutions and sometimes even public humiliation or death.

It is because of these sort of machinations and Ceaușescu's own interpretation of the meaning of nationalism that Verdery talks about a reversal of values.

They [the communists] created a dichotomized universe, dividing the world into the Good and the Bad, Communism and Capitalism, proletarians and kulaks, Party members and those who resisted the Party's dictates. Their emphasis on the People-as-One, combined with the insistence on the moral basis of political community, facilitated establishing the community's boundaries by expelling its enemies (1996: 93).

However, as living conditions within Romania became more ludicrous, the number of dissidents gradually started to grow. Verdery mentions that, compared to other communist states within the Eastern Bloc, Romania did not have a clear-cut revolutionary faction as, say for example, Bulgaria or Hungary. The reason for this was mainly fear of brutal retaliation.

People got used to the harsh reality that Communism proved to offer, and once the "Rational Eating Program" was promulgated in the fall of 1981, they also had to get used to changing their eating habits and learning to queue everyday in front of grocery stores from five in the morning just to get milk and bread with their ration cards.

The reports coming out of Romania in the mid-1980s seemed to be from another world: official proposals to move old people out of the cities, families living for weeks in unheated apartments, ration cards for bread, a law forcing the registration of typewriters with the police, Bibles turned into toilet paper, sixteenth-century churches and nineteenth-century synagogues demolished to make room for the 'Victory of Socialism Boulevard', and so on (Georgescu V. 267).

The meaning of citizenship within Communist Romania had suffered a drastic alteration, but getting out proved to be even harder. The State closed its borders and practiced an isolationist policy to the point that no one would be allowed to leave the homeland without either bribing some Party official or having influential friends on the *other* side. The same applied for the procuring of consumer goods.

As nothing was coming in, but everything was going out, due to Ceaușescu's obsession to repay the country's external debt, the black market blossomed. Wachtel explains in his *Remaining Relevant after Communism*, the dilemma that each Romanian had to face: "Readers of this book who did not experience the daily reality of communism need to be aware that in communist countries the main problem faced by consumers was not money, but rather access to consumer goods" (33). Poor living conditions associated with numerous persecutions and propaganda that mentioned the Leader under constant threat from the outside world led to a diminishing of popular belief in the ruling apparatus. This relationship was slowly approaching its boiling point:

It would be an illusion if we were to imagine that the majority of Romanians rose up in 1989 against communism as a system [...]. They rose up against the consequences of Communism, refusing to go on accepting the total degradation of their conditions of life (Boia 6-7).

On the 21st of December 1989 during Ceaușescu's speech at the Central Committee building, he heard "the cheering multitude suddenly booing him, and the ritual chants of 'Ceaușescu și poporul' (Ceaușescu and the people) changed to 'Ceaușescu dictatorul' (Ceaușescu the dictator)" (Călinescu, Tismăneanu 282). On Christmas Day, both Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife Elena were executed. The self-appointed National Salvation Front (NSF) invoked "the resistance put up by Ceaușescu loyalists in the Securitate." However, the lack of evidence does not appear to support the NSF's version: "from a trial that lasted approximately nine hours only a total of fifty-odd minutes was shown for nearly four months" (Ibid. 283). At popular request, on the 22nd of April 1990, a more detailed version of the trial, of about ninety minutes, was broadcasted nationwide. People were

skeptical but still wanted to believe in the legitimacy of the newly self-appointed government.

The end came swiftly for the Romanian dictator and his wife, Elena. Although the crimes committed against their people had been too many to keep count, many Romanians found despicable the way in which the future leaders of the country chose to handle this situation. Lacking an authentic trial, no one could say for sure if the outcome had not been plotted and planned by Ceaușescu's former Party collaborators. Robert Service seems to incline towards such an explanation: "There was no mercy for the Ceaușescu couple. The new authorities did not want them alive and able to tell the story of the part played by their successors in the maintenance of communism before 1989. They were shot on 25 December" (Service 435).

Once the dictator was dead, the future started to look up yet again. After the mass murders at Timișoara and the violent outbursts that took place in the center of the capital, people started adjusting and tried to resume their daily existence. But the Transition years posed problems of their own.

The NSF began giving speeches that talked about a newer, brighter future that was in store for Romania. Many believed, as they imagined nothing could ever be quite as bad. At the beginning of 1990, in parallel with other former communist countries, Romania initiated a "transitional justice process that was fueled by repeated calls for the condemnation of the communist past" (Stan 65). But this process never made it past its initial phase. People started to doubt the authenticity of their so-called *liberators*, all ex-communists themselves.

However, if history has taught us anything, it is that it repeats itself. This is why, "a former collaborator of Ceaușescu became the first post-communist president (Ion Iliescu ruled post-communist Romania for eleven of its first fifteen years)" (Ibid. 66).

One difference that is noteworthy is that intellectuals started distancing themselves from the political sphere in the years to come. They were once more the architects of the country, helping the people to salvage what it could after more than a decade of trauma and fear. The number of publications that appeared post-December '89 increased in the first couple of months and memoirs appeared to be the only thing that Romanians cared to write about.

A great number of former Party officials went on National Television and denounced the ex-Communist Government. They spoke of their fear to openly oppose the Ceaușescu regime and appealed to the Romanian people for understanding and forgiveness. Few admitted that they had been active members or informants, but suggested rather that they had been covert dissidents to a greater or lesser degree.

As reports began to surface stating that during the last years of Communism in Romania one out of four people were believed to have had close ties to the Securitate, a wave of public resentment and disbelief flooded the hearts and souls of Romanians everywhere. Some of those who, out of fear for their lives, or due to government harassments, had fled the country and were now scattered throughout the world returned, full of hope, only to discover that things hadn't changed all that much. Because of the frailty of Romanian politics in the early 1990s, organized marches and protests still continued to occur, especially inside the capital. The NSF quickly dissolved, but Iliescu's Party, the PDSR, imposed itself within the public scene as the only capable organization to set matters straight and help build a democratic society. But the outcome was far from that desired.⁷

Nowadays, internal quarrels and never-ending struggles to obtain political power have made the public opinion lose faith in the country's leaders. Resentment has yet to fade away as more and more Romanian citizens believe that the only way to live a good and prosperous life is to leave one's country and find a better future elsewhere. Popescu-Sandu blames this on "the continuity in political elite" between the communist and post-communist years, the fear of change and lack of experience with the democratic process, as well as "the hesitancy of civil society organizations to actively pursue their role as apolitical agents of education and reform", and states that all of the above mentioned have "delayed the reevaluation of the communist past" (120). With such a legacy it hardly seems surprising.

It is within this socio-historical background that I chose to entrench my analysis on post-communist nostalgia in the pages to come, as most of the elderly

⁷ For further information see Tony Judt's *Postwar: a history of Europe since 1945*. London: Heinemann (2005), chapter XIX "The End of the Old Order" and chapter XX "A Fissile Continent".

generation, those who actually lived and survived Communism, still look back on that period and sigh. This has become a curious reality in present Romania thanks to our current Presidential and governmental officials who, in some respects, have opened the borders to democracy and closed the doors on progress.

II.2. Splitting the Atom: Bipolarity and Selfhood during Ceaușescu's regime

The idea that lay at the heart of Socialist states implied the dissolution of flawed communities and the implementation of a more secure and improved society, centered on the needs and desires of the people inside it. A society made *by the people, for the people*. Supposedly, this improved State would have provided better living arrangements and an increase in the inhabitants' lifestyles, eliminating class distinctions and offering enough job opportunities that would help the State flourish under the careful guidance of its rulers. The existence of such a community however was later revealed for what it truly was: a mere utopia.

In the postwar years, the only great power in the East, the Soviet Union, started acquiring new territories, smaller, less developed countries, adding them to the grand plan that consisted in the systematization of all societal organizations. Progress and modernization were the main arguments employed by the USSR to legitimize the need for such territorial expansion. But with this reconfiguration of borders and acquisition of satellite countries came the need to reeducate the human element within those societies. The *new man*, the Socialist man, was a human being endowed with qualities fit for a new era; the time for progress had come and changes needed to be made.

The Socialist man that the USSR was so keen on creating had to stand out and become a role model for the rest of the World to follow: *he* would be educated and hardworking, place his country's interests before his own, protect both his fellow countrymen and his family, and renounce all selfish needs for the good of the country. From the beginning, Romanians appeared to encounter some difficulties in reaching these goals, mainly because they had been forced into submission by the Soviets, and secondly because they found it hard to identify with a national agenda that was not theirs.

When Nicolae Ceaușescu began his leadership, all seemed brighter. There was a visible improvement on the artistic front as the Conducător encouraged its people to help Romania find its way back on the map of cultural breakthroughs,

and gradually, as the country started to rise from the ashes of past dictators, Romanians came to think of no one better in the position of the Head of the State.

When reality changed, so did the minds and souls of the Romanian people. Their love for their Ruler turned into fear and resentment, but as the newspapers and national television praised him and talked about the economic improvements that the country was experiencing due to his strategical wisdom, citizens started to doubt themselves. This split in identity and the need to understand one's feelings concerning the reality around him, led to a reversal of values and a complete alteration of the idea of the Socialist man among the populace. The *new* communist man within the borders of Romania was nothing but selfish, chose to attend to his needs instead of those of the State, hardly worked, or stole from his employer (the State), and had no interest in becoming a producer of culture – all he desired was to secure enough money and possessions while not getting caught by the Securitate, and this meant making all sorts of sacrifices: “Over the course of a lifetime, a person's relationship to the Securitate could easily change from torturer to tortured, then back again. An individual might even be a victim and a victimizer at the same time” (Stan 66).

Ambivalence was a constant reality in Communist Romania and as the dictatorial regime was growing more and more intransigent people started coming up with new solutions to evade the scrutinizing eye of the police. Dissimulation and half-truths were now very much a part of daily life. However, not everybody succeeded in tricking the Securitate and some would eventually find themselves either charged for some small irregularity that did not correspond with the desires of the Party, or simply thrown in prison.

This was the case for many intellectuals, especially writers, who were considered to have anti-nationalistic views. As nobody knew for sure what anti-nationalistic stood for, you could find yourself, at any given time, in the position to explain your actions. In most cases, people would get picked up by the Securitate, taken to their headquarters and *persuaded* to give in friends, neighbours or even family that were considered to be enemies of the State. This was a common outcome for most people. Gilroy blames the association of culture to a particular ideology within a nation and claims that “the problems have multiplied where the idea of culture has been abused by being simplified,

instrumentalized, or trivialized, and particularly through being coupled with notions of identity and belonging that are overly fixed or too easily naturalized as exclusively national phenomena” (6). For a country that took pride in having a great deal of writers and vast intellectual potential in the literary and artistic field, its history at the beginning of the twentieth century is stained with the wretched deeds of the Communist Party.

As time went by, “to be against the regime had become synonymous with being pro-European, whereas Ceaușescu and those in factions more or less allied with him ranted against western imperialism and the Europeanizing obliteration of the National soul” (Verdery 1991:2). His call for a return to nationalism had a huge impact on the lives of the citizens of the country; everything that was foreign was considered by default bad or flawed, as the only merchandise and consumer goods allowed for the general public had to be of Romanian origin.

Furthermore, it was also illegal to carry money in another currency that was not Leu⁷ as people were encouraged to stimulate the internal economy and support the Party’s decision in choosing to isolate the country from the Western World. Soon after, The United States fell into the same category whereas ties with China and North Korea grew stronger.

Beginning with 1971 the July Theses⁸ came as a blow to all the intellectuals within Romania. They proposed an increase in ideological propaganda (radio, television and publishing of books) and enlarged upon the extreme importance of educating the people, starting with children, about what being a Communist really implied. After having lived within a free society in the 1960s (although it was a limited and controlled freedom), and without the fear of censorship, Romanians still hoped that this would all turn out to be just a temporary arrangement. However, as years past by, the transient state became permanent.

Looking at the model of the Northern Korean society, Ceaușescu decided to go back on his decision to promote creative autonomy, thus reinstating the

⁷ The Romanian currency that continues to this date

⁸ The President’s speech was later published in the form of an article entitled: “Exposition regarding the PCR programme for improving ideological activity, raising the general level of knowledge and the socialist education of the masses, in order to arrange relations in our society on the basis of the principles of socialist and communist ethics and equity”. For further reference read Adrian Cioroianu: *On the shoulders of Marx. An incursion into the History of Romanian Communism*, Curtea Veche Publishing House, Bucharest (2005).

political censorship that had already existed during Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej's time. Writers were now being encouraged to promote communist ideology to the masses and any refusal to take into consideration the Party's *suggestions* attracted severe consequences such as exclusion from the Writer's Union or imprisonment: "only those books that follow political directives, serving *the formation of communist consciousness* (to use a frequent expression from the documents of the Communist Party)" got published (Cordoş 4). Life within the country changed dramatically over night.

It was during the same time that greater attention was given to the notion of Romanianness; as the political apparatus made use of communist propaganda to raise awareness about the uniqueness of its people, it also sought to inspire Romanians with a sense of pride and belonging. Verdery explains the usage of this concept:

Representations of Romanianness were simultaneously products of cultural striving and means of politics, elements of a relation to the peoples both within and beyond Romania's borders. To be a producer of culture, in Romania, to be an intellectual, has long meant having a central role in defining the Romanian nation to itself and to the world" (Verdery 1991: 21).

Notwithstanding the importance bestowed upon writers by the regime before the 1970s, after the publication of the revised Theses in November most intellectuals were advised to either collaborate or pay the price. Many fled the country, not wanting to continue living under the constant harassment of the Party, and started publishing books within the Western geographical sphere. "Forsaking one's own country, that act of desperation, was a widespread phenomenon touching all ages and professions, and a novelty in the history of a country that had so long been attractive to immigrants and had not had much emigration" (Georgescu V. 265). But desperate times called for desperate measures. Among the intellectuals that left Romania, some, like Eugene Ionesco, Herta Müller and Emil Cioran, are still considered to have been greatly underappreciated during the Communist regime and as such, a great loss for Romanian society.

As the majority of people living during Nicolae Ceaușescu's rule believed their roots provided them with an aura of superiority over foreigners, ideological brainwashing reached absurd proportions. Banners spread all over the country emphasized how Romania is getting bigger, stronger, richer by the day, and as the years passed, Ceaușescu's picture started to get younger and younger with each print. This personality cult had only recently reached these exaggerated dimensions, as a result of the powerful impact that the Asian Communist societies had had on him during his visits. There can be talk of "a consistent effort to construct the figure of a legendary leader with almost superhuman qualities, capable of finding the answers not only to the nation's problems but to those of all humanity" (Georgescu V. 256).

After 1972, everyday life went back to being just as hard and socially controlled as before; general uniformity was the Communist Party's goal now. As Romanianness became a constant, more and more crimes were being committed in the name of the nation. We can talk here about Ceaușescu's decision to promulgate a law denying women the right to have abortions unless they already had 4 children (which was later raised to 5), were older than 40 (later 45), or had become pregnant as a result of an incest or rape. This measure was taken to increase the birthrate, thus expanding Romania's population and assuring its long-lasting presence within the Eastern Bloc.

No matter the political agenda, the 770 Decree proved to have horrendous consequences on the female population.⁹ The death rates increased dramatically in just a couple of months as women were now seeking medical help elsewhere for terminating unwanted pregnancies. Not all those who performed such procedures were accredited as medics or even nurses and offered no guaranties. There have been cases in which women would go home after such a procedure and die of internal bleeding from complications due to the lack of sterile equipment, whereas stories of self-performed abortions were also not scarce. The women who did keep the babies after failed self-inflicted procedures, however, might find themselves having to devote their life to raising a

⁹ An interesting and accurate rendering has been provided by the 2004 documentary, written and directed by Răzvan Georgescu and Florin Iepan, entitled: "Children of the Decree (Das Experiment 770 – Gebaren auf Befehl).

handicapped infant. Some would even go so far as to hand their children to the State in which case the youngsters would get thrown into a placement facility that, usually, did not even have the basic facilities, nor did it care to provide them; children would sleep on floors in large numbers, were barely fed or washed and sometimes beaten senseless for crying or wanting to use the toilet. This, however, was a reality that eluded most Romanians and foreigners for a long time. For communists “ ‘the woman question’ was reduced to a matter of class emancipation. Measures were passed to ensure the equality of women in the workplace and society, but (...) this legislation emancipated women as ‘workers’ rather than citizens” (Cornis-Pope 234).

While people suffered under the “guidance” of the Party, notions of selfhood and personal growth seemed hardly worth thinking about. But as some people struggled to survive the regime, others pondered what it actually meant to call yourself a member of that country:

By stripping individuals of the resources necessary for creating and articulating social selves, it confronted them repeatedly with their failures of self-realization. As their bodies were forced to make histories not of their choosing and their selves became increasingly fractured, they experienced daily the illegitimacy of the state to whose purposes their bodies were bent” (Verdery 1996: 56).

In the 1980s conditions worsened still, due to the implementation of the ration cards. Now Romanians could no longer procure how much food they wished but had to queue and wait, from early morning hours, to see if they could buy their allocated litre of milk. The communist regime’s obsession with production led to an increase in the number of students in the engineering faculties. During the 1980s two out of three graduates were engineers thus Romania became the second largest producer of steel after the USSR. But even as the country was getting richer, its population was on the verge of starvation. Official reports that talked about progress were regarded with distrust, as that development was nowhere to be found on the streets of Romania.

During his rule “Ceaușescu emerged as the epitome of the seemingly omnipotent party-state, becoming the site of a whole range of popular emotions that ranged from loyalty to humiliation, helplessness, fear, and revulsion” (Georgescu, D. 158). These mixed feelings and ambivalence towards the Leader of the country turned Romanians into a complacent, bitter people, which hated their Conducător but thought they still owed him a lot.

Verdery refers to “contradictory images of national ‘selves’ ” and how these selves are sometimes read as “evidence of confusion about identity, resulting from interstitial placement between dominating imperial powers” (1991: 4). As the Soviet Union’s involvement in the political life of Communist Romania slowly disappeared, so did the interest of other developed western societies due to Ceaușescu’s isolationism policy. The country was left in disarray and at the disposal of Party.

With no external support whatsoever, the people gradually learnt to cope with this lifestyle by creating for themselves bipolar identities:

Countless East Europeans have described the ‘social schizophrenia’ or ‘duplicity’ that became their way of life: you developed a public self that could sit at interminable meetings and read aloud the most arrant inanities (...), and then at home or among close friends you revealed your ‘real’ self – a self that was, of course, relentlessly critical of what ‘they’ were doing (Verdery 1996: 94).

Verdery explores this relationship between *they* and *us*, as most Romanians felt the need to separate themselves from the State which was seen in this case as the enemy within. This is how their private life became a haven that kept them aloof from all the ideological madness of the public sphere. But as Romanians have always tried to distance themselves from any type of inclusion within the politics of identity or those of location, it is of no surprise that current debates are still very much abundant in polemics.

The incorporation of Romania within the Balkanist discourse, as Maria Todorova suggests, comes only as a recent reinterpretation within the literary framework. She states, nonetheless, that this inclusion might be the most

accurate of all, as Romanians have had a hard time trying to define the identity problems and categories within which they would feel comfortable. By revising the histories written under Ceaușescu, she observes a clear distinction between this country and those surrounding it. Even after more than a decade of arrant inanities, Romanians still oscillated between convictions of being one of the few chosen people, or being the victims of a totalitarian regime.

“This in-betweenness of the Balkans, their transitional character, could have made them simply an incomplete other; instead they are constructed not as other but as incomplete self” (Todorova 2009: 18). Todorova explains this idea by enlarging on the fact that religion and race have had a definitive say in the matter. She states that the division made between Orthodoxy and Catholicism (the first one attributed to the Eastern hemisphere and the second to the West) implied choosing a path. In the case of the first a next step was expected and that was the embracing of the Muslim religion. Nonetheless, this transition did not happen in Romania as things, more or less, followed the same pattern as before.

The race argument however, suggests that “despite the presence of the theme of racial ambiguity,” which appears as a constant amongst the Balkan people, “in the final analysis the Balkans are still treated as positioned on this side of the fundamental opposition: white versus colored, Indo-European versus the rest” (Ibid. 19). What Todorova seems to imply is that while Orientalism deals with differences *between* types, Balkanism focuses more on analyzing those *within*.

The aim of this paper is not, however, to compare the differences or similarities between Orientalism and Balkanism, but does, nonetheless, find them worth mentioning for a better understanding of selfhood and national identity in Eastern Europe, especially where Romanian consciousness is concerned.

However, “Balkanness is a deprecatory category to which Romanians rarely allude. While having made and continuing to make major contributions to Balkan studies, the Romanian academic community is the only one in the Balkans that does not employ the term Balkan studies” (Ibid. 49). Todorova believes this is a mistake. Being a small, borderline country, Romania has yet to choose a side. Most of its people are still confused when they have to speak of their country and need to integrate it within a specific geographical sphere. Regarding the

inclusion within the politics of location “many of the critical self-evaluations predated the hardening of the Balkanist discourse in the second decade of the twentieth century” (Ibid. 39). Todorova provides us with many examples of this acute self-criticism within Eastern European literature (Caragiale for Romania and Aleko Konstantinov for Bulgaria).

Moreover, she insists on the Romanian people’s rejection of being referred to as members of the Balkan sphere. It is this ambiguous belonging that stirs one’s interest. “In all Balkan cases”, Todorova claims, “we are clearly dealing not only with different ways to cope with stigma but also with self-stigmatization” (Ibid. 57). The Romanians appear to reject the inclusion within the Balkan framework as, they feel it does not clearly portray the nature of their *soul*¹⁰.

Assuming responsibility for the Communist past and its legacy is still a very sensitive subject for all of Romania’s people:

After the fall of Communism in December 1989, a new cycle of desperate reconstruction began in Romania. Writers became involved in journalism, academia, politics, to a lesser degree, and various groups and organizations that dealt with the onerous task of rebuilding civil society (Cordoş 5).

But as Romanians hoped and dreamed of a better future, the wheels of the political sphere were turning. The post-communist structure of power was, in many ways, a continuation of the old one. Iliescu’s Party was the one that succeeded Ceauşescu, but Iliescu failed to convince the country that he was no longer a communist himself. The ties that bound him to the ex-regime were still very much visible in the first decade after the fall of Communism. However, he managed to rule the country for nearly 12 years, which stands to show that Romanians have not yet learned to protect their nation against deceitful opportunists.

Nonetheless, as Parties, which seek to gain control over the public sphere, are, more or less, ex-communists or ex-collaborators themselves, it hardly seems unlikely that we would do so poorly in choosing the best candidate for the job. Verdery reflects on this as she explains the political background soon after the

¹⁰ In Romanian, “soul” can also stand for “identity” in colloquial speech.

'89 Revolution: "In the space of two years (1991-93), parties divided, disappeared, changed names, and reconfigured their political coalitions; [...] In such an unstable political landscape, the referent of 'opposition' is itself highly unstable" (Verdery 1996: 111). But as we plunge deeper and deeper in a highly globalized reality, traces of the willingness to move on start to show.

Nowadays more and more film directors and writers that deal with the topic of Communist Romania receive the attention that they deserve outside of the Eastern European sphere, and as publication numbers increase so do the curiosity and active interest of others.

III. The Engineers of Human Souls.

III. 1. The Nostalgia Trap

Nowadays, there seems to be an interest in the literary field of production for “bringing out the dead”. Each Eastern European country that has dealt, at one point or another in the past, with the threat of being swallowed up by the Socialist ideology, has had to try and fight this legacy afterwards.

Nonetheless, not all citizens within a state can be expected to feel the same about former societal forms of government – as some try to move on and break the ties that bind them to their national history, others dwell in a past which, somehow, always manages to never stay the same. In contemporary societies, this imagined past life they feel they have lost appears especially in the form of written remembrances.

In the pages to follow, I would like to address this topic by adding my own personal contribution to the academic discourse of post-communist nostalgia especially through the use of close readings on two of Dan Lungu’s novels, namely *Sînt o babă comunistă!*¹ and *Raiul Găinilor. Fals roman de zvonuri și mistere*². In order to do so, I have considered bringing to the fore various critical theories formulated by scholars such as Katherine Verdery, Renato Rosaldo, Dominic Boyer and others just as relevant but which, for lack of space and to avoid redundancy, will find themselves mentioned within the text and in the *Works Cited* section at the end of this paper. Both the names of the analysed novels and the quotations provided in the pages to follow, have been given in Romanian, but have, nonetheless, been translated for non-native readers at the end of each page in the form of footnotes.

In the contemporary Western World, “a diagnosis of nostalgia typically earns a writer or scholar condemnation; to be nostalgic is to be out of touch, reactionary, even xenophobic” (Su 2). Furthermore, we should take into consideration the fact that nostalgia is selective; one cannot choose which

¹ *I am a Communist Bidy!*

² *Hen’s Heaven. False novel of Hearsay and Mysteries.*

memories come back, as one cannot choose not to feel a longing after the past if the present disappoints and hinders.

In more recent times, nostalgia “encourages an imaginative exploration of how present systems of social relations fail to address human needs, and the specific objects of nostalgia – lost or imagined homelands – represent efforts to articulate alternatives” (Su 5). As in the case of Lungu’s novel “*Sînt o babă comunistă!*” that will be discussed in a more detailed manner in the next subchapter, I would suggest that John Su’s statement clearly applies to our main character, who seems to dread the possibility that what she always longed for so fervently, never actually existed.

In 2001, Lucian Boia stated in his *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness* that: “According to opinion polls, at least half of the Romanian population consider that they had a better life before 1989. Such nostalgia is fed not only by poverty but also by lack of adaptability to an open society” (7). Nowadays, one would imagine these polls to be out-dated; however, we can observe a split between generations: as senior citizens continue to mourn the loss of socialist ideals, the younger representatives of the country suffer not from partial but total amnesia: “Discussion of communism as a shaping agent is avoided, skipped over, effaced. (...) Writers who want their past to become part of history refer to and describe a past that does not exist anymore in collective memory” (Popescu-Sandu 119). It is, therefore, even more difficult to try and come to terms with one’s historical past when current generations have no recollection of what Communism really meant.

This can also be attributed to the level of importance that both the media and the political sphere have awarded the Romanian past. As books and articles were subject to censorship up to 1989, it was almost impossible to give an accurate description of Romanian Socialist society. After the Revolution however, literary production appeared to recover its strength:

These genres [memoires, diaries and document collections] had been prohibited because often they contested the state’s official version of the national past. Popular fiction, such as thrillers and romance novels, also

appeared in great quantities, having been generally rejected under communism for their socially deviant contents (Pennel 2006).

It would appear that more than a decade of social injustices and ill treatment of the population had simply been removed from the public sphere, giving the opportunity to those who had been politically involved back then, to alter and adjust collective memories. Nonetheless, by means of literary works of people similar to Dan Lungu, counter-histories still surface, providing those who have lived and survived the communist regime with some sense of reassurance that their memories are not mere figments of their imagination.

There is, however, one major downfall to entrusting the “keys to the kingdom” to the vast majority of contemporary writers:

‘modernizing’ Eastern European elites persistently apologize for the nostalgia of their fellow Eastern European citizens, where Western European elites accept such apologies as tokens of reassurance that East Europe is still the way it has always been – that is, full of productive promise, slow to develop, prone to anticivilizational tendencies, and, always in need for developmental attention from the West (Boyer 26).

This vision of the Western World as saviour of underdeveloped countries and producer of culture is nothing new and has been dealt with by various scholars, such as Boyer, who rejects this hegemonic perspective.

The idea that nostalgia ‘belongs’ somehow exclusively or even especially to Eastern Europe is pernicious, an aspect of the persistent allochronization (that is, temporal displacement) of East Europe into the imagined margins of the urban, industrial, and scientific centers of Western European modernity. According to these centers, how could Eastern Europe be anything else other than past-fixed? (Boyer 22).

It is understandable, however, why most Western societies believe such a thing if we are to think in terms of the historical past: most underdeveloped countries

usually belong to the Eastern hemisphere which, until not that long ago, was still under the rule of the Soviet Union.

Moreover, it was also a general belief that support and relief could only come from one direction: the West. And as the Eastern Bloc was waiting patiently for its “knight in shining armour” to come and slay the Socialist Dragon, public manifestations against the regime turned, overnight, into social revolutions that could no longer be swept under the rug. The aid, therefore, did not arrive gift-wrapped from the West, but was, surprisingly, homemade.

Boyer argues “we should regard Eastern European nostalgia always also as a *postimperial symptom*, a symptom of the increasingly manic need in Western Europe to fix East Europe in the past.” In this “postimperial environment, the need for East Europe as a *still lesser* node, a space that West Europe can still suppose itself to dominate, has been vital” (Ibid. 23).

This prescriptiveness attributed to former socialist countries such as Romania, has proved to be a difficult label to shake. Even more so, when a large number of the populace seems to accept and subscribe to such a classification.

Bucur, on the other hand, appears to believe that present day Romania provides us with signs of historical rehabilitation: “Since 1989 Romanians have engaged, much like their other post-communist neighbours, in redefining the pantheon of heroic figures in the last century” (158). If this were indeed the case, Romania would probably manage to secure its place within a different category altogether in a couple of years’ time, providing that it rejects once and for all, this victimizing dimension that it embraced up to now. Daniel M. Pennel also seems to support this belief and expresses his faith that the Romanian people are on the right path:

While the leadership of the communist eras second-rank nomenklatura may have frustrated much of the country’s development since 1989, the power of ideas has invigorated book production, making both Romania’s and the world’s literary and intellectual heritage fully accessible to a public eager to discover and to re-discover (Pennel 2006).

Taking into account all of the above mentioned, a need for further explanations on the concept of post-communist nostalgia is necessary. Katherine Verdery believed that politics were very much a part of daily life and could not, therefore, be isolated from the cultural segment:

Culture and intellectual activity are *inherently* political (not *underlain* by politics, but *interwoven* with it), at two different levels: that of their encounter with alternative values within their own sphere, and that of their place in reproducing society (Verdery 1991: 19).

This is what Dan Lungu tries to accomplish: by means of novels such as the ones mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, he tries to create an alternate reality to the one portrayed by history books for such a long time. In his fabricated Universe, his fictional characters seem to be very much real, and as they live inside the borders of a post-communist country, they feel an uncanny longing to re-live the communist years. This melancholia towards a totalitarian regime that has received so much criticism over the years, might seem unnatural but, as we will observe in subchapters two and three, is still very much present in contemporary Romania.

Renato Rosaldo observes in his *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, that imperialist nostalgia cannot be separated from the mourning of traditional society as both “attempt to use a mask of innocence to cover their involvement with processes of domination” (Rosaldo 86). Although our topic limits us to communist and post-communist ideology, I will not make a comparison between the two forms of government but would like to caution the reader not to gloss over the similarities between the post-colonial nostalgia and the post-communist one³.

Moreover, as Boyer appears to imply, nostalgia can prove a difficult concept to address:

as a kind of discourse that is evoked to create and maintain social distinctions between groups and between persons, it [nostalgia] can never

³ For further references go to Paul Gilroy's *After Empire*, Routledge, London 2004.

be entirely separated from on-going politics of identification and belonging both inside and outside Eastern Europe. In these politics, accusations and embraces of nostalgia are never value neutral (Boyer 20-21)

As we have seen before, Chapter One also deals with this issue of identity within the Eastern hemisphere, as we enlarged upon themes such as *Romanianness* and a bipolar tendency in choosing which ideological beliefs to appropriate for oneself.

There are, of course, two versions to each story: as Westerners preach the "coming to terms" with one's national past, no matter how shameful it may be, Eastern Europeans seem to be of a different opinion. Romanians thus, still yearn for having our efforts praised, but nonetheless fail to subscribe to the modern approaches of a very sensitive discourse; and as we reject classification within the Balkanist framework proposed by Todorova, we reject it admitting our own incapacity to let go and adjust to contemporary times. Until we learn to treat nostalgia as a component in our daily post-communist existence and not fear its implications, we will not be a people who can honestly claim adherence to the Globalized World.

According to Pia Brînzeu, Romanian literary critic and professor at the "University of the West" in Timișoara: "Culture saves the country of Dracula from the doom of both dictatorship and marginality" (554). One of Romania's most promising new writers, Dan Lungu, does just that. As he skilfully analyses and criticises the individual micro cosmos of his fellow countrymen, we can observe in his characters feelings of either direct or insinuated nostalgia with regard to the communist Society that dissolved in 1989.

He was born in 1969, at Botoșani, and finished his BA in sociology at the A.I.Cuza University (Iași) where he also works as a lecturer. His literature is mainly concerned with the social aspect of life after communism and is understandable why if we are to look at his educational background. In most of his books, he deals with frustrated or confused characters that find it hard to adjust within a modern society that failed to deliver that which it had promised.

His writings are filled with humour and irony as the dialogue unravels with the help of colloquial language that can prove to be crude at times.

“Ricoeur argues persuasively for a theory of narrative analysis based on how a text is read, not on its literal form” (qtd. in Rosaldo135). This is indeed an excellent point to make, as one should focus more on the content than the actual stylistic devices employed within a text. And if we are to criticize Lungu’s novels for lack of an appropriate register and use of too many colloquial forms, we should try taking the above into consideration. This is why we also have to look past less polished speeches and grammatical errors made by the characters we analyse, and focus more on what exactly it is the writer was trying to convey by choosing that particular language.

In Lungu’s case, the answer is not that complicated: in order to render country life in post-communist Romania, one must employ the necessary stylistic devices to better depict the authenticity of each individual’s own universe. One should not always think in categories such as merely black or white when it comes to understanding the impact of Communism on human existence. That is why, the majority of Dan Lungu’s writings focus on different shades of grey, as that had been the predominant colour attributed to Socialist societies.

He believes that post-communist literature has still a lot to offer, and states:

Avem nevoie de documente, de mărturii, de rememorări, atât în ce privește poliția politică sau temnițele comuniste, cât și viața cotidiană a epocii. Avem nevoie de sinteze și de o reflecție sistematică pe marginea acestei perioade. Am sentimentul că, de fapt, știm foarte puțin despre comunism. Faptul că mulți și-au trăit măcar o parte a vieții în totalitarism ne dă iluzia că știm exact despre ce e vorba...⁴ (Lungu 2008).

⁴ “We need documents, confessions, remembrances, concerning both the political police or the communist cellars, and the everyday life of the era. We need syntheses and a systematic reflection on the margins of this period. I have the feeling that we actually know very little about communism. The fact that many people have lived at least part of their existence under totalitarianism, gives us the illusion that we know exactly what it is about”.

It is only by means of exhaustive scholarly research and literary works that we can begin to clearly understand the absurdity of Ceaușescu's regime and its effects on the Romanian populace.

III. 2. Communism made a townswoman out of me!

The novel *Sînt o babă comunistă!* begins with one of Emilia Apostoae's monologues. Written in the first person, the reader gets quickly drawn into the story by familiarizing himself from page one with the main character. Emilia, or "Mica" as friends and family call her, is troubled; after having a phone conversation with her daughter who lives in Canada, she embarks on a trip down memory lane, a trip that we'll discover along the way, is hard and tenuous at times. The question that gets her thinking is: "Îa spune-mi, mamă, cu cine votezi duminică?"⁵ (Lungu 2011: 49). She thus begins remembering her entire life and the decisions she has had to make in order to get to where she is now.

We find out that Mica is not at all special. She is not one of those characters meant for greatness, but is, on the other hand, someone who the Eastern European reader can easily identify with: she is one of the many that lived in communist Romania and survived. She is therefore, part of the *miserabilist* literature that Lungu seems to be interested in throughout his novels.

In a small article entitled "(Auto)biography and empathy" Dan Lungu gives his opinion on post-traumatic realism or "miserabilism" literature, a category to which he also claims membership. As he tries to give an accurate description of what it is exactly that this category deals with, he lists the characteristics of the worlds portrayed by writers of this particular genre. We therefore have "marginal social worlds, the periphery and provinces, places with no horizons, petty lives" in which "an oral style, slang, and crude" is employed while characters are presented as "socially déclassés or anomic": "viewed from the outside, this is a dismembered, asocial and ugly world peopled by anti-heroes. Viewed from within, it is an "ordinary", "normal" world, the world of (post)communist Romania" (Lungu 2010: 3).

It is in this world that Emilia Apostoae leads a common life with her husband Țucu, even though he is an absent character for most of the time. The excuse: a return to his roots by moving back to the countryside to take care of his parents' household, against Mica's advice.

⁵ "Tell me, mom, who are you voting for on Sunday?"

Their daily existence is interrupted one day by a phone call from their daughter Alice, the one who has, according to her mother, the name of a princess. The explanation for choosing this particular name is elaborate: “Aveam eu așa o chestie în cap, că la un nume frumos nu poți să ai decât o viață pe măsură. N-a ajuns prințesă, ci ingineră. Asta fiindcă eu am ținut să fie ingineră. Cu gândul că se va angaja la fabrica în care lucram eu pe vremea aia”⁶(Lungu 2011: 5). But before she could say her blessings, “comunismul a căzut și fabrica unde lucram eu s-a dus de râpă”⁷ (Ibid.). As Mica’s train of thought moves from one subject to another, she goes on telling the reader how one day her daughter got on a plane and left for Canada, but also reminisces about the *good old days*, when the factory wasn’t only sticks and stones, and acknowledges that she sometimes daydreams that there, “în secție, scheletele noastre au rămas în poziție de lucru, gata în orice moment să înceapă treaba. Că e doar o pană de curent”⁸ (Ibid. 5-6).

Years passed and Alice announced to her parents that she was engaged to be married to someone named Alain. As proceedings for meeting the future groom begin, Mica retells the conversations she and her husband shared before the encounter and explains how a simple trip to the hairdresser reduced her to tears. The reason: “înainte de revoluție treceam măcar o dată pe lună să mă aranjez”⁹ (Ibid.8). Comments such as the one mentioned above, are not scarce, but as the story unfolds, we can observe the appearance of flashbacks that disrupt the narrative flow in order to give a more accurate rendering of what it actually is that Mica longs for.

The second chapter of the book shows us a different Mica: she is ten years old, lives in the countryside, and the day which she hates most has arrived, the day when she has to help her parents make *tezić*¹⁰. The author describes the process of making this particular fuel during seven pages and emphasizes his

⁶ “I had this idea stuck in my head that, with a beautiful name you can only have a matching life. She didn’t end up a princess, but an engineer. That’s because I wanted her to become an engineer. Thinking she would get a job at the factory where I was employed back then”

⁷ “Communism fell and the factory where I worked went downhill”

⁸ “in the department, our skeletons have remained in working position, ready at any minute to begin work. That it’s just a power outage”.

⁹ “before the revolution I used to go at least once a month to get my hair done”.

¹⁰ a special mix of cow manure and straws, left to dry in the sun and used as fuel for fire, especially at the countryside in Romania.

main character's repulsion towards this matter: "Eu n-o să am nevoie de tezic, o să stau la oraș"¹¹ (Ibid.18).

As far as we can tell, Mica's only ambition is to move to the city once she's old enough. She doesn't seem to either understand or accept her parents' lifestyle and wishes she could be more like her aunt Lucreția, who is an operator and therefore, a very rich and influential person in the eyes of our main character. We get to know more about Lucreția further along in the book, as for example in chapter five, when Mica spends her vacation in the city. Thus, we discover that both her aunt and her uncle, Andrei, are really rich, their wealth consisting in a lot of shoes, nail polish, having electricity and running water.

Later on, as Mica will eventually leave her parent's household and replace it with a small studio of her own, we'll observe how she herself changes, mostly by means of mimicking her aunt. But as Mica becomes a *townswoman*, Lucreția begins the process of demystification. She will no longer be the one who the little girl once looked up to, as Mica grows older and, let us say for argument's sake, wiser. As she witnesses her aunt kissing another man, she decides she can no longer continue living under the same roof with Lucreția and Andrei, and further along the book we find out that Andrei himself runs away with a younger woman, leaving his wife to take care of his only son, Tudor. Mica hears of this from her parents and when her father calls his brother a madman she remains silent (Lungu 2011: 173).

Moreover, we find out that Mica's aunt gets laid off from her job because of her forgetfulness to end a telephone conversation with "Trăiască lupta pentru pace"¹² while at the other end, there was a high ranking member of the Party: "Bine că n-au exclus-o din partid", a spus tata. Nenea Andrei a dat din cap că da, așa e"¹³(Ibid. 93).

The structure of *Sînt o babă comunistă!* does not follow a chronological pattern, but is, more or less, a colage of events from different timeframes and political regimes. As the story commences we encounter the adult Mica, living in post-communist Romania, during the transition years, just before the elections.

¹¹ "I won't need tezic, I'll be living in the city".

¹² "Long live the fight for peace".

¹³ " 'Good thing they didn't kicked her out of the Party', said my father. Uncle Andrei nodded approvingly, good thing indeed".

This serves as an excuse to provide an answer to the never-ending question of who would be better as future President of the country. It is this dilemma that confuses our main character and makes her melancholic about the past.

The chapters slowly replace one period with another; however, this change is subtle and keeps the reader curious even though the personal life of Emilia Apostoae might not be all that exciting; she is one of the thousands of engineers that grew up and lived within a socialist society, learning as they went along that everything can be procured if you know the right people. This is why, after getting a job at a factory that produces metal casings for export, her lifestyle improves overnight: favours and goods replace the need to earn money as either way nothing could be bought from convenience stores.

When the future son-in-law, Alain, finally arrives to meet them, Mica is not at all impressed as he fails to stand up to her out-dated expectations: he reserves a table at a restaurant instead of going to their house, and arrives wearing a casual attire instead of getting dressed up and asking for Alice's hand in marriage. Even though the young man doesn't speak their language and tries politely to make himself understood through Alice's translations, his behaviour displeases Mica, as she is still very much a product of the former World and sees the *foreigner* as someone very different and peculiar. Before the dinner is finished and the young couple returns to Canada, Alain shows an interest in Romanian history: "A întrebat cum a fost comunismul. Când i-am spus că eu o duc mai rău acum ca-nainte de Revoluție, a făcut ochii mari și a întrebat "De ce?". Bărbat-miu mi-a făcut semn pe sub masă. Cum să-i explici?"¹⁴ (Lungu 2011: 28). Mica's point of view is clear: as she compares the life she has now (during the Transition years) with her youth, she sees no reason why she should not regret Communism, as it was that regime that provided her with enough comfort to lead a carefree life.

As Alice's phone calls increase in frequency after she becomes pregnant, so do the polemics between mother and daughter on the topic of Communism. Chapter 7 focuses on one of these conversations. As Alice insists on knowing whom will her mother vote for during elections, Mica voices her opinions:

¹⁴ "He asked about Communism. When I told him that I have it worse now than before the revolution, he looked with eyes wide opened and asked 'Why?'. My husband signaled me under the table. How to make him understand?"

Nu știu, zău, când era mai bine... Acum am văzut la televizor oameni care mor de foame, familii cu copii care dorm în stradă... Pe vremea comunismului nu se întâmpla asta.

- O să se regleze și astea... Deocamdata sîntem în tranziție... dar eu sunt optimistă.
- Cum nu, e ușor să fii optimist când trăiești în Canada, în Franța sau în America... Mai greu este să fii aici și să o trăiești...(…) Sînt o babă comunistă, dacă nu știai. Asta sînt.¹⁵ (Ibid. 50-51).

The argument slowly becomes heated and while her daughter tries to persuade Mica that what she clings so desperately to is a lie, the woman realizes that she is a more fervent advocate of former totalitarian regimes than she herself would have imagined. After the end of this conversation, Mica still can't find her peace and keeps thinking about the meaning of it all:

Regretam timpurile acelea, oamenii de care eram înconjurată, veselie, solidaritatea, dar, nu știu de ce, nostalgia asta nu se lipea deloc cu numele de comunist (...) Acum comuniștii erau cei care au mințit, au luat cu de-a sila, au băgat la închisoare, au torturat și multe altele. Eu nu mă număram nici printre unii, nici printre alții. Eu ce fel de comunistă eram?¹⁶ (Ibid. 54).

Unable to come to a conclusion, Mica will later on, come back to the paradox of being a communist, as she will try to find an answer to what it is she actually misses so much. This self-doubt and confusion also function as mechanisms of

¹⁵ "I really don't know when it was better... Now I see on television people dying of hunger, families with children that sleep on the street... This didn't used to happen during Communism.

- Things like these will also resolve themselves... We're still in transition now...but I feel optimistic.
- Of course, it's easy to be optimistic when you live in Canada, France or America... It's harder to be here and live it...(…) I'm a communist biddy, in case you didn't know. This is what I am."

¹⁶ "I regretted those times, the people I was surrounded by, the cheerfulness, the solidarity, but, for some reason, this nostalgia did not resonate at all with communist label (...) Now, the communists were those who had stolen, took by force, imprisoned, tortured and many others. I couldn't fit in either category. So then, what kind of communist was I?"

recollection, making her re-live a past that had not been so filled with joy for others.

Towards the end of the book, we become acquainted with the past of another character named Misses Rozalia, a neighbour, who had worked as an independent seamstress for as long as Mica could remember. Out of curiosity, our main character provokes a conversation that leads to the unravelling of the seamstress's family history. We thus, come across a very different life story: Rozalia Buzinschi's father, Anton, a well-known tailor, had been labelled as *enemy of the State* for not having served in the Romanian Army due to a medical problem. Connections and a couple of personal favours had helped him maintain his freedom, but impoverished his entire family over night. As Rozalia's dreams of becoming a famous painter were reduced to ashes, she, unlike Mica, found herself a member of a society that she despised. Because she was Anton's daughter, Rozalia's application to Art School was rejected on the grounds of distrust. She was also explained why it would be unfair for her to have the life she wanted, as other, better-suited, children deserved it more than those who appeared to share their parents' "atitudini dușmănoase"¹⁷ (Ibid.165).

Adult Rozalia closes her story with: "Dragă doamnă, ăsta e comunismul meu: cel care a luat cu forța atelierul tatii, care mi-a retezat din fașă visul de a mă face pictoriță, care m-a lipsit de culori toată viața"¹⁸ (Ibid. 166).

Popescu-Sandu addresses this idea of multiple interpretations with regard to individual memories and claims that: "There is no one past anyway because several versions of the past exist in contention, giving the past a multidirectional quality that further complicates the present" (114). This is evident in the manner in which both Rozalia and Mica interact with their own personal history and that of the other's. The communist past therefore presents itself by having different meanings for each of the two women at the same time, that of lost paradise and a horrible nightmare. Therefore, the dichotomy between *good* and *evil* becomes even more vague as Mica tries to make sense of what being a *communist* actually implies.

¹⁷ "resentful tendencies".

¹⁸ "This, dear Madam, is my Communism: the one that took my father's workshop by force, that nipped in the bud my dream of becoming a painter, that deprived me of colours my entire life".

Unlike expected, when Alice calls her mother after this conversation, the answer she receives is no different from the initial one: “Ne-am ciorovăit fără nici un rezultat. Pînă la urmă, am ajuns la aceeași concluzie ca data trecută: ea nu avea nici un motiv să regrete comunismul, iar eu aveam toate motivele s-o fac”¹⁹ (Lungu 2001: 168). Lungu maintains his character’s ambivalent personality up to the very end and transforms her into a fixated, although flat character, with which, however, we sometimes tend to sympathize. Even though Emilia Apostoae does not grow throughout the book, she is at least willing to accept that her memories of the communist past might have also been a product of her imagination and are not shared by the mass majority.

Boyer claims that “post-socialist nostalgia is most often interpreted not literally as a desire to return to state socialism per se. Instead, it is understood as a desire to recapture what life was at that time, whether innocent, euphoric, secure, intelligible” (Boyer 18). This stands at the core of Mica’s interior struggle; while everybody around provides her with arguments against Communism, her memories don’t suffer the slightest alteration: they stay the same and depict happier years of her life, when she was surrounded by friends and didn’t have to dread tomorrow’s financial security. Communism had not failed Emilia Apostoae, Post-communism had: “Doamne, ce bine am dus-o pe timpul comunismului! Dacă acum aş duce-o în jumătate ca pe-atunci, aş fi mulțumită”²⁰ (Lungu 2011: 69).

Țucu’s only contribution in the matter is his answer to Mica’s question about who he will vote for: “

Păi, dacă-i pe cinstite, oricare ar veni, tot fură. Că fură unii sau alții, pentru mine tot aia-i.

- Chiar așa, toți sînt niște hoți?
- Normal. Dacă ar fi oameni cinstiți, ar sta acasă, nu s-ar băga în politică²¹ (Ibid. 108).

¹⁹ “We quarreled pointlessly. At the end, we reached the same conclusion as last time: she had no reason to regret Communism, while I had all the reasons in the world”.

²⁰ “God, I had it so good during Communism! If only now I’d live half as good, I’d be content”.

²¹ “Well, if we’re being honest, whoever comes will steal. That one or the other steal, makes no difference whatsoever for me.

- Is that so? Are all of them thieves?

- Of course. If they were honest men, they’d stay at home and not go into politics”.

This general distrust in the political apparatus of Romania is transparent throughout the novel. *I am a communist Biddy!* is more than a dissection of socialist nostalgia, it is also a critique of the contemporary Government by placing it in antithesis with Ceaușescu's old regime.

No one apart Alice, who lives on another continent, has faith that things will improve in a near future, not even Mica. Her only hope of having a better life is by the re-enactment of old stories. She thus starts thinking about reviving the past by getting all of her former work colleagues back in the export business, in a different workshop, maybe even in her sister Sanda's backyard: "în loc să oftez și să mă plîngăcesc, mai bine făceam ceva ca să reînvii trecutul. Poate nu chiar la fel, dar ceva pe-aproape. O fabrică era greu de pus pe picioare, dar un atelier ca al nostru nu mi se părea imposibil (...) un atelier strașnic, să rîdem și să ne distrăm ca pe vremuri"²² (Ibid. 109). What Mica misses is an imagined community, where her friends and co-workers would share the same socialist ideology that failed to materialize itself during Communism. She seeks refuge in a past that has, until now, proven superior to the present:

Only in the face of disappointment can characters clearly articulate their needs and desires as they perceive the difference between the world as it is and as it *could have been*, and images of lost or even imagined places provide a means for individuals to express this difference (Su 23).

This longing for Ceaușescu's dictatorial regime also implies forgetfulness. The culture in which Lungu writes is dominated by amnesia and, according to John Su, the only way we can shift our attention on what has been forgotten is through the literary text (10). Although his study refers to Anglophone writers of literature, these judgments can also be applicable to Dan Lungu's novels:

²² "instead of sighing and feeling sorry for myself, I'd better do something to revive the past. Maybe not exactly the way it was, but something close to it. A factory was difficult to raise from scratch, but a workshop such as ours did not seem impossible (...) a true workshop, where we can laugh and enjoy ourselves like in the good old days".

In these novels, fantasies of lost or imagined homelands do not serve to lament or restore through language a purported premodern purity; rather, they provide a means by establishing ethical ideals that can be shared by diverse groups who have in common only a longing for a past that never was (3).

However, Mica's plan fails to materialize after an encounter with her sister and a former co-worker, Aurelia, as, apparently, neither of the two shares her nostalgic mood. When her ex-colleague contradicts her memories of brighter days, Mica feels betrayed and starts crying, deciding to keep the plan of the workshop for herself. The novel closes with our protagonist's decision not to vote at all thus becoming one of the numerous passive citizens that have lost faith in the morality of the ruling apparatus.

When the past no longer offers refuge and seems to have disappeared forever, Mica gives up hope that things will eventually improve, but preserves the belief that Communism did at least one thing right: "pe mine comunismul m-a făcut orășeancă"²³ (Ibid. 51) and that offers her some sense of reassurance.

²³ "Communism made a townswoman out of me".

III. 2. The Soviet Hen is bigger than the American one

“Doamne-Dumnezeule, dacă exista un rai al găinilor, te rog să mă duci și pe mine acolo.”²⁴ (Lungu 2007: 143)

In the previous subchapter we have addressed the notion of a different individual past. *Hen's Heaven* also proposes this distinction between the inhabitants of Salcânilor Street who appear to argue only when it comes to their memories and when they talk about Nicolae Ceaușescu: “dacă fusese un om mare, pe care noi nu suntem în stare să-l înțelegem, sau fusese un dictator cu inimă de câine; dacă pe vremea lui era mai bine decât după”²⁵ (Lungu: 2007, 123). This can also be regarded as one of the effects of the long promoted and embraced personality cult that the former dictator had implemented following the North Korean model:

“Whether celebrated as a heroic leader and benevolent father of the Socialist Romanian nation during communism or reviled as a malefic spirit and all-powerful dictator after 1989, Ceaușescu's figure loomed so large in the Romanian imagination that only the registers of the sublime, the heroic, or the tragic could contain him.” (Georgescu D. 162)

The years that followed his death in '89 still proved to help fixate his image deep into the Romanian consciousness. Even though in the majority of cases, his mentioning occurs under negative connotations, his presence has gained mystical proportions. Romanians had lost more than expected at the fall of Communism: they had lost the *most beloved son of the people* and had witnessed him evolve from a good Ruler of the country into a cruel dictator. Thus their nostalgia can be regarded as having an extra value and being, therefore, inconsolable.

²⁴ “God-almighty, if there is a hen's Heaven, please take me there as well.”

²⁵ If he had been a great man, that we just can't seem to understand, or if he had been a coldhearted dictator; if it was better during his time or afterwards...

Lungu's second book, *Hen's Heaven. False novel of Hearsay and Mysteries*, contains the same social criticism as the one previously dealt with. In this novel we can observe the same structural pattern as in *I am a communist Biddy!* even though there are some differences as well, unlike the first one, that deals mainly with one individual's private Universe, the novel that will be addressed next focuses on an entire community's daily existence and how its members interact with one another and with the *outside* world.

As Lungu carefully interweaves post-communist nostalgic feelings with the meanings that the people from Salcânilor Street attribute to their daily existence, we find ourselves facing yet another text that brings forth this Eastern European country's inability to adhere to a new, open society. Their relentless struggle of holding on to former socialist ideals cripples the inhabitants of this closed micro cosmos up to the point of no return. Unlike Mica Apostoae, here we do not have just one main character to refer to, but rather a collective one. The Salcânilor Street community thinks and behaves as one, reacting the same way in the face of political disappointment.

Hen's Heaven begins with an apparently unimportant event that, however, circles the entire street in just a couple of hours. Milica, one of the many people who live there, enters the Colonel's house (the biggest one on their street) and shares her discoveries with the rest of her neighbors. But as the story passes from one individual to another, the information suffers alteration in the process until reaching mythical proportions: "De deasupra ușii de la intrarea în cameră, te privește un cerb atât de fioros, că dacă te uiți în ochii lui și ești gravidă, poți avorta spontan, iar dacă nu ești, ți se pot întâmpla alte grozăvii, fără a exclude chiar paralizia"²⁶ (Lungu 2007: 15). Milica thus finds herself in the privileged position of being the only neighbor to have ever crossed the Colonel's doorstep.

Nonetheless, this privilege quickly fades away as Dom' Petrică²⁷ embarks on a critical analysis of why Milica decided to use that particular family's phone in

²⁶ "From above the door, just before entering the room, a deer so fierce looks down at you, that if you stare it in the eyes and you're with child, you can have a miscarriage, and if you're not, other horrors can happen to you, without excluding even paralysis".

²⁷ A common form of addressing someone, especially in the rural part of Romania, that could be translated as "Mister Petrică".

the first place, and, as a consequence, the inhabitants of Strada Salcânilor²⁸ move on to the next *big thing* on their agenda, namely giving their personal inputs about Veronica Geambașu's unexpected pregnancy.

Dan Lungu brilliantly moves from one point of *major public interest* to another during the first couple of pages of his book. This velocity in storytelling also serves as an example of how the wheels of gossip function within a small community located in between a dangerous ravine (now covered by the construction of the Colonel's house) and an abstract, almost mystical Universe, that is simply referred to as *the City*.

One character that appears unchanged in both of Lungu's novels is Nea Mitu²⁹, whose only function seems to be that of an *entertainer*, interrupting the narrative flow, every once in a while, with one of his stories that have Nicolae Ceaușescu as main character. His audience sometimes doubts the authenticity of such rendering of events, but as their only scope is to amuse the listener, all negative feedback is slowly pushed aside giving Nea Mitu the opportunity to share his jokes and political satires with whoever is willing to hear him out.

Neither in *I am a communist Bidy!*, nor in *Hen's Heaven* do we hardly get any information on who Nea Mitu actually is. Towards the end of the first book we find evidence that seems to link this character to the political police, but as Aurelia lets Mica and Sanda know that their former co-worker appeared to have been an informant, Emilia Apostoae gets angry at this idea and refuses to accept this possibility.

Nea Mitu links the worlds from the two novels together when his stories become a source of amusement and find themselves retold by other characters within the text. Mica's sister mentions that the last time she heard anything about him was before the Tractorul Șifonat³⁰ tavern closed down, when he was still making people laugh with his storytelling (Lungu 2011: 185). Thus we can observe the evolution of this particular character as we encounter him talking to his neighbors from Salcânilor Street about his past, introducing the overlapping

²⁸ Salcânilor Street.

²⁹ Another colloquial form of the traditional Mister, mostly used in the Romanian countryside.

³⁰ The Crumpled Tractor

of two timeframes: that of Emilia Apostoae's past from *I am a communist Biddy!* and that of his own in Dan Lungu's first published novel, *Hen's Heaven*.

As Nea Mitu is one of Transition's greatest critic, his sayings become philosophical statements that contain a secret meaning to the political aspect of daily human life: "Dacă ăsta-i tunelul, luuuung de ți se acrește, luminița aia din capăt, aia mititică și prăpădită, nu-i soarele, bre omule, e-un teveu color, ascultați la mine"³¹ (Lungu 2007: 85). And through this saying, we get a clearer picture of how the transition process was regarded by the majority of Romanians after the '89 Revolution.

At the end of the first chapter we are being informed that an *incredible* event will later on constitute the main topic for gossip on Salcânilor Street, even though we will not find out what that event is until Chapter Seven.

As the story progresses and we become acquainted to the collective main character of the book, we are made part of these peoples' individual existences by understanding what links them together and makes them act like a unit. Nea Mitu might have been an informant for the Securitate in *I am a communist Biddy!* but in *Hen's Heaven* he is presented in a mild, compromising light, making the reader sympathize and relate to him. This is why when he says "dacă vreți să-l vedeți pe cel mai mare fraier al tranziției, fraierul fraierilor, uitați-vă bine la mine, că eu sunt ăla..."³² (Ibid. 81), you realize that compared to other collaborators of the regime, he might just as well have been the lesser out of two evils.

However, not all the people that live on this street receive the same treatment and are considered neighbors as, for example, in the case of the Colonel. Unlike Vera Socoliuc, a woman who had arrived years ago from Bucharest, married and never again left, the Colonel had never truly received his *baptism* that would eventually humanize and turn him into one of them. This sort of christening would usually take the form of a prank or a joke, at the expense of every new member of this closed community.

³¹ If this is the tunnel, loooong that you feel you've had enough, that little light at the end, small and flickering, ain't the Sun, my friend, it's a colour TV, mark my words.

³² If you want to see the biggest transition sucker, the sucker of suckers, take a good looks at me because I'm him...

While Vera Socoliuc “*era ciudata, dar era de pe strada lor*”³³ (Ibid. 100), the Colonel was still very much a stranger in their eyes: “În nicio o împrejurare nu se făcuse de răs (...) Niciodată nu le solicitase vreun ajutor, să le dea sentimentul că în unele momente pot fi egali. Nu!”³⁴ (Ibid. 99). It is because of this distinction that the Colonel, even though he is retired as many others on the street, will never truly be a part of this community, nor could he ever share their Communist past.

After the unusual event that made his daily life a bit more exciting, Relu Covalciuc decides to share this piece of information with his friends, who happen to also be his neighbors. As he makes his way to Tractorul Șifonat he starts to grow melancholic about the past as he looks at the houses he comes across: “Privite cu atenție, aproape toate casele de pe stradă trădau locul de muncă al proprietarului, mai ales pe cel de dinainte de ’89, când se puteau fura în voie tot felul de materiale”³⁵ (Ibid. 109). Nothing, he felt, was as it once was: “Înainte nu se găsea nimic, dar congelatoarele erau pline. Trebuia să te descurci. Toată lumea se descurca! Și-apoi: dacă nu era – nu era pentru toată lumea; acum alții au, iar alții nu (...) Nu, nimic nu mai este ca înainte!”³⁶ (Ibid. 113). We find out that Relu is not the only one to miss the good old days and that Dom’ Petrică also, sometimes, reminisces, in his backyard, about the better days, and paints fruit and vegetables the way he once did as an employee of the State.

It is within this, almost surreally closed, village that Relu Covalciuc’s “Hen’s Heaven” (Ibid. 128) doesn’t resemble Ticu Zidaru’s idea of one for men. As Relu begins to share with his neighbors how he woke up one day to find his garden filled with worms, he first presents the context in which such a thing occurred: his premonition dream. He tells the other men the nightmare he had had of being on a beach, at night, and hearing a menacing voice telling him to take care of all the hens that had appeared out of thin air. But then the voice starts to resemble

³³ *was peculiar, but she was from their street.*

³⁴ *Under no circumstance had he made a fool of himself (...) Never had he ever asked for their help, giving them the feeling that, some of the times, they could be equals. No!*

³⁵ *Looked at closely, almost all the houses on the street betrayed the owner’s workplace, especially the one before ’89, when all sorts of materials could be stolen at will.*

³⁶ *Before, you couldn’t find anything, but the freezers were full. You had to manage. Everybody managed! And then: if it wasn’t – there wasn’t for anybody; now some have, while others don’t (...) No, nothing is as it once was!*

that of a Party's official: "Hai, tovarășe, că întârzii la program"³⁷ (Ibid. 138) and the hens grow twice his size and transparent: "Vezi, tovarășe Covalciuc, vezi? M-a dojenit vocea, părintește. Găina sovietică e mai mare decât cea Americană (...) Toate sunt miresele tale, tovarășe! Partidul ține la tine, Partidul te iubește, habar n-ai cât cheltuiește Partidul pentru tine!"³⁸ (Ibid. 139).

When he awakes from his dream, Relu Covalciuc begins to ponder, over a cup of coffee, if there exists such a thing as a hen's heaven and feels sad that he too isn't one of them:

Mi-ar fi plăcut să moțai cu capu-n pene, să mă doară în cur de tot și de toate, să nu mă mai cicălească nimeni și să nu-mi trebuiască nenorocita asta de pensie. Să nu mai am de plătit telefonul, curentul, gazul, apa și cablul. Să nu merg să votez. Să nu mă enervez la știri. Vă dați seama ce minunată-i viața de găină?³⁹ (Ibid. 143)

And as he ends his philosophical rambling with "Doamne-Dumnezeule, dacă există un rai al găinilor, te rog să mă duci și pe mine acolo"⁴⁰ (Ibid.), he goes to check on his hens only to find his entire yard crawling with worms.

Lungu's narrative slowly builds up to this strange event, but we fail to receive a logical explanation until Chapter Ten. Before Milica's boy could take this worm story to Television, Relu Covalciuc's garden quickly returned to its original state: worm-free. The infestation had lasted three days and had been a consequence of an electrical problem that forced the creatures to emerge into his backyard.

But as Relu mourns the disappearance of the worms, the novel closes with a public display of violence between another neighbor and his daughter's lover,

³⁷ Come one, comrade, or you'll be late with you schedule.

³⁸ See, comrade Covalciuc, see? The voice scolded me, like a parent would. The Soviet Hen is bigger than the American one (...) they're all your brides, comrade! 'The Party cares about you, the Party loves you, you have nu idea how much the Party spends on you!'. Common slogan chanted against the Ceausescu regime.

³⁹ I would've liked to doze off with my head in my feathers, to give a rat's ass about everything and everyone, and to have no one to nag me and not need this God-damned pension. Not to have to pay the phone anymore, the electricity, gas, water and cable. Not having to go vote. Not getting angry watching the news. Do you realize how wonderful a hen's life is?

⁴⁰ "God-almighty, if there is a hen's Heaven, please take me there as well."

who had arrived on their street with his motorcycle. This event made Mr Covalciuc aware that, no matter the reason for his worms' retreat, nobody would care as long as they had something better to gossip about.

Ticu Zidaru's bar (Tractorul șifonat) functions as a beehive drawing all of the male population around the tractor cabin, located in the back of his garden. After he has worked as a tractor driver and tried to get into the agriculture business, he sold his truck for parts, saving only the upper one to make a little shop out of it. This is how Ticu Zidaru's "Café-Bar" (Ibid. 115) came into being. And as it stood binding this community of people even closer to one another, his only regret was that he hadn't named it "Ca Acasă"⁴¹ (Ibid. 120) because that was, in effect, what it represented for all of them: a place where they could unwind and speak their mind without the fear of censorship.

⁴¹ Just like Home.

Conclusion

The present thesis has tried to highlight the importance of post-communist nostalgia depicted in two of Dan Lungu's novels, while also stressing the necessity to include him in a category reserved for writers of relevance within the post-socialist discourse. As his own educational background seems to suggest, his personal take on notions such as *Romanianness* and actual daily existence during the Transition Years proves to be insightful.

After careful consideration of which novels to use, I have chosen *I am a communist Bidy!* and *Hen's Heaven. False novel of Hearsay and Mysteries* hoping to better illustrate how a split in the personality of the individual occurred, affecting the way he would later on relate to ideas such as national identity and the official historical past.

Furthermore, as I have tried to portray, the scholarship on post-communist nostalgia in Eastern European countries could still benefit from some additional analysis. The works of Maria Todorova and Katherine Verdery have proven to be of immense help in the structuring of this paper, as most of their theories and suggestions seem to be focused on making other nations understand how to come to terms with their own historical past.

As history has been a recurrent theme throughout the paper, a chronological exemplification has been made, using the works of Robert Service, Lucian Boia and others, in order to portray an accurate depiction of Romanian society during and after Communism. The presentation of this socio-historical background has intended to smooth the transition between social reality and literary works.

Dan Lungu's talent for giving an accurate depiction of Romania's Transition Years and a national feeling of disillusionment in political representatives, should, in my opinion, serve as subject for further analysis. Even though most of his works have not been published in English, this should not discourage researchers, as this is a mere inconvenience. His characters are skilfully carved to resemble those of existing human personalities among the Romanian populace. What seems to link all of his characters together is the presence of a common nostalgia mixed with resentment towards former dictatorial regimes. It

is this presence in particular that I was interested in analysing throughout this investigation.

As nowadays, scholarship on post-communist nostalgia appears to be reduced in comparison to researches on post-colonialism or imperialism, I subscribe to the existence of similarities between the two, but can only hope for an expanding of the first, for writers, according to Stalin, are “engineers of the human souls” (qtd. in Wachtel: 5).

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