11 books contemporary romanian prose

Translated into English by Alistair Ian Blyth
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Those who want to get to know us should start by reading us!

In this catalogue you will find a comprehensive picture of what Romanian literature means today. In the first place, it is worth knowing that, thanks to the combined efforts of two publishers, Polirom and Cartea Românească, literature in Romania today is much more than just a row of books on a shelf or a salon pastime. Contemporary literature is alive, is read with interest, stirs public debate, and creates currents of feeling and opinion. What is certain is that in Romania it is no longer possible to write or read literature in the same way as fifteen years ago. Not only the more intense rhythm of life but also a vital connection to the realities of the day oblige contemporary writers to problematise the world around them, from the political baggage of their personal memory to the miracles of everyday
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life, from sub-humanity to postmodernism. More recently, it has also been literature that has succeeded in imprinting an image of Romania’s identity abroad. The national and international prizes won by Romanian authors, the numerous book fairs at which Polirom and Cartea Românească have taken part (Frankfurt, Leipzig, Lille, Zurich, Basle, Berne), and also numerous publications abroad, whether already in print or in press, have confirmed not only individual authors but also an entire literary wave.

Our list of authors represents an eloquent selection, comprising a number of different generations and, implicitly, an entire historical and aesthetic process of becoming. The latest novel by renowned writer Gabriela Adameșteanu, The Encounter, already translated by Gallimard, is a sample of all that was best in Romanian literature before the great upheaval of 1989: poetic, ethically involved prose about lies and survival. From the constellation of writers who came to the fore in the 1980s, Ioan Grosăn is an agile juggler of diver literary styles, who manages to transform history into humorous fable, while Petru Cimpoesu brings bonhomie to the miraculous milieu of a tenement block.

In the 1990s, the comic – verging on the grotesque – reality of transition to a free market economy produced a harsh, gritty literature of lowlife brawlers, in the explosively picturesque writing of Radu Aldulescu, but also a more relaxed trend in the ironic prose of Danu Lungu, with its problematisation of social reality. The decade was also ripe for experimental, lyrical and sensual women’s writing, a good example of which is Ruxandra Cesereanu.

The literature of the generation that has made its mark since 2000 is one that is more ironic, expressing the desire of characters (as well as of authors) to construct a mythology, to reinvent themselves among the shards of a shattered reality. This trend is visible in the case of two excellent volumes of memoirs, one about a childhood spent in the Soviet Union, written by Vasile Ern, and the other a nostalgic reminiscence of growing up during the communist period in Romania, fashioned by “four hands”, brothers Filip and Matei Florian. In Our Special Envoy, Florin Lăzărescu writes a novel brimming with bizarre happenings, about a farcical world in search of its own innocence. Lucian Dan Teodorovici presents us with a Romania of chaos.
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and crippled willpower, with gravely comic heroes who fail in their suicide attempts because even death rejects them, making a mockery of them. Lastly, *Theodotius the Small*, by Răzvan Rădulescu, is a polished fairytale of growing up, for refined readers.

This is who we are. Want to get to know us? Read us!

*Doris Mironescu*
The Encounter
Gabriela Adameșteanu worked as an editor for encyclopaedic and literary publishing houses from 1965 to 1990. She ran 22, a political, social, economic and cultural weekly (1991-2005), and is currently the head of the Bucureștiul Cultural literary supplement. She was President of the Romanian PEN Club from 2004 to 2006. She was awarded the Hellmann Hammett Grant by the Human Rights Watch in 2002 for her commitment to the democratisation of Romania. In Romania, Adameșteanu’s fiction has won many national awards and is constantly reprinted. Her latest novel, *The Encounter* (Întîlnirea, 2003, 2007), a modern echo of Homer’s *Odyssey*, focuses on the difficulty of communication between an émigré and his country of origin, a country which has been isolated from the world by years of dictatorship. The novel was published in Bulgarian translation in 2005 and in Hungarian in 2007. Adameșteanu’s first novel, *The Smooth Way of Every Day* (Drumul egal al fiecărei zile, 1975, 1978, 1991, 2004), alternates the theme of a young girl’s *éducation sentimentale* with that of success and failure in one’s personal destiny. In 2008, the novel is due to be published in France and Bulgaria. Her best-known work, *Wasted Morning* (Dimineața Pierdută, 1984, 1992, 1998, 2003), translated and published in France (Gallimard, 2005), Israel (2007), Bulgaria (2007), and Estonia (1992), was short-listed for the Latin Union Prize (2006). With an acute feeling for the idioms and attitudes of different social classes and personalities, in this polyphonic novel Adameșteanu creates a multi-perspective portrait of Romania in the twentieth century, in which individual destinies and collective tragedies are juxtaposed. Some of the short stories from her collections *Give Yourself a Holiday* (Daruieste-ti o zi de vacanta, 1979) and *Summer-Spring* (Vara-primavara, 1989) have been published in American, Russian, Austrian, German, Hungarian, and Estonian anthologies. Her other work includes translations from French literature (Maupassant, Bianciotti), and collections of journalism: *The Obsession with Politics* (Obesia politicii, 1995) and *The Two Romanias* (Cele două Români, 2001).

**Gabriela Adameșteanu, The Encounter, novel**
Year of publication: 2007
320 pages
The Encounter
– synopsis –

Harassed by train conductors who demand his ticket in several languages, a middle-aged man endures a nightmare of hiding and flight, before managing to cross a frontier guarded by soldiers and dogs. He has returned to his native village. There he finds his whole family gathered around a big table, as though for a wedding, baptism or wake, but no one recognises him, not even his mother. The relatives take him for a lunatic on the run from an asylum, or for a Securitate informer, and chase him away.

Traian Manu, a renowned scientist in Italy, wakes up from this typical dream of exile in a car driven by his wife on the highway between Naples and Rome. In spite of his wife Christa’s opposition, Manu has agreed to visit his native country of Romania,
Synopsis

at the insistence of a former colleague, Alexandru Stan, in spite
of not having had any ties with the country since it became a
Communist state. It is August 1986. Romania is still a Communist
country, ruled by Nicolae Ceausescu.

Of German origin, Christa understands Manu’s nostalgia but
warns him of the dangers lurking in any totalitarian regime. To
persuade him, she tells him stories from her own childhood and
adolescence during the Nazi dictatorship, about growing up
with the feeling of being permanently watched, about the hu-
miliation of being part of a collective that glorifies a dictator, and
about how she lost her family members one by one.

Manu’s trip to Romania is in fact the brainchild of collabora-
tion between Alexandru Stan, a Romanian official, and the
Securitate. The aim is for the communist regime to take advan-
tage of Manu’s relations in the West. Manu is followed every-
where, his every move is recorded on tape and in reports by the
spy team, which finally (and paradoxically) succeeds in making
Manu trust only those people who are actually Securitate agents—
to the exclusion of all the innocent people who had been
waiting for him in good faith. All this evolves into a perverse
plan to enlist the innocents as informers via a blackmail scheme.
Among the innocents is Manu’s nephew, Daniel, who vainly
hopes to be recognised as his uncle’s younger alter ego—a
character important to the story on account of his incisive point
of view.

The Securitate’s plan falls apart at the very moment when
there is nothing left to oppose them. Safely back in his adopted
country, exhausted by the trip and wracked by conflicting emo-
tions, Manu suffers a heart attack in the car as his wife drives
him home.
Don’t you hear – the door of the next compartment has just opened? It must be a ticket collector. Who else raps the words out like that? Everything so clear and distinct:

“Gutten Tag, geben Sie mir bitte!”

Feverish, tense, you try to calm your rapid breathing. Your glance fastens sideways on the dark, shining window. Except that you can’t see the landscapes coursing into the night. You’re in an express, an intercity.

“Den Fahrschein Bitte!”

You pat your pockets as though you wanted to go out into the corridor to smoke. The people in the compartment keep their eyes trained – on you. Are they looking? Aren’t they?

“Bonjour, mesdames, messieurs! Vos billets, s’il vous plaît!”
Rising slowly from the bench, you glimpse your petrified face; it flashes in the emptiness of a mirror. Is it your face? It seems not.

“Your ticket please!”

You squeeze past overcoats, suit jackets, hats; past shoes – look! as shiny as the moon – that you try not to tread on; you try hard; you ooze along the corridor; your shadow slides past motionless faces behind compartment windows – rhythmically slides – and you hope those motionless… are convinced you’re going to the restaurant, the buffet, the toilet, quickly, quicker, even quicker, quicker still, yet…

“Den Fahrschein Bitte!”

The speed of the train buffets you against the walls; you’re in an express, a train de grande vitesse. Tgv. You are in the Drăgășani train, third class – puffy black curls: they clog your throat, and a bee buzzes around for a long time. But look, two steps away, the railway clerk’s uniform, the conductor’s cap, his hand held out to punch you ticket.

“Good morning, sir! Your ticket, please!”

Now a trapdoor will open beneath your feet and still explaining, shame-faced, sweaty, jumbled among pronunciations, declensions, conjugations, you’ll summersault between the rapidly turning wheels until you hit wet darkness.

How lucky: the conductor didn’t notice you when he was two steps away! Luckier still, no one sees you struggling under the mound of clothes, heavy overcoats, uniforms, smoking jackets, rustling trench coats, white sheets, the shroud from which rises a cloud of moths. No, it’s always the same bee…

“Den Fahrscheine bitte!”

Only now it seems… You’ve sprung out of the closet and taken off pell-mell… you hear the soldiers’ boots behind you, your pajamas have come undone and your cheeks are full of lather, only half-shaved, running; at a gallop you knock against the walls, the compartment windows: shining, smoky, dark. You’re in a tgv, in a freight train, in an intercity and foreign faces watch you in a strained way; you run, run, run! Look an empty compartment… someone opens the door with a decisive hand, utters flatly:

“Gli biglietti, prego!”

So that the suspicious faces in the corridor should believe that the one you watch has entered the empty compartment…
his face flashes in the emptiness of the mirror – it’s his cap, it’s your face; hide quickly – where?

Calm down. It’s the same dream; this happened before at… you have experienced this before – where? You don’t remember when, you don’t remember where, ah, how tedious… You rummage in your pockets for blood pressure pills. You come up with cigarettes, drops, crumpled pages. Only you don’t recognise the language in which the text for conference is written – you don’t recall the alphabet. What will you read to the audience then? You don’t know. But now you’ve got up from your place at the window of the tgv, of the intercity. You’re well hidden in this freight train. You clean your pipe ostentatiously as though getting ready to go out in the corridor, but why this disapproving silence? Ah, yes! It’s a non-smoking compartment – it’s forbidden to smoke in the train – you’ve crawled under the bench, you crouch, you make yourself small, smaller, even smaller among the turning wheels. You squat on all fours and you hold your breath, from there, from the luggage rack where you’ve clambered, you see the shadow that darkens the glass.

“Good morning, bitte! Vos billets mesdames, messieurs s’il vous plaît!”

Now the door of the compartment is going to open and crouching, scared, you’ll somersault into the darkness cut by blinding wreaths of light.

Above, on the overpass, look there’s a soldier with rifle at the ready, motionless, a statue.

“Who are you? Where have you come from? Where are you going? Show me your papers! Answer!”

You’ve sprung out from under the bench, your horrified face flashes in the emptiness of a mirror.

“Your papers!” shout the customs officers, the border guards, and they beat the door of the empty compartment with their rifle butts.

“Your papers! Who are you?”
“Where are you going?”
“What are you doing here?”
“Answer, or I’ll shoot!”
Don’t be afraid, relax, it’s the same tormenting dream. In order to wake up, you’ve dug your soft nails into the soft flesh. You try to make a fist of your flaccid hand, but you’re still here. Whatever you do, forget it, you can’t escape… you run madly – look, there’s the conductor’s uniform at the end of the corridor – you race toward him like a lunatic, it’s too late to turn back now, it’s too late… you can’t pretend not to see him any more, he’s in front of you, two steps away.

“You papers!” the words come from behind.

How many times have you not sat like that, in the deserted station… getting ready to leave… coming from school; with a trembling hand, you wipe your brows, your damp cheeks… good: you’ve managed to escape from that train full of conductors and armed soldiers… if only the red spots – like blood – would disappear for once from the wet cement and the ringing that pierces your temples, the back of your neck… you look randomly at the young, reddish fur that is sliding across the sleepers under the train… how much this dog looks like your Federigo at home, that way of arching his bushy tail, his tensed legs.

“Fede! Fede!” you cry out, but the dog growls under the train and starts sniffing. What trail is he following? Could it be yours? Only now you’ve turned your back so as not to be recognised by the two sullen soldiers – rifles clenched in their fists.

“You papers!”
“Where are you going? Answer!”
“Where have you come from? Show us your papers!”
“Halt! Halt or I’ll shoot!”

You move hurriedly, you run, quickly, quicker, even quicker – you sense the station behind you growing smaller, ever smaller, and the red stains, like fresh blood, throb on the fogbound footpath where you advance on weakening legs, your shoes wet with dew. There’s a sudden change of sounds, of colours, of light. The intense green of the fir trees climbs up toward the
mist-swathed slope beneath: the tender green of the meadows, the viscid footpath where you crush fibrous tufts of bride grass with boots that pinch you, be careful not to slip! Careful not to...

How many times have you been this way, this way, like this... at the same time, with you, at every step, countless legs climb the cement steps of the bridge below – the water: three tiny strands, sucked by sandy tongues... great, rounded boulders with run-of-the-mill, seasonal tourists on top. Soft, whitish corpses waiting in vain for the sun to come again over the shadow-studded land. Thus came we to the bourn of deep-flowing Ocean. / There the city of the Gimmerian tribe doth lie, / By fog and darkness enveloped. Never upon them / Doth the radiant Sun cast down his rays.

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Here is the DRY CLEANER’S, the signboard attached to the dirty, white wall, stuck in the sandy earth, here is the sheeting case for the eiderdown – rough whitish-yellow shrouds, hung up to dry – above them puffy black curls flow over the heads of the ones who ceaselessly debark. They take down suitcases, satchels, sacks, valises, candles adorned with paper flowers, big wooden boxes, coffins. You pant. You wipe your damp cheeks with your tremulous hand, you clench your hand on the balustrade, you don’t dare to look into the astounding emptiness for fear of slipping off the cement steps into the cold gloom. Who had you make such a trip, stranger, through fog and darkness?

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Precisely because you know the verse very well, you realize that you’ve made a mistake, who had you make such a trip, stranger, through fog and darkness, but what follows? Your bench is right near the open window, a flowering apple bough touches the sill, bunches of puffy bees and pink flowers heap up among the little green leaves.

“...hey, come in,” you whisper to your bee, “come in and sting Mr. ...”

“...than talking to yourself in your corner, come up and recite in front of the class,” says the teacher, arming himself with the ruler from his desk.
Gabriela Adameșteanu

You're not afraid of the teacher's ruler. For 20 lei you make cheat sheets for ancient Greek and Latin, for the lads in the upper classes, but your memory lapses right now; that's why you repeat the poetry to yourself in a whisper on the way to the head of the class, but is there anything harder in life than the road that you have chosen alone through fog and darkness?

On the floorboards blackened by diesel oil, between the two rows of benches pink stains throb under your boots; there are pink flowers from the flowering apple tree outside, a light breath of wind cast them through window; febrile, you walk tensely over the shiny floor, the mirror, be careful not to slip, be careful not to slip! You clear your throat; you arrange your face that flashes in the emptiness of the open window. Is it your face? It seems it's not. You recite: hapless man, better abandon the road to rocky Ithaca rather than wander for years through darkness and fog toward the place where no one awaits you any more.

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You've made a mistake. The word is on the tip of your tongue, but you don't remember it any more, you have a lapse and your tongue cleaves to the roof of your mouth... you search hurriedly in your inside pocket, where you keep your wallet; it's empty, only a bit of change, small and black. A little hole in the middle – a Mycenaean coin, Assyrian, Egyptian – you hold it in your clenched fist... they'll ask you for it in the car park, then when you cross the bridge. You don't find the crumpled sheets with the text of the conference to see where you made your mistake, but what luck! The teacher is deaf: he doesn't hear; he too has grown old in the meantime.

“Good morning, mesdames, messieurs, vos billets, s'il vous plaît,” intones the teacher in a melodious low baritone.

Rapping the door with the ruler, he's put his cap on his head and gone out. You stay alone in the empty classroom; you can't leave, if you don't remember the verse, even if they're waiting for you at home with the table laid. Will they still recognise you... won't they recognise you any more, after so many years of wandering over the seas, through storm and fog?
There's the spire of the church in the valley. Once you have arrived next to them, nothing will remain except to cross the street, and then you're home. What astonished faces they'll have, what shouts of joy they'll give when they see you! Will they recognise you? Won't they recognise you, after so many years of wandering alone in darkness and fog? So many years have passed since you left... it was only yesterday that they drove you to the station.

You try to make out something through the old fence laths: you stand on tiptoes trying to look in the courtyard, but the fence is too high and the green paint sticks to the tips of your fingers. The fence has just been painted; you painted it yourself yesterday before leaving for the station. The house is red, made of brick; they didn't get to finish it because the bank went bust. The banks were nationalised, all of them. The bank won't give them credit any more because you've left home.

Now you're under the cypress at the gate, and you ask yourself: should I draw the bolt? Shouldn't I? Look what a table they've laid in the courtyard, a wedding repast, a baptismal or funeral repast. I told them that after his many adventures and after he lost his comrades, after twenty years, he'd get back home, unknown to all, and all that is fulfilling itself now.

How tedious, how excruciating! How many times you have not stood here under the plum tree with you hand on the barely opened gate, ready to give it a shove!

A child with a dirty face and a bare bottom rises near the fence and pulls up his trousers. Whose child might this be, with snot shining silvery on his cheeks like the sun-dried slime of a snail? You've lost sight of him in the courtyard full of the buzz of bees, of sunlight... it's summer, it's spring... And this child, left to sprout up on his own like a weed, you know him... you've seen him somewhere before, where? Ah, yes! Your mother always carried a picture of him in her purse, a sepia photograph, with coffee or oil stains and dog-eared corners.
Heavy, deliberate steps on the gravel with your stiff, shrivelled footwear, you would like to have all eyes raised toward you, to see you, to hear you. They sit at the table, and the shadow of the pine covers their faces, but is there a pine? Was there a cypress in your yard? A pine in the yard brings bad luck, it's well known, whereas you saw the cypress in Rome.

You tramp over the pebbles in your dusty, worn-out footwear, heavy, deliberate steps – only you see them, their eyes turned toward you… so that you can tell them, “I’m glad to have found you! Enjoy your meal!” Except that they keep eating their meal, they don't even look at you.

And yet they must have known that you were coming, otherwise they wouldn't all be here, all of them, all. So they're all living… no one has died. So the letters, telegrams, announcements of death were all untrue! What happiness, what relief, Oh Lord! Mother and father, look at them sitting as usual at the end of the table. And Mama, who keeps getting up as she always does for a glass of wine or a breadbasket! So they are living, so they're alive! Lord God, what a miracle, what joy, how good! The rest was all a lie, dream, illusion… All you believed, all you suffered all these years, for nothing…

You go closer – smiling broadly, happily – even if they go on talking among themselves in low voices, as if they didn’t see you, as if they didn’t hear your steps… No one raises his eyes to you… all they do is pour wine, water into each other’s glasses. And you, who made such a long journey to get here… for so many tortured nights, you ran through trains full of ticket collectors and soldiers… you’re too tired to savour the joke. And if they don’t understand, then at least she, at least she should be able to understand.

“Well!" you cry in a low voice.

But it's clear she hasn’t heard you, she’s old, poor thing, her senses have dimmed.

“Well!"

You try to cry louder, but you strain your voice in vain, your straining vocal chords emit only an indistinct throaty sound.
“Mama!”

You strive, you strain desperately, but you can’t hear your own voice, and you cast no shadow on the grass. How can it be? Not even she turns her face toward you. And you, who spent all night jumping from one train to the other, hiding under the banquettes, in trains guarded by armed soldiers, you came all the way here in pajamas, barefoot, with your cheeks full of lather, only half-shaved! As though from another life, as though from a dream, you remember all that you suffered on this endless journey, and she doesn’t even ask you, “is that you, my dear?” Or else shout: “It’s him, Him, it is, Lord God, how can I thank you for having lived to see this day, to see him here, with us, among our own? Come to me, you, my dearest. So many people have been waiting for you for so long, after all! Come on, say something! Are you thirsty? Are you hungry? Are you tired? Say something!” Only there is nothing more difficult than to come hither, through fog and darkness…

But she remains silent. She sits stock-still, with her head turned, the shadow of the cypress tree covers her face, and what else can you do then but call out one more time:

“Mama!”

***

She looks at you in astonishment.

“What do you want, stranger?”

Have you really changed so much that even she doesn’t recognise you anymore?

“It’s me, Mama! It’s me, your son! Why do you call me stranger?”

How ill you must look if her gaze fills with pity and her voice softens all of a sudden:

Hapless man! Who knows where you come from? How much you have suffered, if you don’t even remember your mother. Come on, sit down, have a glass of wine, a piece of bread! No one will die if before leaving you pause awhile to catch your breath.

“Leave to go where?” you whisper exhausted.

“What do you mean, where? To your own country, back to where you came from. After all, it’s obvious you’re not one of us…”
“What makes it look like that?”
“What do you mean, what makes it look like that? Your walk, your coat.”
“Come on, stop joking, Mama! You can see that I’m too tired, and I don’t feel like joking!”
“Hapless man! Maybe you were in prison and you lost your mind there because of all you suffered if you keep thinking that I’m your mother for good and all.”
No, she’s not joking! She really didn’t recognise you, poor woman! To what state has old age reduced her if she doesn’t realise that this is your voice that trembles now, impatient and irritated?
“What else do you want me to call you? I’ve never called you anything but Mama!”
“You must be ill, very ill, hapless man, if you have no idea of when you’re awake, of when you’re dreaming, things so simple that even a child knows them! It’s a terrible illness not to know who you are any more.”

***

“Who else could I be? I’m me!”
They’ve all raised their heads; they look at you.
“It’s me, for God’s sake! Can’t you see it’s me, me, me, me!”
They remain silent.
“It’s me, your son, brother nephew, uncle, brother-in-law!”
The tense faces around the table look at you as though through glass. She smiles sadly; she waves her hand in disgust:
“How good it would be if you were you, but you can’t be! If you were you, you wouldn’t be here with us, you’d be far away! If you were you, you’d have gone to the realm beyond; you’d be with the dead.”
“Take a good look at me,” you cry out to them. “I am still me, except that seven years have passed, fourteen, twenty, since I left! I couldn’t stay the way I was in the photographs! I’m weaker, older, it was a long journey to get here, I’m unwashed, in rags, unshaven. I couldn’t look at myself, not even by candle-light! And I can’t even tell how much I’ve changed because here, at your place, the mirrors are covered, all of them...”
How tedious, how excruciating! How many times has he not lived this scene in the same way? Those around the table set for a baptism, for a funeral repast, for a marriage – smiling in embarrassed silence – and you crying out nervously:

“It’s me, except that I’ve put on weight since I switched from cigarettes to pipe-smoking. But I haven’t got that fat either, not so fat that you wouldn’t recognise me!”

They’ve got up from their chairs: they make as though to come closer, they whisper among themselves, they all cry out, their voices all overlap at the same time.

“Who is it you say you belong to? What family do you come from?”

“He claims to be one of the family!”

“But where are you suitcases?”

“If you were he, you wouldn’t have turned up unshaven and barefoot at the wedding!”

“When relative did he say he was?”

“If you were him, you’d be wearing a Rolex and you’d have a huge Mercedes at the gate!”

“It’s not him. Don’t you see his shiny shoes? Don’t you see the expensive coat?”

“An impostor, mind your own business!”

“Who do you belong to? What are you doing here?”

“Who do you belong to? Answer.”

“SSsst! Let him go. Don’t you see? He’s from Securitate!”

“A hapless madman! Look at the state he’s in! A hapless madman, escaped from a madhouse!”

“A dangerous madman!”

“Be careful, I’ve told you who he’s with!”

“They sent him here to test us! He wants to hear what we say, what we talk about, so that he can inform on us!”

“SSsshhh! We don’t have any foreign relatives over there!”

“We only have one, who’s been dead for a long while!”

“We celebrated his seventh anniversary!”

“His fourteenth!”

“His twenty-first!”

“An impostor!”

“An informer!”
“Don’t you see how he’s looking all around? How…”
“None of our people went abroad. Understand that, stranger!”
“We have no relatives over there!”
“We don’t need to leave the country!”
“We’ve never been further than our garden gate!”
“Be careful! He’s only playing the madman so he can hear what we say and report it afterwards!”
“If you were him, they wouldn’t have let you cross the frontier!”
“If you were him, you wouldn’t be carrying suitcases with a broken zip all tied up with rope!”
“If you were him, you’d be dead in Donbass!”
“At Stalingrad…”
“What the devil, after all, we all agreed to say he’d died on the western front at Tatra!”
“Did anyone see you, stranger, when you came through our gate?”
“He should leave and mind his own business! Don’t you see the people gathering on the street by our fence, as if to see a bear!
Come on, give him something for the road, and stop dawdling! Here’s a plastic bag, apples, bread... take what you want from here and go!

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They’ve turned their backs on you. They eat quietly with eyes fixed on their dishes. Well-disposed, they pour wine, water into each other’s glasses.
It’s me, I’m one of you! Take a good look at me, you cry out to them; I am your son, your brother, your nephew, your cousin!
We were all together three months ago, thirteen years ago... We’ve known each other since the cradle after all, since we were little, we slept in the same bed, we ate from the same pot, we were in love with the same girl... I’ve come such a long way to tell you that if I had known what I would endure I would never have left our yard. I’ve come such a long way only because I promised you I would return; otherwise, I would never have set foot here in the yard!
The Encounter

You move only your lips. A rattle comes out of your throat, a bee flies above you and the shadow of the cypress tree covers your face. Your voice can’t be heard, and your body doesn’t cast a shadow on the grass. Relax, let it go, it’s only a dream, the same bothersome, tedious dream…

– Wake up, come on, make a little effort and get up! Do you want to make me fall asleep too? Wake up! We’ve had a small delay. We took the wrong exit, but now we’ll turn right, and in two hours, at the most, we’ll be in front of the town hall where the hotel is! Wake up, and take the way back through fog and darkness…
“Gabriela Adameșteanu rewards her readers with this fascinating book, which reconstructs a motley world of interrupted destinies and the maladies of memory, an inverted Odyssey, where the home of which Ulysses dreams during his wanderings, and to which he finally returns, proves to be nothing but an illusion. A novel that is by no means inferior to Milan Kundera’s Ignorance.”

(Carmen MUȘAT, in Observator cultural)

“The (extremely high) ideational stakes of the novel The Encounter are surpassed only by the author’s ambitions at the
level of its construction. There are rapidly alternating narrative viewpoints (and, together with them, narrative styles), while the narrative tenses blend together depending on the protagonist’s stream of thought.”

(Tudorel URIAN, in România literară)

“Author Gabriela Adameșteanu is one of the most interesting and most highly rated writers to have come from Romania in the last twenty years. Her latest novel, *The Encounter*, now translated into Bulgarian, has also enjoyed a favourable reception on the part of the critics. (...) What is particularly interesting is the structure of the novel, in which there interweave voices (the main characters’ memories and thoughts) and tenses (past, present perfect, and present), monologues and dialogues flow and intersect, and the story moves from the first to the second person singular (a ‘you’ that is also an ‘I’). And nevertheless, in this uneven, broken narrative (in which Securitate documents and files also appear), the characters become surprisingly life-like, and the atmosphere that envelops the reader is captivating and oppressive.”

(Vasilka ALEKSOVA, in Kultura, Bulgaria)

*The Encounter* is a novel of estrangement, a novel about loss of any link with the past or communal memory. It is, of course, the materialisation of an obsession, of exile, about which the author has repeatedly spoken in recent years, but it is above all a novel about the inability to communicate, about failure, about the impossibility of homecoming, a disillusioned and anti-nostalgic book.”

(Paul CERNAT, in 22)

“The travels of Gabriela Adameșteanu’s characters are at once initiatory and documentary. They take us to the periphery of the world, but they also inform us about the world in our immediate vicinity: we discover the world on the other side, which is the itinerary of the characters, but also our own. In “crossing to the other side”, we find very clear images of those on this side. Nothing must remain purposeless, everything must address itself to the people beside us.”

(Cornel UNGUREANU, in Orizont)
Radu Aldulescu – born in Bucharest on 29 June 1954. He made his debut in 1993 with the novel Sonata for Accordion, published by Editura Albatros, for which he was awarded the Prize of the Romanian Writers’ Union. He has also published the novels: The Wake-Going Woman’s Lover (Editura Nemira, 1996; 2nd edition, Cartea Românească, 2006), The Mounted Angel (Phoenix, 1997), The History of a Realm of Greenness and Freshness (Nemira, 1998), and The Prophets of Jerusalem (Editura Publicațiilor pentru Străinătate, 2004; 2nd edition, Editura Corint, 2006). He wrote the screenplay for the film Terminus Paradise, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Venice Film Festival.

Year of publication: 2006
232 pages
The Bride and Groom of Immortality
– synopsis –

The **brides and grooms of immortality** are humble humanity, the invisible majority that makes up the bulk of society: simple and downtrodden folk, the “sole” of society, whom, even though they are born, die, labour and eke out obscure lives among us, in the big cities, we do not see, whom no one reveals to us, of whose existence we are oblivious. The paradox of this lumpen humanity is that, although omnipresent, it is always marginalised, unable to cross society’s threshold of visibility and interest. While there is an “interesting” marginality, that of the deviants, criminals, bohemians, gangsters etc., whose “heroes” have always attracted the attention of art, the press and the humanities, Radu Aldulescu draws our attention to the second-rate people who always dwell at the margins of history,
but who, like an invisible, apparently minor species, are those who perpetuate not only the species and the stratum of society’s excluded, but also simple, basic values, the ‘alphabet’ of humanity. These are simple lives, insignificant occupations, eternal human dramas, existences outside history, which the novel, in its pursuit of the sensational and atypical, has not consistently examined since Zola.

The story of the *Bride and Groom of Immortality* is conceived in the form of three alternating and intersecting narrative levels, which slide towards a denouement of degradation precipitated by poverty. Vicissitudes, poverty and want are given the time, space and local colouring of Romania’s post-communist period of transition, beyond which the two main characters, the so called *bride and groom of immortality*, seem to glimpse a life beyond life, immortality, eternal life.

The three narrative levels of the novel unfold as follows:

1. The biography of Raphael Ogrinjan, raised in an orphanage, and he himself working as a teacher and supervisor in a special school for a time. After the revolution, he spends two years working as an editor for an opposition magazine, after which he remains unemployed.

2. The biography of Mirela Dogaru, from the provinces, married and divorced in Bucharest, left with a child, subsequently having another child in an unmarried relationship. Her second child is born after the revolution, at time when she is in constant search of work, in exchange for a sum of money. An illegal adoption takes place, which is in fact a sale. The sale of her own child seems to mark Mirela, just as having been an orphan seems to mark Raphael, so that he tries to scrape together a family of his own.

3. The pair’s life together is captured for an interval of around one month during a summer heat wave in the Bucharest of the 1990s. The two live together for just over a year in a one-room flat, which they are planning to sell, because they are struggling financially and have two children to feed – their own and Mirela’s child from her first marriage. Their story is initially a love story, but descends into a kind of asceticism determined by the extreme situation to which poverty reduces them. He sends her out to beg and steal, while concomitantly developing an
entire philosophy in the margins of these activities. He haunts outlying districts, as though hallucinating from hunger, and wastes time in interminable, blathering discussions; exhaustion and hunger seem to induce mystical delirium, instilling in him the idea that he is immortal. Half in jest and half in earnest, he adopts the idea of achieving immortality through the penitence imposed by hunger and want.
Mărgărit for one had been just about to leave, he had to get back home to wash his ma, but they’d spun out their gabbing, wandering the streets and going from bar to bar. Raphael knew the score; he’d long been familiar with Mărgărit’s problems. His ma, well, in any case she’d be completely soiled by lunchtime, which is when he usually got back home.

It was long past lunchtime. It was getting dark. And you can imagine it, in that heat, washing and changing her like a baby… A baby would have been a piece of cake. A mound of pasty, sagging flesh, twenty stones, enough to leave him gasping for breath. A vegetable, but she has a sound stomach. She feeds, she eats, she’s hale… She has a healthy appetite, stuffs herself
The Bride and Groom of Immortality

with all kinds. It’s a bad as it can get: he can’t afford to hire a nurse to look after her, but nor can he sit in the house with her all day. He’s doesn’t have any choice: he has to get out and about to earn a crust. What the hell, Raphael, all I did was to lay it down that we have to eat. Regardless! I mean, even when we get to the stage of shitting ourselves, and having others wash our arses for us, even then we still have to eat.

Not just to earn a crust either. You still have to get out of the house for some fresh air. You’re combining the practical with the pleasant, to put it like that. You’d go mad if you stayed in all day just to keep her amused. To make conversation with her, you understand, that’s the only joy she has left, the poor soul, and if you knew how queer and how finicky she was, there’s no pleasing her… There’s nought you can do, that’s what old folk are like, worse than bairns, and Raphael knows what it’s like with bairns, he’s had experience, he used to work with them…

It was Märgärit’s turn not to listen. His ma, the poor soul, she would eat anything that moves, but even she doesn’t know what it is she wants. But you should hear her putting in a serious order: mammy’s Märgärit, from that kilo of meat, make us some marinated meatballs, and some stuffed vine leaves… With cream. In fact no, with yoghurt, because it’s cheaper and we’ve got to economise. That’s how I raised you, by economising, mammy’s Märgärit, to which Raphael, heh, heh, heh, you’re telling me? It was economising and hunger that made us big and strong too, and our children, and our parents…

So then she goes, mammy’s Märgärit, go out and buy a pot of yoghurt, and a meatball soup wouldn’t go amiss, and a bit of mousaka, in that small pan there, with just three tatoes. With this meat here, mammy’s darling, we’ll do the business. With these two pounds of meat we’ll cook up all kinds, just like at an ambassador’s reception. But what are you supposed to do when you bring her the tray with all those dainties to her in bed, and you see her turn her nose up and scowl, it’s enough to make you blow your top, nothing short. Stuffed peppers, that’s what she wanted in fact, mammy’s Märgärit, see what hands I’ve fallen into, so that I won’t have a peaceful old age, that son of mine, he’s more sclerotic than I am, mammy’s Märgärit. Not for anything in the world will she admit what it was she ordered – just two stuffed peppers, that’s all, that’s all she wants, darling
little mammy’s Mărgărit, start cooking all over again, mammy’s Mărgărit, so that you’re still slaving over a hot stove at two o’clock in the morning, as stressed and as riled as can be, but can you say anything? His ma. Worse than a bairn. Maybe you wouldn’t stand for it in a bairn, and it wouldn’t do any good to let a bairn get away with it neither, but you can see very well that it’s completely different with an old woman. You’re thinking that tomorrow or the day after she’s going to die and that you’ll miss her, and that the worms of guilt will gnaw away at your guts for not having done everything in your power, Raphael, it’s a cross to bear. So, we’re back to what we were saying before. That’s what I like about you, you brood about all that sort of thing… That’s why I asked you if you’d been a priest or a monk…

Not on your life. I’ve never had anything to do with priests or monks. I’ve worked in all kinds of places, but most of all in an orphanage school, as a teacher, that’s why I was trying to tell you that I know what it’s like with bairns... They’d reached a local bar and beer garden, in a makeshift tin shack, in a park with paths that wound through the undergrowth and grass around a pond, a different bar than the one they’d left at lunchtime. They’d set out from Vâcărești pond and, after going round in a circle, with frequent stops, they arrived back at the Romanian Optics Factory pond just as it was getting dark. There are large number of lakes and ponds in the area, with bars around them to suit every pocket. They’d never have been able to visit all of them in one summer even if they’d had a mind to, and in any case Mărgărit wouldn’t have had enough funds. Not to mention that he was in a hurry, he was busy, a man with responsibilities and obligations, which ought to have made him keep it as short as possible… But there he was, unable to tear himself away from that table and from Raphael. His head had lolled to one side and his eyes had narrowed, but otherwise he was full of life.

He was standing up well after some ten or twelve mugs of beer interspersed with a few shots of rum, which was how much he’d poured down his neck since lunchtime. Rigid, determined to see the business through to the end. His ma – that was his business, which you might say he was avoiding. Mammy’s Mărgărit was shirking, and on the other hand, Raphael was like
a salve for a wound. He always knows how to listen to others' woes while telling his own, although even he's out of his depth here. Well, he can't compete with a professional of Mårgårit's stature, aye, marrer, of course we've got to eat, but from what I can see, drink's the main thing – it's a basic need.

Mårgårit agreed laughing – you can't operate without an anaesthetic; the pain goes straight to your heart when you cut into the living flesh... I'll explain when I get back. He told him to wait for him a little. He'd been called over to another table at the other end of the beer garden, where three gadgers were sat. Now he was talking to them, standing up and leaning with his fists against the edge of the table. A minute later, he straightened up, startled, as though fending off a blow, and began to rummage with his fists in the deep pockets of his camouflage shorts.

Raphael was groping through the fog of memory, trying to connect the image of Mårgårit rummaging in his pockets with an occurrence that he could no longer remember. His mind stumbled among the tables of the beer garden and rose up above the pitch-black park and the chirping crickets and over Titan Boulevard on the left, traced out by the gliding car headlights. The faces of the men at the table seemed to turn away and bow, avoiding the path of his thought, which at the same time dissolved in the neon lights together with all kinds of different events. All he could remember was that he ought to recall those events, but there it was, he'd forgotten them, frittered them away along with all the all the days of his life. Where was it that he had seen him digging his fists into his pockets and stretching his neck out like a frightened hen? Amid all the din from the tables he couldn't manage to catch what the hell those three gadgers were saying. Nonetheless, he could see that they were threatening him. One was tawny-haired, short and podgy, with a thick gold chain lolling over his flowery shirt, while the other two seemed to be father and son, judging by the likeness and the difference in age. They had swarthy, chinless, mole-like faces, with protruding snouts and short black hair of a mousy lustre. And they were getting more and more het up, piling on the threats and raising their voices, so that Raphael managed to hear how they kept mentioning a certain Zizi, who was going to show him, Mårgårit, don't get him wrong, 'cause he wasn't going to get fooled again, not like last time... He said that you were a
man, but no. A toe-rag, Mărgărit, that's what you are, a toe-rag! And again: he'll show you, just you wait and see – if he doesn't put you in hospital, you can spit in me face!

They were obviously waiting for Zizi to show up, to sort out his business with Mărgărit. The young mole had his mobile to his ear and was nodding, probably agreeing with Zizi and giving him a running commentary on the negotiations, on how Mărgărit was reacting to his messages. Nonetheless, Mărgărit wasn't as repentant as the three would have liked. Though frightened and confused, he was standing up to them, indignant – he didn't owe Zizi anything any more, and Zizi knew it, and they ought to know that he'd given him all the money, down to the last cent... Five hundred dollars, yes, plus one hundred per cent interest, as they'd agreed on from the very start. On time, yes, just like at the bank. Mărgărit had paid off the debt.

Then the tawny one jumped up from his chair and bobbed around him like a jack-in-the-box for a good few seconds, before giving him a slap. Mărgărit took it stoically and remained silent, bowing his head, as though he had nothing else to say. Raphael saw him convicted and defeated and, at last, he stirred from his table. I mean, you have to go to the aid of a mate in a tight spot. He was already reproaching himself for not having intervened earlier. Given the amount of time he'd been hanging around with Mărgărit during the last week, he felt indebted and almost guilty, and so there he goes, swaying as though in a high wind, clearing a path for himself among the closely packed tables, all of them hotching with folk.

He tripped over a chair, and almost fell crashing onto some other blokes' table. Before he could get there, Mărgărit took another clout. From the old mole this time – a jab launched with the movement of a discus thrower, from somewhere below the thigh, compared to which the blow the tawny one had given him was nought but a light tap. Mărgărit jerked as though electrocuted, bent double, and hunched up in a ball with his head in his arms. Blood was pouring from his nose, but in spite of the pain and humiliation, he stayed rooted to the spot. As stubborn as a mule, to show them he was in the right, maybe he sensed Raphael was at his shoulder, ready to back him up, and there he was already arguing the toss furiously: “What’s your quarrel with him?! The hell with you, you arseholes! You saw that he’s weedier and you picked a fight with him?! Is that it, eh!?"
He was roaring as though there were flames belching from his gob. All the blokes at the other tables were looking him up and down with worried eyes, except for the ones his roars were aimed at – indifferent, bored all three of them, and they would have gestured for him to go away, to mind his own business, not to poke his nose into their problems with Margařít. That perverse idiot Margařít, clarified the tawny-haired one emphatically, and the young mole went the hell with him, dad, you’re wasting your time with that loser. Is that a man, for you to hit him? Now you can see him rolling his eyes, and the tawny one the same: leave him be, he knows what he’s doing; let him do his explaining to Zizi. We’ve told him, don’t go saying the day after next that we didn’t tell you.

They’d calmed down; they’d done with that loser Margařít. They’d clouted him a couple of times and that was the end of it. Zizi must have told them the same thing. With the mobile to his ear and intent on Zizi’s instructions, the young mole waved his hand, gesturing for Raphael to clear the field, to go and crow at another table, he can see he’s not wanted here. The elongated snouts of the two moles, moving ever more slowly, growing claggy in the yellowish light of the neon bulbs, seemed also to be telling him to sling his hook. Margařít seemed to want to let them have it their way, pulling Raphael by the arm towards their table, and let’s pay for the beer and go. Then he started going on about his mother again, the poor soul, she’s been waiting half a day for him to wash and feed her, oh, come on Raphael. Leave them the hell out of it. There’s no need for you to get involved; I can handle it on my own…

He was pulling him by the arm not very convincingly, and Raphael was resisting not very convincingly, apparently of a mind to fight for the insult, and the sullied honour, and the shed blood, and Margařít was blowing his nose and wiping the blood and snot on the back of his hand and shaking it off onto the gravel, and in the end he headed towards their table and here is coming back through the bustling crowd with the two plastic chairs over his head. Well, they should sit down if they’re staying, because to Raphael’s mind they ought to stay some more until they came to an agreement: who is it that has the right to dish out slaps and punched noses, and based on what? What loans still have to be paid off?
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The three pulled their chairs closer together around the table to make room for them too, and now they start quarrelling like all hell's been let loose. Raphael could not for the life of him agree, why did they have to hit Mărgărit? At which the old mole couldn't help but be amazed at seeing, at last, someone sticking his neck out for that cur Mărgărit, but Mărgărit didn't have anything to say about it. He just looked at the empty glasses sorrowfully and stretched his neck towards the old mole. Could he give him some money for another round, aye, and he gave him it an'all, without any further comment, and after that they introduced themselves. Raphael, aye, and the tawny one with the gold chain is called Adrian. The other two, father and son, are, of course, gaffer Ghetzu and Răzvanel. Răzvanel, the young mole, started explaining to Raphael that, in the end, they'd been doing Mărgărit a favour and they were just teaching him to do the best thing...

“What the hell! So you cover him in blood…”

“Look here, old duffer, I don’t know how long you’ve know Mărgărit…”

“For a week and a bit, but I don’t see what that has to do…”

“Bilge, old duffer,” Răzvanel gestured with his hand. “There’s no way you could know that Mărgărit has a talent, that everything he puts his hand to turns out a disaster. Listen to me: you’re putting your arse on the line for nothing, as far as he’s concerned. Me, in your place, I’d mind me own business. I mean, you could do him a lot more harm than he could do to himself by his own hand. Well, all we did was to warn him to tread lightly with someone like Zizi. You know what Zizi’s like when it comes to money.”

Răzvanel fell silent. Raphael’s admission that he had no idea who Zizi was didn’t go down well at all. All three of them were amazed, and so Raphael he rolled his eyes and banged his mug of beer back down on the table, spluttering beer and spittle, saying that he might know him to look at, even if the name doesn’t mean anything to him.

“Where was it you said you’re from, marrer?” the old mole asked him.

“From hereabouts. I’ve been hanging round these parts for a good few years now: Dudești, Vitan, Văcărești, Saint Venera, Union Square…”
“How many years?”
“Forty. That’s how old I am.”
“I’d have said you were younger. Me, I’m forty-three.”
“Aha. I shave my head specially. To look younger. So that the white hairs won’t show. It also saves money, you know. Hair costs money. It needs to be fed too.”
“You ought to feed yourself as well, old duffer,” the tawny one sniggered. “You’ve stopped feeding your hair and done away with it; it’ll not be long before you stop feeding yourself and do away with yourself too, heh, heh, heh… You’ve no idea how to save up a bit of flesh on yourself. Look at gaffer Ghetzu, he’s a good housekeeper, with that great big gut of his. He eats twenty stuffed cabbage rolls for starters followed by a load of barbecued sausages, and then he’s hungry again after half an hour.”
Màrgàrit had come back with the mugs of beers and he set them down on the table in front of each of them with exaggerated meticulousness, like a waiter hoping for a tip.
“Good for Màrgàrit,” went gaffer Ghetzu, “cause he feeds himself on just beer and rum and look at him, he’s like a reed.”
He turned to Raphael: “I can just see you ending up the same way tomorrow or the day after. You know… it’s as though I know you to look at. I asked you where you were from, because I was amazed that you didn’t know Zizi. Màrgàrit, bugger it all to hell, are you going to give me that change or what?”
“What change, Ghetzu?”
“What can I say,” went Raphael. “He must be a big wheel this Zizi, if everybody knows him like he were President Iliescu.”
“The change from the beer, man, what are you trying to pull?”
“You can laugh all you like, ’cause he’s bigger than President Iliescu.”
“I told you that I probably know him to look at,” Raphael exculpated himself. “I know plenty of folk just to look at.”
“I bet me life that it’s been less than a month since they let you out of gaol,” went Adrian.
“Don’t bet on it, ’cause you’ll lose.”
“Is that what you’re telling me?” gaffer Ghetzu snapped at him. “Who knows how many years you were inside for you to be so well pickled that you haven’t got a clue what world you’re
living in? If you haven’t even heard of Zizi… I can just see you
tomorrow or the day after going off to Zizi for him to give you
a loaf of bread to eat.” He burst out laughing, in anticipation:
“He’ll send you to Mărgărit, with a sword, to get his money
back.”
“I haven’t got a sword.”
“Big deal. Zizi will kit you out.”
“In any case, Mărgărit’s me marrer.”
“A true friend, one of the best. Ballocks. The change, Mărgărit!”
“I said I was getting another round in, gaffer Ghetzu,” snivel-
elled Mărgărit.
“Get on with it then, you bugger. I’m parched.”
“I reckon I need another twenty thou’ to get another round
of five beers…”
Gaffer Ghetzu purses his lips and looks at Raphael. He looks
even more like a fat mole, with his throat overrun by the thick
network of a week’s stubble.
“He’s a right bugger this marrer of yours. He’s always doing
this. If he can get away with it with us, he thinks he can with
Zizi an’ all. Are you daft, Mărgărit? Do you want him to cut that
throat of yours with his sword? In the end, he’ll do right to slice
you open. A debt’s a debt.”
Mărgărit nods to the rhythm of the old mole’s words, as
though underscoring every phrase.
“That’s right, gaffer Ghetzu, especially as you owe me too.
And Adrian as well, besides yourself.”
“That’s right!” Raphael hastens to confirm, although he doesn’t
know anything about Mărgărit’s dealings with the two. “You
owe him!”
Răzvănél reminds his dad:
“The pair of you clouted him, you both owe him for those
two slaps. You and Adrian. As for me, I didn’t dirty my hands
hitting the poor beggar.”
The old mole slaps himself on the forehead.
“I’d forgotten, Mărgărit, bugger it… A debt’s a debt. Now,
two slaps are no great shakes.”
“There’d have been room for ten, gaffer Ghetzu,” Mărgărit
reassured him. “You know I don’t take it badly, but I’m on me
uppers. I’ve been on me feet walking around since lunchtime
with this mate of mine, and he’s got problems of his own, gaffer
Ghetzu, I’ll tell you all about it… And me mammy’s waiting for me to get back home with something to eat. I should have bought her some chicken legs, she put an order in last night, and some tinned peas, and some bananas…”

“I’m right glad about that, Märgärit, that you see to it your ma has a decent life.”

“What else can I do, gaffer Ghetzu? She’s the only one I’ve got, I haven’t got no one else. Paralysed in bed since the age of eighty. It’ll not be long before she dies, and I’ll be left behind to mourn her – me mammy, poor soul, she’s waiting for me and I haven’t got anything to take her, ohhh…”

This bit of wailing made Adrian shudder.

“You’re making me sick, man, stop bawling. I’m going to puke. Take this: a hundred thou’. I reckon it’s enough for a slap. Take it for yourself and for your ma.”

Märgärit stuffed the money in his pocket, assenting mutely. Bowed slightly forward, with their elbows on the table, Raphael and he looked as though they were set to pounce on the other three, who were sprawling in their chairs with their guts bulging over the waistbands of their shorts, relaxed, sated, groggy. The old mole chipped in, with difficulty:

“I don’t know, Adrian, fuck it. A hundred thou’s a bit much for me. For a slap…” Nonetheless, he’d pulled out a hundred-thousand note and was fluttering it over the table. “I don’t know, I work hard for this money, it doesn’t grow on trees.”

“Go on, dad, give him it,” whined Räzvânel, seemingly touched by Märgärit’s lot and at the same time commiserating with his dad: “You should know that he works hard, he races around all day long, like a horse he is, trying to make some money.”

After hesitating for a while, at last the old mole stretched out the banknote to Märgärit.

“’Cause I heard what you were saying about your ma, bugger it. I’m glad you look after her. But you should know you still owe me for this money.”

“Put it on the slate, gaffer Ghetzu, no problem. You know I’m a man of me word.”

They’d got up from the table. The two moles and the tawny-haired one stepped over the little fence that separated the beer garden from the park. Märgärit seemed to wait for them for
Radu Aldulescu

a few moments, and then he went after them, with Raphael following behind him and asking why he was going after them. Mărgărit shrugged. Well, they’ve subbed him and he might still get something out of them, well, the three had gone into the park to have a piss. Raphael and Mărgărit had a piss as well and then they all went around the outside of the beer garden towards the boulevard. The old mole was lagging a little way behind, muttering something unintelligible. His steps were starting to get wobbly, and so his son turned back to give him a hand. He chased him away. He didn’t need no help, he swore at Mărgărit and tried to chase after him, his arms and legs flapping like a rag doll, Mărgărit, you still owe me, bugger you, at which Mărgărit, straight away, that’s right, I do, gaffer Ghetuzu, you and Zizi, I owe you both, and I respect you like me own father, and gaffer Ghetzu was looking at him with his hands on his hips, panting, with his mole snout raised, sniffing the sultry heat of the night, crisscrossed by the gliding headlights of cars on the boulevard, and he kept challenging him. After a while, he leapt forward and rushed him kicking and punching. He knocked him over and fell on top of him, and now they were both rolling in the gutter, under the fence that separated the park from the pavement of the boulevard, embracing and surrounded by the others, who were doubled up laughing and shouting at Mărgărit to pay his debt.

He was paying his debt, giving gaffer Ghetzu a good thrashing and leaving him sprawling. Anyway, it didn’t take long, because gaffer Ghetzu tired quickly, Mărgărit got up and brushed the dirt off himself and accepted to do what Raphael had told him to do earlier, so that he took his leave of the other three. They both walked together for another half an hour, as far as Sălăjan Square, and before they went their separate ways, Mărgărit gave Raphael one of the two hundred-thousand banknotes.
“In The Bride and Groom of Immortality, the author deals with representatives of a lowly world, whom he presents as they are, with their rough speech and their so-called petty preoccupations, which are in fact the great problems in any of our lives, regardless of what position we hold on the social ladder. For this reason, Radu Aldulescu has rightly been compared to Zola. Beyond their indisputable artistic merits, his books offer us a powerful image of the humble man next us, obliging us to understand him and, above all, to take him seriously.”

(Cristian TEODORESCU, in Le Monde Diplomatique)

“In short, The Bride and Groom of Immortality elevates to the rank of victim of the world’s evil those kinds of individual who
are, not without pride, complaisant in their condition, even if they have outbursts of honour (Raphael confronts the neighbourhood tyrant, risking much more than he can get away with; Mirela decides to have another child, even though she knows perfectly well that she can’t afford to bring it up, even though she will sell the baby and fritter away the money). All things told, we have here one of the best novels of 2006, one which might be a crossroads in the work of Radu Aldulescu.”

(Bogdan CRETU, in Pana mea)

“Radu Aldulescu is the only Romanian prose-writer with an ‘American’ experience of life, which is to say an experience that does not originate in the university milieu, in literary groups, or in philological initiation, but from the urban underbelly, from black passions, from coarse language, from the lumpenproletariat existence as ‘night shelter’.”

(Dan C. MIHĂILESCU, in Jurnalul national)

“Constantly poking the solemnity of the discourse with the thorns of irony, the writer preserves his fictions in the zone of carnivalesque indeterminacy, while his characters are haunted by mystic urges and thirst for strong sensations. The prose of Radu Aldulescu grafts, to the point of pastiche, Dostoevsky onto the temperament of Caragiale characters.”

(Andrei TERIAN, in Ziarul de duminică)

“Radu Aldulescu is one of our few prose-writers to have been born rather than created. He writes prose as easily as breathing, a rugged, sometimes gasping prose, one that is cynical and disturbing at the same time. Perhaps you won’t like it, but it is impossible not to admire the power with which he describes a world no longer touched by God. He was unable to make his debut before 1989, but immediately after that he burst onto the scene with a number of memorable novels: The Wake-Going Woman’s Lover, The History of a Realm of Greenness and Freshness, The Prophets of Jerusalem…”

(Ştefan AGOPIAN, in B 24 -FUN)
Ruxandra Cesereanu – born in Cluj on 17 August 1963. She was a student at the Faculty of Letters, Cluj, graduating in 1985. While at university, she trained as an editor with Echinox magazine. Since 1991, she has been an editor for the Steaua cultural review in Cluj. In 1997, she was awarded her PhD, for a thesis on The Hell of the Prison Camps as reflected in the Romanian Awareness. She is currently a university lecturer in the Comparative Literature department of the Faculty of Letters in Cluj. She is a member of the staff of the Cluj Centre for Research into the Imaginary. She has been awarded numerous bursaries and tenures, in Prague, Barcelona, New York, Paris, and Lyon, for research into the concentration camp universe. She made her literary debut in 1989, with the prose collection Journey through Mirrors. This was followed by Purgatories (1997), Ticephalos (2002), and Nebulon (2005). She has also published collections of poetry: Living Zone (1993), The Garden of Delights (1993), Fall above the City (1994), The Schizoid Ocean (1998, 2006), The Crusader-Woman (anthology, 1999), Venice with Violet Veins: The Letters of a Courtesan (2002), Kore-Persephone (2004). Likewise, she has gained recognition for her political essays: Journey to the Centre of Hell: The Gulag in the Romanian Awareness (1998), Panopticum: Political Torture in the Twentieth Century (2001), The Violent Imagery of Romanians (2003), December ’89: Deconstruction of a Revolution (2004), The Gulag in the Romanian Awareness: The Memoirs and Literature of the Communist Prisons and Camps (2005), Romanian Vices (2007).

Ruxandra Cesereanu, The Birth of Liquid Desires
“Prose” series, Cartea Românească Publishing House
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The Birth of Liquid Desires
– synopsis –

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between the component passages of prose); it enjoys thematic coherence and engages in a deep sounding of interior landscapes.

The volume opens with a text (The Birth of Liquid Desires) that takes passionate love as its theme, as experienced in absence or unrequitedness. Employing the epistolary convention, the tale provides a highly nuanced rendering of the experiences of hopeless love, capturing a diverse range of mental states (from enthusiasm to repulsion, from fascination to hatred). The following prose piece, entitled The Touch, attempts to navigate to the centre of erotic fantasy, along a nightmarish and convoluted course. The third text, The Pearl and Other Snail’s Horns, is, in fact, a long and dense prose poem, on the theme of another incompatibility that love attempts to surmount: incest. However, it is not the taboo that is crucial here, but rather the pretext to investigate (in the form of a confession) the most obscure limits of desire and intimacy.

The second part of the book, Post-males, unfolds a kaleidoscope of masculine images, as they are retained by a capricious, ludic, sensual and – most importantly – expressive feminine memory. The one hundred and seven portraits of men are just as many masculine characters, moralities, and physiognomies, treated with lucidity and precision.

Finally, after an autobiographical and self-ironic postscript, there is a pseudo-questionnaire, containing questions addressed both to women – What is a man? – and to men – What does it mean to be a man? Constructed with much imagination, the answers manage to create a new and piquant gallery of masculine portraits, from the perspective of both camps.
The men a woman twists around in words are _post-males_.
As a rule, all that is left of them is flayed skin put out to dry. But sometimes they leave behind visions, phantasms, sensations and emotions.

The man of whom I shall write at the beginning of this chain of men of every variety was a cat. Many people might think he was a tomcat, but no, he was a green cat, with piercing eyes and a well-trimmed bushy moustache. A hussar-cat, with strange desires, which he told me about, as we were sitting on the steps of a pavilion. He had a warm voice, nonetheless rugose from smoking, a colonel’s voice, half Prussian, half Polish. He was a short man, striding softly or even slightly swaying, with eyes a
little inflamed by alcohol, like a merry frog. That was why I liked him: he was both a cat and a frog. He was a man who was one of us, a women’s man, almost like us, without having lost his virile sense and without ever having had the urge to be with a man bodily, to consummate sex with one like and identical to him. He saw in women warm roundnesses and had acquired a taste for voluptuousness. I didn’t know what a woman with warm roundness is, but I liked how it sounded. He spoke slowly, chewing his words like slices of halva, swallowing them at leisure. That is how the idea of writing about men came to me. Because it was he who began to tell me about how he would have liked to be a woman for a day. He would have liked to find out, for one day in the whole of his man’s life, how it is for female blood to flow there, through the crevice, what kind of blood it is, how it flows outside. He was very attached to our life, that of women, in a tender and blithe way, because, as I have already said, he was a cat. He did not, however, want to know about how it is to give birth, the pangs of creation did not arouse him in the least. He wanted to be a woman just for one day. As a man, his desires were both strange and normal; in any case they had enchanted me. He would have liked to have been endowed with a marsupial pouch, but not like that of a kangaroo: a better concealed, eventually invisible, marsupial pouch in which to carry his lover. More precisely, he would have liked his lover to dwell all day in that marsupial pouch, to carry her with him day and night, to shield her from the temptations and from the scorns of this world. He would have let her breathe fresh air only at night, by the light of the stars and, as he specified to me, he would have let her watch television for a little. But he would have made her coffee at the crack of dawn and he would have washed her like a badger cub. He would have spied on her while she said her prayers, to see whether she said a prayer for him. He would have hand-fed her, like a frail creature. Well, I told him, but this lover of yours would have to be the size of a five-year-old girl, otherwise she wouldn’t fit in your marsupial pouch. What can you do with a lover who has the body of a five-year-old girl? A lover who is always with you and in you, he told me, what more could I ask? A pocket lover, I murmured. I would tell her stories and brush her hair, he
interrupted. I looked closely at the man before me: he was a cat of a man, and so I said meow-meow and off I went.

He was a tall red-haired man, almost always dressed in black. He was an interesting man, but I avoided him like the plague. I would not have liked to have been touched by him at any time or under any circumstances. I felt a revulsion, as towards a hysterical and incomplete man. His small hands were those of a girl, his eyes autistic. He was lively and full of charm and a great storyteller, picturesquely loquacious when he was not in the grip of paranoia. His body was never to be seen, because it was always swaddled, camouflaged in roomy and concealing layers of clothes. He refused to make his body felt in one way or another, and that was why he was reminiscent of a gravedigger. He had white skin, unaccustomed to being touched. He did not know what it meant to be tempted or to desire, because he did not permit himself to feel anything. He was frightened of the world and of the bodies that circulated through it. Had he been able to choose the way in which he could be born, he would have opted to be a soul without a body. That is why he was, in fact, a kind of ghost. He was a man enclosed within his own body as though in a crypt. He had the sharp voice of a quarrelsome or nosy woman: it seemed that he had concentrated his hope of life in that hysterical, squeaky voice of his, in the manhood that it ought to have contained. What was to be done with such a man? To leave him to his own devices, to find his own way. He had a horror of the male sex, because he had a horror of his own body. Sometimes he and his solitude made me nauseous. Other times, he was very dear to me, because he had red hair and dressed in black.

He was a mature man, very mature, corpulent and soft. He was neither ugly nor handsome, but he had a voice that stirred all the outbursts and inbursts of a woman. He had the voice of a lively and gentle man, of a somnolent man, with flushed skin. I liked his voice as a quilt, as a sheet. I floated after his voice; I bent towards it to pick it like a succulent fruit. I could have rubbed up against that voice as though up against a body. It was even a slippery, wet body, hence the way in which it invaded my ears as though they were defoliated sexes. I would thus hear
Ruxandra Cesereanu

with my own sex split in two, and his voice fell like a silent, fluffy avalanche. It was nice. It had a kind of silky, orchid yearning. His corpulence did not entice to bodily love, but nor to disgust. It was a corpulence like any other, bearable. But his voice was a mature sex, not at all hurried, a sign, a passage, a crossroads. He had chubby and childish hands. Their sensuality was minimal, but functional.

His long black hair, smelling of laundry soap, aroused me: long black hair. Sometimes, his eyes got in his hair and stayed there for a long while, hanging like bats. He was just skin and bones, thin, a man hard to caress, because there was not a crumb of flesh left on him. I don't know how women touched him, because I never touched him. His long black hair was enough for me. It was my baldaquin. He creaked from all his joints, he was doubled-up in the thoracic cavity, he was a man crammed into himself, sickly and dear. I liked his voice only when it grated jerkily. Otherwise it would be hoarse and prickly, it would prickle my flesh and I didn't like it. I could not at all imagine how that man made love, because I saw him as just a single, tall bone, from head to foot. I didn't like his beard, but had he shaved it off, I would never have recognised him again. Polished hair and bone, that's what he was.

He was a faun, a swarthy man, with a stiff beard. He had a curved, arched body, as though he were continuously embracing a woman. He often had an appetite for women, but he did not permit himself to expose it. He looked at them and was content with that much. He had a somehow gobbling mouth, with powerful teeth, which would have been capable of ripping you apart. He could have been an industrious shepherd of female sexes, his happy and obedient little sheep. But he was concerned about appearances. With his hands he would have touched greedily, with his beard he would have pricked wildly. But not he. He would speak of the body, but not of possessing it, although the latter obsessed him. He would smile satisfied at his own masculine state, he did not omit a single woman with his gaze, he would touch her in passing, as though he had given her a slap on the buttock, weighing up her backside, and nothing more. I often used to talk to him about women and men; I
liked to talk to him. I had never seen his body, but I suspected that it was dreadfully hairy. You could tell by his backwoodsman’s beard. His body hair was probably what prevented him from letting himself go: not because he was embarrassed, but because he was tangled in webs of lianas that hindered him advancing. His jungle of mature but nonetheless callow man, of faun but nonetheless tamed man. And, unfortunately, of conformist and predictable man.

He was a manling, which is to say a fresh little man. He had well-drawn and strong lips. He was a guerrilla fighter, although he looked like a little monk. I don’t know how much he knew about women, nor even if he had had any. His body was collapsed or ruptured, although he was young. Like a seahorse. However, he also seemed to be a budding inquisitor, reining in his body and his fluids. He might just as easily have been able to become a full and seductive man, a gourmand of women. He had to be prudent, because he was so slight that he would not have been able to survive the passion of too many females. I gazed on him with pleasure, as though he were my own, albeit imperfect, work. His eyes were sunken: they had a Spanish sensuality, but restrained rather than lustful. His eyelashes were arousing, as though they were a hundred untiring thighs all tumbled one on top of another. I had the sensation that he was wrapping me in yards of hair, as though in a cocoon. I would have liked to be younger for him, but time had left me behind.

I was crazy about tall men, and he was just the right height for my appetite. But he was an inveterate masturbator. He had nacreous, almost Japanese skin; he had little brushes for eyelashes, fleshy lips and telescopic eyes. Women liked him, and he was addicted to them: he had possessed many and nonetheless he would never be sated, even after the sexual act was consummated he would still not miss out on a bout of masturbation. For that reason he disgusted me, even if it was a pitiful disgust. His own body was like a brother in arms to him, he could have done anything to it, except to mutilate it. That is why he used it in every shape and form, as a submissive and malleable servant. And nevertheless, his body was svelte and lively; it was a young body, in the most authentic flowing of blood through veins and
arteries. But it was, at the same time, the body of an autist. Sick of itself and, for that reason, stammering. I felt sorry for that man, so alien in our world. However many women he possessed, it was still with himself and with his own sex that he ate, dreamed and prayed to God. What more can I say, except Amen?

One, two, three, one, two three, he plunges into his flesh, glancing sidelong and furtively at some women. With pasteboard appetites, with puffy eyes, as motionless as a Sphinx, he unnaturally caresses his ravenous body, his inflamed and defeated man’s body, with hairy hands, with legs cleaving the foul air, he falls and by no means ceases in his rapacious chasm, like an owl fur-lined in its screech, the Masturbator has no gods, he does not even have the keys to the body. The sticky, delusive and heavy touch momentarily raises him to the heavens, into a Nirvana that tastes of jam. He would look like a yogi in the lotus position, were his mouth not glassily half-opened, were his fixed smile not boozy, were his hands not moving like windmills, without them being the chimeras of Don Quixote mad on earth. He would be like an orphan with former octogenarian millionaire parents, were his eyes not leaping with sickly liveliness, one, two, three, the Masturbator is waltzing all by himself or dancing the tango with the phantasmal bodies of the above-mentioned women, not femmes fatales, or sensual, but bitter, with puckered breasts, their sex as black as the mouth of hell, in which, swimming on the point of drowning, the Masturbator seeks a crossing.

He was a huge man, of around one hundred and fifty kilos: he was the fattest and sexiest man I had ever seen. His body, although adipose, was friendly and calm, it was equal to itself, and that was what I liked. I never imagined him undressed, because there was no need at all: his sexual and warm voice did everything in place of his body. You could clamber on that voice like a baobab and live there for years at a time, without needing to feed yourself on anything. His body was a quivering basilica, stirring like an extraterrestrial mutant snail. There was something regal in his bodily hugeness, a patriarchate of flesh, a storehouse of bones enveloped in yellow furs, like a Methuselah.
of Siberia. If some woman might imagine a Yeti in the hypostasis of a sonic lover and nothing more, then such was this man, the fattest and the sexiest I had ever seen.

He was a lean, wizened man, with the eyes of a corpse. He was harsh with both women and men. I could never view him sexually, because he creaked with so much leanness and harshness. It was as though he were a boomerang-man. He yearned for interstellar communication with women, but he managed it only with men. For that reason he could speak only in an obscure tongue, so as to be sure that no one would understand him. I don’t know how he made love with women, but I feared that he pulled some of them by the hair and struck them across the face. His mistake was that he did not see in women predators, but sought partners for dialogue. Naturally, he was a romantic, inasmuch as he had no business in the century that had given birth to him. He would have felt at home in exile in Siberia or on a desert island, whence he could have sent impassioned letters.

He was a man as libidinous as a gob of spit. That’s exactly how I felt him to be. He had skin beaded with sweat, with a kind of bloated bubbles. His mouth was large, as broad as a frying pan. He was tall, as I like a man to be, but for nothing. For, he provoked the disgust of a purulent maggot that gets under the skin and bursts there. As for his voice, that made my revulsion all the greater. It was so greasy, so smeared in its faux tropical warmth that it would stick to the body of listener, and the latter would suddenly start to itch. It was the voice of a tender louse or an almost fervent bedbug. I was not at all sorry for that man, who was fit only to be thrown in the trash. After he spoke a few words to me, I would feel my skin stinging. Or I would have the feeling that I was about to come down with scabies. He had long pianist’s hands, but they were of no use to him. He had long eyelashes, but nor were they of any use to him. He did not know how to caress, or to see, or to talk. And that, with his voice of a slobbering slug.

He was a man who looked feeble-minded, with the face of a cretinous child, although he was intelligent and sensitive. He was so haughty that I used to feel like slapping him across the
mouth, since that was whence all that vermiculate haughtiness spouted. Then, he was thin and cranky, and his thinness aroused repulsion, because I imagined his spine arching into his stomach and turning his innards inside out. In the summer, he used to wear low-cut blouses, as though he were a woman, so that his acquaintances used to nickname him the Wench. He liked those of the same sex as him, but he had never tried anything because he was far too thoroughly eaten by the avid mouths of the female sex. He did not know how to choose women, but only to be chosen by them. He spoke bluntly and was wilfully and tendentiously scabrous, but all that made him neither more attractive nor more repulsive. My repulsion came above all from his hybrid legs, which were those of neither a man nor a woman. And from his shoulders, those of an ephebe on steroids. If someone could imagine a weightlifting angel, then that man was something like that. Between worlds.

He was an ugly man, but his ugliness attracted me. It was almost a beautiful ugliness, that is to say. His entire being was concentrated in his face, I never looked at his body, I never thought that he had bones and that blood flowed through his veins. I never thought that he had a sex. But I always gazed at his face with a morbid fascination. There was nothing handsome or pleasant in that face: the nose was swollen and hideous, the mouth frayed, the eyes puffy, the cheekbones unhinged. Archimboldo, Archimboldo! But all the ugliness of those features brought about a symphonic understanding of the whole face, so that the ugliness emerged from its habitual state and became something else. I might say that it became a provocative, interrogative stasis. That face was a map of the world, as I knew all too well, and that was what tempted me so cruelly. To touch that map, to travel over it, to attach myself to it. Things were none too normal, of course, if that was the way I felt. His face was like a broken lighthouse.

He was a man with a healthy body, the body of a well-fed peasant or a sailor with well-honed muscles. When he walked, I could hear his innards booming and his bones crossing blades as though in a fencing match. On the other hand, he had a face liquefied by languor, and the pallor of a simpleton. He was so
ardent that his face consumed all the energy of the rest of his body, throttled as he was by all kinds of phantasms. His well-made body was thus useless in love: a beast of burden, good for bearing that ghost-like face. I felt him hulking in his passion. He had outbursts of rage. He was quarrelsome, coarse and did not know how to comport himself with women: he thought they could be a coin of exchange. He would come to blows, like an out-of-work drunkard, his albino foetus face convulsing. Everything flowed melting over that face, death, sexuality, and faith. Nothing was consistent or clear; everything was viscous. Pallid snail’s head atop an athlete’s body.

He was fat, but he was enormously successful with women. His flesh and his voice and his varicose legs were all charming. His sense of humour gushed through his beard like a snake. Women liked him, because he didn’t wear rings on his fingers, neither the rings of a lone male nor of a married man. The crown of his head was like that of a newborn babe, and he had the chubby hands of a small boy greedy for sweets. Most of all he was seductive for the fact that he knew how to dance on his own. His belly was both an inflatable swimming float and a pillow for sleeping, and women, however much they might have thought that things were otherwise, used to adore sleeping on top of him, as though on a warm and living bed, a moving, steaming, whitish bed. I liked his ears, like those of a baby alligator. I would have played with them had he let me. He liked both to eat and to be eaten a little. He was an endlessly erotic and eroticised Ubu. He aroused passion and jealousy and frustration and rancour. I used to look at him, unalone in his corpulence as he was, and wonder: what would a plump Don Juan have been like?

He had a shaven head and he always kept it that way, because he wanted to have two phalluses, one concealed the other visible. I knew from the start what message he wanted to convey by his close-cropped pate. He ate women with both a spoon and a ladle, and from time to time he would cut their souls in two or three with a kitchen knife. And then he would kick them out of the house. He had also frequented a number of brothels, in order to attempt all kinds of procedures for being
raised from the dead. He often used to tell me about his women, as though I were a professional confessor. He liked to watch my eyes popping out. He twirled women like hoops, throwing them up into the air, jumping through them, twisting them around. He was hard to bear as a man, but he could be borne as a witness. His stories had something fantastic about them, as they were uttered by an incorrigible predator of women. He would lick his lips and his fingers when he was recounting his women, as though they were hunks of meat gobbled on the run. Had he been able, he would have added spicy sauces to them. Sometimes, he used to recount womanly fluids as though they were decadent ambrosias. He was a shaven pig, intelligent, slim, enticing. He would have crunched up however many women, whenever, wherever.

He almost always smelled as though he had pissed himself. He had the heavy stench of an unwashed man. His body was crumpled in on itself like a caterpillar swaddled up in its segments. Whenever I met him, I would never know where his spinal column was, or where his hips were joined. I would never have been able to touch him, because of his amorphous body with its pestilential smell. His gums were fused together by rosy ridges, as though he were still breastfeeding. Nevertheless, what I knew about him was that he made love quite often. On the other hand, he didn’t really know how to talk. His mind was in another world, which is why he did not take care of his body, but let it go to hell, to the trash. Whenever I met him, I would feel like bandaging my nose with gauze, as in a time of plague. Had I been closer to him, I would have told him to go and live in a fishery or a tannery, so as to quench his unkempt odour. His body was puffy, swollen by toxins. Otherwise, he had handsome, albeit watery, eyes, and the smile of a serene and contented murderer, even though he would have been incapable of killing so much as a fly.
The Birth of Liquid Desires
Excerpts from selected reviews

“Ruxandra Cesereanu’s book *The Birth of Liquid Desires* looks set to enjoy great success, not merely because it is one of the most refined literary experiments of recent years, but because it is an astonishing compendium of erotic fantasies, which have nothing banal or vulgar about them, and which approach us gracefully, helping us to emerge precisely from banality and tastelessness when it comes to what most absorbs us – the Eros.”

(Dan STANCA, in *România liberă*)

“The title of Ruxandra Cesereanu’s latest book, *The Birth of Liquid Desires*, is much more than an allusion to Dali’s painting of 1932, it is the guiding thread of a literary experiment that
Ruxandra Cesereanu embodies incipient eroticism, on the lines along which the author has already initiated her readers, in *Tricephalos*. Ruxandra Cesereanu's writing is humorous, her observations are subtle, and each portrait comes with its own ambience, which evolves from melancholy to irony, from piety to mockery, to caricature.

(Alina HORDILĂ, in *Altitudini*)

“We do not yet find ourselves in a dynamic culture of impresarios and image-builders that might turn a writer like Ruxandra Cesereanu into an eccentric star, a corks and delicious VIP, which is to say what she is already, except that not everybody knows it...”

(Luminița MARCU, in *Cotidianul*)

“The book contains a number of experimental prose pieces and is entirely consecrated to love or, more generally speaking, the mysterious attraction between women and men. The courage of erotic fantasy, unfettered imagination, and the consummate art of the portrait to be found in this volume are reminiscent of the author’s previous novel, *Tricephalos*. Ruxandra Cesereanu attacks and dismantles taboos one by one. She investigates the most intimate mechanisms of human relationships and explores a world that is apparently visible, but, in essence, full of unknowns: the miraculous world of men. *The Birth of Liquid Desires* is a volume full of refinement, but also brimming with a sensuality that is hard to ignore.”

(Claudiu GROZA, in *Clujeanul*)

“Sketches from the pen of an author in an irresistibly ludic frame of mind. Sensual and full of imagination, these prose pieces are anchored in the most prosaic reality at one end, and in the super-reality of the dream and invention at the other. Bizarre, lively, enchanting, and then some!”

(Mircea MIHĂIES, in *Cotidianul*)
Petru Cimpoesu

Simeon the Lifting. Novel with Angels and Moldavians
Petru Cimpoesu – born in Vaslui on 20 January 1952. He is an engineer, a graduate of the Ploiești Petroleum and Gas Institute in 1976. Currently, he is the director of the Bacău County Cultural, Religious and National Heritage Department. He is one of Romania’s leading contemporary prose writers, and his novels have been lavishly praised in the press, winning major national literary awards. Published works: Provincial Memoirs, short prose, 1983 (Jassy Writers’ Association Prize); Natural, novel, 1985 (Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Prose); Unwilling Hero, novel, 1994 (Jassy Writers’ Association Prize); A Kingdom for a Fly, children’s literature, 1994; The Tale of the Great Brigand, novel, 2000 (Jassy Writers’ Association Prize); Simeon the Liftite: Novel with Angels and Moldavians, 2001 (Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Prose); Christina the Domestic and the Soul-Hunters, 2006, (Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Prose, and numerous other prizes awarded by publications in Romania). The second edition of The Tale of the Great Brigand was published by Polirom in 2007. The novel Simeon the Liftite has been translated into Czech, under the title Simion Výtazník, and was published by Dybbuk, Prague. In 2006, the novel was awarded the Magnesia Litera, the Czech Republic’s most important literary prize, and was regarded as “book of the year”.

Petru Cimpoesu, Simeon the Liftite. Novel with Angels and Moldavians, novel
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In this novel brimming with humour and frequent references to the supernatural, the tenants of an anonymous provincial block in the town of Bacău embody one tiny part of the gigantic grotesque created by Romania’s period of transition. Here we discover Mr Elefterie, a gullible pensioner who, having lost the money he deposited in a mutual assistance fund, one night dreams the winning numbers for the so-called “6 out of 49” lottery and, of course, loses a hefty sum once more. Then we fret about the fate of Mr Eftimie the teacher, whom a pupil falsely accuses of having seduced her – so convincingly that even the teacher himself begins to wonder whether he has done so and then forgotten about in the meantime; in the end, we discover that the schoolgirl was dreaming of winning a
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beauty contest in which Mr Eftimie was to sit as a member of the jury. Then we find amusement in the pedantic style of Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent, a typical tenement block administrator, who communicates with the tenants by means of pasting up notices, and who has a terrible secret: he used to work for the former Securitate as an electrician. Then we have Mr Nicostrat, a great lover of yoga and women, to whom he gives lessons on the Kama Sutra. There is a whole host of other equally strange characters, including Themistocles, a boy suspected by his teacher, with whom he is in love, of being a precocious genius.

However, the life of these typical Romanians is turned upside down one fine day. One by one, they observe that the block lift is out of order, having got stuck on the eighth floor. This would not necessarily be an insoluble problem, were it not for the fact that the lift is occupied by a self-imposed exile, their neighbour Simeon – the block’s “authorised” cobbler. The latter, surprisingly, has not only chosen to spend a period isolated inside the lift, but in addition, according to legends that swiftly spread through the block, he has begun to work miracles, including the “spectacular” healing of Mr Anghel, another neighbour, who had been suffering from a skin disease. However, it is not just the miracles, of which the neighbours have only heard rumours, but also the stories that Simeon tells from inside the lift, his prophecies and parables, which ensure him of an aura of celebrity, creating for him renown as Simeon the Liftite, after the model of St Simeon the Stylite. And in Simeon’s parables, prophecies and stories, we discover piquant commentaries about the uncommon sharpness of wit displayed by Romanians, who know how to fix anything using nothing but a bit of wire; we learn about the imminent return to power of Ion Iliescu, at a time when all had written him off, and about how Jesus might descend among the Romanian people so dear to Him in order to stand, after a memorable election campaign, as president.

After almost two weeks of prophesising and storytelling, Simeon the Liftite abandons the lift unexpectedly, leaving forever the block where he had dwelled. However, he does not depart alone, for he takes with him his disciple Themistocles, the schoolboy suspected of being a genius. And thenceforth there is room only for legend.
Let us recapitulate. On Saturday afternoon, at five forty-five, Mr Toma ascends to the sixth floor, paying a visit to Mr Eftimie and discussing modern marketing methods, after which he descends, also by the stairs, at five past six. On Monday morning, at quarter past seven, Mrs Pelaghia from the second floor descends on her way to work; shortly thereafter she is followed by Mr Gheorghe from the seventh floor, but in a completely different direction. Two hours later, Mr Elefterie will leave the house and head for the nearest branch of the National Lottery. Before or after that, a series of persons descended or ascended, women and men, children going to or coming from school, pensioners, the unemployed, private entrepreneurs etc., possibly also other persons present in the respective building on various business.
All these gentlemen and all these ladies have a common denominator: they reside in the same eight-storey block on Sheep (formerly Euler) Street in Bacău. They also have something else in common, something which cannot have escaped the perspicacity of the reader: none of them has reported the fact that the lift is out of order. Mrs Pelaghia for the reason that, living on the second floor, as well as for other reasons, she prefers to ascend and descend by the stairs. Then we can take it as read that Mr Gheorghe, leading a sporting life and in constant motion, never uses the lift. Let us allow that some of the tenants did not leave the house at an early hour that Saturday, and afterwards, when they did go out, it was already too late to complain. We shall even go as far as to accept as valid the explanation that Mr Elefterie, absorbed in his own thoughts regarding an eventual lottery win, was able to pass by the entrance to the blocked lift impassively – he did no more than try the door, as though in a dream. But what about the others? The only explanation would be that they were used to it. Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent himself, at the exact moment when, during the course of that Saturday, he wished to descend to the ground floor, where he was going to paste up an important new announcement, had ascertained the lift was stuck… somewhere. But where? He of all people ought to have asked himself, in his capacity as stair superintendent. Perhaps he asked himself, we do not know. What is certain is only that he descended by the stairs in order to put up the notice, he ascended, also by the stairs, back to the third floor, where he resides, and… then he forgot. A single conclusion is unavoidable: it was not the first time the lift had got stuck, probably somewhere between the floors. No one was trapped in it, no one was desperately banging on the door asking to be saved, no one was cursing the maintenance company, no family had gathered on the landing to hearten the member stuck in the lift with sundry advice – all this was even able to create the impression that the lift was not stuck at all. Nevertheless, it was out of order – this was a fact upon which all those who, for one reason or another, tried to use the lift would have been in agreement. However, no one could have specified at what time the event had occurred. Moreover, not even the next day did the occurrence have any repercussions. Sunday passed almost unnoticed. In his diary, Mr
Jon-the-stair-superintendent recorded no notable incident. A possible explanation would be that, as a rule, the tenants do not go out much on Sundays. They stay in and watch the television. There are interesting programmes: football matches, motor racing, comedy, bingo, talk shows, soap operas and, in general, all that the soul of a worker, pensioner or someone on the dole might desire on a day of rest. Only if they happened to have a guest would the latter hurriedly announce, crossing the threshold and still breathing heavily, with his last gasp, like the runner from Marathon: “Did you know the lift is out of order!” “We know,” they would say, without granting the announcement any especial importance, even with a slight ironic satisfaction in their voices, well camouflaged by their hospitable smiles – since the news did not directly affect them, for the time being. It was not until Monday morning, but above all not until Monday afternoon, when they were coming home tired from work, that they took note of the especial importance of a lift in an eight-storey block. Monday evening, in fact. Because in the morning it is easier, almost pleasant: descending the stairs is a substitute for invigorating exercise.

**For the members of the “Friendship” group.** Monday is a day without any rehearsals. Consequently, Mr Ilie decided, from the very first hours of the morning, to repair his motorbike. This could not take place round the back of the block, because the weather forecast and, along with it, the clouds louring in the sky, announced damp weather with scattered showers and thunderstorms. Nor could he risk it in the entrance hall of the block; various persons were always going in and out, especially kids, who could have pinched some spare part or other, just to play with it or to sell it in the flea market afterwards. That is why Mr Ilie reckoned it would be appropriate to do the necessary repairs in his own flat, situated on the sixth floor. But surprise, surprise! The lift was not working. An unpleasant surprise for Mr Ilie let us admit. First of all he uncoupled the sidecar, leaning it against the wall of the building, and after that the two wheels, with which he set off, like it or not, up the stairs. It was just then that Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent was taking down a new notice, inasmuch as the one composed and posted a mere two
days previously no longer satisfied him. The notice composed that Saturday had gone as follows:

“Esteemed tenants, the gasworks have announced that because your association has not paid the invoice for services provided in its entirety, commencing 15 October the gas supply will be suspended.”

The new notice made an absolutely necessary addition. It went as follows:

“Esteemed tenants, the gasworks have announced that because your association has not paid the invoice for services provided in its entirety, commencing 15 October the gas supply will be suspended.

We request that you take appropriate measures.”

“Good morning, neighbour,” Mr Ilie proffered the first greeting.

“Good morning, neighbour!” replied Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent. “What’s that you’re up to?”

“Well, I’ve decided to repair my motorbike.”

“Very well, very well,” muttered Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent, although he was not entirely in agreement.

However, in the Regulations for Discipline and Civilised Co-habitation, which he had drawn up but a month before, immediately bringing them to the knowledge of all the tenants, he had not foreseen the fact that the latter are not allowed to carry out mechanical repairs in their flats. This was an aspect that would have to be noted for use in the next draft. Before then, at the next block meeting the question would be subject to debate on the part of the tenants, in order for the decision to be taken within a democratic framework.

“But what’s wrong with the lift?” Mr Ilie asked out of mere curiosity.

“Ah, yes, the lift... Well, what else could have happened? They've broken it!”

Had he been more vigilant, Mr Ilie would have detected a slight imprecision in the answer of Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent, as well as his haste to relegate the problem to the background of their brief exchange. The truth is, as we have
shown above, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent had quite simply forgotten about the lift, overwhelmed as he was by a host of other administrative problems, with which he would have to cope on his own, as usual. The others never got involved.

“The repairmen ought to be called out,” Mr Ilie opined.
“And if I call them out, are they going to come?”

The answer-question of the stair superintendent was left dangling from the walls of the first-floor landing, attempting to solve the enigma of its own logical loop, inasmuch as the two interlocutors had each moved off in different directions: Mr Ilie towards his sixth-floor flat, whence he would ultimately take the entire motorbike, part by part, and Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent towards the notice board at the entrance to the block, where he would paste the new version of the announcement concerning the gas bill, in place of the old one which no longer satisfied him.

However, having reached the notice board, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent was overwhelmed by certain pangs of conscience. A few children who were playing on the steps in front of the block saw him hesitate for a while before unlocking the glass pane of the panel, with its built-in lock to prevent ne’er-do-wells from tearing down the various notices and announcements displayed there. But they did not accord the proper attention to this fact, since they were children from another block. During those moments, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent was reflecting on whether he ought firstly to telephone the tenants’ association, to call the lift servicing company, or better still to verify in advance the state of affairs in the field, at the scene. The latter option bore the greatest burden of initiative and responsibility. Moreover, it would allow him to exercise his entire authority in an unequivocal manner, to turn his perspicacity to good account, and to adopt certain urgent measures, if the situation demanded, although for the time being it remained unclear both in what way the situation might demand measures and what the concrete conditions for applying them might be.

With a certain pang in his heart, with conflicting feelings, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent folded up the sheet of paper he had been about to paste up and thrust it into the inside pocket of his coat. It contained the results of a mental and physical effort exerted for more than an hour that morning. Beyond its
concise and imperative formulation, what none of the eventual readers of the notice had any way of knowing were the difficulties that Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent had had to overcome in typing up the text in question. Not having the dexterity and practice required for such an occupation, he had had to solve as he went along both the problem of finding the letters on the typewriter, not an easy task at his age, and that of unblocking the typebars when, for some inexplicable reason, Mr Jon’s index finger pressed two keys simultaneously, though it had been set the task of pressing only one. And let us not even mention the repeated corrections caused by unwanted letters cropping up in the middle of a word, such as a *t* in the word *tenants*, which thereby became *tentants* (to give just a single example, but there were others), providing an occasion for malicious irony, and which, when observed too late, necessitated the retyping of the entire text.

The twelve-volt bulbs, which in new lifts, or in lifts in blocks inhabited by disciplined people, indicate the floor, were dead. That did not mean much. In the final instance, it did not mean anything. They used to be dead even when the lift was working within normal parameters, not because of the tenants and not even due to the fault of the maintenance company. Whenever they were replaced, after a few hours of use they would definitively go out. That was why the first observation that Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent was able to make was a negative one: it was not possible to establish with any precision at what floor the lift had got stuck. In order to convince himself one final time, he loudly banged the door of the lift with the palm of his hand …

No one replied.

Meanwhile, Mr Ilie had taken the wheels of his motorbike up to his flat; he now paused behind Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent, holding the cylinder with aluminium flanges, the most important part of the motorbike, and a pedal. For the smaller parts, he was intending, on his next trip, to come down with two plastic bags. The idea, valid in itself, was to prove disastrous in practice, due to the poor quality of the material from which the said bags were made.

“Well, anything moving?” he asked.

“It’s stuck!” replied Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent, without turning around, carefully listening to the silence behind the
metal door, a solemn silence that dominated the entire eight-floor lift shaft, plus the pulley cabin.

“Maybe someone has deliberately left the lift door open on one of the floors?” suggested Mr Ilie.

“I don’t think so,” replied Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent.

He contradicted him groundlessly, for the simple reason that he could not, at that moment, accept that anyone else could be right instead of him.

In fact, he had not contradicted him properly speaking, but rather he had said what he would have wished to believe. However, in spite of this wish, the hypothesis launched by Mr Ilie – who, in the meantime, somewhat offended by the lack of consideration he had been shown, had set off up the stairs determined never again to enquire about the state of the lift – dominated with ever greater authority Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent’s other idea, so that in the end he found himself forced to admit what was obvious from the very start: before ruling out a hypothesis, you have to check it. Had he found out about this, it is not known how Mr Ilie would have reacted.

Before proceeding to take action properly speaking, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent reckoned it necessary to restore a little order in front of the block.

“Children, what block are you from?” he asked the lads and lasses who were playing on the step right in front of the door to the block, so that, in order to enter the hall, you had to find space for your feet between their small, frail bodies, so soft that you felt sorry to touch them.

“From Block 44,” answered a little girl.

“And why don’t you go and play outside your own block?”

“Cyprian beats us up.”

Always the same answer. Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent had been determined a number of times to find out who this Cyprian was, who his parents were, where they worked etc., but he had put off doing so because of other more important or pressing activities, such as the present case. He left the group of children without having taken any organisational measure, but took a note in his mental agenda, as a separate point, that he should subsequently return to the matter of “Cyprian” when time and other communal duties allowed. For the time being, the children were not causing any real damage; as usual, they were playing Red Riding Hood.
In the very instant that he set his foot on the first step of the stair that led to the first floor, he was struck by a wholly new and unexpected idea: a series of illustrative texts assembled under the title of *Guide for the Good Neighbour*, with quotations from ancient Greek philosophy, which he would extract from *A Dictionary of Wisdom*, by Theodor Simenschy. He had received the book as a present from his workmates when he retired, and had very much appreciated the gesture, without observing at first that it was some five years old and had been purchased from the bargain bin. Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent had retired at the age of fifty-five, due to the nature of the work he performed, but he had obtained his position as stair superintendent much later, two years after the Revolution, after the former superintendent, Mrs Fevronia the engineer, died as a result of a botched operation. So they say. In reality, it seems to have been a case of an induced miscarriage. Since then, her husband had stayed shut up in the house for most of the time, not participating at any staircase meetings or in any communal actions, although he always paid his upkeep charge and other monetary dues on time, so that the neighbours groundlessly nicknamed him: the Strange'un.

On the landing of the first floor, he meets Mr Ilie once more. However, the latter goes on his way with two empty plastic bags in his hand, as though he has not recognised him. Maybe he did not have any more suggestions to make. Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent approaches the door of the lift on tiptoes and listens carefully. Nothing. Somewhere below can be heard the voice of the older girl explaining to the others:

“Pay attention, I’m Red Riding Hood, you’re Grandma, you’re Mother, and you’re the Wolf.”

“Why am I the Wolf,” protested a little boy’s voice, “I’m the littlest, how can I eat such a big Red Riding Hood? Better let me be Riding Hood, so even the littlest Wolf can eat me…”

Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent did not bother to listen to what followed. With his crooked middle finger, he tapped lightly, as though he were asking permission to enter.

“Hello?” he asked. “Hello? Is the lift on this floor? Is there anyone in the lift?”

No one replied. (...)
On the seventh floor he proceeded in exactly the same way as on all the other floors. With his crooked middle finger, he tapped lightly, as though he were asking permission to enter.

“Hello?” he asked. “Hello? Is the lift on this floor? Is there anyone in the lift?”

In exactly the same way as on all the other floors, no one replied. He tugged the door handle, thereby to convince himself. In a certain sense, things were beginning to become clear. The lift was stuck somewhere between floors. But what remained inexplicable was how it had got stuck while empty. Nevertheless, in order to conclude what he had begun, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent climbed to the top floor. He mechanically repeated the same words, only changing the order of the operations slightly, that is, firstly tapping on the door, then pulling the handle and finally putting the two questions.

“Hello?” he asked. “Hello? Is the lift on this floor? Is there anyone in the lift?”

“Yes, there is!” replied a muffled voice somewhere higher up, from towards the pulley cabin.

Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent jumped startled to one side, because he had not been expecting any reply. His heart began to thump violently, right in his stomach, as though it had dropped there, threatening him with high blood pressure, something most dangerous at his age. Of course, his breathing went on the blink too. It was lucky he did not suffer from asthma, like Mrs Gudelia. In such a situation, she would have stretched out on the floor with her mouth open, going purple in the face. Mustering all his strength, leaning against the wall with his shoulder, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent managed to ask, only with his voice slightly hoarse, while at the same time attempting to maintain an impression of authority:

“And who is there, may I ask?”

“Simeon, from the ground floor,” came the reply.

On hearing this name, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent felt his heart move back in place. He took one deep breath, like one who has just gone through great peril and nevertheless managed to escape unscathed.

“The cobbler?”

“The very same.”
“Ah, Mr Simeon, it was you? I got a fright, I didn’t know what to think...” he said overjoyed and at the same time disappointed, as he had probably been expecting something far worse. “What are you doing there, Mr Simeon?”

The last question had a slight note of reproach, otherwise quite justified.

“I’m saying my morning prayers. I’m praying to God for all the tenants of this block, of this town, of all the villages and towns of this land, and for all mankind in general.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if you prayed in your own bed-sit?”

“I can’t, because there is always someone slamming the door of the lift. I can’t concentrate. And apart from that, there are too many mosquitoes.”

Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent pondered for a few moments. In a way, Simeon was right. The manner in which many tenants used the lift was totally at odds with its instructions for use. It was Simeon’s misfortune that his bed-sit was on the ground floor, right next to the door of the lift. On the other hand, the standing water in the basement represented a genuine hotbed of infection and, needless to say, an ideal place for mosquitoes to breed. Even if you kept the windows shut all day, they came up through the ventilation shaft and infiltrated wherever they wanted.

Weighing up matters with all his wisdom, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent reckoned it more judicious to resolve the case amicably.

“Very well, but at least after you finish praying could you release the lift, so that the other citizens can use it,” he recommended, as though, having made this recommendation, the problem had already been solved.

“After that I’ll be starting my midday prayers,” announced Simeon curtly. “Then my evening prayers and then my night-time prayers.”

Given this inconsiderate reply, the problem at once grew complicated, and risked leading to a tense situation and creating subsequent conflicts between the two tenants. Nonetheless, displaying much tact, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent once more avoided proceeding to more drastic measures.

“When will you eat, when will you sleep, when will you go to the toilet?” he asked, as though his concern for Simeon’s nourishment and other necessities prevailed in relation to the need to unblock the lift.
“I have discovered a method,” said Simeon mysteriously.
“Look here, Mr Simeon!” A wee bit irritated, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent at the last moment avoided the harsh words he had been preparing. “People need the lift. You have to understand that we can’t play lifts, we’re not children any more. If you want to become a saint, go to a monastery. The tenants have a right to use this lift because they pay for it.”

“In the ten years since this block was built, I have never used the lift, but nonetheless, as far as paying goes, I’ve paid the same upkeep as everyone else,” Simeon replied calmly.

“Well, you live on the ground floor, it’s natural, but think about those who have to climb to the seventh or eighth floor, they come home from work tired, perhaps some of them are ill, others are getting on in years, or else some are pregnant women with babes in arms…”

But not even the sentimental and humanitarian note that Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent had struck met with any success.

“There are no pregnant women in this block,” replied Simeon with the utmost certainty. “As for the others, you should try the stairs for a change. You’ll meet each other more often, exchange a word or two. Haven’t you noticed that, because of this box, you have isolated yourselves from one another? Each one climbs in, presses the button and then goes straight into the house.”

“Mr Simeon, out with it: have you got something against us? Are you trying to punish us? Maybe one of your neighbours has caused you grief and you want to take revenge…”

“Not at all. I don’t have anything against anybody. On the contrary, I love you all as my brothers.”

“Then release the lift!”

“Well, that’s not possible, because the lift is stuck, my dear fellow.”

“Well, get it unstuck then!”

“That’s not possible either. I wouldn’t have anywhere to say my prayers after that.”

“Why don’t you go and pray in church?”

“Oh dear, oh dear, you talk as if you didn’t know how crowded it is in church and how everyone tramples on each other’s feet! As if you didn’t know that most people go to church just because they need another Ceaușescu – for them, God is a
replacement for him. Take it from me, Jon: if Ceaușescu hadn’t
died, they would never have felt the need to go to church.”

The last words rather set Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent to
thinking, because he too had not started to go to church until
after the events of December 1989. It was becoming more and
more clear that whatever arguments he might have advanced,
Simeon would have found a reply to every single one. Nonethe-
less, even though negotiations up to then had not led to any
positive result, Mr Jon-the-stair-superintendent was satisfied that
at least they were talking. As long as they kept talking, the
chances of finding a solution were not entirely lost. But, at a
given moment, Simeon fell silent. Worried, Mr Jon-the-stair-
superintendent, kept asking:

“Mr Simeon, are you there? Has anything happened to you?
Mr Simeon?”

After a while, Simeon replied somewhat hurriedly:

“That’s all, I have to go. The angel is calling me.”

And after that he did not utter so much as a single word!
“Nothing of the sludge of the inner-city style, of the omni present sexual allusions and jokes, filters from the reality of our mass media into this novel written with talent, esprit and literary verve. In an eight-storey block on Sheep (formerly Euler) Street in Bacău, plenty of things happen, if there is someone to observe and relate them. This novel of irresistible tenement-block and metaphysical humour would make an excellent television serial; and then, not only the narrower reading public, but also the wider audience of image consumers would be able to climb the stairs, with heavy steps but a light heart, towards the divine miracle on the eighth floor.”

(Daniel CRISTEA-ENACHE, in Adevarul literar și artistic)
“The trumps of Petru Cimpoeșu’s novel are irony and humour. The author manages to create comic scenes almost from nothing, skilfully wagering on the prejudices and tics of his characters. His irony changes its timbre according to the situation. It can be caustic, but not so much so that it turns the characters into imbeciles. The characters are naïve, credulous, libidinous, grasping, dreamers, but never idiots. Simeon the Liftite is a novel that makes you laugh aloud and forget about the tragic side of life as you read. It is a book such as has never before been written in our language, which shows us just how comic, grotesque, bizarre and pitiful we often are in our day-to-day life.”

(Iulian CIOCAN, in Contrafort, Republic of Moldova)

“Simeon the Liftite: Novel with Angels and Moldavians was a revelation, which has spectacularly brought Petru Cimpoeșu to the forefront of post-revolution prose. Almost unanimously regarded by the critics as the ‘long-awaited novel of transition’, ‘a memorable image of life in a housing block’, and so on, a book of allegorical realism, brimming with humour of metaphysical dimensions, a book that has accumulated the maximum number of points in the category of ‘the fiction of national identity’, an expressive miniature image of post-1989 Romania.”

(Paul CERNAT, in 22 magazine)

“Petru Cimpoeșu daringly imagines a limit situation. The most shocking: during the Romanian presidential elections, seeing that the Romanian people can not, of their own will, tear themselves from promiscuity and indecision, Jesus Christ Himself decides to descend into their midst, just as he had not long ago, for three days in December 1989. What is blasphemy for some is not so in the artistic vision of Petru Cimpoeșu. The Saviour stands as a candidate in the Romanian presidential election, sacrificing Himself for us once again, in the humiliating position of running against Mr Ion Iliescu. In the end, the book is about a small world, with its comical and innocent convulsions during a time when everyone seems to have gone mad, a world of incipient freedom, of mimicking the civilising rules and
norms of democracy as a clumsy initiation into its effective practice. It is about our Romanian world at the beginning of this century and millennium. It is in a certain sense a post-Apocalyptic world."

(Vasile DAN, in Familia)
Vasile Ernu

Born in the USSR
Vasile Ernu – born in the USSR in 1971. He has a Bachelor’s Degree in Philosophy (Al. I. Cuza University, Iassy, Romania, 1996) and a Master’s Degree in Philosophy (Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania, 1997). He is one of the founding editors of Philosophy&Stuff magazine and an associate editor of Idea arta+societate magazine. He has been an active member of the Idea and Tranzit foundations and of Idea Publishing House. He is a publishing adviser for Polirom Publishing House. His first book, Born in the USSR (Polirom, 2006), is to be translated into Russian and published by Ad Marginem, Moscow. The book has been nominated for the following prizes: the Cuvîntul magazine Prize for Debut, the Observator Cultural Prize for Fiction and Memoirs, the România Literara Prize for Debut, the Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Debut, and the Anonimul Foundation Opera Prima Prize. The book has been awarded the România Literara magazine Prize for Debut and the Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Debut. It is the first book in Romania to be accompanied by a visual and audio extension on the web: www.nascutinurss.ro.

Vasile Ernu, Born in the USSR
“Ego-graphies” list. Polirom Publishing House
Year of publication: 2006, 2007
272 pages
Everything I am writing here originates from a two-sided, not necessarily unique experience. It is the immediate experience of a citizen at home in the Soviet milieu, on the one hand, combined with a literary, culturally-acquired experience, on the other. They jointly define me as a product *made in the USSR*. It is virtually impossible for me to distinguish between the two. My narrative perspective, however, is that of *Homo sovieticus*, an undeniable product of that land and its culture. I therefore propose to avoid making any direct use of the intellectual paraphernalia I have since acquired.

I am going to attempt a sort of archaeological approach to daily life in the former Soviet Union, with the object of arriving at a metaphor for Soviet culture and civilisation. The ensuing
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text, bearing the unavoidable marks of a “heretical genre”, aims at a puzzle-like synthesis of topics, heroes, situations, memories, objects and key words. Although each piece of the resulting text-puzzle can be read separately, the whole can only be perceived by methodically assembling the jigsaw. The resulting construct makes no claim to being an exact replica of Soviet culture as we knew it, in terms of objectivity and accuracy. Rather it is an exercise in subjective, personal archaeology, primarily concerned with tracing the contours of a culture, with capturing its overall “mood”, so to speak, its recurrent thought- and speech-patterns, in short, with sketching the Soviet cultural mentality. This archaeological exercise neither offers a key intended to foster understanding, nor does it pass moral or value judgments. It is simply intended to induce a familiarisation of sorts, with a view to helping each and every one of us to comprehend what the Soviet Union actually was, and – more to the point – what its absence actually means.

Recounting the daily life of past times automatically poses all the risks associated with nostalgia – there is no doubt about that. Yet nostalgia as a concept clashes with the very idea of Homo sovieticus for the simple reason that nostalgia is a form of past-oriented utopia, whereas he operates with future-oriented utopias. Moreover, nostalgia as a form of homecoming is well nigh impossible since for us there is no such thing as home anymore. Thus, if there is any nostalgia to speak of, it is not of the kind that embarks upon a reconstruction of the past, but rather of the kind that resolves itself in the attempt to record memories from the past. As nostalgia, at least in theory, is not so unrelated to irony – both operate with the joint contemplation of the object and the subject – I take the liberty of combining the two, and thus look back with a mixture of nostalgia and irony.

From time to time I feel the urge to book a ticket back to the USSR, and each time I have to remind myself such things are not on sale anymore. There is no train, no plane and no road that can take one back to the USSR, for the simple reason that the Soviet Union no longer exists. The only way for me to visit my country is by resorting to memory. The following text is the narrative reminiscence of that incredible adventure.
What would the Soviet citizen drink? (I)

There is a standard answer to this question: the Soviet citizen would drink anything, and lots of it too. For starters. The Soviet citizen would designate as *drink* any liquid possessing the capacity to contribute a shade of colour to daily life, or, more often than not, to reveal and enhance the hidden dispositions of the soul.

To begin with, we perhaps ought to define the authentic drinker as such. Anyone can achieve a fair command of drinking, to a certain extent and for certain reasons, or simply in order to be admitted to a certain *tusovka/circle*. I can tell you in all honesty that the genuine drinker – and the Soviet drinker in
particular – transcends such causes. We might say that, by and large, he is not even remotely affected by any of them. Any Soviet drinker worthy of the name drinks all by himself from early in the morning and needs no reason whatsoever to do so.

The most familiar drinks in the USSR were vodka, wine, and beer, not to mention *Troynoy Odekolon* and the *Chipok* concoction. It is, of course, beyond the scope of our present study to furnish information on the actual drinking procedure. Nor are we here concerned with the amounts of the aforesaid substances ingested. Back *home*, traditional drinks were partaken of in lavish quantities and on a regular basis, just like *out there*, for that matter. The only difference had to do with the packaging and the wide selection on offer. It was the unofficial industry turning out a wide range of improvised drinks that truly boomed in “the boundless land of my birth”. The Soviet citizen took his fate in his own hands. Sensing that the state denied him a satisfactory range of alcoholic beverages, he decided to carve out a drinking destiny for himself. An initial *alcoholic samizdat* thus came into being. It was orally circulated and observed scrupulously to the letter. Building communism without alcohol is like practising capitalism without advertising. While advertising is the engine of the market economy in capitalism, the driving force of communism was drinking. It is noteworthy that the Soviet state used to provide its citizens with the raw materials required for the quick and inexpensive production of the most ingenious concoctions. Since the resulting variety was simply staggering, one is at a loss as to where to begin.

Well then… Let’s start with beer. Drinking beer just for the sake of drinking beer is a complete waste of time. With the rare exceptions of having it with friends over some *tarakana* (i.e. smoked salt fish; on entering any beer place in the Soviet Union one could recognise the familiar odour of fish.). Drinking beer in a variety of combinations is, on the other hand, a pursuit more instructive by far – the future appears much brighter, and one experiences a sensation akin to growing wings.

Have you ever heard of *Yorsh*, one of the most popular drinks in the USSR? Well, in the USSR mixing vodka into your beer is like adding salt to your soup. In the classic *Yorsh*, the ratio of 50g of vodka to 500g of beer is commonly observed. However, the proportions are known to fluctuate, depending on a variety of factors (climatic, psychosomatic, ideological etc.).
Consequently, a combination based on a ratio of 250g to 250g is quite a frequent occurrence.

For those interested in some of the finer points governing such admixtures, we have a number of more nuanced recipes. One of them is the Rembrandt (also known as Here Come the Thrushes): the vodka is poured into the beer, taking precautions to avoid mixing the two. If the vodka settles neatly on the bottom and all mixing has been successfully avoided, we are in the presence of a genuine Rembrandt. If this isn’t the case, then we’re stuck with a forged Rembrandt. A proportion of 50g of vodka to 200g of beer characterises an early Rembrandt, while a proportion of 200g of vodka to 100g of beer is the hallmark of a late Rembrandt.

Of further interest is the technique of Chasing the Bear into his Den. It is a simple enough technique: you take a pint of beer and drink it down in small gulps. The space vacated by each gulp is immediately replenished with vodka. The procedure is repeated until the initial amount of beer has been completely replaced with pure vodka. Chasing the Bear out of his Den is basically the same thing, the only difference being that beer has to replace the vodka. Another technique worth knowing about is Vodolaz. It involves the following steps: you drop a small glass of vodka into a pint of beer. The glass has to remain in an upright position. The pint is downed in one gulp, making sure the vodka is swallowed at the very end. In other words, as the Soviet saying goes, beer without vodka is like a wedding party without music. We should by all means mention here the Chipok. It is basically a Yorsb, that is, a mixture of vodka and beer, in which the pint is tightly covered with the palm of the hand prior to being vigorously knocked against the knee, with the aim of “fizzing up” the mixture. You don’t want to know the effect…

In praise of the Soviet tualet

Dedicated to Ilya Kabakov

There is hardly any space more conducive to intimacy in the life of the Soviet citizen than the tualet. Allow me, as a token of my boundless respect for the convenience as such, as well as
Vasile Ernu

for the word designating it, to persist in employing the original Soviet term whenever referring to it in the present chapter: **tualet.** It is, perhaps, the word that connotes the highest degree of intimacy in the vocabulary of any Soviet citizen. The **tualet** is where you alone and no one else but you go to solve those particular problems which no other person or agency can tackle in your stead. And I mean nobody – neither your father nor mother, neither your wife nor friend, not even the First Secretary himself can take your place in paying the mandatory visit you owe to the **tualet.** Your experience of the place is bound to mark you for life. The intimate relationship with the location and your perception thereof will be perpetuated in every nook and cranny of your inner self. Our individual awareness of the space in question went into the making of our national being. The Soviet **tualet** is part of an acquired commonwealth of experience, defining an essential trait of our spirit.

I cannot approximate with any degree of accuracy the experience a citizen of a Western capitalist state may have in repairing to the convenience under discussion, yet on my very first visit to a country of that description, the first thing to cause me a nagging feeling of discomfort were the toilets. What made me uneasy was not their squalor, since compared to their opposite numbers in the Soviet Union they were a genuine paradise of cleanliness, nor was it any encroachment on privacy, since most of them were scrupulously partitioned to fend off the inquisitive looks of fellow patrons. I nonetheless resented their absolute inability to conjure up the state of intimacy I expected of such a place. For the Soviet citizen that is an unacceptable failure. The **tualet** ought to be the epitome of collective intimacy in its purest form. The Soviet citizen is afflicted with instant constipation when confronted with the capitalist boudoir that passes for a toilet, for the simple reason that such a space fails to elicit any intimate response from him. Consequently, there are no memories of western toilets one could dwell on. And the absence of memories signals the absence of intimacy.

So what is so special about that particular place of perdition? Well, I’ll try to let you in on a few things, the sort of things not commonly shared with others, as each of us tends to keep them to ourselves. Intimate memories are hard to put into words. Such things are the stuff one holds onto in order to remember
and enjoy privately. Few attempt to narrate them, and of those few, only a very small fraction are reasonably successful in the attempt. Nonetheless, let me give it a try.

I ought to start by telling you that there are basically two types of Soviet tualet, which every Soviet citizen either loves or hates. All the same, regardless of the particular sentiment you entertain, you do relate intimately to both of them. The former type of tualet is the one in the komunal’ka. This is where you first encounter it and also where you come to experience your first moments of intimacy with that kind of space. The komunal’ka tualet is a space to be shared. It belongs equally to every one living in the house. That is to say, it is an area of shared intimacy, by no means limited to the intimate use of one’s own family. It’s where tyotya Klava also comes, as well as dyadya Volodya, just like the beautiful Marusya, and that pain in the neck Lyonya, as well as all the other twenty people living in the house. That place indiscriminately respects, services and puts up with each and every one of them. The tualet is essentially unbiased. One may occasionally hurt its feelings, yet it will never retaliate in kind.

Going to any tualet is an art in itself, yet going to the one in the komunal’ka should be counted among our most authentic rites of passage. This is where you become a sort of stalker/guide taking charge of your entire being. When going there you ought to know that, although you are alone, the neighbours are watching you. At any given time, there is bound to be at least one of them watching and passing judgement. “There he goes again. Bound to spend another half an hour in there…” “Reading novels, he is, or doing who knows what”. Indeed, when you go to the tualet, if you the treat the place with the respect it deserves, there are two items that you should take along. Your book and your roll of toilet paper. Toilet paper is never to be found in the tualet proper. It belongs in your room, where it is given pride of place. And it is to be used sparingly. Yet you should not assume that, having forgotten to take your roll of toilet paper, you are bound to end up in an embarrassing situation. Not at all. You’ll find in there, tucked in a nook, either a copy of last year’s Pravda, which will automatically double as reading matter should you feel thus inclined, or a sheaf of
conveniently-sized sheets, neatly cut out of the Konsomol’skaya Pravda by means of a pair of scissors. Tyotya Klava will see to it.

As for the book, there are no restrictions whatsoever governing your choice of reading matter. It’s entirely up to you. You have the freedom to read any book that might take your fancy. The tualet is the perfect reading room, as well as the place that ought to be credited with turning out the largest number of Soviet intellectuals, the most remarkable of them too. You should not succumb to the common misconception that our education is by and large the merit of the Soviet school, or of libraries such as “Nadezhda Krupskaya” or “V.I. Lenin”, or of some Lomonosov University or other. Granted, they did play a worthy part in our education. The tualet, however, beats by a long chalk any such educational and cultural establishments as far as our intellectual development is concerned. Therefore, whenever we express our gratitude towards the people and institutions that shape and educate us, we should not forget to give due thanks to this veritable sanctuary of Soviet culture – the tualet.

The second important tualet in our lives, as well as in the great Soviet civilisation, is the public tualet. This is an altogether different space, a different world we might say, where existence acquires a dramatically new meaning. At this level, experience is more intense, more carnal, more biologically focused. This is where the tualet penetrates your being through every pore. While in the first case collective experience was only assumed, remote, cognitively implied, yet not palpably manifest, in this second case collective experience is overwhelmingly immediate.

All over the country, from Kamchatka to Vilnius, from institutions such as schools to factories and plants, you will see whitewashed structures bearing on opposite corners, in large characters, the letters M and W (Men and Women, respectively). The classical design does away with doors, in favour of an L-shaped wall sheltering the entrance and screening off the interior. Not that anyone would be even remotely curious to attempt viewing the interior in question. In the Soviet public tualet voyeurism is as good as non-existent. This is not a place where people watch each other. Watching is sooner avoided, even resisted. Everyone’s eyes are on the lookout for the comfort provided by blind spots. In spite of all that, something strange happens. You start watching yourself through the eyes
of others. You see yourself as seen by the others, you see yourself through their eyes, as it were. This is far more disturbing and gives way to a weird feeling you can’t exactly put your finger on.

On entering the premises, you had to act with great determination, walk briskly and watch your step. On occasions a certain degree of astuteness was required in order to accomplish the task you’d taken upon yourself. Sometimes you’d have to put it off, or even give it up altogether. You and the public tualet were pitted against each other in fierce combat, yet you had to respect it, for it was the place you couldn’t imagine life without. And gradually, the combat, the odour, the tualet’s very mode of existence came to be part of you.

In there, running along a wall, there was a length of gutter, sloping down at an imperceptible gradient (in the Men’s section, that is), into which water would be allowed to drip at very irregular intervals. If at all. That was the pissing area. On the opposite side there was a row of holes in the floor. I mean holes as in “black hole”. Each hole was flanked by sole-shaped footrests in high relief. Everything in plain view. The protruding sole-patterned footrests were designed as an encouragement for you to take the “eagle” position over the pit and thus aim with optimum accuracy. Now I can’t explain why, but the crux of the matter is that the Soviet citizen, although trained to aim accurately by the target practice routine to which he was subjected from his first years in school, would systematically fail to hit the pit at this particular location. The Soviet citizen’s crap simply refused to enter the hole and vanish into the Void, into that great Nothingness. It demanded greater respect than that, it yearned to abide among us and tell us that it, too, existed, just as we existed. And, mysteriously, it was invariably successful in its endeavours. It stayed above, among us. Of course, there’s no need for me to tell you that such decadent gimmicks as toilet paper were unheard of, and taps with running water were few and far between. One had to fight tooth and nail in order to survive the public tualet, and the theatre of combat was the tualet itself. You wanted to purge yourself of your excrement and cast the dregs of your being into the Void, but the excrement in question would put up a fight of incredible fieriness. The battle as such and the battlefield itself gradually came to be
taken for granted. And if by *reductio ad absurdum* you found yourself in a *tualet* fitted with a *pedestal* (seat), then planting your feet on the *pedestal* was in the nature of things. The established matrix governing positions and hierarchies was not to be tampered with.

This most intimate space of the Soviet being doubled as the archive of the most authentic messages transmitted by the Soviet citizen to the great Soviet people at large. They were the kind of messages whereby the unsophisticated citizen communicated with the whole world. The messages were inscribed upon the inner walls of the *tualet*, which had long since ceased to be white. They would be written using whatever happened to be available, from chalk to ball-point pen to faeces. As a rule, the messages dealt with fundamental topics, from love, *e.g.* МАША + ВОВА = ЛЮБОВЬ (Masha + Vova = love), to the most exquisite forms of profanity. It is at the level of profanity that the Soviet people’s innermost dispositions and highest aspirations find their truest expression. I would venture to say that in the Soviet Russian language there are a maximum of ten words and phrases synthetically expressing the Soviet personality and civilization in their entirety. Those words and phrases are not to be found in Lenin’s *Complete Works*, neither in Marx’s *Capital*, and still less in the syrupy writings of American Kremlinologists. They’re to be found exclusively upon the walls of the *tualet*.

I should like to add something else. You are, of course, familiar with Proust. What want to tell you is that for the Soviet citizen nothing can play the part of Proust’s *madeleines* more appropriately than the *tualet*. That is how the *tualet* functions for us. The familiar odour of faeces, urine and vast amounts of chlorine, sometimes bringing spontaneous tears to your eyes, the familiar sight of white walls streaked with piss, footprints and vulgar inscriptions, the familiar rush of chilly air piercing you in winter are liable, even today, to stir in the Soviet citizen the most sordid, yet most cherished, memories. It is the *tualet* that conjures up the most secret memories, thereby enabling you to revisit your own life.
Coming from western countries, my friends, who are a highly educated and academically inclined lot, are quick to point out to me, by way of reproach, that we in the USSR were unable to construct a civil society. I stand rebuked. Indeed, we did fail to construct a civil society even remotely akin to western civil society, yet I very much doubt that we needed it in the first place, since Soviet society marched to a different beat, with altogether different mechanisms coming into play in the process. We had an altogether different set of social gatherings to serve as “civil society”, and I do assure you that in our daily life they were ideally suited for the part.

The area primarily serving the purpose of bringing people together in club-like structures to foster social dialogue, political debate, analysis, attitude and – it goes without saying – heavy drinking, was the kukhnya/kitchen. (The relationship between communism and the kitchen is a reality which all communist countries seem to share.) In the beginning we would assemble in komunal’ka kitchens. Subsequently the state provided us with apartments, each boasting its own separate kitchen. Why we needed kitchens in the first place was not for cooking, but for organising the aforesaid gatherings of Soviet “civil society”. The Party simply had to make such facilities available. We would get together, discuss, and immediately start drinking. The gathering as such was prompted by the rhetorical question commonly bandied about among friends: “Don’t you think drinking something might be the expedient thing to do under the circumstances?” And we would all agree that, indeed, it was the expedient thing to do, and we would file into the kitchen, and the discussion would flow just as “immediately”.

Such gatherings were usually frequented by close friends, yet it was not uncommon for less familiar guests to join them. We took the liberty of discussing almost everything. We would discuss the position of our leaders with respect to foreign or domestic politics, and would even go so far as to question our intervention in Afghanistan. We would exchange information on who had managed to get hold of what books, what music they’d been listening to or acquired, what was the evolution of Sakharov’s condition, and what Radio Free Europe was saying.
Vasile Ernul

We would consider new methods for improving the system, and rather than raise ideological issues, we would object primarily to the State's inability to provide us with consumer goods. The State, in its way, would tolerate us, would listen, and would provide us with an amount of goods sufficient to keep ideology-related doubts within reasonable limits. In our hearts we all knew that we were ideologically superior to the class-enemy, and our standard bearers, Marx and Lenin, couldn't possibly be wrong. Granted, the Party did commit the odd faux pas, some of our leaders would make occasional mistakes, yet all this meant was that we could go back to the direction traced by the first revolutionaries. This point was also duly subjected to debate in the kitchen, the place where Soviet “civil society” was wont to gather.

Things did not stop there, however. The State would provide us with a further opportunity for assembly, which the citizens of a capitalist country could never have imagined, namely the ocheredi/queue. Queuing was a mode of existence, a hypostasis of any communist entity, the ultimate communist awareness of being, we might say. Those lacking such awareness have no idea what life is all about. The Soviet people were not altogether devoid of Russian inclinations, and thus they would often come to discuss such metaphysical matters as “Does God exist?” or “What is the meaning of life?” Various answers to those questions would be attempted in the kitchen. The vodka would flow, answers were quick to follow suit, and we would reach our conclusions. God, it was obvious, did not exist, since Soviet science had convincingly demonstrated His non-existence. As for life itself, it was even more obvious that man only lived once, for the purpose of queuing. Consequently we would go on queuing.

What did people queue for? Now, this is the wrong way of asking the question. You pose such questions in terms of Americans, since in principle they queue up during sales in order to consume things they do not actually need, but only believe they do. As far as the Soviet citizen is concerned, the question simply doesn't make sense. The queue was a datum, a privilege obtained in the process of class struggle, and therefore we queued. Far from being just a means to an end, the queue was, first and foremost, a raison d'être. In due time, quite naturally, you did
come to find out what you’d been queuing for – as it was not uncommon for people to join a queue in the hope of making some worthwhile purchase only to find out in the end that they had been queuing outside the city information bureau.

There is such a thing as a genuine queue culture, including its own specialised vocabulary. For all their liberty and all their civil society they were unable to create the kind of affluence brought about by this our social institution. “Who’s the person after you?” “Are you the last one the queue?” “Would you be so kind as to keep my place for me in the queue?” “I’ll be back in a moment” “Hey, young man, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.” “What are they selling here?” And so on and so forth. At this point, I do not propose to explain the wealth of meaning implied by such utterances. Those who know are not ignorant of the matter, and those who do not will never find out. I could list countless phrases and situations which are truly remarkable. This is where new acquaintances were made, ideas and opinions took shape, group solidarity either came into existence or came to nothing. This is where I witnessed the power of the proletariat as well as its anger. This is where I learned what “being of one accord” and “together for better and worse” really meant. However, this is also where I witnessed the rage and triumph of the individualist spirit in action. This is where I learned the meaning of class conscience – the class conscience of the queue. It is a force capable of changing the world from its very foundations. The more is the pity that those capitalists managed to manufacture goods in such quantities as to exceed our capacity to queue. Mass production dealt a fatal blow to queue production, and in the process, we were transformed from superior-conscience proletarians into pathetic consumers. The dictatorship of mass-produced goods was stronger than the dictatorship of the queue. And thus, Soviet civil society relinquished their positions in order to watch the commercial break on television.
“*Born in USSR* is a gripping and intellectually useful book. There are brilliant jokes in rich abundance, Ilf and Petrov are almost everywhere, and, generally, each layer of Soviet life is deconstructed into numerous facts and significant little stories, remarkably narrated by the debuting author. Beyond this appetising programme there are also very profound reflections, for instance, the analysis of the ratio between freedom and interdictions displays critical acumen and accuracy.”

(Daniel CRISTEA-ENACHE, in *Ziarul de duminică*)

“This work owes its obvious freshness, in terms of the Romanian market, to a few tremendously banal truths, truths which were, however, repressed by the post-communist cultural industr-
try. Hold onto your seats: there was life under communism too; there were people who laughed and danced under communism too! And acknowledging this is not the same as forgetting the horrors of totalitarianism! On the contrary: the work makes a significant contribution to the reinforcement of critical resistance to another hegemonic ideology: the projection of communism (and the East) as a new ‘Middle Ages’, a world of darkness, evil and savagery, a sort of primitive phase of humanity. Beyond these preconceptions, which continue to nurture some careers, Vasile Ernu’s work contributes to the development of a differential way of thinking, capable of conceiving far more complex things than Black and White, an exercise in the preservation and fructification of his own history while not ignoring its horrors. Vasile Ernu’s sympathy for ‘communism’, in fact his simple dialogue with the daily life of his own past, an invitation to make uninhibited comparisons, is dangerous only for dogmatic anticommunism, so provincial and predictable, peculiar to a culture at the periphery of capitalism, preoccupied with the internalisation of dominant ideologies, the Europe-centred and capitalism-centred ones.

(Ovidiu ȚICHINDELEANU, in Observator cultural)

“*Born in the USSR* is a miniature encyclopaedia of daily life in the Soviet Union, a life not wholly lacking in enjoyable aspects. Some were creations of the regime, the pioneers’ camps, for instance; others were created by the ‘Soviet people’ in the context imposed by the regime, like the picnics following the May Day parades and, finally, through a bizarre transformation of a phenomenon into its opposite, there were theoretically negative situations that morphed into pretexts for having fun: queuing up at the food shops and the discussions that took place there. Vasile Ernu talks ironically and gently about the small pleasures of the Soviet people.”

(Florin CONSTANTINIU, in Dosarele Istoriei)
Filip Florian and Matei Florian

The Alley Boys
Filip Florian – born in Bucharest on 16 May 1968. Between 1990 and 1999 he was an editor for Cuvântul magazine; between 1992 and 1995, editor at the Bucharest desk of the Free Europe radio station; and between 1995 and 1999, Deutsche Welle correspondent for Bucharest. He published short prose in România literară, Luceafărul, Euphorion and Cuvântul magazines. His debut novel, Degete mici (Little Fingers) (Polirom, 2005; 2nd edition, 2007) was awarded the România literară and Anonimul Foundation Prize for Debut, the Romanian National Employers’ Union Prize for Outstanding Debut, and the Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Debut.

Matei Florian – born in Bucharest on 8 January 1979. He made his debut with poems published in Cuvântul magazine. Since 1998, he has been a reporter and then columnist for Dilema veche magazine. He has contributed reportages, literary reviews and short plays to various cultural publications and radio stations. Băluțeii (The Alley Boys) is his first novel.

Filip Florian and Matei Florian, The Alley Boys, novel
“Ego-prose” series, Polirom Publishing House
Year of publication: 2006, 2007
264 pages
This book by brothers Filip and Matei Florian is original first of all for its technique: each narrator recounts an event from his childhood through his own eyes, while the other rounds off the story, gives it new meanings, and offers revelations to his co-narrator and brother. Thus, ‘delicate matters’ that had remained unelucidated in the past are cleared up in the present, confessions are made, and truths unuttered at the time are now spoken. The dialogue between the two narrators provides delights for the reader, as the pair’s childhood grows from memory beneath our very eyes, with a candour and force that transports us to a miraculous world, interpreted and evaluated by the mature eyes of those who now reinvent it.

However, beyond this aspect, there is a freedom from constraint, created by the child’s viewpoint, whereby serious, per-
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Preliminary subjects are dealt with, such as their parents’ divorce or the death of their grandparents, but above all general aspects of life in a totalitarian society. The aberrations of the ideology and way of life imposed by communism are refracted through the prism of childish naivety, which accentuates their absurdity and grotesqueness. What remains in spite of such aspects is a serene book, whose finale, to which every page builds up, is, in fact, brotherly love, a love ‘narrated’ through the personal miracles of each brother, miracles that are now dissected, brought down from the magic of childhood into a realism which naturally still preserves a question mark, a fairytale thread.

The authors familiarise us with the various characters that descend from the world of fairytale into Bătuţ Alley in Bucharest, where the two brothers live: for example, Sting and Stung, Matei’s friends, who suddenly turn up in a jar of mustard, and whom Filip now regrets, at the time the story is told, because he never saw them. Or we delight in characters who cross over from the cinema, television and children’s magazines, becoming ‘Joe Lemonade’, ‘Giani Morandi’, ‘Rome Specs’ or ‘Brooslee’, names reinvented for the stars of the day, filtered through the childish imagination and brought back to life for the amusement of the reader in the pages of the book.

Their shared love of football, moreover for the same team, Bucharest’s Dynamo, creates other episodes, develops another world, one of sighs and incomprehensible passions, which draws the two brothers closer, creating for them a shared frontline. This love unfolds at a level that comes close to poetry: football and its related passions are narrated with candour, so that we discover a story beyond the stands, another tale of the miraculous which we all too often pass by without discovering.

In the end, *The Alley Boys* is a novel about the miracles in our own back yard, regardless of whether they occur in an obscure lane in an obscure district of a land kept in obscurity by communist dictatorship. However, even if they are viewed only through the lens of naivety and now transformed into an exceptional tale, for miracles there are no impediments, no barriers. And those who attempt to raise barriers to the miraculous are, ultimately, doomed to disappear. What remains is a simple tale, but one that is astonishing in its power to absorb us even now.
3.

The incredible adventures of Sting and Stung

Sting and Stung came into being in a jar of mustard, the very next morning after I dreamt of serpentine roads and devils. Had it been necessary to invent a realm from whence they might come forth – a couple of translucent, earnest-looking blobs, faceless and ageless, and generally possessing no other quality save their existence – then that jar, of the kind Mum used to wash thoroughly as soon as the mustard had finished, for subsequent use as glasses, and thick, ugly, heavy-duty glasses at that, then the jar upon which I was fixing eyes still dazed by sleep and dreams would have been by far the most appropriate.

There is one thing I have learned (although no book was required for that end, just a tiny amount of attention), namely
Filip Florian and Matei Florian

when miracles occur, even small-sized miracles like this one, it is never enough to focus on just one aspect. So as to prove to you that I’m not being funny, or trying to pull your leg, or having you on, or anything like that, having been carried away with the thrill to which almost all grown-ups succumb the moment they put pen to paper, I assure you I am fully aware of how unlikely it is for two characters to come into being – hey, presto! – in a jar of mustard. Granted, it would be far more convenient were things to happen that way, yet I would somehow feel uneasy about it because 1. It’d mean throwing truth down the drain and 2. I’d no longer be able to look you in the eye (to say nothing of Filip, who’d never want to hear from me again, and that’s a fact). For his sake then, if not for your own, and ultimately for my own sake, I’ll do my best to clarify, as tactfully as narrated miracles demand, the genesis of Sting and Stung in a jar of mustard, one dull Sunday morning in October, most probably at eight o’clock.

To sum up, Sting and Stung came into being one dull morning, following the night I had that dream about serpentine roads and devils, a dream that has continued to pursue me (with almost wizard-like persistence) to the present day. (...)

All I know is that I woke up in a dazed state (as I’ve already told you), with flickering strip lights and coiled devils weighing heavily on my mind, grabbed a picture book without too much text – Snow White – and made my way into the kitchen. Mum was toasting bread on the gas stove, and the resulting fragrance together with the burning light bulb (it was a dark, overcast day) made the kitchen, how shall I put it, seem like the first and the last place on earth, the only place whose existence was beyond all doubt, as though in the beginning God had not created light, the waters and the dry land, but that kitchen of ours with Mum toasting bread in it, prior to summoning me out of sleep, story book in hand. I don’t know what that book had to do with it all, I didn’t so much as glance at it, I knew it by heart, yet, I feel bound to say it once more, when you’re dealing with miracles even minor details are there for a purpose. Filip was not there, it may not even have been Sunday, but as far as the jar of mustard (into which my eyes bored with no hint of alarm), the morning and the fragrance of toast are concerned, you should not for a moment doubt them. I could of course claim that I was
hearing, filtered to a high pitch through the window pane, the clip-clop of horses drawing a cart over the asphalt, and the garbled street cry of the gypsies asking for empty bottles to buy: *emmee booo'les, booo*! Yet something tells me I’d be superimposing images, and superimposed images are the last thing I need right now.

I had no particular expectation that morning, the dream had slowed down to a distant throb, I was sitting on my chair at the table, staring into the void, until the void into which I was staring sucked me in with a thoroughness that enabled me to realise that what I was actually staring at was the mustard in a jar.

I don’t know whether you’ve ever had the curiosity to pay any attention to what goes on in a jar of that description, but I assure you that, at first, you won’t notice anything much, except a mass of something which could only be described as yellow. If the mustard jar has already been opened, the view is much better, of course: the mustard spoon has carved into the mass a network of tunnels, paths, and highways. At this point it is quite easy to lose yourself in their maze, stained yellow and damp though they might seem to you. And since a miracle (unfortunately or fortunately) can almost always also be explained logically, I don’t think it’s going to be a major challenge for anyone to come up with the following question: “what’s the use of all those tunnels and crossroads and lanes if no one lives in there?” I do believe that is what I must have asked myself. And just like that, in a most natural sequence of events leading from the answer to a logical question to a miracle with the fragrance of toast, without Mom, whose back was turned on the whole thing, not even remotely suspecting what was going on in the kitchen of flat 40, Sting and Stung, the two inseparable friends who were to become the trustworthy companions of my childhood, came into existence. I did not whoop with excitement, nor did I whoop with terror, the light bulb did not flicker like the strip light in our bathroom, the window did not burst open from some unaccountable gust of wind, and the dogs in the street did not let out so much as a whimper when from down there, from deep inside the jar of mustard, the following conversation echoed for the first time in the Barracks Road district of Bucharest.
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and, quite possibly, the whole of the universe (how am I to know?):

“How’re you doin’, Sting?”
“I’m doin’ fine, Stung.”
“And how’s Missus Sting doing?”
“Oh, she’s doin’ fine, too. And what about Missus Stung?”
“She’s doing fine. Bye, Sting.”
“Bye, Stung.”

I’m telling you the truth, I listened to them talk without batting an eyelid. That was another thing I’d just learned: miracles are easy to get used to. At that particular age, at least.

It is elder brothers who are always the problem. It is not as if they had anything against our miracles, frowning upon them, or anything like that. Not at all. It is simply that they find miracles somewhat hard to comprehend. And if a brother happens to be eleven years your senior, now that is definitely a case when you have to take a break and fill him in nice an’ easy, so that on future occasions you will be sure to avoid any surprises. But be that as it may, I’ve got to take some time off at all costs. Make a detour. Digress, divagate, stray from the subject. Open that thing we commonly call a parenthesis. Or whatever. Here are some points (seven in number):

• Little brothers have their own distinct and not-to-be-tampered-with reality
• Notwithstanding the undeniable credit that goes to them for having watched Mum’s belly getting bigger and bigger (with you inside), having pushed you around in a pram, having listened to your priest-like gurgles and the like (the list could go on for many pages), elder brothers have no right whatsoever so much as to hint that your memories (however vague they might be) are, in actual fact, erroneous
• When that kind of thing does occur, nonetheless, it ought to be properly acknowledged as such, so as to remove the slightest shade of suspicion. Consequently, such ambiguities as “I’m afraid I don’t really remember” should no longer occur on the same page with statements of such obvious certainty as “he’s been laying it on thick, way too thick”;
• Objections, reservations and misgivings would be much easier to accept if we, the little ones, were granted, even for just one moment, the right to decide what’s true or false regarding
certain episodes in the child-life of the big ones (for instance: Filip + Alexandra Ștefănescu; Filip + Comrade Ulărescu).

In conclusion:
- Little brothers are envious of elder brothers
- Little brothers and elder brothers can never be equal
- It all comes down to Sting and Stung.

4. Some of the miracles gracing the biography of elder brothers

The trouble is I have never seen Sting and Stung for myself, be it because I wear glasses, or be it for different reasons altogether. Now I did used to hear Matei talking as he moved around the flat but, why should I lie to you, I thought he was talking to himself. (...) As for the theory Matei advances in the previous chapter (“It’s elder brothers that are always the problem”), I happen to believe the exact opposite. And in order to prove that it is younger brothers who are always the problem, I’m going to give you my own list of points (also seven in number):

- For a while, younger brothers firmly believe there is only one reality, and it is only brothers that fall under two different headings – younger and older
- Younger brothers would not even for a moment suspect that, in the distant past, older brothers did all sorts of things in close communion with their own angels and elves
- Timepieces tick independently of both brothers’ will
- Each age has its own miracles, each miracle its own witness, each witness a brother (or was on the point of having one).

Consequently:
- Brothers can write a book together, but can never come across the same angels and elves simultaneously
- Even when they grow up, younger brothers remain younger than older brothers;
- Younger brothers never forget having their butts kicked by older brothers.

What am I to do, then, I, Filip, concealed so far behind the mask of older-brother? The only thing left for me to do me is...
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reminisce nostalgically about how I used to kick the butts of younger brothers, immerse myself in my own miracles and serenely swim among them.

**Miracle A:** Summers are so hot in Severin, so muggy, that you try to stay in the shade wherever you can find it. We found it behind some bushes in the graveyard, spread our mat on a very big stone (on which someone had carved some letters and numbers), laid out our things around the house, and started cooking a meal in a rusty tin (which someone had used for lighting some candles). I fetched four earthworms, snapped them into small segments and allowed them to simmer in our stew, the girls chopped rose petals, anemone buttons, iris leaves, mixed in some gravel and dirt, stirred well so that the stew wouldn’t stick to the bottom of the pot, and when everything was ready, we put the food onto plates (torn out of newspaper pages so as to approximate round shapes). Next, since we were playing mums and dads anyway, we had to undress and lounge naked about the house, watch telly, hang our clothes on the peg, a wooden cross (on which someone had carved some letters and numbers), but still something was missing, as the mum and the baby had no willies, so we looked around for two twiggies, adjusted them properly, so that Cerasela and Lori would also have their willies like all human beings.

**Miracle B:** The beige Soviet Pobeda car would drive off its patch of packed earth in a cloud of dust, would charge through puddles splashing right and left like a speedboat, would drive off through the snow leaving deep ruts in its wake, yet it would always grind its way back to the same spot, so that I could see it from our windows, parked sideways outside our block. And there was also Fane from the sixth grade who, as a rule, would hit me repeatedly across the back of the head saying my noggin looked like a watermelon, and who, after each football game, league or international, would chase me till he caught me, twist my arms behind my back and unleash a rain of finger-flicks at my lugs (and such jug lugs, too!) until it hurt so much that I started crying. And then one Wednesday, when the championship was off and no one in Severin remembered the cup because Rapid had beaten Știința in the end game and they say
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you shouldn't trouble the dead for forty days after their demise, Fane lent me his catapult. And he said I wouldn't be able to hit the Pobeda. Now the Pobeda was no longer parked sideways, for I wasn't upstairs, in either the large or the small room, but down on the packed earth, where I could have a front view of the Pobeda. And you can bet your bottom dollar I hit the target, hit it spot on, I did, first shot I took, I shattered its windshield to smithereens, showering the hood with tiny bluish glass shards (like fish scales), and Fane chased me till he caught me, twisted my arms behind my back till the owner came followed by his wife (the nurse who'd once given me shots when I had a bad cold), they were screaming their heads off, red in the face like boiled lobsters, he was wearing his pyjamas, she was wearing a housecoat, then everyone came and Fane told them I was a Dynamo supporter. Some time later Dad came (he was a Steagu supporter), then he left, not straight away, but in two days or so, left for Bucharest to buy a Pobeda windshield with the holiday money he had set aside for our trip to Sarmizegetusa.

Miracle C: Harun-al-Rashid had been at war for some time. He loved his country and wanted to defend it. But he also loved his wife, and so, although he had the eunuchs guard her against evil men, Harun-al-Rashid, without letting her know, had also arranged for his faithful djinns to guard her, just in case. And guess what happened. The eunuchs he'd hired were not really eunuchs, they were just pretending to be eunuchs, but in actual fact they could do all sorts of things, and as the woman was pining for what Harun-al-Rashid used to do to her in times of peace, she came to an agreement with the eunuchs that they should be doing those things to her, or, well, that they should just do them to each other. It was lucky the djinns were there. They got terribly angry about what was going on in the bedchambers, and squeezed under the palace (where the foundations were, I guess) and started shaking it with all their might, hard, really hard, so as to punish Harun-al-Rashid's wife and the eunuchs who'd lied about being eunuchs. And at that very moment, as I was reading how the palace was shaking and how cross the djinns were, everything started shaking for real, although the block in the Băiuț Alley was not exactly a palace. The walls and the furniture were making cracking noises, the
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lamp was swinging as though I had climbed up onto a chair and given it a shove with my hand, toys, notebooks, books and pencils were galumphing on the shelves, on the brackets and on the table, my reading lamp was hopping up and down at my bedside, and even I, no matter how hard I was trying to keep to one place, was sliding towards the edge of my bed, but what I found worst was the noise, the windows rattling in their casements, the doors threshing on their hinges, a series of thuds culminating with an explosive one, a racket coming from somewhere else, the objects that, having had enough of galumphing, had now started falling onto the floor, the djinns were truly going berserk, no matter how faithful they were to Harun-al-Rashid, they were behaving too much like the evil spirits of Crihala and had now stampeded into Barracks Road, I could not for the life of me figure out what I'd done wrong, I was a nine-year old child after all (and quite harmless compared to the eunuchs), and I threw my blanket to one side and jumped to my feet and in the hall I ran into Dad who was reeling towards me, shaken out of his sleep, in his underwear, not wearing his glasses, then Mum was there too, coming out of the bathroom, all wet, with nothing but a towel wrapped around her body. I was trying to tell them about the djinns (to make them understand), I was stammering, shaking, unable to get the right words out, the three of us were rolling as if on board a ship in a storm, Mum was hugging me in her arms, caressing my hair, she suddenly understood what I meant by those djinns and told me it was an earthquake. There was an earthquake going on, you know, a big, big earthquake, and on being given that particular piece of information, I no longer worried. Dad was fully awake now, he dragged us into the door frame (Dad was an expert on what to do in the event of an earthquake), he was steadying us with his arms, and we just stood there clinging to one another for a long, long time until the objects around calmed down, the cracking noises, the galumphing, the rattling, the threshing and the thuds came to an end, the lights went off, only the moonlight stayed on (a large reddish moon), and now people started galumphing, spilling out of their blocks like ants out of their anthills, screaming and running, I guess no one had told them it had been an earthquake and not the revenge of the djinns that had hit Barracks Road. Later on we discerned by candlelight what had
caused the explosive thud following the series of lesser thuds, it was the telly, whose screen had shattered like a Pobeda wind-shield hit by a catapult. Before I fell asleep, Mom told me a story about a white-dotted mushroom out of which a mass of dwarves were spilling out, running among the tiny flowers and grass blades in the meadow, and screaming happily, just like the people outside.

_Miracle D_: the Spanish teacher was sitting with her legs crossed, the Spanish teacher’s skirt had slid back, I was standing next to the teacher’s desk, watching the Spanish teacher correcting my essay in red ink, the Spanish teacher’s left thigh was bare, the day was sunny, the Spanish teacher’s high-heeled shoe was quivering slightly, on my essay written in blue ink all sorts of red signs were throbbing, the Spanish teacher’s left thigh coloured brown whenever a passing cloud obscured the sun, I wished I had written a long, long essay, with plenty of mistakes, because the Spanish teacher’s left thigh had dozed off, it had dozed off for sure, one could tell by the way it was breathing, and it would have been such a pity to wake it up.
“There is no way you could not like it. You have to like it!”

(Mihai IOVĂNEL, in Cultura)

“I assure you that you won’t have read anything like The Alley Boys! And not just because the novel has been written by four hands, by two brothers, but also because it is very rare to find someone who has written about childhood with so much style, winningly blending fantasy with nostalgia and humour.”

(Marius CHIVU, in România libera)

“Paradise exists – it was invented by two brothers somewhere on Băiuț Alley. This book by brothers Matei and Filip
Florian delicately and innocently skirts a gloomy epoch. Not because any political annulment of the regime is part of their candid concerns, but because the Ceauşescus, secret police informers in their block, and ideologies are absolutely secondary to the story. They are far from possessing the power of a Steaua-Dynamo match, or a neighbourhood game of football where defeat ends in tears and sobs."

(Florentina CIUVERCĂ, in Evenimentul zilei)

"The Alley Boys is not a book about 'today's world', but a lucid submersion in the magic of an intimate past. Solidary over time, the two cavalier-brothers from Băiuţ compose with humour and ironic delicacy a fresh and charming book about the everyday miracle of their childhood during the Ceauşescu regime, one of the most beautiful 'young books' to have been published in Romania in recent years."

(Paul CERNAT, in Bucureştiul Cultural)

"The Florian brothers’ book remains one of the most convincing novels about communism."

(Andrei TERIAN, in Cultura)

"The Alley Boys is an extraordinary tale – with two voices that are extremely different, but which communicate perfectly, with broad thrusts and scrupulous contradictions, with refrains as long as a series of parallel histories, and with much love – of a fabulous family from a place in which nothing is accidental."

(Simona SORA, in Dilema Veche)
Ioan Groșan

Hundred Years at the Gates
of the Orient
Ioan Groșan – born in 1954. He is a prose-writer, playwright and journalist. A graduate of the Philology Faculty of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, he has over the years been a teacher, the creative director of the Ministry of Culture’s Cinematography Studio, and an editor for Contrapunct and Academia Căţavenci. He is currently a journalist and editor for the Ziua daily. He is a member of the Romanian Writers’ Union. Published volumes: Caravana cinematografică (The Cinematography Caravan) (1985, Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Debut); Trenul de noapte (Night-Train) (1989); Scoală ludică (The Ludic School) (1990); Planeta mediocrilor (Planet of Mediocrities) (1st edition: 1991; 2nd edition: 2002); O sută de ani de zile la Porțile Orientului (A Hundred Years at the Gates of the Orient) (1st edition: 1992, Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Prose; 2nd edition: 2001; 3rd edition, 2007); Jurnal de bordel (Brothel Diary) (1995); Nutzi, spaima Constituției. Jurnal de Cotroceni (Little Johnny, Terror of the Constitution: Cotroceni Diary) (1998); Județul Vaslui în NATO (Vaslui County in NATO) (2002).

Ioan Groșan, A Hundred Years at the Gates of the Orient, roman
2nd edition, “Fiction Ltd.” list, Polirom
Year of publication: 2007
344 pages
Written in serialised form, with short and lively scenes, Ioan Groșan’s novel is an extraordinary “historical” tale, in which, however, modern inserts make an important contribution to the flavour of the narrative and to the extraordinary humour to be found throughout the book. The action proper extends over the 17th Century, and the characters and fictive events are described using archaic language. However, besides the contribution it makes to the book’s atmosphere, this archaic idiom is ‘exploded’ by a series of literary references, allusions to Romanian and international literature, and the presence of neologisms that cause the reader to laugh out loud.

The story centres on a handful of characters: on the one hand, there is the Voievode Barzovius, accompanied by Eagle the Spatharius and the rhapsode Broantes, who is on his way to
Synopsis

Istanbul to try and regain the throne he has lost in Moldavia. On the other hand, we have the “reverend” monks Methodius and Jovanutz, whose secret mission is to reach Rome and beg the Pope for an alliance with Moldavia, with the aim of annihilating the Ottoman armies. On the way, a whole host of other characters appear, all of them with their own zany stories, who create episodes that heighten the atmosphere and enhance the novelty.

Anachronistically, the Voievode Barzovi and his companions arrive at the sultan’s court, where they are greeted by the “odalisque on duty”. Moreover, we find the sultan in his own fitness salon, doing push-ups in preparation for an erotic massage. Methodius and Jovanutz, on the other hand, finally get to see the Pope, and the scene in which Methodius recounts the meeting is, like many other episodes, a classic example of (self-)irony: “The Pope asked us where Moldavia was. And? And we told him. And what did he say? When he heard where it was, he said that he wasn’t going to get involved at this point in time, but that he’d keep in touch…” The humorous and ironic dialogue is one of the book’s strong points. This is a seventeenth century where a character can, for example, get away with saying: “Hada way wɪˈye, lad, I see ye like maieutics, divent ye?” The comical situations are similarly punctuated by witty ripostes. For example, on returning from Istanbul and disembarking on what he thinks is Romanian soil, the Voivode Barzovi throws himself into the mud and kisses the ground. The wise Eagle the Spatharius realises that the ship has landed “a bit further up” than it should have, which is to say on Russian soil, and acridly concludes: “Your Highness, I think your kiss was somewhat misplaced”. The story is sometimes interrupted by direct addresses to the reader, but also by letters the author has supposedly received from readers during the course of the serialisation. One example is a letter from Aurica Antofie, a “pensioner by trade”, who, after making a show of her historical knowledge, demands that the author should cease confusing honest people and fooling them into thinking the story presents historical facts: he should either disclose his “sources” or make a public admission that the whole thing is a fantasy.

Happily, the novel *A Hundred Years at the Gates of the Orient* has found itself readers who have no need of such detailed explanations: readers who are content with a historical fiction in which narrative acrobatics, playfulness, humour and literary sleight of hand create a total entertainment that captures their attention from the very first to the very last word.
Episode 1. Of how two worthy monks did fit into one habit

Around 1600 and something, had someone ventured to gaze over the rolling hills beyond Vaslui, he would have descried at a glance two silhouettes walking bent under the untiring blast of the icy Crimean wind. The first figure was tall and pockmarked, with a hooked nose, and jug lugs hidden beneath freshly shorn locks of hair. The second figure seemed shorter, but on closer examination he was revealed to be an extraordinarily tall young man, with bandy legs, freckles, flaxen hair and a furtive eye, who would have made any woman of easy virtue quiver. From their garb, you would have reckoned they were Benedictine monks, except that they were wearing berets on their heads. They walked briskly, now and then anxiously turning
back their heads. When they reached Bear's Dell, they stopped for a rest.

"Reverend Methodius," spoke the young man shyly, but not without a brief smile at the corner of his mouth, "you must be weary after such a journey. Let us rest a while in the Lord."

"The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away!" sighed the old man sitting down cross-legged. "My son," he continued, getting out something to eat, "let us render unto the body what is the body's, for without the body the soul is equal to nought. Tuck in!"

Their repast was humble: two sorrel leaves, three prunes, a chunk of cold maize porridge, an onion, and a hastily snared rabbit. But as they were feasting, raising thanks in their minds to the Creator of All, a clatter of hooves grew louder in the valley and as quick as you could clap your hands Bear's Dell was filled with yells.

"The Tartars!" the old monk had time to cry, hiding the young monk underneath his habit.

The Tartars surrounded them savagely lashing their horses with switches. One of higher rank shouted at the old man:

"Shtakryhm, hrykma!"

"Ma io no capisco!" stammered Methodius.

**Episode 2. Of how the two monks became acquainted with Tartar customs**

Hearing the old man's words, the Tartar screwed up his eyes sideways:

"Lei parla italiano?" he asked.

"Si, io parlo," replied the frightened Methodius.

The swarthy but handsome face of the Tartar wrinkled in a smile:

"Bravo, signore," he said in fluent Italian, "my dejected soul rejoices to encounter in these wastes a man of choice education of the spirit, and the sweet sound of words of noble stock, other than barbarous words, are pleasing to my ears."

"How can it be?" wondered Methodius. "You know Italian, sir?"

"As you can see," replied the Tartar. "My father, Khantartar, on seeing me inclined to book learning, sent me to school. I completed my studies in the Classics at Padua last year. Perhaps
you are going to ask me what I am doing here. The Italian duchies are going through a horrendous economic crisis, a plague, and in spite of the fact that I have a Degree magna cum laude, I was unable to find a post with any duke. So, I have come back home to the old ways: I plunder the wastelands and find succour in dreams. If your way does not run too aslant to mine and if your heart if not too affrighted by the appearance of my men, then I beg you to be my guest along with your companion, who, if you keep him under your habit much longer, will assuredly suffocate. My camp is nearby.”

Indeed, the young monk could scarcely breathe. Ashamed and frightened, he emerged into the light.

“Be not afraid, my son,” Methodius spoke. “The Tartar gentleman is an honest man.” Then, turning toward the young khan:

“We shall come to you and we shall honour you, but no more, for thoughts other than hospitality impel us on our way. Pulvis et umbra sumus!”

“Amen!” replied the Tartar, spurring his horse.

After a good hour of unsaddled galloping, the horde and the two monks arrived at the Tartar camp. As they passed among the tents, the wonderment of the guests was not little when they saw what strange customs seemed to prevail there. In front of a purple tent, seven young Tartars were queuing, each with a book in his hand. An old Tartar took their books and gave them other new books. On the right, four Tartar women were weeding a bed of Dniester onions, and another two were weaving a carpet with beautiful traditional motifs. Next to a taller tent, the colour of a bustard egg, an almost naked Tartar was bending over a printing press. Finally, in the centre of the camp, posing for a bald icon painter with a thin beard, a superb young Tartar woman was reclining on one side. The light of the sun was mirrored in her deep green eyes as though in slowly moving water.

The heart of the young monk leapt.

Episode 3. Of how two young people conversed at the beginning of the seventeenth century

Seeing the gaze of the young monk stealing toward the Tartar woman, the khan bared his teeth, made of gold from the fall of Constantinople (1453), in a narrow, wise smile.
“Does she please you?” he asked. “Let me introduce you. She is my sister.”

The Tartar woman slowly twisted round, like a snake, and two small, coy flames, like two pinheads, darted at the monk.

“My name is Huruzuma!” she said, with a slight Asiatic accent. “What is your name?”

“Jovanutz!” replied the monk simply.

For a moment, their eyes met. “Do not tempt me so sorely, O Lord,” thought Jovanutz in fright.

“Do you come from afar?” she asked him.

“From roundabout!” he replied evasively.

Somewhere a blackbird began to sing. A breeze was blowing and it smelled sweet enough to make you swoon.

“We shall now leave you for a moment,” said the khan. Then, turning toward Methodius; “Let us go, father. I want to show you my harem.”

They moved away. The youngsters were left alone.

“Sit down!” said the Tartar woman. “Relax. You must be tired. Have you been travelling long?”

“Enormously long!” said Jovanutz timidly.

“But why do you travel around so much?”

“Men are like coin. The best coin travels in every land.”

“Where is it you are coming from now?”

Jovanutz cautiously raised his head, gazed carefully around him, and slowly said:

“Will you tell anyone?”

“What! Are you a child?”

“From Rome!” he whispered. The blackbird suddenly fell silent.

Episode 4. On the way to the harem

Leaving the two youngsters to feed on each other’s gaze and to spin their yarn, the khan and Methodius sauntered leisurely towards the harem.

“Signore,” said Methodius in a lowered voice, “we are now sauntering leisurely towards the harem. I can understand you, for you are in your prime and you must have seven lives in that bronze breast of yours… But I… in a harem… if you will forgive me…”

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“Amore, more, ore, re probantur amicitiae!” answered the Tartar smiling. “Or are you worried that you will lose your soul?”

“Oh, the soul! It's not the soul I'm worried about,” said the monk dreamily. “Animi Volant, corpora manent, as the prophets said. It's the body I'm worried about. The body – that unknown quantity.”

“You Danube folk certainly are strange!” the Tartar meditated.

“Thus was it written for us, that we should have the ease of the wind and the inconstancy of the waters. But we are not complaining. We endure. We exist. All of us. Here today, tomorrow in Focshani, what we have had and what we have lost.”

“We’ve arrived,” said the Tartar, indicating the door of the harem, on which a traditional Tartar coat of arms was traced: an ox head impaled on the tip of a spear.

Under the coat of arms, there was an old Asiatic dictum, written in scrawled letters: “Inter arma silent musae”.

“I'm not going in,” said the monk decisively.

“If you don't go in, then I will,” said the Tartar menacingly.

“Then I'll go in too,” said Methodius.

And so they went in. Inside there was darkness. A scent of pineapple struck them. Methodius was cautiously advancing when, in a corner, a door slowly opened, through which filtered a languorous ray of light. Methodius hesitated for a moment, bashfully approached the door, blinked his eyes and … what should he see?

Episode 5. A Model Harem

Entering the door masked by the superb body of a young Tartar woman, masked by the massive body of a eunuch, Methodius stopped on the threshold, his eyes boggling: in a room plunged in pleasant semi-darkness, whence purled the sweet sounds of a lyre, seven young Tartar women, all alike, were stooping around a strange machine. In one corner, resting on some pillows and puffing on an ivory pipe gracefully held by a eunuch, an old Tartar, completely shaven and tattooed on his chest with both the cross of Saint George and the crescent moon, sat deep in thought.
“What’s that?” stammered Methodius, pointing at the machine. “A printing press, mon cher!” the young khan explained. “And what is it you are printing?” said Methodius, pleasantly surprised. “Psalters, homilies, lexicons, ‘The History of the Ottoman Empire’, the part about the rise of the empire.” “Yes, but what about the girls?” “They do the proofreading.” “And what about… him?” he whispered, peeking from the corner of his eye at the tattooed Tartar. “Him? He won the ‘From hundreds of Tartars’ competition. Let me introduce you. His name is Myrzak.” They went closer. “I observe that, in spite of the worldly things around you, the mind is not affrighted beneath the burden of enticements,” Methodius gently spoke to Myrzak. “A pleasant rumour cometh to mine ears,” said Myrzak without raising his head. “Wonder not, stranger, that the sweetness of temptation no longer tests me. For there is no pastime more useful than the reading of books.” “You speak truly,” answered Methodius. “But methinks that you too were young once and you perhaps knew the flower of sin.” At these words, Myrzak smiled bitterly and, by way of an answer, showed his left shoulder, on which were tattooed the words: YULISHKA, MOHACI, 1526.

Episode 6. Of what else two young people discussed at the beginning of the seventeenth century

While the khan and Methodius were visiting the harem, Jovanutz, the young monk, and Huruzuma, the foster sister of the Tartar, had remained alone. “So you mean to say you’ve been to Rome!” said the Tartar girl, rolling her r’s, getting up sideways.

Jovanutz did not dare to gaze upon her directly. The puritanical education he had received in the house of his parents, serfs of the Neamtz region, an education according to which a woman should know her place, and not recline on her side, made him tend to avoid such perilous advances.
“And as I was saying,” continued Huruzuma, “you mean to say that you are coming back from Rome, no? Why don’t you answer?”

The young monk at last raised his eyes, preparing to answer politely but firmly, “Yes, I’m coming back from Rome”, but the Tartar girl did not let him begin, but rather went on:

“How happy you must be, master Jovanutz! To travel so widely and to see so much! Whereas I... always on the steppe. I look to the right: steppe. I look to the left: steppe. I look up above... what else is there to say!”

“Y-yes!” said Jovanutz in his mind, nonetheless espying the curving point of Huruzuma’s boot as it playfully moved amid the lush grass that grew there by the Dniester illo tempore.

“I get terribly bored!” sighed the Tartar girl, looking around her. “It’s pointless knowing how to read and write. I don’t have anyone to exchange impressions with, to exchange views with, except my brother. Master Jovanutz, don’t get the wrong impression of me, but I’m only human. I would like to travel, to open my soul to someone... You know, master monk, I’ve never been to the seaside...”

Jovanutz stood with his head bowed, toying with a tassel on his habit. Huruzuma's confessions perturbed him greatly.

“But apart from that,” Huruzuma went on gaily, all of a sudden, “it’s a not a bad life all in all. In the evening we make a campfire, throw on brushwood, joke, laugh, sing... Would you like me to sing you something?”

And without waiting for permission, Huruzuma threw her head back and began to sing in a sonorous, high, pleasant voice:

“We exalt thee, glorious Baikal...”

**Episode 7. Prattle not without significance**

Having been enlightened as to the wholly noble purposes of the printing-press-harem, Methodius, whose autumnal body had seen many springs, felt the need to rest.

“I do not tire of praising the general zeal I see here,” he said to the Tartar. “My eyes are gladdened, my heart uplifted. But to tell you the truth, great khan, my unworthy legs are far removed from my mind and will not heed me. Would I err overly if,
seeing that wonderful chair over there, I desired to sit and, behold, I did just that?"

“Not at all,” replied the Tartar, bowing. “We ourselves treasure sitting down. Sedentariness, when it comes from within, presages rising, just as rising precedes the fall. Sit, reverend, be well, for soon you will rise up.”

“Iti bene, ubi sum, as the prophets say!” Methodius sighed with pleasure.

“Tuzuma,” the young khan turned to a nearby eunuch, “please bring us a cup of kumâs.”

Rustling lightly, the eunuch vanished and returned with two whitish chalices.

“You know, great khan,” said Methodius after tasting from the cup, “looking through your psalters, I observe that the poetic line is neither long nor short but just right. A marvellous thing: as many iambs, as many dactylys.”

“We are a young culture,” replied the Tartar, also taking a seat. “As you see, we have started from very little. What am I saying? From nothing. Now judge for yourself: could I have allowed free verse? Great poetry must have rhythm. Where there is no rhythm, there is no poetics, and can a poetry say anything without poetics?”

“I understand,” said Methodius. “I understand and I am filled with wonder. May God grant you health!”

“Please…” said the Tartar, lowering his eyes embarrassed.

“To your health!”

“Heaven be praised!” replied Methodius and drained his cup.

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**Episode 8. In which honest thanks is bestowed upon the reader and noteworthy new faces appear**

Allow us, Reader, as thou with trusting care dost pore over these lines, to make pause. And do thou too draw thy breath, rest thy eyes and let them glide swiftly over the words, for we have not anything to say of that which commonly might retain thy attention. Have faith in us: we shall not lead thee from thy ways into temptation. We no longer tell our tale, but rather indulge in a little rhetoric. Sit thee down beside us and stretch thy limbs for a moment. As writing doth weary us, so reading doth thee. Ut pictura, lectura. Seek thou not ruthlessly for meanings and motives where they elude the chronicler himself, but lolling
in the shade of ripening tales, set aside thy red pencil in the grass and gaze with gentle, sleepy eyes upon the fine phrase I have fashioned. Thus!

***

Let us now leave Methodius, the khan, Jovanutz and Huruzuma for a while, to enjoy the sweetness of camp life, and let us cast our gaze across the steppe. What do we descry? Arise, Reader!

At a certain distance from the camp, three men on horseback were approaching slowly, at a walking pace. The horses could barely continue; the riders could barely hold themselves in the saddle. The one in the middle, stouter, bearded, well dressed, with a marten-skin cap on his head, was sighing and kept looking behind him. He had two companions: one tall, broad-shouldered, with a grim countenance, the other quite young.

“Leave off these black thoughts, illustrious lord!” spoke the broad-shouldered one. “The times do not stand beneath men, but men beneath the times. Yesterday you were, today you are no longer. Yesterday you resided, today you wander.”

“Alas, Spatharius Eagle!” lamented the fat one, tugging his beard, “If only I had managed to take my books!”

**Episode 9. After the fall**

“Do not take it amiss, great Lord, if I speak freely, but you used to sit far too much with your nose in those books!” spoke Eagle the Spatharius to the fat one with the marten-fur cap. “You would be reading and we would be collecting the taxes. Was there any justice in that? The Poles would come, and you would be reading. The Tartars would be laying waste, and you would be reading. The Cossacks would be ravaging, and you would be writing. It was lucky the Turks came and deposed you, because I for one had had enough.”

“I wanted to be enlightened,” lamented the one with the marten-fur cap, barely managing to stay in the saddle. “I didn’t want to cut off heads, I wanted to enlighten them.”

“The sword cuts off the enlightened head,” said Eagle the Spatharius, gazing into the distance. “If you don’t cut it off,
then others will. Let there be heads, for there are swords aplenty."

"Alas, how you speak to me, Spatharius Eagle! The day before yesterday, you would not have dared to raise your voice higher than where sits your head."

"Different times, different voices, illustrious lord!" said the spatharius. "I would have raised my voice in vain if you did not lower your ear. The rabble were shouting outside but you heard them not. You would be muttering away in Latin."

"Why were they shouting, spatharius?" lamented the fat one. "I built them schools, I brought them a printing press, I gave them a theatre."

"You gave them a theatre to look at from the outside, because not one of them would go in, they were afraid. Serfs in the theatre! Whoever has seen the like? Boyars, courtiers, you can get away with, but serfs! You, illustrious lord, forgive me for saying it, dreamt you were on the Tiber, when it was the Bahlui that flowed but two steps away!"

"Alas, alas!" moaned the fat one. "Alas, alas! Don’t remind me! How shameful! How they tumbled me into it, like a boulder!"

"That’s the Turks for you," said the spatharius. "Lucky the water was shallow and you have large loins. But even so, if poor Broanteș and myself hadn’t been loyal to you, you would have departed into the world of the righteous. Am I or am I not right, Broanteș?" added the spatharius, turning in the saddle toward the other travelling companion, who was listening carefully, plunged in thought.

"Uhuhuhuhuh!" went Broanteș.

"You see, illustrious Lord?" said the spatharius to the fat one. "What use is it having learnt poetic utterance if they’ve cut your tongue out? Wouldn’t he have been better off if you’d left him at home to plough?"

**Episode 10. An emotional reunion**

And as the three were making their escape over the steppe and talking (that is, only two of them were talking, since, as we have already mentioned, the third companion, due to one of those unfortunate events that have so often determined the fate
of the Danubian rhapsodes, had had a goodly portion of his
tongue cut off), they came to a grove. Suddenly, the mare of
Eagle the Spatharius whinnied and reared up on her hind legs.

“Ho, Laika, ho! There aren’t any Tartars!” Eagle quieted his
mare, lightly patting her on the neck.

“Oh but there are!” came a shout from the grove and dozens
of Tartars camouflaged in bushes surrounded our heroes, raising
their bows.

“Don’t shoot, comrades!” Eagle swiftly cried. “We are honest
folk!”

“Shut it!” one of the higher-up bushes shouted at him. “Here, you
speak when you’re spoken to! What are you doing on our lands?”

“We’re lost,” said Eagle the Spatharius. “Don’t go by the way
we look, for our fate has been harsh. We are bigwigs, boyars.
Take us to your leader.”

The bush rustled undecidedly:

“Listen, scarecrow, if you’re lying and if you’re not who you
say you are, and if you bother the khan for nothing, your mare
will weep for pity.”

“Be it as you say, honourable Tartar,” replied the spatharius.
When the Tartar cohort and their fresh prisoners entered the
camp, the young khan, his sister Huruzuma and the two Moldavian
monks were enjoying some kumâs. The head bush came to a
stop in front of the khan:

“Ham urai stâhâl kumâs!” he announced.

“He has captured three wayfarers and has the right to a cup
of kumâs,” the khan interpreted for Methodius.

The latter raised his head to see the prisoners and froze.

“What do my eyes see?” he cried, leaping from his chair.

“Can it be true? Is it you, illustrious Lord?”

“Worthy Methodius! You – here?” exclaimed the one with
the marten-fur cap. “Mother of God preserve me! It is I, your
holiness! Even I!”

“In such a plight!” said Methodius, amazed. “But for what
deeds?”

“How should I know? Apparently in payment for the fact that
I...” but here the fat one was unable to continue, for he burst
out weeping.

“Nullius tantum flumen est ingenii, nullius dicendi aut
scribendi tanta vis, tanta copia, quae non dicam exornare, sed
Ioan Groșan

enarrare, res tuas gestas possit, illustrious Lord!” said the Tartar, profoundly moved.

“Thank you very much!” replied the one with the marten-fur cap, wiping his eyes.

Episode 11. The turbid waters become somewhat more limpid

On beholding such a strange reunion, every soul in the Tartar camp, young and old, with their dogs, with their piglets, gathered around the Moldavians, as curious as could be.

“As you say, reverend Methodius!” said Eagle the Spatharius, dismounting embarrassed, for the little Tartars, like children anywhere in the world, were romping next to him and poking him with their toy swords. “We thought you were in Rome, but here you are at the Gates of the Orient.”

“We have been to Rome, we were there,” Methodius hastened to say, shaking the spatharius’ hand and kissing it. “We were there, and we spoke with them.”

“And what did they say?” asked the fat one hopefully, having remained mounted on his horse.

“Well, what could they say? As if you yourself don’t know what they say,” said Eagle in Methodius’ stead. “That we’ll see, that we’ll do it, that it’ll be tonsured, that it’ll be shaved, shilly-shally, come back later, long live Latinity, whatever, pleasantries. What would they need a Romanian school there for?”

“You are not far from the truth, Eagle,” said Methodius. “Except that you see it from only one side. The truth, spatharius, is an old oak-tree: the more you look at it from different sides, the more you realise that it has many hollows.”

“As you will, reverend!” replied Eagle.

Then, turning to the fat one:

“Your worship, if you unburdened that horse of your august weight, would it not be better not only for your rump but also for the soul of this worthy beast?”

“I shall dismount, for thus was it written for me,” sighed the fat one, looking in fright at the little Tartars who were gesturing with their toy swords for him to come down.

“Illustrious khan,” said Eagle raising his head. “Allow me to introduce you to the Voievod Barzovius, formerly prince, ban-
ished the day before yesterday, for reasons which may escape you but not me. But let us leave that to one side. If you will, honour him, for as you see his body, such is his heart."

“Welcome to the fair climes of Tartardom!” said the young khan, all smiles, advancing to greet them.

“Which is the voievod?” whispered Huruzuma, who was standing some way off with Jovanutz, gripping him tightly by the hand.

Under his habit, Jovanutz quivered from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. He had never felt the like before.

“Look, that’s him!” he whispered, thrilled.
“It is a very good thing that A Hundred Years at the Gates of the Orient has just been republished. It was first published immediately after 1990, but books published back then fell into a void. People were not interested in literature, but rather in memoirs, diaries and books about political imprisonment. Thus, the initiative to place an important book back in circulation is very welcome.”

(Carmen MUȘAT)

“Whereas for readers of the 1990s literature was a conglomerate in which genres were indistinguishable, there is now a clearer perception, and people are interested in seeing the differences. The republication of Ioan Groșan’s novel will be a
challenge for today's readers, and it will be very interesting to see how the text is received on a new reading. The pleasing and provocative exhalation of this novel still lingers for me.”

(Ioan Es. POP)

“Ioan Groșan is one of the few creators of a new school who has not become prisoner to a single epic formula. With mature complicity, he combines the experience of intertextuality with the Faulknerian spirit and Chekovian meticulousness in his description of existential platitude.”

(Radu G. ȚEPOSU)

“A Hundred Years at the Gates of the Orient is constructed from short and brisk tableaux, furnished by the 17th Century but penned by an 'eighties-generation prose-writer with a taste for textualist saga and derision. The passages in which Groșan's world takes shape are seemingly cut-outs from all that is most succulent in the Levant and the world at its gates: furtive-eyed and sprightly-hearted monks, Moldavian princes who swallow the dumpling of dethronement and then lobby vigorously in Istanbul, Armenian taverns and inn courtyards, where tales and above all wine flow beneath the gaze of fetching maids.”

(Alina PURCARU, in Cotidianul)
Florin Lăzărescu
Our Special Envoy
Florin Lăzărescu – born 28 March 1974, Doroșcani, Jassy. Prose writer, journalist and screenwriter. His novel Our Special Envoy (Polirom, 2005) won second prize at the Grand Awards for East-European Literature in Vienna, 2006, and will be published in German, French, and Slovenian in 2007. He made his debut in 2000, with a collection of short stories, Mistletoe Nests (Editura Outopos, Jassy). He has also published a collection of short stories in electronic format: Six Ways of Remembering a Horse (Editura Liternet, www.liternet.ro, 2003), and a novel: What there is to Know about the Panda Bear (Polirom, Jassy, 2003). Since 15 January 2003, he has been writing an on-line Personal Diary (at his own website, http://lazarescu.reea.net). He was a founding member of the Suplimentul de cultură weekly. Author of the screenplay for the short film The Tube with a Hat (directed by Radu Jude and winner of the Grand Prize for Short Film at a series of international festivals, such as Montpellier, Cottbus, Bilbao, and Sundance, the world’s largest independent film festival). He writes scripts for the Animated Planet Show, a cartoon satirical serial broadcast by Antena 1, Romania’s second largest television channel. Contact: flazarescu@gmail.com.

Florin Lăzărescu, Our Special Envoy, novel
“Ego. Prose” series, Polirom Publishing House
Year of publication: 2005
240 pages
A satirical novel at first sight, but one in which the author, with verve and talent, paints a fresco of the post-1989 Romanian press and all its traits: pursuit of cheap sensationalism, the invention and simulation of stories, etc. However, besides this subject in itself, the author slips in a number of other hot topics from the contemporary world, such as ideological conflict, terrorism and so on. The narrative is packed with suspense and spiced with a series of unprecedented situations, which provide abundant humour.

The President of Romania announces his official attendance at the funeral of a leading journalist, who has died in a motorcar accident. The press hunt him for a statement, an Arab terrorist to blow him up. However, as a result of a misunderstanding, both
Synopsis

Antonie, the special envoy of a local paper, and Mohammed, the terrorist, fail to intercept the President. The two “hunters” meet in an empty church (supposedly the place where the President is due to make his appearance), into which Mohammed bursts carrying a rucksack full of dynamite, shouting: “Die, western pigs!” After managing to convince the terrorist that Romanians can only dream of becoming “western pigs”, Antonie resumes his hunt for the president, finally arriving at a press conference after the journalist’s burial. Suspected by the bodyguards of making an attempt on the President’s life, he is neutralised with a punch in the face. Antonie loses consciousness, and an orange tunnel opens before his eyes, through which he sees his entire past life. And it is not just any life! Having once been prince of ruins, he becomes a journalist typical of our times: superficial and always chasing sensational subjects.

The brisk narrative continually changes its viewpoint and outline, moving at a relentless pace. Florin Lăzărescu is a master of the technique of cinematographic exposition, dextrously alternating planes and following multiple, conflicting narrative threads. One of these threads is, of course, that of Antonie, who narrates the ‘world’, after having supposedly gained satisfactory knowledge of it. The second is reserved for his father, Iosif, a history teacher, who, after serving time as a political prisoner, raises his boy in the mountains, far from the madding crowd. Then there is Ioan, the monk who takes the young and savage Antonie into his care. Autonomous levels of the epic deal with the problems of Elvis the gypsy, with his “magic” mirror, drugs, and fear of his boss, the Moor; and with the desperation of an Arab terrorist, in the form of Mohammed, who wants to blow up ‘western pigs’ starting further east, in Romania.

In a novel with much humour but also a whole host of occurrences that ‘construct’ Romanian society at the limits of the tragic, Florin Lăzărescu provides a perspective of child-like innocence, projecting worldly horrors into the realm of fairytale and ludic fable.
He pushed open the door of the lift with his foot, holding the mirror under his left arm, and a plastic bag in his right hand. He set down his load by the door, unlocked it and entered the bed-sit. He went to the kitchen sink, but it was full of dirty dishes. He lifted the bag up to his eyes. A short jerk and the fish slid onto the carpet. It was a large carp, more than three kilograms.

In the morning, when he had left to go to work, with the mirror under his arm, he could never have suspected what a day was to follow.

Elvis was out of sorts. In the last few days he had not been selling enough to cover the money he had to give the Moor. He was scared to death of him, but with God’s help he could
not even imagine that he would not be able to get through it all.

With the little bags of cocaine in the lining of his coat, with the mirror under his arm, he looked like a madman and nothing more. Who would hassle a man standing in a crowd with a pair of scales, inviting folk to weigh themselves? He was just earning an honest crust, without putting his hand in anyone's pocket. That was how the idea came to him, as he was adjusting his quiff in the bathroom mirror. He had only just fallen in with the Moor and he needed a disguise, an alibi in case the police came and asked him what he was up to. And he remembered that man on the street with the scales, the man no one was paying any attention to. “That’s it!” he exclaimed, overjoyed. “People don’t have time to look in the mirror when they’re walking down the street, but it’s the kind of thing they need. Someone’s got a blotch on his face? Bingo! You stop him, show him it, and ask for some money... That’ll be the spiel for the cops. In reality, you’re luring the young'uns using the mirror. They’re always looking in the mirror. They’ll think it’s a lark. And as they’re admiring themselves in the mirror, you tell them that they’d see how handsome they’d look if they tried a snort of cocaine... And anyhow, you won’t need to spell it out for them. They’ll catch on quickly enough what’s going down.” Although naïve, Elvis’s ruse proved to be as efficient as it was simple. If he bumped into the police, at the most he would get a kick in the arse and then they would leave him in peace. They thought he was small-time. On the other hand, it was an excellent method for distributing drugs. Among young people he had come to be known as “the gypsy with the mirror”. In some of the secondary schools where he used to peddle his wares, a distinct idiom had even been created. “Let’s have a look in the mirror!” or “Are you going to be looking in the mirror tonight?” were expressions laden with meaning even for many who had never met Elvis.

By lunchtime, he had managed to slip a few bags over. He rounded up the sum for the Moor. But his fear of him did not wane for so much as a moment. There was no fooling with him. He would split your guts opens with a single blow of the knife. His speciality. He had never seen him doing it, but he had heard enough stories about it. The last time he had called him in to hand over the goods – much more stuff than usual – he had said:
“Hey, Elvis, you’re doing a good job. You’ve expanded your market. It’s time to increase your ration. Not just the dough but also the merchandise. See how much faith I have in you? How much I think of serious people? But mind you don’t disappoint me, because then whack!” He sliced the air with an imaginary knife. “We turn over another leaf! It would be a shame, a young, handsome lad like you!”

Elvis had never thought about death until then. But the idea that he could end up split open by the Moor’s bowie knife had given him a terrible jolt. Maybe that was why, for almost a week, Elvis had been going to church every day to pray.

He would leave the mirror by the steps and enter the empty church. He would walk on tiptoes, as though he were a burglar. He headed to the catafalque, upon which rested the relics of a saint, brought there the day before. He knelt:

“GuardianangelgrantedtomebyGodlamsmallmakemelargelam weakmakemestrongLordhavemercy…”

He rapidly uttered the only prayer he knew, from when he was a child. Given the amount of help he needed, he sensed it was too little. He concentrated, trying something else:

“Ourfatherthatartinheavendowhatyoulikeandgiveusthisdayour dailybreadandleadusnotintotemptationbecauseweforgive others’sins…”

He strained his memory in vain. That was as much as he could remember.

“Lord, if you’re there, then look, I’m leaving the bullshit to one side now. I told you the other day about this and that, but that wasn’t what all the trouble was about. I was beating round the bush with You. To tell You the truth, I’ve got a problem with a certain Moor and I reckon You can help me out. He’s caught me in trap with his drugs. I mean he’s forced me to sell drugs, because he gives me a part of the money as well. And I need money, ’cause I’ve got to eat somehow. ’Cause I’m only human. I know You’ve got problems of Your own and all that, and a load of beggars on Your hands to look after, but please could You look after me as well, ’cause the Moor’ll slash me with his knife. D’you know what he does, Lord? I think You know. If you cross him, he grabs your head with one hand and slits you open with the other. A brother told me, who saw him when he
Florin Lăzărescu

did it to Pearly, who used to sell sunflower seeds, but, in fact, he was selling drugs the same as me. And Pearly wanted to do a runner with the money from the drugs, to set up house with one of the Moor’s whores, who said she loved him. Big deal, he said, the amount of dough the Moor has he won’t even notice. He’ll say fuck that Pearly, wait ’till I get my hands on him, and then he’ll find someone else, and he’ll not bother to look for him. Not him, Lord! He nabbed Pearly and slit him open and he said to the whore look at how your geezer’s laughing at me with his belly. That’s what he said, that he’d made him another gob in his belly… I’m not one to do a runner with the money and You’re my witness that it’s never even crossed my mind. But I don’t think that I’m going to manage to sell all the drugs the Moor’s given me and I don’t have the guts to go and tell him. Even if he doesn’t split me open now, I can see it coming, he’ll have a grudge against me and do it later. Help me, Lord, and at least give me a sign if You’re on the ball…”

He raised his eyes and looked at the relics. Fear had seeped into his bones. It seemed to him that something was moving under the vestments of the saint. He moved back a few steps and then approached once more. He unveiled the skeleton and looked at it in its nakedness. In the hands joined over the chest, he observed that the middle finger was sticking out, as though pointing at something. Without thinking too much about what he was doing, he detached the finger from the body, thrust it in his pocket and fled out of the church. He grabbed the mirror and dashed with it into the first tram that came his way.

“This finger works miracles, I’m sure it works miracles, and it’ll save me from the Moor,” Elvis trembled for joy within himself.

He rode the first tram for a few stops, got off, and then got on another, thinking of going back.

“What if I make God angry? I’d better take the finger back. But what does God care about a holy bone? The number of bones He has in this world, he probably won’t even notice. It’s the least of His troubles…”

He walked straight up to some kids at the tram terminus. He got talking to them, but the lads laughed at him.

“Get the hell out of here! Do you think we’re suckers! We can get it at the school gates at half the price.”
Elvis turned his gaze to a man who was sitting on a bench, somewhere in the middle of the station.

"Look in the mirror and give a penny, your lordship!"

"I'm not your lordship and, in general, I'm not anybody's lordship!"

"Come on, lordship, you've no idea what a bargain you're getting here!"

He did not convince him.

"If not even the finger can help me to get hold of the money for the Moor, it means there's nothing holy in this world."

He decided to give God another chance. He went to the park, leaned the mirror against a tree and sat down on a bench on the other side of the path.

"Lord, if You're there, give me a sign in the mirror! Tell me if I've made you angry! Do you want me to take the finger back? No, I'll take it right now, just You tell me. Just give me a sign…"

He was watching the mirror as though it was a television.

The mirror captured the image of the world to the best of its powers. In the bottom half, the tops of the trees behind Elvis. In the top half, a patch of sky.

A still life.

A flock of crows furrowed the mirrored sky. Elvis did not rejoice at such a divine sign, on the contrary, he was annoyed, recalling what people on the street used to shout at him. Even the Moor, although a gypsy by birth, still used to call him “Hey you, crow!”

So, if even God separates the world into crows and all the other birds, it means that he can hardly expect much help from Him. Elvis avenged himself by dividing the dominion of heaven according to the image and likeness of the world. The Big God, unjust, bad, in other words indifferent to the misfortunes of folk of his kind. And the God of the gypsies, ragged, swarthy, who had filched a piece of the Old God's heaven. “Hey,” he said to the Old One, “crafty you may be, and you think you've got no master, but let yours truly have a bit of sky where I can watch over my crows.” In fact, he didn't even ask. The God of the gypsies quite simply stole it from Him, and the Old God wasn't on the ball, it was as if you'd pinched a hundred quid from a billionaire. And from there, from his cubby-hole, the God of the gypsies looks after his brothers on earth. It was from him that Elvis was expecting a sign.
He wondered what were the chances of the saint's finger having belonged to a gypsy. Are there gypsy saints too? If his grandmother, a great fortune-teller, had still been alive, he could have asked her. She knew everything. Even things that had yet to happen. She even knew when she was going to die: at the age of seventy-six. Two years before she died, he found her with her fortune-telling cards scattered in her lap, weeping. “Look,” she said, “I can see here as plain as can be that at the age of seventy-six I'm going to lose my sight. God is going to take away the light from my eyes. He revealed it to me in a dream and told me that I'd messed up all his calculations with my cards. All the loves I've kindled and quenched, and not one of them was to his liking. You've been meddling in my affairs, Leloaie! God told me. “You've caused me much grief. I'm going to make your eyes turn milky so that you won't peer any more into how I fashion the world, so that you won't interfere any more in its course. You've greatly angered me.' He's going to take away my sight and leave me prey to all the sorceresses that wish me ill.”

And so it was. She slowly lost her sight and the gift of reading the cards. At the precise age of seventy-six, on her birthday, they found her dead in the middle of the room, on top of her scattered cards. Elvis had never believed up until then. He used to say that the only purpose of the cards was to part suckers from their money. And that's why he never asked her to tell his fortune. Who could he ask now? His mother had done a runner off to Italy. He had never found out who his father was and no one had ever bothered to give him any explanations about who was responsible for him coming into the world. When he grew up, he realised by himself. His mates used to laugh at him: “Your ma recognises your pa from a mile off!”

He wracked his brains, maybe he could find in some recess the name of a saint who might have been a gypsy. He kept turning it over in his mind as he sat on the park bench and he didn't cease until the redeeming idea of the Feast of the Forty Martyrs came to him. “Out of forty,” thought Elvis, “one must have been a gypsy.”

But what was the use? He could not believe that he had nicked precisely the finger of one of the forty saints, and that one a gypsy.
In the mirror across the way had appeared a stray dog with one ear missing. It approached, growled at the sight of its own reflection and then ran off. It approached again, took fright at its own face in the mirror, growled, and fled terrified. Elvis watched this strange game for a while and came to the conclusion: “Stupid dog!”

In front of him, a little girl was going back and forth on roller-skates. In one hand she was holding a toy panda and in the other a bagel with just one bite taken out of it. Elvis suddenly realised he was hungry.

“Slow down!” he shouted at the little girl. “Keep still! I can’t see.”

“See what?” asked the girl, amazed, elegantly braking her roller-skates.

“The mirror!”

“The girl looked curiously at the mirror.”

“Is it yours?”

“Of course it’s mine! Whose else could it be?”

The girl shrugged:

“Nobody’s! And what can you see in it?”

“None of your business. You wouldn’t understand,” replied Elvis. “If you must know, it’s an enchanted mirror.”

“Really! Can I have a look in it too?”

“All right, only if you give me the bagel.”

She handed him the bagel.

“Now what do I do?”

“Nothing. You go and look in the mirror.”

“And what will I see?”

“I don’t know. Make a wish, and you’ll see whether it comes true.”

The girl trod on the tips of her roller-skates up to the mirror. She made her teddy bear look into it, straightened the bowtie around its neck, and whispered something to it, of which Elvis didn’t catch anything.

The gypsy was content. He had forgotten the Moor. His hunger too had passed. He stretched out on the bench and fell fast asleep.

When he awoke, it was almost dark. The park was deserted. Only the dog had remained. It was creeping up to the mirror and yelping.
Elvis got up and stretched. He called the dog and tossed the saint’s finger at it.
“Take that, something to chew on!”
He set off home.
“Elvis,” yelled the boss of the neighbourhood fishmonger’s.
“Come here, because they’ve brought the fish! Lend me a hand to unload them. Come on, because it’ll be you who has need of me tomorrow.”

Elvis had no choice. Anyhow, he had no joy at the thought of sitting alone in the house and thinking about the Moor.
He spent nearly an hour unloading plastic crates from the van, all of them full to the brim with carp weighing over three kilograms. All the fish were alive. The ones on top were struggling in agony, and Elvis, I don’t know how, started to grow frightened of them. He felt as though they might swallow him with their spasmodically gaping mouths, desperately searching for air. When one of the carp jerked madly and fell onto the pavement, he felt like howling in fright.

“Hey, Elvis,” said the owner of the dying fish, laughing. “I see that one likes you. Go on then, I’ll let you have it.”
He wrapped the carp in a plastic bag and gave him it when they finished.
When he arrived in the kitchen with the fish he was still afraid of it at first. He dropped it on the floor tiles and it seemed to him that the fish was endowed with a diabolical power. He had the impression that it was jerking and struggling on purpose, so as to instil even greater terror in him. He tried to pick it up, but it slipped from his hands once more. He took leave of his senses and started kicking it all around the room.
“Fucking fish. Not even dead you won’t keep still. Just you wait, I’ll fix you!”
He kicked the fish, projecting it against the wall.
“I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you with my own hands. You won’t get to die a peaceful death.”
The carp’s body was no longer moving. It was trying to gulp the air, gaping its mouth open.
“Fuck you!”
He gave it another kick.
“Die! Die or I’ll kill you!”
He tries to kick it in the mouth with the tip of his foot, but he
slips on the wet streak the fish has left on the tiles. He falls flat
on his back, roaring in pain.
He gets up yelling.
“Just you wait, you fucker! Just you wait until I get changed,
so that that I don’t get my clothes dirty, I’ll fix you!”
The fish was greedily gulping the air in the kitchen, more
horrified at what was happening to it than at the cruel death
promised by Elvis.
The gypsy quickly headed towards the door, picked up the
mirror, took it to the bathroom and hung it from a nail ham-
mered in the wall above the sink. He removed everything from
his coat, including the drugs, which he placed on the edge of
the sink. Then he undressed. He hung his clothes up and re-
mained in his underpants.
He looked in the mirror, trying to mimic the fish’s mouth
with his lips.
He splashed his face with water. He felt like singing. He was
overwhelmed by immense and wholly inexplicable good spirits.
He looked at the drugs and wondered why it was that he had
never tried them. Perhaps it was from fear of losing his mind, as
he had heard can happen. Perhaps from miserliness. Why spend
good money on trash? Perhaps from fear of the Moor.
And just because he was well disposed, because he felt like
singing, because he was thinking of confronting the Moor, he
decided that the moment had come for him to see what all the
fuss with drugs was about. He couldn’t conceive that anything
out of the ordinary would happen to him. “I mean, here I am,
now,” he looked into the mirror as proof, “I snort some flour up
my nose and then suddenly I change! Ballocks!”
He took the mirror from its hook, placed it face up on the
sink, and poured onto it the contents of a bag of cocaine. When
he moved his nose towards the drug, he saw his face and burst
out laughing. The white powder scattered all over the mirror. He
gathered it back, using the edge of his palm, approached and
powerfully inhaled air into his chest through his nostrils. His
breathing was arrested and he gaped his mouth open spasmodi-
cally, trying to gulp as much air as possible.
He swore.
Florin Lăzărescu

He hung the mirror on the wall and stared at it, waiting to observe whether any change took place.

“Ballocks!”
The more he looked at his face the more and more he burst out laughing. Uncontrollable laughter.

“Boo!” he shouted at his image in the mirror.
A boundless joy invaded his body. He felt it percolating through his blood into every cell.

“Boo! Boo!” He put his hand to his mouth, to stop his laughter, as though he were ashamed of the image reflected in the mirror.

“Ballocks! These drugs don’t have any effect. I’m still me!” He poured out another bag, which he snorted straight from his palm.
He had never had such an urge to sing.
He turned on the tap and washed his face. He smoothed the hair on his temples with his palm and began to croon Love Me Tender:

“Luv me tenda… Luv me sweet…”
He grinned at the face in the mirror, which was starting to look strange.

“Never lemme go…” He raised his arms, clicking his fingers, and continued aloud:

“You may have my luv complete…”
He undulated his body, trying to move like a belly dancer:

“Coz I luv you so.”
He was dizzier than after the heaviest of drinking sessions. A stifling warmth pricked in his flesh as though his bones had caught fire. He clambered up onto the bathtub, tottering, opened the bathroom window and stuck his head out. He vomited right in the middle of the street and then laughed.

“Sombrero-o-o!” a shout could be heard outside.
Elvis felt his temples bursting, as though someone had shouted at him through a megaphone from close up. Like a thunderclap that struck him from the blue.
He covered his ears with his hands. Just as he was lowering his arms, the shout was heard once more:

“Sombrero-o-o!”
He tensed and answered with all the might of his vocal cords:
Our Special Envoy

“Sombrero get stuffed!”
He closed the window and went back to the mirror.
“Boo! Boo!” he tried to cheer himself up.
Without any effect. He puckered his lips, imitating the fish’s mouth. For a fraction of a second, he saw the face of the fish itself, addressing him:
“Hey, crow, having fun on my money? Let’s see where you’ll get the money from now, to pay for the Moor’s drugs.”
Elvis went wild with fury.
“What do you care, you corpse? What’s it to you? Weren’t you better off when I forgot about you?”
The fish in the mirror said nothing.
“Lost your voice? Where’ve you gone?”
When he recognised his own face, Elvis remembered that the fish was in the kitchen. Trying hard to keep his balance, he ran to the kitchen.
The carp had vanished.
He armed himself with a knife from the sink and scanned the room with his eyes.
“Fucking fish! Where’re you hiding? Think you can escape!”
Elvis was walking on tiptoes, so as not to tread on the carp by mistake.
“Fi-i-i-i-sh! Fi-i-i-i-sh!! Where’re you hiding? Come out, I’m not going to do anything to you! You’re going to croak in any case, because you haven’t got any air.”
The fish was silent.
Elvis wondered how the hell you were supposed to call a fish.
“Kitty, kitty! Here, doggy, doggy!” he jested and the laughter hit him again.
He liked the new game.
“Me-e-e-e-ow! Me-e-e-e-ow!! Come out, or I’ll set the cat on you.”
He found it under the sink, behind the trash bucket.
“So this is where you were? Looking for water? Water – ballocks!”
The fish was not moving at all. Elvis felt sorry for it.
“Come on, I know you’re faking!”
He tried to pick it up, but it slipped through his fingers. He became annoyed again.
“Now I’m going to cut you open!”
He shunted it into the bathroom with his foot. He turned on the water, put the plug in and lowered the fish into the tub. It floated belly up.
“Come on, give me a sign of life! I know you’re faking it! But if you make a sudden movement and scare me, just you watch me kill you!”
He took it by the gills and dragged it out. He thrust the knife into its belly and split it open. Seeing the fish’s guts, he dropped it and felt nauseous. He bent down and vomited in the tub.
He slipped on the tiles, next to the fish, breathing more and more irregularly.
“Please God don’t let me die!” he prayed, feeling that everything was becoming dark before his eyes.
There was less and less air. He opened his mouth and stammered:
“All for nothing, because you don’t exist. Only the Moor exists.”
He collapsed face down.
“*Our Special Envoy* has the value of a veritable manifesto for the new wave of prose-writers: an exceptional book, from which it is not easy to drag yourself away, even after you have finished reading it.”

(Andrei TERIAN, in *Cultura*)

“Florin Lăzărescu knows how to create a sense of mystery: narrative threads are inexplicably abandoned, correspondences and ‘sacred’ subtexts glint bewilderingly at every step, gaps and ambiguities function as magnets for signification. There is no stridency, no exaggerated affectation, no theoretic white noise: the slangy, strong language as well as the reflections on God,
death, madness, immortality and holiness sound extraordinarily familiar. The phrasing is simple, but beyond the exuberant verve there opens up intelligence and imagination."

(Paul CERNAT, in Bucureștiul cultural)

“Our Special Envoy confirms Florin Lăzărescu as a literary professional, as a practitioner who knows that, besides talent or a ‘novelistic idea’, you also need the science of writing.”

(Doris MIRONESCU, in Suplimentul de cultură)

“Florin Lăzărescu is probably one of the few young writers who, once you have sampled his writing, becomes close and familiar to you. It is almost as if you expect to meet his characters walking down the street, and his humour is contagious and invigorating.”

(Bogdan CREȚU, in Cultura)

“Our Special Envoy is the book of a mature writer, with an unmistakable profile, with an already well-outlined narrative project, whose sequel is awaited not only with interest but also enthusiasm.”

(Bianca BURȚA-CERNAT, in Observator cultural)
Dan Lungu

I'm a Communist Biddy!
Dan Lungu – born in Botoșani, 1969. University Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, A. I. Cuza University, Jassy. Postdoctoral studies at the Sorbonne. Editor for Au Sud de l’Est magazine. In 1996, he founded the Club 8 literary group. Between 2001 and 2002, he was editor-in-chief of Timpul cultural review. Published works: Muchii (Edges) (verses, Junimea, 1996); Cheta la flegmă (Chip in to the Spit) (short prose, OuTopos, 1999); Construcția identității într-o societate totalitară. O cercetare sociologică asupra scriitorilor (The Construction of Identity in a Totalitarian Society: A Sociological Investigation of Writers) (Junimea, 2003); Proză cu amănunte (Retail Prose) (short prose, Cronica, 2003); Nuntă la parter (Ground-Floor Wedding) (theatre, Versus, 2003); Raiul gâiniilor (fals roman de zvonuri și mistere) (Hens’ Heaven (Faux Novel of Rumours and Mysteries) (Polirom, 2004; 2nd edition, 2007); Băieți de gâscă (Good Guys) (short prose, Polirom, 2005); Sînt o babă comunistă! (I’m a Communist Biddy!) (novel, Polirom, 2007; in press at Editions Jacqueline Chambon, under the title Moi, la vieille coco). In 2005, Hens’ Heaven was published in French by Editions Jacqueline Chambon, under the title Le paradis des poules. The novel has also been translated into German (Residenz Verlag) and Slovenian (Apokalipsa publishing house). Good Guys has been published in German by Drava Verlag. Dan Lungu was one of the Romanian writers invited to take part in “Les belles étrangères” (France, 2005). He has won the Junimea Society Prize for literary activity (1993); the Nemira Publishing House Prize for Short Prose (1997); the Dobrogea Branch of the Writers’ Union Prize for Prose Debut (1999); the Goethe Zentrum Prize for the Promotion of Originality, as a representative of Club 8 (2001); and the Jassy Branch of the Writers’ Union Prize for Prose (2005). He is a member of the Romanian Association of Professional Writers and of the Romanian Writers’ Union.

Dan Lungu, I’m a Communist Biddy!, novel “Ego Prose” series, Polirom Publishing House
Year of publication: 2007
240 pages
I’m a Communist Biddy!
– synopsis –

The profound stake of Dan Lungu’s novel resides in an examination of the following paradox: how is it possible that many, even very many, people who formerly lived under a totalitarian, inhuman regime, without having enjoyed privileges or favours, can now be capable of nostalgia? The author, through the intermediary of an old woman, who relates her life in the first person, attempts to deconstruct the mechanisms of nostalgia and to unravel this psychological enigma.

The novel is set ten years after the fall of the Ceaușescu dictatorship and shortly before the general elections. Emilia Apostoae, a pensioner, the greater part of whose life has been lived under the “people’s regime”, receives a telephone call from Alice, her daughter, an immigrant in Canada, who urges her
Synopsis

mother “not to vote for the former communists”. This telephone call, followed by other arguments, casts Emilia into a veritable crisis of identity, from which she tries to save herself by recollecting the past and seeking to justify her nostalgia in her own eyes and those of her daughter. We thus go back to her childhood and adolescence during the time of the dictatorship; we enter the rhythms and problems of daily life during that epoch.

The story moves at a brisk pace, the dialogue is engaging, humour shows its fangs, and mindsets are revealed by degrees. Apparently simple occurrences progressively develop their power of suggestion and range. Little by little, we are presented with a “normality” constructed by the regime and decanted in time, a normality that stirs regrets in Emilia but chills the reader. Dan Lungu does not accuse, but rather is empathetic: he describes the atrocity of an evil that has become banal, while at the same time being attentive to the dignity of his characters. His writing is rich in significant and redolent detail, but it does not even for a moment lose sight of the broader picture.

The novel continues the ‘experiment in mentality’ begun by Dan Lungu in Hens’ Heaven – the descent into a communism residual not at the political or social level but at the level of an ordinary person who has lived through that system and been profoundly marked by it. I’m a Communist Biddy! forces you to smile, to laugh uproariously, to grow sad, but above all to interrupt your reading for a few moments and go outside in order to convince yourself that reality is otherwise, that people are otherwise. However, after such an exercise, the only thing left will be for you to conclude that the author has met the old woman who is a neighbour in your block, that he has met her daughter who has emigrated to Canada, that he has met your former workmate who used to tell political jokes while at the same time informing on you to the secret police behind your back. And then he wrote this book precisely in order to hold a mirror up to us all, in which we can see ourselves as we are and as, more often than not, we should not like to be.

“I’m a Communist Biddy!” is more than the tale of an old woman: it is a museum on paper of daily life in a totalitarian society, a compendium of political humour, a lesson about the incommensurability of human experiences and, why not, the unpredictable story of an abstention from the vote.
It's nine in the morning and we're working like daft. We're giving it our all, so that we can take it easy after the break. The doorbell, loud and hoarse, like a hooter, informs us that there's someone at the door, a stranger. The bolt is drawn and the foreman appears, with a face like a funeral. Next to him, an elegant bloke holding a cigarette, none too jolly either. Aurelia whispers to me that it's the new director. I heard a few months ago that they'd changed the director, but I hadn't had a chance to see his mug until now. Shaven to the bone, with an impeccable haircut, but forbidding at first sight. I'm thinking that the foreman is in hot water or that one of us has put our foot in it, really deep, if the director has condescended to take his fancy suit for a walk among our greasy overalls. Comrade Suit puts his
Dan Lungu

hands over his ears and scrunches up his eyes, and the foreman makes a sign for us to shut down the machinery. As soon as you can hear yourself think, the foreman tells us to gather around, because the comrade director general has an announcement for us. We form a circle around him. Comrade Suit stubs out his cigarette end with the toe of his 420-lei-a-pair shoe, clasps his hands together, and lets rip, solemnly:

"Dear comrades, I have some good news for us all. Because your workshop has for many years been foremost in 'Socialist Competition', the comrades from the County branch of the Party have entrusted us with a lofty and privileged mission."

We're obviously in for it now, I tell myself. They're probably going to increase our hours.

"A mission of which we should be proud. That of presenting and making known the fruits of our labour at the highest level possible, to comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu..."

Blah, blah, blah. We all freeze to the spot. In three days, Ceaușescu is going to visit our workshop, to stimulate production for export.

"Please start preparing for this edifying moment immediately!" the director concludes his speech.

This means military discipline, we all know it.

Gaffer Mitu has a pasteurised look about him, as he himself says. Either he's got a hangover, or his morning dose of holy water was a bit too large.

The foreman tries to obtain a day's delay from the director, before commencing the cleanup, because we have to finish an order for Thailand. Any delay will result in docked wages.

"Comrade, Ceaușescu is coming, don't you understand? Is export what matters to us now?" the director snaps at him, lighting another cigarette.

They both go out, and we remain, pensive.

"On my life, I won't budge until I take a photo of Ceaușescu right here next to my lathe, says gaffer Mitu, chewing his words.

"Gaffer Mitu, if Ceaușescu shakes hands with you, you won't wash until your dying day," gaffer Pancu goads him.

"Noooo, I want a kiss from Lena. I'm going to dress up as a pioneer and give her flowers, just so she'll give me a peck on the cheek."

We all laugh, but without pleasure.
The foreman comes back sharpish. He reads gaffer Mitu at a glance and sends him off to sleep for an hour. He hasn’t managed to budge the director on a delay, so we all get ready to make everywhere squeaky clean. He warns us that if we don’t make a good job of it, we’ll all be in the lurch. The director, especially given that he’s new, is also quaking in his underpants, so he’ll be keeping a close eye on us in the days to come. In three days and three nights we’ll have to sort out everything that hasn’t been repaired or cleaned for the last twenty years. If need be, we’ll work in shifts. We won’t be alone, because the entire factory will be in on the act. Our workshop has been picked out, but you never know where Ceaușescu will have a mind to poke his nose in. I’ve never seen the foreman so agitated. He’s talking and walking among us. He’s thinking out loud. He’s giving orders for today and the following days.

He changes his mind. He contradicts himself. He stutters. He’s in a panic!

In the end, we manage to get ourselves organised somewhat. We decide to start with the whitewashing, because that makes the most mess. Then we’ll go on to painting everything that hasn’t seen a paintbrush for years, cleaning the windows, polishing the machinery, and after that we’ll see.

The scurrying begins. At first we all get under each other’s feet, but little by little we each settle down to business. Where they’ve passed by with the whitewash, Aurelia and me clean up the splashes and do the windows. Sanda couldn’t be luckier – she’s on maternity leave.

It’s afternoon already and things are progressing nicely, but we’re far from having finished. We’ve only had a quarter of an hour break. My back is aching and my hands are stinging. At first, me and Aurelia chatted about this and that, but now we’re working in silence. The only thing you can hear is the swishing of the brush and the creaking of the windows.

From the storeroom appear two women with piles of overalls and all kinds of protective gear. We receive new kit. On the day of the visit we’ll have to look like in the textbook, as the foreman says. With helmets and goggles, with gloves and leather aprons where the case.

On this occasion, the boss decrees a break. He sends someone to buy food for all the others. Plus mineral water, in spite of
some murmured protests. He brings the coffee from his own
office.

Each person has to sign for the new kit. For the first time
ever, the people from stores have the patience to let us try the
gear on. Up to now, they always used to give us it and that
would be that. If it was too small or too large, you would have
to pester them for a week before they would change it for you.
We lay out the table for everyone, and we go off one at a time
and come back with our effects under our arm. We munch
without speaking, lost in our own thoughts.

Gaffer Mitu appears, with a helmet on his head, goggles,
apron and bulky pigskin gloves. He walks swaying, with his
arms spread out in front of him, as though he wanted to throttle
somebody.

“My name is Dumitru Prunariu,” he says, “the first Romanian
in space. At this solemn moment, I want to convey to you
greetings from our Martian friends.”

I take advantage of the moment of relaxation to make a
phone call to Tzucu and tell him I don’t know when I’ll be
going back. He’s just got in, immediately after Alice, and is
warming up the dinner. I explain to him what it’s all about and
he says he knows about Ceaușescu’s visit, that they have been
mobilised too, and that he’ll tell me all about it at home. Today
they got away quickly, but tomorrow looks set to be grim. I ask
him to take Alice round to Sanda’s, for a day or two, until the
storm passes. It’s not the first time the lass has stayed at her
auntie’s, because they get on really well.

The street is all a bustle too. Barrels of tar are boiling, and
the tipper trucks are unloading asphalt. Down the hill, the
steamrollers are already at work. At last, they are laying some
asphalt round here. Up to now, you had to do the slalom in the
car just to avoid the potholes. By the entrance on the hill, the
tall dusty pines are being washed with a hose. Next to our
fence, facing the street, mounds of black earth are being carried
off in buckets. The gravel and dry grass disappear, and here and
there flowerbeds are being made. The watchmen are painting
the large gate at the vehicles entrance.

The other sections aren’t sitting idle either. Everyone is on
the move. Inside, they have already gone on to painting. In the
first place, the flange that runs around the workshop, then we
go on to the metal parts, the posts and all the rest. Everything in green. Although the windows are wide open, the smell is making us dizzy.

It’s ten o’clock at night and, the same as everywhere else in town, the power has been cut off.

We light a few lanterns, but you can’t see much. The foreman is in despair. He’s talking on the phone in his office. He’s roaring:

“Ceauşescu is coming, don’t you understand? Turn the power on, otherwise it will be you who has to answer for it.”

We wait. We’re exhausted. The boss keeps making phone calls. Not even gaffer Mitu has any more appetite for jokes.

At last, the electricity comes back on and, with difficulty, we start work again. We don’t make much headway. He leaves us to it for another hour and then lets us go home. When I get back, Tzucu is asleep. I don’t wake him. I fall asleep like a log.

Here we are the next day, at the crack of dawn. Among us, two unknown persons in new overalls. The foreman makes the introductions, glumly:

“These are your new colleagues. They are called Andrei and Maria. They will be the workers’ representatives in the official delegation that will accompany the comrade President. Now they will give us a helping hand and familiarise themselves with the workplace.”

Andrei is athletic, with short hair. Judging from his jaw, I would sooner see him in shorts and boxing gloves than in overalls. Maria is very pretty, just right for handing over flowers.

The plan for today is as follows: in the morning we’ll finish painting inside and polish all the machinery until you can see you face in it, and in the afternoon we’ll move on to fixing up the exterior. I’m in the same team as Aurelia again. We start on the machinery. We remove the oil-soaked dust from all the crannies, scrub with emery paper, and buff with felt. The boss passes it on, from one to another, for us to mind what we say in front of the new pair. There wasn’t any need to tell us. The hardest will be for gaffer Mitu, who has a bit of a loose tongue.

I peek from the corner of my eye at our new workmates. Andrei is looking at a lathe like it’s a giraffe, and it’s as though Maria is holding a hedgehog not a rag.
Dan Lungu

“It’s hard to change your trade from one day to the next,” I whisper to Aurelia.

Aurelia laughs to herself.

Comrade Suit passes by to see how the work is going and to encourage us.

At one point, Maria comes over to us. She asks us for a plaster, because she has got a blister from the emery paper. She has delicate hands, but the nails are not polished. I bring her a roll of leucoplast from the first aid kit, to cut off as much as she wants. She asks us if we usually work like this.

“Not quite at this pace, but it’s hard work,” says Aurelia prudently.

Maria stays next to us. She has begun to get used to it and is scrubbing vigorously. She tells us she has a bairn in the fourth form and that the lessons are hard, they have a whole heap of subjects. I say that it’s better that way, so that they’ll get used to hard work from an early age. After that I regret saying it. Who knows how she’ll interpret it.

We scrub in silence.

The boss calls me to one side and tells me it’s my turn to go and talk to the secret policeman responsible for the factory. He explains which office I have to go to. He tells me not to be frightened. It’s nothing serious. Everyone has to go. (…)

“Apostoae Emilia ?” the secret policeman asks me, leafing through some documents.

I nod yes. He is a man of about forty, going slightly grey, with a placid face and a bored voice. I’d expected to see a harsher figure, with a thundering voice.

“Maiden name Burac ?”

“Yes.”

“Mother and father agricultural labourers?”

“Exactly”

“What does your husband do?”

“Locksmith mechanic.”

“Yes… yes… But why aren’t you a member of the Party?”

“Hmm… I don’t know… I don’t think I have the necessary ideological level, comrade…”

“I see that you are a good element, you don’t have any deviations…”
“That’s right.”
“You have received a flat through the factory, how do you feel in it?”
“Good.”
“Were you put forward to join the Party but refused?”
“No.”
“But if you were put forward, would you accept?”
“I don’t know… I think so.”
“And you say you don’t have the necessary ideological level? How is that?”
“I don’t know… That’s what I think…”
“What are you lacking in order to have the necessary ideological level?”
“Perhaps I should study Party documents more… How do I know?”
“Are you satisfied with the collective you work in?”
“Yes.”
“And with the foreman?”
“With him too.”
“Do you have any complaints about the workplace?”
“Nnno.”
“Do you consider that you lack anything in particular, which the factory might help you with?”
“I don’t know… Maybe a gas cylinder…”
“Is that all?”
“Yes, I think so.”
“Well then, fill in a request form, which you will leave with me, and tomorrow go to the union to pick up a voucher for the gas cylinder.”

When I get back, they’re on a break. I get out my packed lunch and sit on the bench outside, next to Aurelia.
“How was it?” she asks me.
I look at her amazed at how she knew.
“The boss told me that I have to go after the break as well.”
“Aha,” it all becomes clear to me. “He’s alright even so. He asks you what complaints you have. I told him that I’d like a gas cylinder and he told me to fill in a request form.”
“But why hasn’t he asked us up to now?”
I nod my head in sign that it’s clear why now and not before.
We eat. Finally, Aurelia gets out an orange. She tells me about
how at her husband’s shop they don’t stint on unloading the goods. They get all kinds of stuff. Salami, milk, chocolate, everything. And not just them, but in almost all the neighbourhoods. Well, there’s still a queue, but only twenty or thirty people, not hordes.

Maria comes over, so we stop talking. Aurelia offers her some of the opened orange. Maria takes a segment, picks off the pith, and then eats it. I look at her with round eyes.

“I can’t stand the pith. I eat oranges like grapefruit,” she smiles.

So as not to show myself up, I don’t tell her that I’ve not yet had occasion to eat a grapefruit.

In the afternoon, we all move on to outside. We sweep, clean, dig. We’ve received black earth, roses and pieces of lawn from the town hall. We paint all the outside pipes and the mobile crane. On the main wing of the factory, another team, from another section, paints in letters as tall as a man “Long Live the Romanian Communist Party”. The porters have also received two new colleagues. The asphalting of the road has reached the factory yard.

In the evening, when the power is cut off, they let us go home.

I get back knackered. It’s too late to phone Sanda to see how Alice is. I chat with Tzucu for a little. We haven’t spoken for two days. He tells me that they were taken off to transplant maize. They go to the Party Farm, uproot the maize from an experimental plot – large and comely maize, with great big cobs – and then they plant it at the edge of the fields, two or three rows deep, along the roads which Ceaușescu will travel down to I don’t know what agricultural collective. They uproot the puny maize and load it into trailers. Even he doesn’t know what happens after that. They carry out all these operations in the blazing sun. At least they give them mineral water.

The third day is a bit lighter. We’re busy “decking out portraits”. We divide into two teams, one for inside and one for outside. I’m inside. We make a panel of honour, with photographs of the foremost workers. We’re having fun. We put Mitu’s photograph as the best of the best, the model to be followed. Then we draw up a graph of political information meetings,
I'm a Communist Biddy

with dates and topics that we just make up. That is, not exactly – we copy them from a template brought by the foreman. We cut out articles from newspapers, which we tack to a piece of polystyrene wrapped in red canvas. We hang up two or three portraits of Ceaușescu. The boss brings us some twenty thick volumes of the works of Uncle Nicu, to put in his office. Because he doesn't have a bookcase, we cart one from the Furniture Factory, on loan. He also brings forty flowerpots, for us to spread around the place, as aesthetically as possible. We have to sign for them. Whatever gets lost or broken, we'll have to pay for.

There's a hullabaloo outside. Someone's shouting.
Me and Aurelia go to the door to see what it's all about.
A scowling bloke with brown hair, wearing a suit and tie, is rolling his eyes and foaming at the mouth.
"You're a bunch of idiots and dolts! You're in for it now, I promise you! As soon as this visit is over you'll have me to answer to! Is this a factory for drunkards? Is it wine we make or do we produce for export? You're irresponsible."

And off he goes like a whirlwind, one of those ones that flatten everything in their path. We find out that it was the grapevines that had upset him. Gaffer Culidiuc is the most affected of all of us. He had planted them, cleaned them and trimmed them for years, and now the lads have already set about pulling them up. He can't watch; he goes into the workshop. The boss doesn't say anything, because the new workmates are there, but his eyes are blazing. I'll miss shade too, the plump black bunches of grapes… Gaffer Culidiuc makes a sign to us that the scowling bloke is barmy. We ask him who he is and he says that he is a bigwig in the County branch of the Party.

Not even an hour passes and the blonde-haired young porter comes in guffawing. He wants to tell us something, but the foreman makes a discreet sign for him to be silent. The porter doesn't catch on and lets rip, thirteen to the dozen. He says that that bloke just now – Comrade Whirlwind, as I've christened him in my mind – found fault with the pine trees by the main gate, and why are they so dusty. They explained to him that
they had been washed with the hose, but that they couldn’t get
them any greener than that. Then the bloke apparently began to
bellow that he wasn’t interested, that, if need be, they should
paint them, only that they should look like real pine trees, from
the mountains. And now, perched on the Electrical Plant trucks
with mobile ladders, a number of blokes are painting the pine
trees with spray guns.

Only Adrian, Maria and gaffer Mitu laugh. Oh, and gaffer
Culidiuc, who is in the workshop, standing behind us.

Only now does the hapless porter understand. You can see
by his frightened glance.

“In the end, it’s one way of solving it,” he tries to wriggle out
of it.

This time, we all laugh.

The porter can’t understand a thing.

The boss takes him by the shoulders and asks him to show
him where he saw such a thing, because he doesn’t believe it.
You can see from a mile away that he wants to get him out of
the shit.

Today, we leave earlier, so that we’ll have time to prepare for
the next day and to rest. The boss gives us our final instructions:
overalls have to be ironed and starched; the men have to be
shaven and to smell of toothpaste, not of rotgut; the woman
without lipstick, makeup or nail varnish.

I get back home. Tzucu isn’t back yet. The pots are empty,
and the sink is full. I get down to business. Tzuku turns up. He
tells me about how some chap with a loud mouth came and
hauled them over the coals: them, for not watering the planted
maize, and the blokes from the Party Farm, who were getting
ready a herd of thoroughbred cows to send to the agricultural
collective that Ceaușescu was going to visit, for sabotaging the
event. I described Whirlwind to him and he confirmed it was
him. There had been a right carry-on with the cows. In the first
place, he made them remove all the black cows from the stock,
because they didn’t set an optimistic tone. Then he was dissat-
isfied with the way they had been washed and curried. But the
worst was when he batten onto their hooves, for not being
glossy enough, because he knew that thoroughbred cows have
to have shiny hooves. In the end, he made them lacquer the
hooves, for them to look like in the textbook.

We go on chatting about this and that and then fall asleep.
The director general and the boss make the inspection. They closely examine each of us individually, straightening a collar or two. With all this protective gear on us we look like something out of an exhibition. The atmosphere is tense. Our new colleagues haven’t turned up, probably because the official delegation has gone somewhere else. Comrade Suit goes out and we are left to ourselves. The time passes slowly. We walk to and fro, listlessly. We don’t even feel like sitting down, so as not to crease anything.

On the street, on either side, workers, pioneers and communist youth have already been deployed, with placards and flags. Their chatter can be heard as far as in the factory yard.

From time to time, gaffer Mitu walks around swaying, with arms outstretched, as he imagines a cosmonaut walks. We smile, but we don’t feel like laughing. Whatever you might say, we are excited. It’s not every day that Ceaușescu comes to our workshop. And I think that we are a little afraid too, even if no one says so. We have to make a good impression! A very good impression!

From time to time, the foreman brings us news from Comrade Suit: Ceaușescu is in town; Ceaușescu is in the viewing stand, the parade is about to begin; Ceaușescu is having lunch; Ceaușescu is heading for the agricultural collective. The tension grows. The worst thing is that we don’t have anything to do; we just have to wait. We have to be ready at any moment.

At around five in the afternoon, a stupendous piece of news arrives: Ceaușescu has left town.

But we remain in position, in case it’s a false alarm.

At around seven, Comrade Suit appears and confirms that Ceaușescu has left town. He thanks us and tells us that maybe we will be luckier next time. He leaves in a hurry.

We’re left to ourselves and the atmosphere suddenly relaxes.

“Boss, what about those new colleagues of ours who didn’t turn up today? What shall we do? Clock them out?” asks gaffer Mitu drolly.

“Bugger them!”

We all decide to go to a restaurant and celebrate our achievement.
“We are dealing here with an extraordinary novel, one of the few that I can calmly recommend for export. Because it is incredibly simple to read. Because it is written with astonishing lightness, because it has no pretensions to be a fresco of the Ceausescu epoch or of the 1990s. It is an examination, humane and at the same time cold, of a typically Central-European state of mind.”

(C. ROGOZANU, in Suplimentul de cultura)

“I’m a Communist Biddy!”, the latest novel by the excellent Dan Lungu, written in the form of the confession of Emilia Apostoae, formerly employed at a metalwork factory, is probably the best novel about nostalgia for life under communism.
I'm a Communist Biddy

A realist-minimalist novel of astonishing humour, true in all its situations and dialogue, a book full of humour, but, above all, full of bitterness, the derisory, the absurd…”

(Marius CHIVU, in Dilema veche)

“One cannot help but feel sympathy for this woman who recounts her life and ultimately draws the correct conclusion about communism. All things considered, Dan Lungu has written an excellent novel, one that will enjoy an outstanding career, not only in Romania.”

(Ștefan AGOPIAN, in Academia Ștăienecu)

“This novel will be read breathlessly by those nostalgic for the old regime, as well as by young people for whom Ceausescu is nothing but a character in commercials.”

(Daniel CRISTEA-ENACHE, in Cultura)

“Under the confessional pretext lies concealed a very good novel, a novel of copious humour, written in the first person, on one of the most topical of subjects: the (im)possibility of reconciling the memories of a happy childhood and youth with a recognition of the abjection of communism.”

(Mihaela URSU, in Apostrof)
Răzvan Rădulescu

Theodosius the Small
Răzvan Rădulescu – born 23 October 1969. He is a graduate of the Faculty of Foreign Languages and of the Music Academy in Bucharest. His literary debut was in the group anthology Family Picture (Editura Leca Brâncuși, 1995). His work The Life and Deeds of Ilie Cazane (Cartea Românească, 1997) was awarded the Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for Debut. He has been creative director for the magazine Elle Romania. He contributes to Dilema Veche, 22, Cotidianul and Time Out magazines. At the same time, he is one of Romania’s most successful screenwriters today. He has written the screenplays for the films Goods and Money (2001, in collaboration with Cristi Puiu), Niki Ardelean, Retired Colonel (2003, in collaboration with Cristi Puiu), Offset (2004, in collaboration with Cristi Puiu), The Death of Mr Lăzărescu (2005, in collaboration with Cristi Puiu), and The Paper will be Blue (2005, in collaboration with Alexandru Băicu and Radu Muntean). His novel Theodosius the Small was awarded Cuvântul magazine’s Prize for Prose in 2006.

Răzvan Rădulescu, Theodosius the Small, novel
“Ego. Prose” series, Polirom Publishing House
Year of publication: 2006
440 pages
Răzvan Rădulescu’s novel *Theodosius the Small*, a fantasy that garbs social concerns in fairytale attire, concocts characters that would by no means be out of place sitting at the same table as today’s politicians, strategists or media personalities. The author “profits” from subjects and characters whose equivalent can be found in reality, filters them through his own sense of the absurd, creates exuberant identities for them and, on no few occasions, allows them, with ludic sadism, to kill each other, to lay traps for each other, and to reveal their grotesque face.

In the world of Răzvan Rădulescu, the geography of Romania is transformed: borders are jumbled in such a way that conflicts with historic roots are sparked in the resulting new territories.
Synopsis

Within a fantastic Wallachia, we find miniature kingdoms, containing both familiar contemporary localities, such as Bucharest, Filiași and Petrich, and places established by narrative convention, such as the Mushroom Fields, Strawberry Fields, and Mushberry Valley. Of course, since conflicts in such important and interesting fictional regions require characters to match, the “potentates of the day” find their way in to the story: the masters who fight for a share of zones of influence and power. Thus we have Theodosius the Small, Gavril the Catdog, Kalliope the Owl, Samoil the Minotaur, Otilia the Ghost, and Oliviu the Sheatfish Protector, allied with Duke Otto and the Purple Ants. These are characters who are specific to the fantasy and at the same time somehow affable, but who conceal towering ambitions and Machiavellian minds. In the kingdom inherited by Theodosius, too young to hold the reins of power, plots are hatched, intrigues develop, and spectacular battles are waged.

The backdrop appears to be historical – there are conflicts between palaces, kings sit on thrones, wars are waged by the sword, we witness banquets typical of times long passed, and communication is by means of courier – but nevertheless the story also has many elements from the contemporary world. And the interventions of the author, who assumes the task of explaining certain controversial aspects of the book, situate it within a fully postmodern context. These interventions on the part of the narrator, sometimes even taking the form of letters addressed to the imagined editor of his “chronicle”, although written in a harsh and sententious tone, are more often than not riotously funny, counterbalancing the bloody events of the story and providing welcome respite for the reader.

In the end, the novel is a story about childhood, seen through adult eyes. However, it is not about childhood in itself, but rather about its fantasies, about the way in which the events of today’s world are transformed by the vision of a child into fantastic madness, with comic horrors and sad comedies. A novel about childhood, but one whose message is aimed above all at adults.
In spite of the sumptuous preparations the Catdog and Theodosius had made for the Sheatfish Protector’s reception (the entire residence had been inundated in water, the pillows from the couch and the napkins in the kitchen were slowly spinning in the blue eddies, and the rugs had risen ten or even twenty centimetres aloft and were fluttering in slow motion), the latter, whether from excessive caution or because he wanted to be entertained in a less customary fashion, had arrived in his own travel aquarium and requested that the banquet be held in the shade of the walnut tree.

The Catdog had punctiliously complied, and assisted by Theodosius he had brought out a long table.

“There’s no need for any chairs,” the Sheatfish Protector gestured behind the glass of his spacious aquarium in token of
refusal. Indeed, through the none too limpid water of the aquarium – lake water, as Theodosius imagined – it was possible to see a little table with curved legs, on which stood three dishes all in a row (one deeper, for the soup, another shallow, for the main course, and the last smaller, for dessert); an ice bucket on a stand, and a separate compartment for ice cubes; and an armchair, in which the Sheatfish Protector was lolling. The armchair was quite similar to the one Theodosius had seen at the bottom of Cold Lake, but was probably lighter. In addition, the aquarium of the Sheatfish contained a plain serving table, lake sand and silt – which eddied up from the bottom whenever the Sheatfish shifted position on his throne – two pots with filiform freshwater plants, and a complicated device, consisting mainly of an articulated tube, a funnel, and numerous rubber grommets, which allowed the fish to make himself heard when he deigned to speak. Around the panes of the aquarium, fastened by cords, it was possible to draw rich drapes, whose folds were now crammed into the corners. The entire glass construction and all its contents rested on a metal stand, from which two sturdy and skilfully decorated handles protruded to either side. The aquarium could be lifted and carried from place to place by means of these handles. For this none too pleasant task (since the aquarium, with the Shearfish in it, must have been rather heavy), the fat fish was accompanied, besides another six fishes of lesser rank, by four bearer fishes, themselves encased in their own aquaria. Of course, the aquaria that ensured a natural medium for those who transported the Sheatfish Protector were less sumptuous and had no facilities whatsoever: there were neither tables nor chairs nor ice buckets (in any case, during the entire course of the subsequent banquet, nothing was to pass the lips of the bearer fish). Their aquaria sooner resembled glass suits of armour, through which their arms and legs protruded into the air, strangulated by joints with rubber garnitures and riveted rings. The construction of the aquaria in effect prevented the fish from sitting, and when the Catdog made a gesture for them to be seated, the four bearers angrily jerked their legs, emitting from their mouths remarks that materialised in streams of bubbles and gathered on the surface of the water.

“What will you have to drink?” the Catdog asked the Sheatfish Protector.
“What’ll we have to drink?” The Sheatfish turned toward his six counsellors, who, installed upon their sub-aquatic chairs, were each unfolding a serviette and leisurely spreading them over their knees. “Aren’t we having anything to drink? Very well. I’ll have wine.”

“I’ll have wine too,” said Theodosius, sitting on the other side of the table, opposite the Sheatfish Protector.

The Catdog poured about two fingers of wine into his glass, filled his own cup to the brim, and poured the contents of a third over the upper lip of the aquarium, into the water containing the Sheatfish. The wine separated into thick strands and sank undulating like an octopus over the fish. The latter opened his mouth and engulfed a part of the liquid.

“Cheers,” he said, “and if you’re in the mood for toasts, make them yourselves.”

“I should like to make a toast,” could be heard from the voice funnel of one of the counsellors. “Though I have no wine,” he said, affably rising from his chair, “I would like to wish the Illustrious Theodosius a long reign and to assure him that, although in the past perhaps we fishes have machinated against him, the whole of Cold Lake is now loyal to him unto the death – or at least so I believe.”

The Sheatfish’s face darkened and he drummed his fingers on the tabletop.

“Have you finished?” he asked the counsellor.

“Straight away, illustrious Sheatfish Protector. I should merely like to add that yesterday, following the departure of the illustrious Catdog, we signed a treaty with the Purple Ants as regards exploitation of the Petrila salt mines. And with the Green Ants, in Filiași, we had a fruitful meeting…”

“One moment,” the Catdog interrupted him, let us go back a little to Petrila. When…”

“Why should we go back to Petrila?” mewed the Sheatfish Protector in the Catdog’s direction, and then twisted around toward the counsellor and glared at him. “We are here to carouse, not to talk politics. All the more so given that I have ascertained that politics poisons our lives.”

“Agreed, let’s not talk politics,” said the Catdog. “I merely want to find out what is with the salt mines.”

“I shall explain,” said the Sheatfish benevolently. “Sit down,” he addressed the counsellor. “And jettison the acoustic tube.
Now. Jettison the tube. And you, all of you, jettison your tubes. Please don’t think badly of me,” he went on, turning toward Theodosius and the Catdog, “but I can no longer abide these counsellors when they open their mouths. They are very duplicitous. I ask them something and they start to quibble, about how you are our master, illustrious Sheatfish Protector, and so on. I can never get a sincere opinion from my subjects. That’s why I’m leaving them without their funnels, because then they have to give a straight answer: to nod either yes or no.”

Indeed, the fish-counsellors had jettisoned their funnel-equipped tubes – they had fallen with a thud onto the grass – and were now looking at their master with ineffable sadness.

“What have you got to say, you gang of scoundrels,” the Sheatfish bellowed at them, causing the water at the surface of his aquarium to ripple. “Do any of you still want to make a toast?”

The fish shook their heads.

“I repeat the question: do any of you still want to make a toast?”

Anxious, the counsellors consulted among themselves by means of glances and then, doubtfully, nodded their heads.

“Don’t fool with me,” roared the Sheatfish, and the six began to quiver like reeds, moving their heads in every direction. The Sheatfish looked at them piercingly, then slumped in his armchair and began to laugh. “Good, we’ve cleared that one up. I’ll have a piece of ham, if you’ll be so kind, Gavriil. I’d like you to serve me, Theodosius.”

Theodosius gave a start. The wine had somewhat gone to his head and he had been overwhelmed by sweet boredom. He rose from his seat, took a slice of ham, brushing off the parsley, and cast it into the Sheatfish Protector’s aquarium. The latter watched it gently sinking, alternately casting glances at Theodosius, visibly dissatisfied at the way he had tossed him the morsel, and then, as the ham reached the level of his nose, he gulped it down, closing his eyes.

“Tell me what is with Petrila,” the Catdog resumed.

“With Petrila,” answered the Sheatfish Protector with his mouth full, “things stand thus: immediately after our discussion yesterday, I decided to put to some kind of use the privileges
you are prepared to grant the ants in future, and to implement a costly investment. That of giving my subjects a salt water resort in the Whale Gulf, with facilities, the whole works."

“You move fast,” said the Catdog, biting his lower lip.

“Why not? The costs of the investment are high. If we’d come to an understanding after you signed the treaty, the ants would have increased their pretensions. You can’t condemn me for my business acumen. The main thing is to be on the ball.”

“Why is it called the Whale Gulf?” Theodosius demanded to know, while in his mind there took shape a gleaming cetacean, which frolicked in the gulf spouting jets of water from the top of its head.

“Ah, because the lake is so salty in that area that only a whale could live there.”

“Oh, really?” wondered the Catdog. “I had always thought it was because it has the shape of a whale when you look at it on the map.”

“Pah, not at all,” laughed the Sheatfish. “You spend too much time looking at maps. Where’s the shape of a whale? What’s the shape of a whale? I’d like some more ham and, if possible, some cheese. I too would have the shape of a whale if you drew me on a map. No, the water is salty because of the Saltwater River. Which river, pay attention here, Theodosius, you’ll laugh, is only salty in fact after it passes through the salt mines. That is what makes the ants believe they have rights over the water in Whale Gulf. They claim that the salt is theirs. Some more wine, please.”

The Catdog rose and poured wine into the fish’s aquarium. In doing so, he noticed that the six counsellors were squirming in their chairs and pointing at their mouths.

“Are you hungry?” asked Gavriil the Catdog.

The fishes nodded repeatedly. Theodosius took some trays of appetisers from the table and, with the aid of a fork, emptied the food into the aquaria, taking care to share it out as fairly as possible. The counsellors fell to eating at once, with tears of gratitude streaming from their eyes.

“Well,” continued the Sheatfish. “The question of desalinisation of the river came up a few years ago. I was against it. A part of the authorities at Petrila is in favour of closing the salt mines. That, you will realise, would automatically transform the Saltwater River into a freshwater river.”
“And how will they make a living if they close the mines?”
“That’s their business. As it seems to me, that is not the issue. It’s a question of principles: the Gulf stream carries the salt across the lake almost to the other shore. Not much salt, it’s true, but a certain amount. Tell me, in strictly legal terms, whose is the salt carried by the Gulf stream? The ants? So don’t be surprised if they lay claim to that as well, tomorrow or the day after.”

The Catdog had relaxed and began to laugh.
“You do what you do and in the end the treaty with the ants still does not suit you. It is plain from every word you say.”
“Doesn’t it?” said the fish with his mouth full.
“Aha.”
“Aha, you say, but it doesn’t suit me at all. That is, if they close the mines, it’s one thing: I couldn’t care less, that’ll be the end of my resort, but that’s how it goes. I’m not going to do myself in because of it. But there will probably start to be an exodus of the unemployed to Filiași. The implications of commuting are dreadful. Think of the traffic of ants over the lake from dawn to dusk. It’s clear to you that they’ll be commuting over the lake day in day out.”

“And then?”
“And then my delegation negotiated with that part of the leadership which doesn’t want to close the mines. Simple. You wouldn’t believe it, but you find a lot of Purple Ants who despise the Green Ants from the west and who want to split the province. Personally, I don’t understand them, for me all ants are the same, blonde or brunette, it’s all the same to me, I find them all repulsive alike and I detest them all alike, with those muscles of their like balls and those antennae waving all the time. Ugh, they make you want to puke.”

“Please,” the Catdog gestured, “we are eating.”
“Pardon me,” said the Sheatfish, “I couldn’t help myself. I only wanted to give you an idea so that you can understand what I feel at the thought of boatloads of such creatures sailing up and down my lake. However, to resume. I send a team of negotiators. And they negotiated and I signed a treaty stipulating that the mines will remain open, and I think that in a year or two the Whale Gulf will become a paradise of underwater resorts.”

“I understand,” said the Catdog. “That is, I understand partly. You say you negotiated. I am convinced that the ants who backed your cause received certain bonuses on your part.”
“Naturally,” the Sheatfish Protector agreed, leaning back and extracting a toothpick from the pocket of his caftan.

“I would be curious to know what.”

“Ah, a mere bagatelle. I promised them I would organise wee adventures for their political opponents whenever they try to cross the lake.”

“And will you organise them?”

“Don’t ask, I haven’t got a clue about technical details of that kind. I signed an agreement of principle. It’s possible that you will hear or read in the papers that such and such a vessel bound for Filiași suddenly sprang a leak and that the crew were forced to abandon ship and so on and so forth, but I repeat, I won’t have any concrete cases on my conscience.”

“And did you promise them anything else?”

“I promised them effective support so that the government favourable to me will remain in power and rule the Green Ants henceforth for long and happy years.”

The Catdog could not have been more amused. The Sheatfish Protector too began to smile.

“Do you know what amazes me?” asked the Catdog. “It amazes me that you never pose the problem that an unfortunate accident might also befall you, and then all the strings you have been pulling, all your arrangements and all your calculations will blow up. I have been wondering for a long time whether you are a politician or an intriguer and now I think it is starting to become clear to me.”

“Gavriil, you can think what you like about me. However, I assure you that, behind every move I make there stands the good of the kingdom.” The Sheatfish had solemnly placed his right hand on his chest. “What I am doing may seem a nasty trick, but I, in my own inner forum, know that I am inspired by the best intentions and one day you too will convince yourselves of this truth. It may be that when you convince yourselves, I shall no longer be,” added the Sheatfish Protector, after a tear-jerking pause.

“What can I say,” the Catdog admitted defeat. “Faced with such statements I can do no more than to raise my glass and drink your health. Theodosius, let us drink to the health of the Sheatfish Protector and the Cold Lake, which, even if he does not rule it wisely, he rules driven by the best intentions.”

Having said that, Gavriil emptied his cup and put it on the table. Theodosius drank too and felt that he was becoming
sleepy. The Catdog leaned toward his ear and said to him in a hushed voice:

“I know you are bored, but I promise you that as soon as the party is over I shall take you to the ‘Little Lemon’ café and buy you two chocolate cakes, an éclair and a baklava.”

“What, does the ‘Little Lemon’ still exist?” asked the Sheatfish, to keep the conversation going.

“Of course it does,” affirmed the Catdog.

“Hm, I thought they had closed it down. Do you recall, we used to go to that restaurant opposite, also on the boulevard, what was it called…”

“The ‘Little Cherry’.”

“The ‘Little Cherry’, we used to eat steaks, drink until we were blotto and then go off to the ‘Little Lemon’, where there was a brothel.”

“Theodosius, you go off to bed now, sleep for a couple of hours, and after that we’ll go to the café.”

“Leave him be, Gavriil, don’t send him off. He ought to know too, that that was what they used to say, that it was a brothel.”

“There’s no way you could have known. It was only a rumour and, whenever you wanted to check, it would turn out that you were blotto, as you yourself say,” the Catdog put him in his place.

“That’s precisely the charm of it,” said the Sheatfish, whose speech had become slurred. “That’s the charm of it. To hear a rumour and not to verify it and to behave as though it were true. That’s the only way you can maintain order. I’m telling it only so that, just like that, so that you know.” The Sheatfish’s tone became confidential. “If I allowed myself to ignore or to throw into doubt a single rumour from all those that pass my ears, I would long ago have been a gleaming skeleton at the bottom of the lake. Is that or is that not so, conclave of plotters?” roared the Sheatfish unexpectedly, turning on his counsellors. The latter dropped the forks from their hands and began to tremble once more; while two of them nodded affirmatively, the other four shook their heads in negation.

“Leave them in peace,” said the Catdog in disgust. “Let us drink instead.”

“Let’s drink, by all means, but let’s make merry too and pleasurably recall our youth,” said the Sheatfish with misty eyes,
and then went on to address Theodosius alone. “You should
know, my beloved child, that at the ‘Little Lemon’ café there was
a brothel on the first floor, and you used to go in through the
café. But they didn’t let you go in just like that, any old how.
Because it was only for customers of the house, those with an
open palm, who used to go in innocently, walk up and down in
front of the counters with cream puffs, éclairs, nougat, iced
buns, fudge cake, tarts, éclairs – I’ve already said – and with an
air that they were itching to buy, they would ask the fat woman
vendor (what was she called, Gavril? Geta?) with the mous-
tache and headscarf, they would ask her if by any chance,
besides all the goodies on display in the refrigerated display
cabinet, she had any home-made chocolate cake with cherries.
Or with morellos, I forget which, because I’m old and as drunk
as a hog (pour some more wine Gavril). And then the vendor
would make a hidden sign with her hand and the customer
would vanish through the curtain towards the kitchen. And
there, at the stainless steel tables, splattered with pastry dough,
whipped cream and icing sugar, young lasses, in the fifth or
sixth form at the most, summarily dressed, would be twirling
rolling pins, touching the table with their tummies.”

“You’re a libidinous hog,” Gavril the Catdog upbraided
him, without much conviction, even smiling at the shadows of
the past that were flitting through his mind.

The Sheatfish grinned and he too closed his eyes.

“I’m old, but I’m still in form,” he articulated with difficulty
and asked for another glass of wine. “I could have looked after
Theodosius. You have no idea, my boy, what you are missing,
and that’s without taking into account that, living with me, you
would have grown a lovely pair of gills on the nape of your
neck and you would have been able to breathe underwater just
as easily as us.”

“But we could have lived here, in this house, and you would
have grown a pair of lungs,” retorted Theodosius unexpectedly.

The Sheatfish gave a start, unpleasantly surprised.

“Look at him, Gavril, what a cheeky little whippersnapper.
And you’re laughing too. Laugh and you’ll only encourage him
to speak to me in that tone. If I’d brought up him in the way I
know best, he would have been a respectful young lad by now,
without any nasty habits, he would have been obedient, Gavril.
And he would have ruled the kingdom wisely. First of all as
regent – and I, his trusty tutor, would have guided him with my advice – then as king when he came of age – and again I, his humble counsellor, would have whispered in his ear my opinions founded on experience. He would have learned to treasure me, Gavriil, and see here, at this age he would have been ruling the kingdom without a care. But as it is, what a tangled situation! His throne – Otto wants it; his authority is the same as when you break a dish but not completely: cracked. The ants dream of an autonomous state and I swear to you, Gavriil, they will have it. By force of circumstances they will have it, and I am going to do all in my power, before you manage to sign any expanded treaty, I’m no ox to force things, but I, I,” screamed the Sheatfish without warning, banging the table and knocking the plates out of alignment, “instead of having a carefree old age, I have to wrack my brains, to sign secret agreements, and to obtain by subterfuge and tactical conjuring tricks what I deserve by rights. Two teardrops quivered in the scaly eyelids of the Sheatfish, as though in a Japanese cartoon. “I have betrayed you, Gavriil, I have betrayed my sovereign, but for his own good. I don’t care about you. Do you know how much I care? This much. In the end I’m glad that you have dealt with bringing him up, so that everyone can see what a predicament the kingdom has fallen into: disorder, disintegration, tabloid scandals. You’ve lost your grip on the reins, you don’t even care about them, what have you been up to all these years? You’ve gone fishing, you’ve cleared the forests from the royal estates – any servant could have done that, but you don’t have servants. You’ve taught Theodosius how to live on a modest income, like a servant. You’ve wasted your time trying to reconcile Kalliope and Samoil, two senile oldsters I would have done away with quicker than you can say fish. When I come to power – oh, how I’ll laugh then, because perhaps you imagine that moment is a very long way off, but I’m telling you it’s very close – when I come to power, those old bastards will hang as quick as can be, from two nice little gibbets. And as for you – you time-waster – I’ll throw you in the dungeon at Filiași. You know, I go there at least once a week and, whenever I have time, and twice a week I go to the eastern shore of the lake to see the thick mossy walls of the gaol reflected in the water. And as for Theodosius, I’ll leave it up to him to choose whether he wants to be handed
Theodosius the Small

over to Otto, who keeps insistently demanding him (oh, how insistently he demands him!) or to remain king and obey me. In the end, how much do I ask? Am I asking much? How many years do I have left to live? Understand me, Gavriil, in the years still left to me, I want to rule the kingdom, from the shadow. I don’t want Bucharest to be full of statues to the Sheatfish Protector. I don’t want my name in all the school history textbooks – that’s just a consolation for the vainglorious. All I want is to rule. To expand the waters of the lake. And for Bucharest to be submerged, so that I can, thank you very much, stroll over the bottom of a big lake as far as Mushberry Valley, which will be called the Duckweed Shore, that’s what I’m thinking of calling it, and north as far as the foothills of Ottoberg Castle, and east as far as Our Sea, for that is our wish, by the will of the Great Sheatfish Protector over the Cold and Salt Lake, stretching over the capital and over the Apple Orchards, which apple trees, under water, will bring to light rotten fruit.”

The Sheatfish swallowed the saliva at the corners of his mouth and rolled his gaze over those present: three of the six counsellors were casting uneasy glances, another two were stock-still and seemed no longer to be breathing, the last kept opening his mouth spasmodically and releasing, at regular intervals, a bubble of air. Gavriil had sat with his fists propping up his chin during the Sheatfish’s peroration and now he was slowly recovering from his astonishment. Theodosius had grown frightened and was avoiding the fish’s eyes. He was clinging to the Catdog’s waistcoat with all his might. The Catdog bent down and whispered in his ear:

“Let him be, he’s talking nonsense.” Then he added, “He not such a bad lad as he seems. But when he drinks too much, he says stupid things. You know,” he addressed the Sheatfish Protector, who, with his eyes transfixed in space, had remained prey to his own enthusiasm, “for those words I could throw you into gaol, not tomorrow, when perhaps you will be in power, but now, when I am. Or I could, legally, pull the plug out of your tank and let you suffocate slowly. Do you know that?”

The Sheatfish smacked his lips with the indifference of a drunkard and, manoeuvring a lever under his table, caused the curtains that adorned the inside of the aquarium to unfurl along their cords and completely cover the windowpanes. In a short while a loud snoring could be heard from behind the drapes.
"Theodosius the Small is by far the best book of Romanian prose to have been published this year and is undoubtedly one of the pinnacles since 1989. Likewise, it is a product for export, whose value I do not know whether we genuinely appreciate."

(Bianca BURŢA-CERNAT, in Observator cultural)

“A splendid book, one such as few have been written in Romania in recent years.”

(Andrei TERIAN, in Cultura)

“Theodosius the Small is the (master)work of a maestro. A book that is a classic and a drug, one of the best novels published in Romania since 1990.”

(Paul CERNAT, in Dilemateca)
The characters in *Theodosius the Small* are cruel, conniving, slanderous and megalomaniacal. They have all the traits of important people. What remains is the ironic style in which the characters vie with each other as they wage bitter battles for territory. Undoubtedly, when telling his tale Răzvan Rădulescu always has a moral, a theme, a gripe, a polemical position. For this reason, *Theodosius the Small* is written with grace; it does not parody, it does not pastiche, it tells a story for the young but above all for grown-ups. We have been able to benefit from publication of this book in order to infiltrate the world of Răzvan Rădulescu, author of the novel *Theodosius the Small* and screenwriter of the film *The Death of Mr Lăzărescu*.

(Ovidiu ȘIMONCA, in *Observator cultural*)

“The story is so wonderfully well told and constructed that it is addictive.”

(Mihai IOVĂNEL, in *Gândul*)

“Screenwriter Răzvan Rădulescu is passionately lucid, a master of febrile action viewed coolly. But my favourite is the novelist: the latter represents a more friendly and playful side of the same great talent.”

(Andrei GORZO, in *Ziua*)
Our Circus Presents:

Lucian Dan Teodorovici
Lucian Dan Teodorovici – born in Rădăuți, on 17 June 1975. He is the co-ordinator of Polirom’s “Ego. Prose” series, and senior editor of the *Suplimentul de cultură* weekly. Between 2002 and 2006, he was editor-in-chief at the Polirom Publishing House, Jassy. He has contributed prose, drama, and articles to various cultural magazines in Romania and abroad, including *Suplimentul de cultură*, *Timpul*, *Dilema veche*, *Observator cultural*, *Familia*, *ArtPanorama*, *Hyperion*, *Discobolul*, *Orizont*, *Evenimentul zilei*, *Cotidianul*, *Wienzeile* (Vienna), and *Au sud de l’Est* (Paris). He is a scriptwriter for the *Animated Planet Show*, broadcast by the Antena 1 television channel in Romania, and has written screenplays for the feature-length film adaptation of *Our Circus Presents*: and the award-winning short films *Chocolates* and *A Good Day*, which were financed by the Romanian National Centre of Cinematography. He has won numerous literary prizes in Romania, and has given international readings in Leipzig (2006), Lille (2006), Vienna (2007) and Paris (2007). Published volumes: *Cu puțin timp înaintea coborârii extraterestrilor printre noi* (*Shortly before the Extraterrestrials Descended Among us*), novel, OuTopos publishing house, Jassy, 1999, 2nd revised and expanded edition, Polirom, Jassy, 2005; *Lumea văzută printr-o gaură de mărimea unei țigări marijuana* (*The World Seen through a Hole the Width of a Spliff*), short stories, Constantin Brâncuși Foundation Press, Târgu-Jiu, 2000; *Circul nostru vă prezintă*: (*Our Circus Presents:*, novel, Polirom, Jassy, 2002, 2nd revised edition, Polirom, Jassy, 2007; *Atunci i-am ars două palme* (*Then I Belted Him Two Slaps*), short stories, Polirom, Jassy, 2004. The film adaptation of *Our Circus Presents* will be released in cinemas in 2008.

**Lucian Dan Teodorovici, *Our Circus Presents*:; novel**  
**Year of publication: 2007**  
**240 pages**
Our Circus Presents:
– synopsis –

The main character of the book, a man of thirty, lives in a modest flat on the fifth floor of a housing block. Every Sunday, the protagonist performs a kind of ritual: he climbs onto the window ledge and waits for a suicidal urge, which, however, never comes.

The events of the novel unfold over the course of three days. On the first day, the young man sets off to the town’s railway station in search of prostitutes. On the way, he runs into another young man, known during the story as the “bloke with the orange braces”, who has hanged himself from an old steam engine in an unused siding. The protagonist saves him and takes him to the station hospital, from where the bloke with the orange braces discharges himself on his own two feet. The main
Synopsis

character will later find the man he saved in a railway workers' bar. He is unwillingly embroiled in a fight provoked by the bloke with the orange braces, who breaks a chair over the head of one of the prostitutes in the bar, leaving her in a pool of blood. For the second time in the space of the same day, the protagonist saves the bloke with the orange braces, this time from the fury of the drinkers in the bar, and takes him back to his own flat. This is where the entire atmosphere of the story takes shape: a disabused world of strange neighbours and a building superintendent who is an old woman yearning for a relationship with a young man of thirty.

During the other two days covered by the action of the novel, we discover that the young protagonist is a member of a kind of club for “professional suicides” – people in search of death, sometimes for the most stupid reasons and in the most bizarre ways: one wants to kill himself by sleeping with as many women of easy virtue as possible, in the hope of contracting a fatal disease; another wants to commit suicide by drinking huge quantities of the finest quality whiskey, until he falls into an alcoholic coma; etc. They are all “suicide artists”, and it is into this strange group that the young man of thirty would now like to introduce his new friend. Parallel to these events, the two attempt to find out whether the prostitute in the bar has managed to survive being hit over the head with a chair. The answer will not be revealed until the end of the novel.

The finale closes the circle of the tale: during a further visit to the railway station, the protagonist discovers that the prostitute has died. He does not tell his new friend about this. At the same time, however, frightened at the turn that events have taken, he comes up with a plan: he convinces the bloke with the orange braces to go to the station, to the locomotive where he first found him. And he proposes that they both commit suicide. The young man tells his companion that in this way the railway workers will understand that they both regret the incident with the prostitute – and they will be forgiven. In fact, the protagonist's plan is to free himself from the noose and to chase away anyone who tries to save the other, allowing him to die and thereby escaping from any legal consequences of his association with the prostitute's murderer. The plan fails, however, for various reasons – the protagonist does not allow his new
friend to die, but rather tells him the truth about the prostitute and about what he has been planning. It all ends with a roar of laughter, an agonised roar of laughter which consecrates the general principle and theme of the book, according to which whoever has failed at everything else in life can only be consistent and fail at his own death.
There are days – what am I saying: months! – when I desperately wait for events, praying for something the hell to happen, hoping for some phone call to wrench me out of the numbness, to inform me that, somewhere in this apparently so immobile world, something is happening worthy of my attention. But the phone call does not come, however much I pine away waiting for it.

But when events are determined to assail you from every side, it is no longer any surprise at all when your phone rings. Moreover, it is absolutely no surprise when you hear that the first words from the other end of the line are:

“Today is the day!”

Indeed. What could be surprising in that, when in the last few hours you have saved someone from death twice, you have
witnessed the possible murder of a prostitute, you have slept in
the same room as the presumed murderer and, at the same time,
subsequent suicide, you have visited an ex-girlfriend, more than
fifteen years older than yourself, and, the cherry on the cake,
you have dared to call that ex-girlfriend “madam”?

I myself had been thinking that today is the day: it is the day
that comes after yesterday, the day on which I’ll continue to
have to put up with a series of questions whose answer I don’t
know whether I’m capable of finding, the day on which I’ll be
swinging between regrets and curiosity. But, recognising the
voice at the other end of the line, I realise that this day brings
something extra with it: the respectable madness of my pal the
former theologian, who is thinking of killing himself by drinking
whiskey until he enters an alcoholic coma.

Lately, he has told me about this intention of his countless
times. And I, naturally, admired him for the idea (just as I had
admired him before that for the idea with the prostitutes). How-
ever, also taking into account the fact that he would never
manage to save up enough money to buy ten litres of the finest
whiskey, as he would have wished. The time when he worked
for a private firm, with a more than satisfactory wage, had
passed. Once, just once since he was laid off, he managed –
from his dole money, which he was still receiving at the time,
and from his work as an amateur dogcatcher – to put aside a
sum sufficient for three litres. He phoned me up then too. And
he set about drinking, happy. All the while he talked to me
about suicide. Philosophically, pathetically, but at the same time
enthusiastically, as though it were a question of the supreme
creative act of which man might be capable. In the end, in order
to justify his claim, he went on to biblical arguments:

“Maybe you don’t know,” he said to me, “but the Bible
presents God as having four essential qualities: firstly, through
the way in which he acts toward the Pharaoh at the moment the
Jews are freed from bondage in Egypt, God proves to be a
powerful, fear-inspiring force. Also through the liberation of the
Jews and, above all, through the way in which he resolves that
situation, He proves His wisdom. Through the punishment He
inflicts upon those who have persecuted His people, God mani-
ests his justice. Then, we discover a third quality in His respect
for the promise He made as regards the descendants of Abraham
and in His entire behaviour to His people. The fourth principal quality is therefore love. Get it?"

I had understood the bit about the qualities. But I couldn't see what it was he was getting at. I nodded, as though I had been fully edified.

“Proceeding from this summary characterisation,” he continued his idea, “We could find an answer to the question ‘Why the hell did God create the world?’ What do you think, could we?”

“We could.”

What else could I say?

“Well, no, my friend, look but we couldn’t. How the devil could we! Let’s take the first quality of God: power. Why did God need to manifest his power over mortals? Why did he have to create the Earth and mankind, when, as the Bible says, He had previously created the angels? Therefore he already had someone he could show off his power to. Here’s the problem, but pay attention: in distinction to angels, the Creator offered humans the possibility of multiplying, evolving, learning, choosing. He gave humans a part of Himself, making them creators in their turn. And also in distinction to the angels, man was also offered the right to be disobedient. So, God’s power was manifested to us as to subjects, which is what angels are, but only as payment for the war man has started against the divinity. Think about the times when God has revealed His power. To Cain, who committed murder. To the Pharaoh. To the rulers of His people, when they defied Him. It can therefore be said that His power only manifests itself in self-defence. In conclusion, to the question ‘Did God create the world in order to have someone to manifest His power to?’ I can answer you without hesitation that He didn’t. Because, in the beginning, he had no intention of showing His power to mankind. He was obliged to do so. Well then!”

My pal the former theologian paused for a few seconds, probably to gather his booze-addled thoughts.

“But let’s see,” he went on finally, “how things stand with the second quality, wisdom. Do you really think that the world was born out of vanity, out of the desire of an absolute awareness, such as God, to prove its wisdom before much inferior existences? His wisdom helped Him to build the world, yes, but the display of that wisdom was is no case one of the purposes for
the appearance of the world. How much could the appreciation of some ignorant wretches have pleased Him, the embodiment of wisdom to the maximum degree? Not at all, don’t you think?”

“That’s right, how could it?” I nodded, more and more bored by his explanation.

“Another quality of God is justice, as I’ve already told you. As God’s first creation, namely the angels, had been conceived in order to live in justice, it can be presupposed, forcing the argument it is true, that God created man in order to be able to manifest His spirit of justice. Though slightly fatuous, this claim might, nonetheless, be taken into account. However, in the very first chapter of Genesis, we discover that God declares Himself satisfied with His creation, regarding it as very good. As he was referring to His creation in Paradise, it seems quite clear that he was satisfied with what he saw at that moment. It might therefore be considered that the temptation of Adam and Eve had not been foreseen by the divinity. In other words, not even His redemptive wish had been part of the purpose for creating the world, as long as, when He declared Himself satisfied with what He had made, sin did not yet exist. It therefore remains to be seen how things stand with the fourth quality of God.”

“Love,” I interrupted, from a desire to contribute something to the discussion.

“Yes, love. I see you remember. Did the One Above need love, and was that why He created us? No, my friend, the angels loved Him too. So, it’s clear that it wasn’t a need for love that made Him invent man. Tell me, then: why the devil did God create the world?”

“How should I know?”

He was already drunk and terribly incensed, and it seemed to me that his entire philosophy had completely lost any coherence. Ultimately, after all that prattle about God and the world, he had arrived back at the same question as at the beginning.

However, although he was already seriously reeling, and his eyes had begun to dart about rather strangely in his sockets, my pal proved capable of resuming his discourse:

“You see, if you weren’t paying attention? Well, didn’t I mention at one point that, in the very first chapter of Genesis, God declares Himself satisfied with His work? That’s the secret, my friend. Imagine a painter or any other kind of artist, who,
when he finishes his work, is enthused by the idea he had and looks on the result with satisfaction, murmuring to himself: ‘It’s a good piece of work’. Although he knows that the difficult task of putting the finishing touches is still to come, he rejoices at the thought that what he has before him is his own work, born of his own idea and brought to fulfilment by him alone. You see? Like the artist, God created something and put His name to His creation. And, above all, like the artist, God had no purpose, no reason for creating the world. But people have always posed the question: why were we created, after all? And, since the simplest answer, which is to say “just because”, didn’t suit anybody, philosophy came into being. And philosophy led to evolution. Now, at last, do you see why God created the world? Just because!”

After that discussion, I often thought about my pal’s explanation and I discovered a host of meanings, each one of them equivalent to a revelation. But I hadn’t understood anything at the time. And nonetheless, I said:

“Yes, I see. Except that I don’t see what connection it has with your suicide.”

“I’ve been wasting my breath on you, in that case. Well, how the devil could it not have a connection!? My suicide is an artistic act, my friend. And, like any artistic act, it has no motivation. Or, if it has, it’s not one that just anyone can discover.”

And then, suddenly distracted, he added:

“That’s why, you see, you’ll never succeed in killing yourself.”

My indignation, aroused by the sneering smile with which he accompanied that assertion, could, I think, be heard far from his abode.

“Who the fuck made you think you’re cleverer than me!? How’s that: you succeed in killing yourself, but you don’t credit me with any chance at all!!?”

“Exactly. Look, let me demonstrate it to you. What reasons have you got to kill yourself?”

What reasons did I have? That was a stupid question, to which I probably shouldn’t have given him any answer. Nonetheless, I said:

“Do you know what I would like from life? A beautiful woman to take care of me and to have sex with me until I feel
Our Circus Presents:

I can take no more. In fact no, a lot of beautiful women to take care of me and have sex with me until I feel I can take no more. I wouldn't say no to a hefty inheritance from some uncle in the West – not that I have one. I'd also like to be a footballer. Those footballers are the richest people in uniform. I'd probably quite like to loll around in bed all my life watching television, eating, having sex and reading. Or – aha, yes, most of all! – to invent a device, a kind of magnet, to attract all the money lost by all the people in the world. Not all the money lost throughout time, I'm not that pretentious, but, let's say, over a fixed period: over the course of a month. Well, you see, not one of these things, not one of my wishes is ever going to come true. That's why I want to kill myself!"

My whiskey-drinking pal complemented his smile with a roar of laughter.

"You've given yourself away," he said. "Now do you see why I told you that you'd never kill yourself? Because you have too many motives. That's the main, in fact the sole motive a normal person should have for killing himself: not to have any motive. Because behind each of those motives lies hidden a wish. And any wish, believe me, brings with it some hope of fulfilment. If God had had such easily detectible motives for creating the world, I tell you that the Earth would not exist today. Because God is too clever not to have realised the idea I've just laid out to you."

I agreed with him. And I agreed with him so much that the discussion was followed by a greatly enhanced consequence of the morning's outbursts on the ledge. So, in expectation of the urge, I strove to find out whether I have wishes or not. The window ledge thus became a kind of barometer of desires.

As for him? He drank a bottle of whiskey after that. Consequently, he got drunk enough for his sexual appetite to make him abandon the other two bottles and leave the house in search of a woman.

And, as he didn't have any money for prostitutes, that evening he stopped in front of every person of the female sex that came his way, and said to them, seriously reeling:

"Would you like to make love with me? After that, if you don't like it, I can commit suicide."

Of that event I remember that the next day, when he awoke from his drunken stupor, he told me over the telephone:
“Look, my friend, didn’t I tell you last night? Desires stifle any appetite to kill yourself! It just so happened that I slept with a woman… Farewell suicide!”

***

“Today is the day!” the voice at the other end of the line now solemnly resounds.

And, for all that I know what he is referring to, since the entire relationship between us is based on a single point in common, the only way I can react is to ask mechanically:

“What day?”

I hear a mutter of annoyance.

“What do you mean, what day? Haven’t I told you about it umpteen times? It’s the day on which I’ve managed to buy enough whiskey to kill an elephant. Are you interested?”

This time, although I haven’t the slightest doubt about namely what should interest me, I don’t answer mechanically, but only out of a pointless desire to banter with him:

“The whiskey?”

More muttering, more annoyance – an infantile satisfaction for me.

“It’s only for me, my friend, as you know full well. Are you interested in coming to see me kill myself?”

This isn’t a case of a wedding that you don’t have enough money to go to and so you excuse yourself by claiming to have a heavy cold. Nor is it a case of a birthday party, which you have reasons not to go to because you don’t like music at full volume or people dancing when you don’t know any kind of dance. This is a case of witnessing a suicide. And such an invitation, as everyone must agree, is hard to refuse. Even if accepting it would lead to having to listen to another interminable lecture about God and His four essential qualities and about unprecedented artistic acts. You can easily tolerate something of the sort, when you think that the opportunity of witnessing a suicide in the fullest sense doesn’t crop up very often in your life. What else can we say: you would have to be completely mad not to take advantage of it! Except that for me there is a hitch:

“I’m not available.”
I’m talking nonsense. If she could hear me, my former neigh-
bour would be right in imagining that between myself and him
with the orange braces there is much more than a mere friendship.

“I’m not alone,” I hastily correct myself.

“Well, this is something I never expected you to say. You’re
thinking of missing such an opportunity for the sake of a
woman?” marvelled the voice at the other end of the line.

Not for a woman, no. In fact, not for anyone. All I want at the
present time is to convince my whiskey-drinking pal to invite
the person I’ve spent the last twenty hours with as well. Al-
though I haven’t asked my friend with the orange braces whether
he wants to come, I’m convinced that, like myself, he wouldn’t
want to miss such a moment.

“I have a guest. A friend. Couldn’t he come with me?”

He mutters again, expressing for the third time his annoy-
ance in this way.

“I don’t really want to. It’s a personal act: you know how I
see it. You’re welcome, bearing in mind…”

“But he’s one of us!” I interrupt, hoping thereby to convince
him.

In the next instant I cannot but wonder what the hell I meant
by that. What did that “one of us” mean, which I uttered so
nonchalantly? Had some kind of caste of suicides been created
in my mind, of which I too was an honourable member? Stranger
still is that the mind of the one at the other end of the line seems
to be on the same wavelength as mine. Because to my friend,
who today has decided to put an end to his life, this “one of us”
seems as natural as can be, given that he concludes, with relief:

“Ah, alright! In that case, I can’t see any reason not to bring
him along.” (…)

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Even if the atmosphere ought to be relaxed, bearing in mind
the fact that it overlaps with a number of unexpected achieve-
ments in the life of my friend the former theologian, I feel
something weighing on my chest. I don’t know what. Anyhow,
this feeling becomes sharper the moment I see our host pouring
coffee into the cup of my friend with the orange braces, whose
presence I have quite forgotten in the last few minutes.
“Sugar?” the one who has invited us asks, as affable as ever. “Instead of coffee,” I hear my companion say, “couldn’t you give us both a cup of whiskey?” And here is the explanation for the pressing sensation in my chest! For the third time in the last few hours, the voice of the assistant at the dispensary suddenly resounds in my ears: “If you give him a brandy, he’ll tell you everything.” How could I have forgotten? I realise – a little too late, it is true – that I have made a mistake in bringing my guest here. The other also thinks the same thing, goggling his eyes, utterly stupefied. Then, ignoring the one I have come with, he snaps at me: “Didn’t you tell him what I want to do?” “Yes, I did.” I am genuinely scared at what might come of the gaffe made by the one with orange braces. What if we get chucked out? How the hell could I have forgotten? There’s no doubt about it: I’m to blame. I should have pointed out to my friend that he should restrain himself, however much that bucket of alcohol might tempt him.

“He was joking,” I say, trying to mend the situation and at the same time pinching my companion’s thigh with all my might. “What the hell’s got into you?” says the latter, jumping up from his chair and rubbing the spot where I nipped him. And as I’m endeavouring to give him a conspiring wink, he unexpectedly clouts me across the face, a slap strong enough to topple me onto the carpet, chair and all. In the seconds in which I try to come back to my senses, reason, crammed into one corner of my mind, demands that I should not react, that I should behave normally, especially given the fact that I’m not in my own house. Unfortunately, however, reason has very few other courses of action to dictate to me, and so, once I’m on my feet, I reply with all my force, punching my aggressor. In the sudden welter, I nevertheless manage to see my frightened whiskey-drinking friend grab the bucket, cradling it in his arms to protect it. This move comes too late, however. In the next moment, the one with the orange braces, roaring, rushes at me, pushing the former theologian, who, with the bucket in his arms, had just thrust himself between us. So it happens that, as we are rolling on the carpet, chaotically slugging each other, fighting without any well-founded reason, a drawn-out moan fills the room…
At that moment, as though on cue, we cease the fight that had erupted out of the blue. This affords us the opportunity to see our host on his knees, noisily lamenting in front of the spilled bucket, in front of the puddle of expensive liquor which, with each passing moment, is spreading over the carpet.

***

We sit gloomily around the table, upon which the bucket is enthroned. In spite of the wholly tragic situation, my friend who had planned to kill himself today can no longer find the strength to reproach us with anything. He merely weeps, with his head in his hands. And we try to console him. Patting him on the back (the one with the orange braces). Or on the head (me).

Using a piece of gauze, we have managed to collect a small part of the liquor spilled on the carpet. Which, added to that remaining in the bucket, makes, at present, one or perhaps two litres of whiskey standing on the table. We each have a cup of whiskey in front of us; we are each trying to dissolve our bitterness by drinking from our cups. Undoubtedly, however, someone is less upset by the situation, and that someone, in spite of his guilt-ridden sighs, is my friend with the orange braces. In the end, he has got what he wanted. Now, without encountering any resistance on the part of our host, he can drink as much as he likes from the bucket of liquor.

Nor is the atmosphere at all improved in the moment when the most afflicted among us, my pal, who has missed another opportunity to commit suicide, bursts into hysterical laughter. In fact, he even manages to scare us, when he thrusts away his chair with a shriek and climbs onto the table, and then starts to dance around the bucket. Such a reaction is anything but normal and so, seemingly of the same mind, we grab him by the legs and pull him back down.

There is no way we can stop his laughter, however. Amid guffaws, he manages to say:

“And so there it is, brothers, ha, ha, starting tomorrow, instead of seeing to my own affairs in the other world, I'll be back to my staple trades: unemployment and bounty hunting! Because there is no chance of me winning the lottery a second time!”
“Bounty hunting” is merely the pompous term he uses to describe his work as an amateur dogcatcher or, to put it more accurately, as a man who scours the streets for days on end in search of pedigree dogs. Once he finds such a dog, my pal scans the newspapers for small ads that begin “Pedigree dog lost in the … area.” If a small ad includes information that fits the description of the dog he has found and, above all, if it concludes with “Reward for the finder”, he presents himself at the owner’s door with the quadruped. If not, then the dog regains its freedom. More often than not, however, taking into account that not many dogs go missing from their owners at random, my pal helps them to go astray, without too many scruples.

“You said that you’ve put some money aside for your funeral. You could spend it on another ten litres... So, there’s still a chance of killing yourself,” I encourage him.

He looks at me as though I’m from another planet, and stops laughing.

“And not be buried in the proper way? Are you mad?!” he shouts at me. “What do you want, for them to cremate me?”

From the way he is looking at me, I probably ought to realise that the idea is utterly idiotic. But, I don’t know why, it seems to me that there is not much difference between being buried and being cremated, given that, in any case, the act in question occurs after you die. And so I naively express this opinion.

“Look here, it’s obvious that you don’t know anything,” he attempts to enlighten me, lowering his voice. “But I, in contrast to you, still read a few things. I’ve read that, if you burn, in the instant that your body reaches the temperature of a living person, you come back to life for a second. Get it?”

This time it’s my turn to look at him as though he were from another planet. But he doesn’t give me very long to philosophise in the margins of this idea because, raising his voice, he says:

“What use to me is another second of life?! Go on, tell me, what use is it to me?!”

Naturally, he doesn’t have any use for that one second. So, without commenting further, I pick up my teacup of whiskey and knock it back. In complete silence, the other two follow my example.
“Outlying districts dominated by aggressive gypsies; filthy trams full of motley and dubious people; strange, elderly pensioners, the suspicious and malevolent neighbours in insalubrious blocks of flats; homeless glue-sniffers – this is the everyday circus that unfolds in the background of the novel.”

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