

TERRIFYING PROJECTIONS OF SOVIET CHILDHOOD

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Abstract. In the creative process, the relationship of childhood with the act of writing reveals tangential defining elements, because metaphorically speaking, the writer is a perpetual child (not in the sense of immaturity, but in the sense of permanent search, youthful and playful curiosity, exploring originality), which it allows him to constantly present his world through the prism of a unique aspect. The article highlights the specific features of some examples of Soviet childhood, identified in the novels *Din calidor* by Paul Goma, *Copil la ruși* by Leo Butnaru, *Grădina de sticlă* by Tatiana Țibuleac or in the story *Copii în cătușele Siberiei* by Spiridon Vangheli. The system of characters presented in these texts highlights a lesser-known side of the Soviet system, that of deportations/ immigration, abandonment etc. The numerous juvenile characters offer the reader a panoramic perspective on their childhood, as well as on the communist society with all its specific aspects. Among them political dogmas, the cohabitation of patriarchal traditions with communist propaganda, atheism, pioneering, multilingualism (especially Russian terminology) etc. Can be listed. However, this fact does not prevent the writers from presenting us with a sunny childhood, candid and full of age-specific adventures. In this way, the theme of childhood is always based on the idea of travelling in time, often nostalgic, meant to juxtapose the monotonous, complicated, problematic present of a fabulous, paradisiacal, mythical past, capitalizing on the dreams and aspirations of adults through the youthful perspective.

Keywords: Soviet childhood, (post)modern perspectives, playful, narrator, character, biography.

Proiectări terifiante ale copilăriei sovietice

Rezumat. În procesul creativ, relația copilăriei cu actul de a scrie relevă elemente definitorii tangențiale, deoarece metaforic vorbind, scriitorul este un copil perpetuu (nu în sensul imaturității, ci în sensul căutării permanente, tineresc și jucăuș). Curiozitatea, explorarea originalității, care îi permite să-și prezinte constant lumea prin prisma unui aspect unic. Articolul evidențiază trăsăturile specifice ale unor exemple de copilărie sovietică, identificate în romanele *Din calidor* de Paul Goma, *Copil la ruși* de Leo Butnaru, *Grădina de sticlă* de Tatiana Țibuleac sau în povestirea *Copii în cătușele Siberiei* de Spiridon Vangheli. Sistemul de personaje prezentat în aceste texte evidențiază o latură mai puțin cunoscută a sistemului sovietic, cea a deportărilor/ imigrației, abandonului etc. Numeroasele personaje juvenile oferă cititorului o perspectivă panoramică asupra copilăriei lor, precum și asupra societății comuniste. Cu toate aspectele sale specifice. Printre acestea pot fi enumerate dogmele politice, coabitarea tradițiilor patriarhale cu propaganda comunistă, ateismul, pionieratul, multilingvismul (în special terminologia rusă) etc. Acest fapt nu-i împiedică însă pe scriitori să ne prezinte o copilărie însoțită, sinceră și plină de aventuri specifice vârstei. În acest fel, tema copilăriei se bazează mereu pe ideea unei călătorii în timp, adesea nostalgică, menită să juxtapună prezentul monoton, complicat, problematic al unui trecut fabulos, paradisiac, mitic, valorificând visele și aspirațiile adulților prin perspectiva tinerească.

Cuvinte-cheie: copilărie sovietică, perspective (post)moderne, jucăuș, narator, personaj, biografie.

Throughout history, the notion of *childhood* has undergone numerous semantic mutations, constantly being attributed new connections in relation to the social, economic, religious and cultural development of human society. If we talk about the literary approach of the notion, then we notice an increased interest of the authors given the fact that their artistic perception is constantly supplemented with sociological, psychological, civic and moral data on the concept, but also due to the aesthetic or fictional/imaginary component they dispose of.

That is why, more and more often, there is an insistence on writings with autobiographical background, in which the functionality of childhood memory intertwines with its special qualities, being evoked a universe in vivid colours, with meticulous details, with lost meanings, with an ideal image. In the creative process, the relationship of childhood with the act of writing reveals tangential defining elements, because metaphorically speaking, the writer is a perpetual child (not in the sense of immaturity, but in the sense of permanent search, youthful and playful curiosity, exploring originality), which allows him to constantly present his world through the prism of an always original aspect.

Analysing the concept of *childhood* as a theme and that of a *child* as a literary character in Romanian literature, Diana Vrabie states: "The subtle metaphor of human ingenuity, symbolic column of paradise lost, childhood hides in the fullness of its essence the candour of primary gestures, the unsaid defies utterance, the tumultuous throb send beyond words and sincere wonder becomes the engine of the universe. His quintessence is shaped by magic and dream, naivety and play, exuberance and ease, converted at the age of maturity into a dramatic nostalgia for the lost paradise" [1, p. 52]. This study highlights a typology of childhood hypostases as follows: *plenary childhood*, the one in which the child has loved ones, *unpleasant childhood*, when parents are missing or the child has undergone through significant events such as war, famine etc., *childhood under communism*, *childhood spent in rural areas*, but also *in urban areas*.

For the most part, the texts we put forward for studying the phenomenon of Soviet childhood naturally and exhaustively capitalize on this typology. Thus, the numerous youthful characters offer the reader a panoramic perspective on their childhood, but also on the communist society with all its specific aspects. Among these we can list: political dogmas, the cohabitation of patriarchal traditions with communist propaganda, atheism, pioneering, multilingualism (especially Russian terminology) etc. However, this fact does not prevent the writers from presenting us with a sunny childhood, candid and full of age-specific adventures.

Returning to these affective-existential experiences, vibrant pages appear about the childhood and adolescence of those born in the USSR, among which we list authors such as: Vasile Ernu, Leo Butnaru, Savatie Baştovoi, Emilian Galaicu-Păun, Tatiana Țăbuleac, Iulian Ciocan, Boris Vasiliev, Claudia Partole, Aureliu Busuioc, Liliana Corobca, Spiridon Vangheli, Vladimir Beşleagă and others. a. The list of those who have tangents with this period and whose writing is influenced in one way or another by the reminiscences of the Soviet Union and its denationalizing effects may continue. Even if the texts of some of the above writers do not fit into the postmodernist literary movement, they are valuable testimonies of the political influence on the changes that Bessarabia went through, how its citizens "turned" into *comrades*, but especially what effect had the policy and social change on childhood as a period of development of Soviet society.

The flow of the writers' affective memory presents the reader with an alchemical mixture between the personal experiences of the narrators and the historical data. We can admit that the biography of some works is consumed in the opposite direction, from text to existence, so the writing acquires, in this sense, a therapeutic effect, facilitating another way of presenting communism, from an individual perspective, i.e., the personal relationship with the political and social regime of that period. Of course, there are many more studies on communism, many

of which fall into the category of non-fiction. We will try, in this study, to find some tangents between the fictional/ non-fictional dichotomy using, particularly, the study coordinated by Liliana Corobcă *Panorama of communism in Soviet Moldova* [2] or *Sovietland. The Land of the Gulag* by Antoanela Olteanu [3]. These studies provide an exhaustive overview of the phenomenon of communism and the re-education of citizens in order to indoctrinate them for their subsequent transformation into Soviet comrades. In this way, “the deportation of intellectuals and the political elite ended the natural and historical development of the traditional culture, language and Romanian values. A state of disregard of the local population was created, of the abolition of any forms and attempts to preserve the national specificity, of pathological fear towards the other, which could be a potential traitor or moulder” [4, p. 168]. Terror, intimidation, prisons and labour camps for the enemies of the people are just some of the repressive measures discussed in detail in the work of Antoanela Olteanu, which provides a synchronous and diachronic perspective on the gulag phenomenon and its consequences.

Both the authors of the essays and those of the novels about childhood are formed in the last years of the Soviet regime, being, from this point of view, *the children of communism*, which facilitates the discovery of many similarities in their works. Therefore, the profiles of the children-outlined characters imply some identity fragmentisms that appear as a result of the tension between the imposed ideology and the reality of the childhood world. Of course, these fragmentisms cannot fail to mark adults as “authors of memories”.

The child, as a character, remains candid and curious to uncover the mysteries of the universe, that’s why the gallery of characters will be constantly filled with memorable exponents of the rural world (Trofimaş, Bobocel, Mitruţă, Ionică, joined by Lică, Sasha Vakulovski and slum children), of the city (Nătăfleaşă, Silică, Emiliaş, the line can continue with Marcel Pulbere, Iulian, Lastocika and the children of the

communes) or those brought from the rural environment for a city holiday or vice versa.

The specificity of the code of postmodernism aesthetics reveals the book, the intertext, the playful-ironic register and capitalizes on the writer’s linguistic inventiveness. In this sense, the research of the highlighted texts is an important impetus in order to identify the specific features of the youthful characters seen through the prism of the peculiarities of the postmodernist movement.

In the study of *Childhood and Society*, the Danish emeritus psychologist and psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, draws attention to the need and importance of the notion of *childhood* in personality development: “it is human to have a long childhood; it is civilized to have an even longer childhood. Prolonged childhood makes man a technical and mental virtuoso, but at the same time leaves in him traces of emotional immaturity for the rest of his life” [5, p. 20]. Or what else is the inexhaustible source of technical and scientific developments, if not naive curiosity, the continuous thirst for knowledge and freedom of imagination shown by scientists combined with constant effort and ambition in the name of an idea?!

This explains the zeal with which each social system shapes its future citizens, using the education of children to give them “their own form of mature human identity, their unique version of integrity” [5, p. 20]. In this way, it is very clear that the mission of the ideological system, in general, and the Soviet system, in particular, was to “build” the new type of citizen – the Soviet comrade – in the image and likeness of Comrade Lenin proclaimed by the cult of personality as a socialist and communist ideological model, opener of roads and new horizons, brave hero of the struggle against the bourgeoisie and defender of the simple citizen!

In the literature identified both about and for children, child characters are defined in a relationship of permanent opposition to adult society, marked by numerous differences. The archetypal portraits of these reflect the anxieties and aspirations of the adults of the age they rep-

resent, the authors giving a relative importance to the dreams, fantasies, fears and aspirations of the reading children. However, we must keep in mind that child characters are not just the opposition of adult characters, they are part of a system of representations that varies from one era to another, from one current to another.

In this way, the theme of childhood is always based on the idea of a time travel, often nostalgic, meant to juxtapose the monotonous, complicated, problematic present to a fabulous, paradisaical, mythical past, capitalizing on the dreams and aspirations of adults through the youthful perspective. This double approach, in which the past and the present are engaged, the individual and the collective is intended, especially, for children in order to shape them, to model them, to influence them at least indirectly. The perspective of the adult author, who most often narrates in the first person and tends towards the hypostasis of the child character, requires a continuous effort of communication with the real reader, addressing another age, an individual belonging to another world. As proof in this sense, we can remark on *Amintiri din Copilărie* by Ion Creangă, which, although presenting the childhood of the universal child, is strongly rooted in the era it evokes, increasingly losing its young reader due to the strongly archaic language.

The language of the text virtually forces the adult author to take a relative distance from the childhood dreams, from such symbolic and mythical representations, in order to succeed in constructing characters less distant from the future reader, more truthful, detaching himself from his childhood to objectify it for the act of narration.

The Soviet period paints, in Romanian literature, a new typology of childhood that manifests itself in the terrifying whirlwind of a world war and the years immediately following characterized by organized hunger and immeasurable poverty, deportations and immigration. These macabre events present children who live their own experience of knowing the world. For example, Paul Goma's child character from the autobiographical novel *Din Calidor*, unreserv-

edly submits his innocence "to the existence of pain and goes through childhood as an undeserved hell" mentions Ion Simuț. Paul Goma's childhood is strongly marked by history and this is clearly seen in the novel, whose narrator and character constitute a child.

In the same magnitude of the macabre events are presented the characters-children Olguța and Ionuț from the story *Copii în cătușele Siberiei* by Spiridon Vangheli. The author manages to bring to the fore the sufferings of the people chopped by the class struggle and the burning desire of some moulders and drones of the nation to "reckon" with those who until recently embodied the head of the village: teachers, priests, husbandman, mayors etc. and their families. The description of the road, the many human losses, the inhuman conditions of the journey, but especially the need to start all over again in an absolutely foreign and austere corner of the world, without acquaintances and relatives, without the necessary conditions to acquire food and proper clothing for the climatic conditions are only some of the oppressions to which the deportees are subjected. The image of the absolute happiness of children who go carolling on the New Year's Eve and who are given a baked potato as a gift is so desolate that it expresses, in a few words, the whole ordeal of these unlucky people. The disappearance of Ionuț, whose leg was later discovered, bitten by wolves, can be highlighted, in the same order of ideas. The author manages a very complicated writing exercise, to expose through a language specific to the youthful age to convey a strong message, based on so many stories of deported people and to keep a neutral tone throughout the writing, leaving a trace of hope, at the reader's discretion, for the future of his characters.

If, most often, the regression to the universe of childhood (autobiographical or fictional) has to do with what can be called the great literary topos of nostalgia, in the case of the novel *Grădina de sticlă* by Tatiana Țibuleac the mechanism that guided this narrative is more much a kind of amputation of the infested limb. The narrative is both violent and gentle, coupled with

love and therapy, anger and helplessness in the face of illness and death, the need for a family and its complete absence. We find that the presentation of childhood in its archetypal version is fragmentary and rudimentary, as an Arcadia, which is associated with naturalness, freedom, lack of social constraints or harmony with oneself and the world. On the contrary, childhood is not idealized, it does not represent the paradise realm, but becomes a lost premature good. Social and political changes, perestroika and population escalation are lost against the background of a personal drama, which is intensified by the abandonment of parents, the experience of the orphanage, the arrival of a stepmother, the activity of a glassmaker, the robbery, rapes etc.

The character of the narrative has dimensions anchored temporally and socially, references are made to historical realities such as: the activity of collecting bottles, Gorbachev's reforms, the prohibition of alcohol law, perestroika (economic reconstruction of Soviet society) and glasnost (political openness-transparency), as well as the damage from Chernobyl, the language of the era or the descriptions of a Soviet Chisinau. At the same time, the inner drama that the child goes through breaks her from these realities and "carries" her to a perfect timelessness, presenting us with an alienated character, without help, in suffering, an abandoned child on a desert island.

The observations on educational references are strongly influenced by political life, although we do not attest to propaganda elements, but rather to their continuity, as if the venom has already entered the blood, and what follows is a perpetual mobile mechanism, the manipulation of the masses continues, already having the experience of years of terror, discrimination and scorn. We identify the portrayal of the teacher and the indispensable pioneers, of the typical urban slums, all reflecting a problematic childhood, deprived of the ability to alleviate trauma by euphemism or playful spirit, the existential drama of the character is not overcome, but, on the contrary, is intensified by a frank, outraged, hateful language that requires revenge. Through

those experiences the protagonist is deprived of the incandescent part of life, she is forced to mature prematurely, to understand the existential complexity starting from the hardest side of things.

The wonderful world of childhood sometimes turns daily activities, through imagination, into a continuous game. Thus, the washed clothes, still steamed out, froze instantly in caricature positions, turning into accordion, triangles, snakes or seagulls, depending on the type of clothing or the texture of the material. The girl's clothes froze in silly positions "as if someone had drawn headless dwarfs on the clothesline" [6, p. 31]. The red wool dress she wore for several years in a row was hard to wash and especially hard to wring, but the girl does not complain and does not become ungrateful, on the contrary she plays with thousands of drops that turn into small diamonds because of the frost and were her first treasure! Play and imagination fail to protect her completely, the child quickly realizes the power of money to a distorted extent: "Then I understood that the ugliest people are surrounded by the most beautiful things. Raia was a frog, and a scabby one on top of that, but as of living, and she lived like a queen!" [6, p. 31]. Of course, these judgments could not be made independently, from here we conclude what kind of education she received at home and that the emotional aspect was neglected.

However, most of the time, the work stayed work, "what occupied a shelf in the closet, stretched for three meters outside. The curtains had to be brought first. I dragged them under my arm like doors, being careful not to smash them [...]. If something like this happened, Tamara Pavlovna would wash that thing again, cursing me for a long time [...]" [6, p. 32-33]. Swearing was not the only punishment for an adopted child, she was repeatedly hit by the new mother, sometimes for less significant reasons: "That's how I ruined the TV cover and I didn't have a name in that winter" [6, p. 33].

Lastochika makes significant efforts to understand her new mother, whom she does not exactly love, but with whom she feels emo-

tionally attached and to whom she feels morally indebted, in order to please her and to be less punished, but also for unravelling her own enigma: “how walking through misery and the taste for cleanness reconciled in her [Tamara Pavlovna]” [6, p. 32], her being obsessed with cleanliness and raising the child with the same habits. In addition, the girl learned to appreciate the money and to indulge in that condition, not to empathize with those around her because no one helped her when she needed and to steal from Tamara’s money: “I had stolen a lot of money and I kept them hidden in the basement, behind the pipe. I could buy anything I wanted. Why I was stealing, I don’t know. Not out of poverty, not out of hunger. She always gave me money. I rather stole from the belief that I deserved more, or at least equal. How else to punish her if not impoverishing her?” [6, p. 107]. Repeatedly, the narrator confesses contradictory feelings for the adoptive mother: hate and tender feelings, gratitude and resentment, the sense of injustice and exaggerated permissiveness, mixed with immense confidence. Lastochika records numerous cases of conflict between the characters, the reason being diverse, either educational or less. Is she trying to justify Tamara Pavlovna’s actions?! Is she trying to express her appreciation over the years for the fact that she was still chosen and that everything was left to her in the end?!

The social status of the parents is very important, so, in a similar situation were the children from single-parent families, especially if some of them also had the misfortune of being born illegitimate: “And among all others, the legitimate ones, as they say, the love children (the harshest hedge-born was not used, and the delicate bastard Italianism was not yet known in Negureni), as well as those given to richer families, had a somewhat special status – more reserved, more teased, more pushed...” [7, p. 107]. This category of children is represented by Victor C., “the most tormented of the

children of the Negurians [...] beaten, malnourished at home, thrown out when mother had her scoundrel over, ostracized, wronged by the bad world... But sometimes pitied by someone... «What is the child’s fault, little Victoras?»” [7, p. 108]. There is also a discrepancy, mentioned by Leo Butnaru, between the meaning of the child’s name and his faith of a defeated of society’s standards, but also of the existence, in general. Also, in the category of sympathized children are those born during the famine of 1946–1947, identifiable by the later confession of the cruel truth: “We were bragging about one more than the other: «We got our godparents over. Look at what they brought me!» Other kids were silent, not bragging. They did not have godparents, because they were born exactly during the famine” [7, p. 64].

The series of characters with unfortunate fate, portrayed in the above novels can continue. It is unquestionable that the playful, heavenly side of their childhood is strongly affected by specific features of their existence: lack of parents, lack of freedom to live where they want, lack of money and food etc. We attest to a whole range of child characters who are forced to mature prematurely, given the fact that they are subject to events clearly superior due to the complexity of their age of comprehension.

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