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## **Dystopian Spaces in the Romanian Novel: A Geocritical Perspective**

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### **Résumé | Abstract**

**FR** L'article vise à engager un dialogue entre les concepts d'« utopie » et de « dystopie », en utilisant la géocritique comme outil méthodologique. L'idée sous-jacente du texte perçoit l'évolution des espaces utopiques et dystopiques à travers une boucle temporelle : nous proposons une analyse de deux romans roumains publiés après 1945. Ces œuvres traitent de la même période historique du totalitarisme en utilisant des instruments différents : *Biserica neagră* d'Anatol E. Baconsky (écrit en 1970, publié en allemand sous le titre *Die schwarze Kirche*, interdit en Roumanie et publié en roumain seulement après la Révolution, en 1990) et *Amintiri din epoca lui Bibi. O post-utopie*, publié en 2019, écrit par l'auteur contemporain Andrei Cornea. Notre analyse se concentre sur l'observation de la construction des espaces dystopiques et la réflexion des aspects sociaux, économiques et politiques dans le domaine littéraire, ainsi que sur l'évolution vers la post-utopie. Nous soulignons le parcours paradoxal de libération des pesanteurs d'une idéologie oppressive, tout en mettant en avant la rétention d'une mémoire qui façonne le présent de l'auteur. À travers cette exploration, nous avons l'intention d'éclairer la relation complexe entre la littérature et le contexte socio-politique qui l'informe.

**Mots-clés :** Dystopie, utopie roumaine, post-utopie, espaces, roman, idéologie.

**EN** This article aims to engage in a dialogue between the concepts of « utopia » and « dystopia », utilizing geocriticism as a methodological tool. The underlying idea of this paper perceives the evolution of utopian and dystopian spaces through a temporal loop : we propose an analysis of two Romanian novels published after 1945. These works discuss the same historical period of totalitarianism using different instruments : *Biserica neagră* by Anatol E. Baconsky (written in 1970, published in German with the title *Die schwarze Kirche*, banned in Romania and published in Romanian only after the Revolution, in 1990) and *Amintiri din epoca lui Bibi. O post-utopie*, published in 2019, written by the contemporary writer Andrei Cornea. Our analysis focuses on the construction of dystopian spaces and the reflection of social, economic, and political aspects within the literary domain, as well as the evolution towards post-utopia. We highlight the paradoxical journey of liberation from the burdens of oppressive ideology, while also emphasizing the retention of a memory that shapes the authorial present. Through this exploration, we intend to shed light on the intricate relationship between literature and the socio-political context that informs it.

**Keywords :** Dystopia, Romanian Utopia, Post-Utopia, Spaces, Novel, Ideology.

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## **Dystopian Spaces in the Romanian Novel : A Geocritical Perspective**

### **1. Avatars of the Romanian utopian genre : from dystopia to post-utopia**

**T**his paper explores the process of utopia formation, focusing specifically on the marginal cultural space of South-Eastern Europe, particularly Romania. Literature plays a crucial role in this exploration, as its fictional nature allows for a diverse range of perspectives to emerge from a single reality. By projecting into the imaginary realm, we can facilitate a transdisciplinary analysis that employs tools such as geocriticism to uncover the complex relationship.

The utopian literary genre occupies a unique intersection where social and ideological elements intertwine with cultural, economic, and educational aspects. This convergence shapes a comprehensive project applicable to the originating society. Through this framework, we aim to understand how utopia is constructed in literature and its implications for the broader cultural context in which it is situated. Ultimately, the paper seeks to demonstrate how the exploration of utopia can enrich our understanding of socio-cultural dynamics in a region often overlooked in wider discussions.

Two Romanian dystopias will be discussed (*The Black Church* by Anatol E. Baconsky<sup>1</sup> and *Memories from Bibi's Era. A post-utopia* by

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<sup>1</sup> The novel *The Black Church* is one of the most significant works of Anatol E. Baconsky, written during his peak artistic maturity. Completed in 1971, this novel was preceded by a collection of prose that had already set the specific atmosphere of the communist epoch. The book tragically faced censorship under the Romanian communist regime. Despite the ban (The Romanian public heard about it, with excerpts being read on Radio Free Europe), *The Black Church* managed to get published in 1976, but only in a German translation from the Romanian manuscript, entitled *Die schwarze Kirche*. This was the only way foreign readers could enjoy this remarkable work. Baconsky's novel explores the ideological constraints of the 1950s while also foreshadowing the emergence of a new communist regime that would come into full power, with

Andrei Cornea) according to the proposed system of categorization and using the geocritical method, which is legitimate when investigating the same space – the dystopian city – from two different perspectives. In *Geocriticism. Real and fictional spaces*, Westphal systematizes the main elements of geocriticism, which will serve as a methodological support for the analysis of dystopian spaces. These are listed as follows: multifocalization (which means relating to a space from multiple perspectives; it also involves the relationship between the observer and the reference space), polysensoriality (the role of the human senses in the perception of space), stratigraphy (the space is represented according to the temporal component), intertextuality and referentiality (the relationship between real and fictional space/world). Regarding the referentiality, Westphal notes that, unlike homotopias and heterotopias (which provide real representations of spaces), utopia does not indicate a referential space, but activates a kind of incompatibility between referent and fictional representation – the narrative is constructed in the form of projections, at the edge or around a referent (thus, it is an imaginary representation)<sup>2</sup>.

The paradoxical nature of Romanian culture arises from its lack of a formal utopian framework that typically supports dystopian narratives, unlike other European cultures. In Romanian literature, a key work that partially aligns with the utopian genre is *Tiganiada* by Ion Budai-Deleanu (*The Gypsyad*, 1875), which presents a negative, satirical utopia situated in a real space, differing significantly from the utopian projects found in European literature, following the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), a text which sets the benchmarks for the new literary species, in the culture of the Renaissance. Consequently, within the Romanian and broader Eastern European cultural context, dystopian discourses not only dominate but were also established prior to the emergence of the utopian model, which is often viewed as the basis for negative utopias. Two primary factors have inherently driven dystopian writing: firstly, the questionable impact of technological and

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the iron grip of communism, following Ceaușescu's theses in 1971. The Romanian public was deprived of this novel until 1990, when the dictatorship fell, and all the banned works hidden in the drawers of writers were finally released. The book was published in Romanian in 1990 by a well-known Romanian publishing house. In the political and social context of that time, *The Black Church* represented an act of courage and a form of protest against censorship and oppression. Its publication in 1990 marked an important moment in the history of Romanian literature, bringing to light a masterpiece hidden for nearly two decades. The two novels have not been translated into English; the translation of the selected excerpts is our own.

<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism. Real and Fictional Spaces*, trans. Robert T. Tally Jr., New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

scientific advancements on humanity, and secondly, the influence of totalitarian regimes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Fátima Vieira outlines a foundational scenario that underpins every narrative structure, which is then filled with specific events, resembling an epic pattern. The reader, serving as a guide through a system of social organization, has the knowledge necessary to compare their own society with the one from which they draw insights, allowing them to identify distinctions in idealized terms :

it normally pictures the journey (by sea, land or air) of a man or woman to an unknown place (an island, a country or a continent) ; once there, the utopian traveller is usually offered a guided tour of the society, and given an explanation of its social, political, economic and religious organization ; this journey typically implies the return of the utopian traveller to his or her own country, in order to be able to take back the message that there are alternative and better ways of organizing society<sup>3</sup>.

Utopia addresses a fundamental and longstanding human desire to navigate and rise above the crises that are inherent in every era. It provides a strategy for envisioning and transforming reality into an idealized present or future. In the Romanian cultural context, the concept of utopia is explored by Corin Braga, who offers a classification system that divides utopian thought into various categories, in *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*<sup>4</sup>. This analysis not only enriches the understanding of utopian discourse in Romania but also highlights its relevance as a tool for imagining solutions to contemporary challenges. However, we frequently encounter instances of osmosis among utopian discourses, even within a single text that may reflect elements of various other utopian visions. The interpretation of these utopias is highly subjective, as the saying goes : « one man's utopia is another man's anti-

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<sup>3</sup> Fátima Vieira, « The Concept of Utopia », in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> In a separate study, entitled *Morfologia lumilor posibile. Utopie, antiutopie, science-fiction, fantasy (The Morphology of Possible Worlds. Utopia, Anti-utopia, Science-fiction, Fantasy)*, București, Editura Tracus Arte, 2015, Corin Braga stratifies a categorisation of the sub-genres of utopia, according to the nature and purpose of each one. To begin with, he delineates two core *topoi* : utopia and anti-utopia. Then, using the mechanism of inversion, he identifies four subcategories : utopia (« the non-place »), eutopia (« the good place »), dystopia (« the bad place ») and anti-utopia (« the anti-place »). The morphological model proposed by Corin Braga takes into account several dichotomies such as possible-impossible, real-fantastic, positive-negative : eutopia = « possible positive virtuality », outopia = « impossible positive virtuality », dystopia = « possible negative virtuality », negative society, and anti-utopia = « impossible negative virtuality ». We thus have « positive worlds – eutopia and outopia, negative worlds – dystopia and anti-utopia, probable and possible worlds – eutopia and dystopia, and improbable and impossible worlds – outopia and anti-utopia ». See Corin Braga, *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique*, Paris, Garnier, 2018, p. 626. The four subgenres derive from the primary genre. Utopia is the opposite of anti-utopia and eutopia the opposite of dystopia/negative utopia.

utopia, for where one reader deciphers the vision of an ideal society another reader is likely to see the critique of the current society »<sup>5</sup>.

While utopia expresses faith in a better world, the future, and humanity, dystopia depicts a nightmarish universe. Utopia aims to establish a new social construct, whereas anti-utopia critiques and seeks to dismantle the present and its historical roots. These concepts are two sides of the same coin : each distinct but inherently linked to the other. Striving for a utopia requires an awareness that a dystopian aspect may always exist and could potentially dominate : « each of them is distinct, but one supposes the existence of the other. You can aim to create a utopia, but you must be aware that there will always be a dystopian side to it, and that this side can dominate »<sup>6</sup>.

In *The Negative Utopia in Romanian Literature*, Bogdan Crețu observes the unique characteristics of the Romanian cultural landscape, where negative utopian enclaves have existed since the flourishing of utopian literature in the Western world, beginning with the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as seen in the works of Dimitrie Cantemir and Ion Budai-Deleanu : « At the height of the golden age of utopia during the Enlightenment, we were developing the parody of utopia, or at least discrediting it »<sup>7</sup>. The reasons for these different developments in Europe are linked to the delayed appearance of travel journals in Romanian literature and the insufficient development of urban spaces, which are crucial for utopian constructs. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the establishment of the communist regime, led to the rise of subversive literature. Thus dystopia became a form of resistance, allowing writers to defend their freedom through fiction.

After the moment of 1989, marked by the Revolution that led to the fall of the Ceaușescu regime, reality adopted forms that can be described as utopian or dystopian, signifying a relationship to the past that can be understood as « post-utopia ». This transition is characterized by a profound transformation in societal perceptions and narratives following the collapse of a totalitarian system. The revolutionary events of December 1989 not only dismantled an oppressive political structure, but also catalysed a re-evaluation of historical ideologies and aspirations. In this context, the term « post-utopia » encapsulates a dual perspective : on the one hand, it reflects the disillusionment with the promises of a

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<sup>5</sup> Corin Braga, « From Eden to Utopia. A Morphology of the Utopian Genre », *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, vol. 15, n° 44, 2016, p. 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Muschamp, « Service Not Included », in Edward Rothstein, Herbert Muschamp, Martin Marty (ed.), *Visions of Utopia*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> « În plină epocă de aur a utopiei, în Iluminism, la noi se dezvoltă, așadar, parodierea sau măcar discreditarea acesteia », our translation. Bogdan Crețu, *Utopia negativă în literatura română*, București, Cartea Românească, 2008, p. 5-6.

brighter future that were made during the communist era ; on the other hand, it signals a newfound complexity in understanding freedom, identity, and social constructs in the ensuing democratic landscape.

In the aftermath of the revolution, literature and cultural discourse began to explore these themes, oscillating between idealistic visions of progress and the stark realities of socio-political challenges. Authors and artists frequently grappled with memories of the past while also envisioning potential futures – a juxtaposition that often led to narratives imbued with both hope and despair. Hence, the idea of « post-utopia » serves as a framework through which one can analyse the complexities of Romanian society's evolving relationship with its history, characterized by a continuous struggle to reconcile the ideals of liberation with the lingering vestiges of its totalitarian past. While Zygmunt Bauman used the term « retrotopia » to describe a focus on the past without projecting into the future, post-utopia refers to contemporary writings that offer, through reflections on the past, fragmented visions of the present. Retrotopia signifies a longing for a past seen as superior, which entails a revival of traditional values. In contrast, post-utopia involves a dismissal of the notion of a perfect society, advocating for realistic and pragmatic strategies to enhance social and political conditions. This analysis will demonstrate how contemporary dystopias, while oriented towards the past, reveal significant insights into the present. Our approach is particularly relevant because the first text examines first-hand experiences of the beginning of a dictatorship, while the second text reflects on the same dictatorial system from a contemporary perspective, looking back at that past. By analysing both works, we aim to uncover how their depictions of authoritarianism inform our understanding of current social and political issues, highlighting the enduring impact of history on contemporary narratives.

## **2. Dystopian spaces, contaminated spaces, safe spaces**

Spaces are fundamental to the construction of utopia because they require a schematization – an imaginative delineation of boundaries, and the realization of an urban model for social organization. The perception of such a space is influenced by several factors : one's personal experiences within that space, the elements deeply rooted in the individual imagination, and how that space (whether a state, a city, an island, etc.) is mentally configured as a result of one's readings and cultural exposure. Individuals relate to spaces differently based on the emotional resonance they experience, shaped by the various historical and social contexts they

have lived through<sup>8</sup>. This diverse relationship to space reflects the complexity of human experience and underscores how utopian visions can be informed by both personal narratives and collective memories. Ultimately, the interpretation of a utopian space is not static ; it evolves with each individual's journey through different eras, reflecting an intricate interplay between personal, cultural, and historical influences<sup>9</sup>.

Anatol E. Baconsky had a fascinating biographical journey. He was born in 1925 in Cofa-Hotin and pursued his studies at the Faculty of Law in Cluj, where he also developed interests in aesthetics and philosophy. Baconsky made his literary debut in 1945 with the essay « The Social and the Genesis of Art » (« Socialul și geneza artei »), published in the newspaper *Tribuna nouă*. He established himself as a poet during the era of socialist realism, contributing surrealist poems to the collective volume *Anthology of Spring (Antologia primăverii)*. This period marked a significant point in his literary career, showcasing his ability to navigate the complexities of artistic expression under prevailing political constraints.

He served as the editorial secretary and later became the editor-in-chief of the Cluj magazine *Almanahul literar* in 1952, which was subsequently renamed *Steaua*. As a prominent figure within the Steaua literary group, he led efforts to revive the works of interwar writers, who had been banned, rediscovering the values of modernity such as subjectivism, impressionism, interiority, and sentimentalism. This movement was closely followed by a growing interest in subjective poetry. In 1956, Baconsky distanced himself from the principles of socialist realism, which led to accusations of ideological diversion, evasionism, and negativism. He was criticized for organizing literary groups that prioritized aesthetic considerations over ideological conformity. This shift marked a significant turning point in his career, reflecting both his commitment to artistic freedom and the tensions inherent in the political climate of the time. In 1967, he published the volume *Equinox of Fools*

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<sup>8</sup> In a wide-ranging study dedicated to genre and imagined communities (*Imaginary Communities : Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*), Phillip E. Wegner traces the relationship between the social field of the modern state and utopian discourse, and how the utopian project influences reality, drawing on political criticism, social criticism and literary history. Wegner believes that utopias emerge as historically determined spectres of moments of crisis during modernity. See Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities : Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> In this vein, Barbara Piatti puts forward the idea that « authors also indulge in creating entirely new worlds with totally imaginary settings. These options – both faint and strong correspondences between geospace and textual space, as well as various connections that can be discovered to exist somewhere in between – have to be taken into account ». Barbara Piatti, Hans Rudolf Bär, « Mapping Literature : Towards a Geography of Fiction », in William Cartwright, Georg Gartner *et alii*, *Cartography and Art*, Berlin, Springer, 2009, p. 124.

and *Other Stories (Echinoxul nebunilor și alte povestiri)*, and, in 1968, *Remember*, vol. I : *Travel Diary* and vol. II : *Pseudo-Travel Diary*. He passed away in Bucharest during the earthquake of 1977<sup>10</sup>.

In *The Black Church*, Baconsky creates a dystopia that presents an anti-communist ideological narrative. This work features poetic and surrealist elements that contrast sharply with the harsh realism characteristic of early twentieth-century dystopian literature, such as that found in Orwell's works. Although written in 1970, *The Black Church* was not published until 1976 in West Berlin under the title *Die schwarze Kirche*<sup>11</sup>, and it only became available in Romania in 1990<sup>12</sup>, after the fall of communism. The delay in its publication was due to the book's failure to conform to the cultural norms imposed by the political regime. In the context of this allegorical and parabolic novel, the depicted spaces and characters represent elements of butaphoria, grotesqueness, alienation, and absurdity. These features serve to underscore the themes of dislocation and disillusionment within the narrative, highlighting the impact of totalitarianism on both individuals and society. Baconsky's character says that « Thus, the reality from which I sought to escape was becoming increasingly entrenched and assertive in claiming its dominion over me »<sup>13</sup>. This writing falls into the sub-genre of dystopia, as defined by Corin Braga, in which an « imaginary city is constructed by selecting the negative components of the image of the real historical society and reassembling them in a vision inferior to the landmark »<sup>14</sup>.

If utopias aim to establish stability, dystopias work to disrupt it by creating an imbalance within the narrative world and short-circuiting the references to the phenomena or ideologies experienced by individuals. The beginning of the novel introduces a crucial element that sets the stage for the story : the notion of « homecoming » within a serene atmosphere. As typical in many dystopian narratives, the author employs a narrative device known as the utopian witness, which legitimizes the existence of

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<sup>10</sup> See the complete description in Eugen Simion (ed.), « Anatol E. Baconsky », *Dicționarul General al Literaturii Române*, vol. I, București, Editura Univers Enciclopedic, 2004, p. 301-304.

<sup>11</sup> Anatol E. Baconsky, *Die schwarze Kirche*, trans. Max Demeter Peyfuss, Berlin, Ullstein, 1976.

<sup>12</sup> Anatol E. Baconsky, *Biserica neagră*, in *Scrieri*, vol. II, *Proze*, București, Cartea Românească, 1990, p. 7-242.

<sup>13</sup> All the fragments here are excerpts from Anatol E. Baconsky, *Biserica neagră*, in *Scrieri*, vol. II, Chișinău, Editura Știința, 2022, in our translation : « Așadar, realitatea din care încercasem să evadesc nu făcea decât să se constituie mereu mai temeinic și să-și revendice drepturile asupra mea ». *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> « [Imaginară] construită prin selecția componentelor negative, ale imaginii societății istorice reale, și reasamblarea lor într-o viziune inferioară reperului ». Corin Braga, « Lumi ficționale. O taxinomie a genului utopic », in *Id.* (ed.), *Morfologia lumilor posibile*, *op. cit.*, p. 57-58.



this new space. The protagonist-narrator returns to his hometown, which has been reconstructed according to the absurd logic of the communist regime. He is plagued by suspicions and foreboding, accompanied by a peculiar sense of anxiety that reflects the pervasive atmosphere of non-existence and languor that envelops the concealed reality :

I was returning home, shadowed by a sense of foreboding [...]. The straight, wide streets had the air of empty warehouses [...]. The triangular square near my house was filled of crows and seagulls. Passersby stared at me with persistent glances, as if I were an unwelcome stranger [...]. I was always hurrying my steps, with the feeling that I was heading for a treacherous refuge that was late in coming my way<sup>15</sup>.

The regular lines, lack of colour, emptiness, and geometric shapes that appear to organize the space, all illustrate a process of asepticization, reflecting an aspect of the ideology that was permeating society. Such a place is hard to spot, even if sometimes the fictional (imaginary, new) space is created with the help of references to « geospacer », an idea discussed by Barbara Piatti<sup>16</sup> (in our case, the Romanian space). Baconsky selects a port city as the backdrop for the subtextual camouflage of the indigenous society, where a diverse array of synesthetic experiences converges, such as the ringing of bells from the old churches. « We had inherited them for generations ; we were born with their sound in our ears, just as the sea lingered in our nostrils with its scent of fresh and decaying algae. Just as life itself, with its insidious inertia, had atrophied our awareness of our daily actions, turning us into officiants of its implacable ritual »<sup>17</sup>.

This polysensory experience – one of the principles of geocriticism employed by Westphal in *Geocriticism : Real and Fictional Spaces* – helps define the concept of retrotopic space, which evokes nostalgia for a protective and idealized past. Whenever a space engages the senses, this sensory information undergoes a mental process that shapes the observer's perception of that space.

In this context, the city and all its administrative and geographical components function as a topophrenic space. The term « topophrenic »

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<sup>15</sup> « Mă întorceam spre casă umbrit de presimțiri [...]. Străzile drepte și largi aveau aerul unor magazine goale [...]. Piața triunghiulară din vecinătatea casei mele era plină de ciori și de pescăruși. Trecătorii mă observau cu priviri insistente ca și când aş fi fost un străin nedorit [...]. grăbeam mereu pașii, cu sentimental că mă îndrept spre un refugiu perfid care întârzie să-mi apară în cale ». *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> Barbara Piatti *et alii*, *op. cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>17</sup> « [Clopoțele bisericilor vechi] le moștenisem de generații, ne născusem cu sunetul lor în auz, tot așa cum marea ne stăruia în nări cu mirosul ei de alge vii și moarte, tot așa cum viața însăși cu inerția ei ticăloasă ne atrofiase conștiința faptelor noastre de fiecare zi, prefăcându-ne în oficiați ai ritualului ei implacabil ». Anatol E. Baconsky, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

refers to the relationship between place (*topos*) and the mind (*phrenos*), highlighting how specific locations evoke emotional and psychological responses in individuals. This interplay suggests that the physical characteristics of the city – its sounds, smells, sights, and overall atmosphere – inform and influence the observer’s memories, emotions, and interpretations of their environment, ultimately affecting their understanding of both the actual and idealized meanings of that space.<sup>18</sup> The only area that remains accessible is the shoreline, which appears to be both a starting point and a point of escape.

In dystopian narratives, there exists an ontological break, as readers are accustomed to analysing situations based on their own realities. The protagonist from *The Black Church* never has a stable home ; instead, he is assigned living spaces that align with his new directives and pursuits. Each of these assigned rooms feels prison-like – damp, chaotically arranged, and dominated by the same obsessive shade of red, which alludes to the colours of the Communist Party. Initially, the protagonist resides in a rented room in a landlady’s house, where he discovers a pink envelope – an image that recurs throughout the novel. Inside the envelope, he finds a bust of an old idol, reminiscent of Stalin, along with an invitation to the League of Beggars headquarters. This scene underscores the oppressive and surreal circumstances of his environment, reflecting the themes of control and manipulation that permeate the dystopian experience. This mystical group, an esoteric sect, serves as an allusion to the communist regime and the secret associations that ideologically influenced society.

Subsequently, he is moved against his will to a room in the verger’s house at the Black Church. This new space is characterized by a lack of privacy and peace ; it is constantly disturbed and feels like a lonely burrow : « I was feeling like an object without belonging, whose usefulness and meaning people had suddenly forgotten. With mechanical steps I set off in a direction dictated by absence and randomness »<sup>19</sup>.

In this constructed alternative world<sup>20</sup>, the Black Church serves as the central hub of the league, a malevolent centre of power that acts as a tomb for both no one and everyone :

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<sup>18</sup> See Robert T. Tally Jr., *Topophobia : Place, Narrative, and The Spatial Imagination*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> « Mă simțeam ca un obiect fără apartenență, căruia oamenii i-au uitat dintr-odată utilitatea și sensul. Cu pași mecanici pornii într-o direcție dictată de absență și de hazard ». Anatol E. Baconsky, *op. cit.* p. 94.

<sup>20</sup> As in science fiction or fantasy fiction, the author of a utopian/dystopian text builds their narrative starting from a subjective primary world. All the literary forms mentioned above form the semantic basin of possible worlds, in which geographical, cultural, ideological elements of the Romanian space together with national identity are defamiliarized. See Marius Conkan, « Lumi

It had been a long time since I last visited the Black Church, the oldest and most imposing structure inherited by the city through its apocryphal history. Perched on the seashore in a secluded area that was once the center of the old fortress, its dark silhouette now looms over the remnants of the ruined walls that surrounded it in its prime, as well as a few makeshift shacks inhabited by the impoverished, scattered among blackened stone slabs and weeds. Massive and dark, with thick walls and buttresses, and spires and domes harmoniously designed in the Byzantine style, the church resembled a forgotten fortress, conquered by time and shadows. Beyond it, after a desolate area overtaken by brambles, lay fragments of additional ruined walls, followed by one of the bastions, and finally, the port<sup>21</sup>.

The Black Church serves as the irradiation nucleus of communism, appropriating individual thought and transforming it into a vision of unanimity. It has become a desacralized space where traditional church services no longer take place ; instead, only funerals – particularly those of young intellectuals – and orgies that unleash primal instincts are held. In this setting, the routines of a mechanically functioning world, represented by the maid, the verger, and the three porters, become homogenized alongside the protagonist's life. Within this dystopian framework, power dictates the balance or imbalance of societal dynamics through various mechanisms of coercion. Consequently, the port city relies on this centre of power, the Black Church, which is an essential condition for the existence and functioning of the urban space.

The gradual emergence and disappearance of enigmatic characters, such as the three men, the servant in the professor's house, and the gravediggers, they all exhibit a calm and impassive demeanour. They appear unaffected, submissive, taciturn, and inflexible, which serves as another indication of the dystopian world, juxtaposed against the orgies and abuses taking place in the verger's house. In this environment, intellectuals are reduced to mere tools of the verger, while the city's metaphysicians are criticized for their flawed reasoning. Additionally, a window in the protagonist's room overlooks the cemetery by the sea, further emphasizing the bleakness of his surroundings. The inability to escape is also attested to by the landscape outside, « everything seemed

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alternative » [« Alternative Worlds »], in Corin Braga (ed.), *Enciclopedia imaginariilor din România*, vol. I, *Imaginar literar*, Iași, Polirom, 2020, p. 392-408.

<sup>21</sup> « Nu mai fusesem de mult la Biserica Neagră, cea mai veche și mai impunătoare din câte moștenise orașul de-a lungul unei istorii apocrife. Așezată pe țărmul mării într-o zonă singuratică, unde cândva era centrul vechii cetăți, profilul ei întunecat domina azi urmele zidurilor ruinate care o înconjuraseră în vremea ei de mărire și câteva cocioabe improvizate de sărăcime printre lespezi de piatră înegrite și bălării. Masivă, întunecată, cu ziduri groase și contraforturi, cu turlle și cupole armonizate după moda Bizanțului, părea o fortăreață uitată, cucerită de timp și de umbre. Mult mai departe, după un spațiu pustiu invadat de mărăcini, continuau alte fragmente de zid ruinat, apoi unul din bastioane și, în sfârșit, portul ». Anatol E. Baconsky, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

to me like a foreign body inserted into a confused organism »<sup>22</sup>. Another feature of the negative utopia is the absolute control of every element of the city and the existence of a constant pressure of external forces upon the individual.

The protagonist is unable to act ; he feels as though he is outside his own body, controlled by an external force ; he is reduced to a mere marionette of the system. The empty spaces are often described as « haunted by a bitter light », conveying a sense of emptiness resulting from a lack of meaning and the illogical organization of society. People run, hide, and isolate themselves in a society marked by suspicion, with very few passers-by on the streets. Other indicators of this dystopia include pervasive tattling and a constant sense of surveillance ; the protagonist is followed everywhere – whether in the cemetery, at the church, or by maids and the verger.

Additionally, there are secret archives and the League of Beggars, which functions as a body that enforces legislation and dictates every aspect of life. Absurdity reigns : people are born and die on command, and killings occur without reason. Nothing is negotiable, and propaganda is delivered through a single voice that recites the anthem of submission, along with slogans and meaningless speeches. The language of poetic essence stands in stark contrast to the “wooden language” of the League's supporters, who utter flattery and pseudo-words in a sluggish tone – « the verbal garbage spewed daily by all the parlances who rot here or elsewhere »<sup>23</sup>. Baconsky uses the Orwellian phrase « new speech »<sup>24</sup> to indicate the dogmatic discourse delivered without rational foundation. Another typical aspect of a totalitarian society is people's fear of expressing their opinions, as they are, « bent under the burden of silence »<sup>25</sup>.

The urban space dismantles any hope ; it is paralyzed and paralyzing :

Dead before it is alive, or agonizing from a birth doomed to never end... a city that smothers all that is dear, while casting gold and gems into the path of corpses ; a tomb-city for high and cold thoughts, a simpering city, a victim-city, a city of cretinous candor ! NO ! NO ! NO ! Forever NO to this land that seeks chains, dreams of chains, lives in chains, sleeps, breathes, hears, and thinks in chains !<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> « [Fiecare] lucru îmi părea un corp străin introdus într-un organism derutat ». *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>23</sup> « [Gunoaiete] verbale scuipate zilnic de toate graiurile care putrezesc aici ori aiurea ». *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>24</sup> « [Noului] grai al tuturor ». *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> « [Aplecați] sub povara mutismului ». *Ibid.*, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> « [Mort] înainte de a fi trăit sau agonizând dintr-o naștere blestemată să n-aibă moarte... cetate care înăbușă tot ce-i drag și scuipă aur și nestemate în calea cadavrelor, cetate-cavou pentru

It reveals the prohibition of any solid, reasoned thinking and the exclusion of intellectuals from the social fabric. Everything is designed to promote uniformity and render individuals susceptible to manipulation by stripping away any capacity for resistance. Another significant space within the dystopian regime is the Night Asylum, constructed on the site of the national library, as all libraries and museums have been abolished. Inside this institution, Stalin's bust stands in stark contrast to the surrounding décor.

The butler led me up an alabaster staircase covered with old, luxurious carpets, illuminated by bronze, crystal, and earthenware lanterns. We then entered a drawing room adorned with burgundy silk wallpaper, featuring walls filled with sumptuous mirrors and paintings of erotic scenes. At the back of the room, on a pedestal, the same bust – this time cast in gold – stood between large candles and three-armed silver candlesticks, where white candles burned brightly<sup>27</sup>.

The bleak colour palette of the spaces and the strong synesthetic correspondences are vividly expressed : grey waters, frost, snow, dense darkness, dampness, lifeless troughs, decaying mosaic quays, dead bastions, and miserable brothels, « it was a late autumn day, rotting grass, damp ground with a musty smell, sick air with dirty beads »<sup>28</sup>.

Those who disrupt the oppressive urban silence are the beggars<sup>29</sup>. This serves as an allusion to the manipulated, deluded, and aggressive individuals who fulfil the narratological function of a narrative superstructure, akin to a chorus in ancient epic poetry. They advocate the voice of the communist propaganda, preaching doctrine through concealed messages such as : « through humility and mercy we will liberate the world »<sup>30</sup>, « pity, humility, modesty »<sup>31</sup>, their fundamental principles that subsume obedience and false abnegation (of the new state order).

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gândurile înalte și reci, cetate-surâs, cetate-victimă, cetate-candoare cretină ! NU ! NU ! NU ! pentru totdeauna NU acestui meleg care caută lanțuri, visează lanțuri, trăiește lanțuri, doarme, respiră, aude și cugetă lanțuri ! ». *Ibid.*, p. 89.

<sup>27</sup> « [Majordomul] mă conduse pe o scară de alabastru acoperită cu vechi și scumpe covoare, luminată cu lampioane de bronz, de cristal, de faianță ; traversarăm apoi un salon îmbrăcat în tapet de mătase vișinie, cu pereții plini de oglinzi somptuoase și de tablouri cu scene erotice. În fund, pe un pedestal, același bust, dar de data aceasta turnat în aur, stătea între candel mari și sfeșnice de argint cu trei brațe, în care ardeau lumânări albe ». *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>28</sup> « [Era] o zi de toamnă târzie, iarbă putrezită, pământ umed cu miros de mușchi, aer bolnav cu mărgăritare murdare ». *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>29</sup> Their humble condition is at odds with the League's status, « in League circles a shameless affluence reigned ». *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>30</sup> « [Prin] umilință și milostenie vom elibera lumea ». *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Multi-focalization is a concept that involves both pluri-perspectivism – wherein the same space is represented fictionally across various literary texts by different authors, and even across different cultural epochs – and the dynamic relationship between the observer and the reference space. This concept recognizes that a single location can be perceived and interpreted from multiple viewpoints, allowing for a richer and more complex understanding of that space. Each perspective offers unique insights and contributes to a multifaceted portrayal of the setting, highlighting how personal experiences, cultural contexts, and historical backgrounds shape one's interpretation of the environment. Through multi-focalization, readers can appreciate the diversity of meanings associated with a particular space and understand how different narratives converge or diverge around it<sup>32</sup>. Through different perspectives, the Black Church can be understood not only as a religious site but also as a symbol of power, oppression, and community, reflecting the diverse meanings it holds for various characters within the narrative. Thus, the point of view of the inhabitants of the city is endogenous<sup>33</sup>, and that of the observer-narrator is allogenuous : « I was and was not a stranger. I had returned only halfway to the city of my parents and my ancestors, who were sleeping under black and white flagstones on that shore doomed to exist from memories... past or future memories, memories of yesterday, tomorrow, of never »<sup>34</sup>.

The memory of the birthplace fades, leaving the hero as a stranger in a defamiliarized space. The affective relationship between the narrator-protagonist and the dystopian environment, shaped by memories and

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<sup>32</sup> According to Westphal, « the point of view is relative to the situation of the observer with respect to the space of reference. The observer engages with this space through a number of relations ranging from those of intimacy or familiarity to those that are more or less absolutely foreign ». Bertrand Westphal, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

<sup>33</sup> According to these variations, Westphal notes three points of view/ modes of focus of the observer, corresponding to the three levels of perception of the spatial referent : the point of view can be endogenous (there is an autochthonous vision of space), exogenous/exotic (the traveller's vision of the new space) or allogenuous (determined by a space that is neither fully familiar, nor foreign, exotic). The network of points of view/multi-focalisation, in terms of dystopian space, looks at how the perception of this type of space influences its artistic representation. In the case of utopias (the spaces depicted being overtly fictional, imaginary), we are dealing with a binary system of analysing the perspectives, in the sense that the sum of all the perspectives of the characters in the utopian texts represents two foci in the logic of multi-focalisation – namely, that of the locals (endogenous autochthonous point of view) and that of the traveller/observer (allogenuous or exotic exogenous point of view). When we explicitly discuss a utopia, there are implicitly two points of view that we analyse as such, because we are not talking about real representations of space, as in the case of homotopias and heterotopias.

<sup>34</sup> « [Eram] și nu eram străin. Mă întorsesem numai pe jumătate în orașul părinților și al străbunilor mei, care dormeau subț lespezi albe și negre pe țărnul acela sortit să existe din amintiri... amintiri trecute sau viitoare, amintiri de ieri, de mâine, de niciodată ». Anatol E. Baconsky, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

shadows of spatial recollection, is expressed through a language rich in surrealist poetic foundations. The protagonist's spatial memory offers him retrospective landmarks that starkly contrast with those present in the current diegesis. In this altered reality, the dimensions of time and space dissolve ; everything is reduced to a linear existence, and individuals become automated « machines for living mystified events »<sup>35</sup>. This depiction underscores the disconnection between past and present, as well as the loss of meaningful engagement with the world around them : « I felt I was forgetting or knowing false things, invented by a treacherous pseudo-memory, I felt a pseudo-life was overwhelming me, forcing me to live it »<sup>36</sup>. The sense of reality and the perception of spatial references are dictated by the pseudomemory of a dehumanized, mechanized individual.

An illusory effect of acceptance is created as the narrator-character is repeatedly told various false facts until his mind accepts them as truth : « I was only telling the truth. That was all I knew, but that truth had gradually been mystified into a bald-faced lie. The truth that I once knew had long since disappeared, replaced by another that was deceptive, becoming lost among obscure events »<sup>37</sup>.

He becomes ensnared in the web of the irrational, gradually and imperceptibly descending into a social hell. In this process, he comes to master the language of his new reality ; the behaviors of others begin to reflect his own, and his memory is forcibly infiltrated by a pseudo-awareness of meaning.

If this space-time continuum represents a dystopia, then foreignness is perceived as a form of utopia.

Their foreignness was an ideal nowhere, a non-existent and impossible world, which you invoke without knowing it yourself and without believing in it - a world born of the feeling that your miseries must have their antipodes somewhere in a geography wrought by the reflections and longings of all the disinherited. But where will my own foreignness, which I have never fully renounced, find its place ?<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> « [mașini] de trăit evenimente mistificate ». *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> « Simțeam că uit sau că știu lucruri false, inventate de o pseudomemorie trădătoare, simțeam că mă copleșește o pseudo viață, obligându-mă s-o trăiesc ». *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> « [Nu] spuneam decât adevărul. Era tot ce știam, însă adevărul acesta se mistificase treptat, devenind o minciună sfruntată. Adevărul pe care-l știam eu dispăruse de mult, înlocuit de altul ce se disimula, pierzându-se printre evenimente obscure ». *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>38</sup> « Străinătatea lor era un nicăieri ideal, o lume inexistentă și imposibilă, pe care o invoci fără s-o știi tu însuși și fără să crezi în ea - lume născută din sentimentul că mizeriile tale trebuie să-și aibă antipodurile undeva într-o geografie lucrată de refulările și nostalgiile tuturor dezmoșteniților. Dar oare propria mea străinătate, la care nu renunțasem niciodată pe de-a-ntregul, unde va fi sălășluind ? ». *Ibid.*, p. 168.

The transition between the spaces reconstructed from fragments of memory and the borderline experiences that the protagonist undergoes in the present narrative results in an alienation from his own being. He is involuntarily drawn into the collapse of a transformed world, forced into a marginal existence. This situation represents a cognitive experiment – the utopian project – which, as the narrative unfolds, transcends the initial scenario and evolves towards an ultimate en-topia, where the project is implemented in reality. The abuse of power, the political system devoid of humanity, and the herd mentality that stifles independent thought serve as caustic allusions to the socio-political practices of Romania during the national-communist period. Baconsky's dystopian discourse critically examines the present, set in a marginal harbour space, and dismantles the existing ideological and cultural systems. He renders a necro-geographical world marked by decay and desolation.

The pervasive dark melancholy present in the novel's narrative undertone has been a hallmark of Baconsky's poetry since the post-realist socialist phase, and it extends deeply into the text in question. This sense of despair reflects not only the societal conditions of his time but also the existential struggles faced by individuals under oppressive regimes. Through this lens, Baconsky not only critiques the past but also engages with its lingering impacts on contemporary reality.

### 3. Post-utopia, retrotopia and Big Brother

*Memories from Bibi's Era : A Post-Utopia* by Andrei Cornea critically and self-reflexively investigates the conditions of collective memory following the Romanian dictatorship through a re-evaluation of the past within the context of current reality. This metatextual approach illustrates the mechanism of memory and its function in reflecting societal changes. The fertile dialogue established between Cornea's work and George Orwell's canonical novel of the 20th-century dystopian genre, *1984*, is evident through various aspects of metafiction. The *mise en abyme* elucidates the process of writing this "dark utopia", capturing the perspective of an author who resists the traditional role of a novelist – describing himself as « a disembodied shadow-maker, an animator of drawings to frighten grown children »<sup>39</sup>. This self-awareness regarding the act of creation and its implications enhances the narrative's depth and complexity. Post-utopia remains anchored in a profound process of

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<sup>39</sup> « [Un] născocitor de umbre fără trup, un animator de desene de speriat copiii mari ». Andrei Cornea, *Amintiri din epoca lui Bibi. O post-utopie*, București, Humanitas, 2019, p. 41.



recovering a vanished reality, as society seeks to shed its deceitful trappings.

Andrei Cornea (born 1952 in Bucharest, Romania) is an essayist and translator who currently serves as a university professor in Bucharest. He graduated from the Faculty of History and Art Theory, as well as the Faculty of Classical Languages in Bucharest. Cornea made his publishing debut in 1977, with the volume *From the Navigation Map to Sightseeing*.

He has worked as a museographer and later as a researcher at the Institute of Art History in Bucharest from 1987 to 2007. In the late 1990s, he served as an editor at the BBC radio station. Over the course of his career, he has received numerous awards, including the Professional Writers' Association Prize (1995), the National Museum of Romanian Literature Prize (2009), as well as accolades from the magazines *Cuvântul* and *România literară*. He published other volumes of philosophical essays like *Penumbra, Platon. Filozofie și cenzură (Penumbra, Plato. Philosophy and Censorship)*, *Turnirul khazar. Împotriva relativismului contemporan (The Khazar Joust. Against the Contemporary Relativism)*, *De la Școala din Atena la Școala de la Păltiniș sau Despre utopii, realități și (ne)deosebirea dintre ele (From the School of Athens to the School of Păltiniș or On Utopias, Realities and the (Non) Difference Between Them)*.

The author introduces a documentary aspect and provides clues that suggest a utopian background with a clearly recognizable social referent : the communist and post-communist indigenous society, characterized by degeneration resulting from excessive tolerance that has turned into apathy. The opening pages evoke a well-known literary work from that era, *The Good Soldier Švejk* by Jaroslav Hašek, in which the protagonist is arrested for removing the emperor's portrait, which is soiled by fly droppings. Similarly, Andrei Cornea's character observes a space stained by the remnants of a former dictator's portrait, which can only be inferred.

The spaces in the novel create a utopian pathway, particularly through the depiction of the London Chestnut Café, which serves as a place of community and is reminiscent of the Prague pub that Švejk frequented. Winston Smith, Cornea's post-utopian character, represents the last bearer of collective memory and an observer of human nature ; he belongs not only to the present society, but also to the past, characterized by the era of SOCENG (English socialism) and the dictatorship of Big Brother.

The narrative is framed within urban space, utilizing London's cosmopolitanism to convey a protean image. This setting highlights the complexities of identity and memory amid the shifting landscapes of social and political realities. In line with the « spirit of the continuous

and general renewal of London and the universe »<sup>40</sup>, the café decor, the names of the streets and personalities (the abbreviation of the dictator's name turns repugnance into derision and favours unanimous oblivion), beliefs, creeds, slogans, means of transport, etc. are changed. What remains invariably, however, is the place where the portrait of the former dictator Bibi/B.B./Big Brother (Ceaușescu's analogue) hangs, marked by a huge, faded stain, a sign of the inextirpable past : « We haven't been able to wipe the trail well, though we've rubbed it with everything ; the cursed thing kept coming out »<sup>41</sup>. The true catalyst of Andrei Cornea's dystopia is not necessarily the extra-fictional social reality, but rather the overarching phenomenon of forgetting – specifically, the forgetting of “the truth”. In this context, remembering and forgetting act as metaphorical concepts that play a critical role in shaping both individual and collective memory<sup>42</sup>.

Orwell's legendary character, Winston Smith, is transhipped from dystopia into Andrei Cornea's post-utopia, which, despite its democratic appearance, tends to repeat the past due to the suppression of truth through amnesia. Winston ends up being accused of distorting and caricaturing historical events in his spurious “novel” submitted for publication, of his memory not necessarily being historical, collective memory, but only a facet of it : Robertson reproaches him that « your novel [...] is, so to speak, dramatic embellishment, exaggeration »<sup>43</sup>. Nevertheless, Robertson agrees to publish the manuscript, but not as a memoir ; instead, it will be presented as a novel, incorporating historical inserts and adopting a detached tone within a heterodiegetic narrative. Essentially, it becomes a negative utopia in the tradition of Thomas More, set in a distant or even imaginary land, albeit under a different title (instead of *Memories of 1984*, let it be *Nineteen-eighty-four*) and under the pseudonym George Orwell, to avoid possible lawsuits, especially now, on the eve of the presidential elections.

Surprisingly and illogically, Bibi will run again for president (on behalf of the nationalist-populist party, Movement for National Revival) and will be democratically elected by the people.

This time, the regime is returning through elections, disguised as democracy. Even if it abandons the old methods of governance, it will establish a policy that relies on an illusory, behind-the-scenes controlled

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<sup>40</sup> « [Spiritul] înnoirii continue și generale a Londrei și-a universului ». *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>41</sup> « N-am reușit să ștergem bine urma, deși am frecat-o cu de toate ; tot ieșea la vedere blestemată ». *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> See Andreea Mironescu, « Postcomunismul ca spațiu al amintirii. Considerații conceptuale », *Revista Transilvania*, vol. 1, 2016, p. 34-39.

<sup>43</sup> « Romanul tău [...] e, ca să zic așa, îngroșare dramatică, exagerare ». Andrei Cornea, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

freedom – essentially a dictatorship in a velvet glove, imperceptible to the masses, thereby creating a pseudo-democracy. The new ideology employs the same deceptive tactics for indoctrination and persuasion, albeit with softer methods.

Winston acts as a mere witness aiming to convey the truth, rather than portraying himself as a novelist seeking a complementary perspective on history. The diary of Bibi's memoirs was confiscated during the Communist era and was only returned after the 1984 revolution. The protagonist states vehemently ... : « I don't want to change myself. I don't want progress. I don't need to refresh myself. I'm not going down the road to oblivion like all the other callows. Never. It's a good thing I wrote it all down there [...]. And if I remain here the last one the last one unrefreshed, I will be the man who testifies, who does not forget what should not be forgotten »<sup>44</sup>. Reminiscent of the censored manuscript of the Black Church, this event leads to the destruction of his reputation and self-esteem. He is accused of plagiarizing George Orwell, an author almost unknown to the British public and unfamiliar to Smith himself, particularly with his novel *1984*, published before the atomic war. The authenticity of his memoirs is thereby called into question. Ultimately, overwhelmed by these accusations, his mind becomes clouded, and his memory atrophies completely. Paradoxically, « Winston Smith has taken refuge in almost complete self-forgetfulness »<sup>45</sup>. Smith, like everyone else, becomes an instrument of the new organization. However, we learn from O'Brien himself that the diary is not plagiarized ; it is a mere copy of a copy, because the source of Big Brother's ideology is Orwell's dystopia itself. After the atomic war, Bibi discovers the Orwell document, extracts the ideology from the dystopian text, faithfully follows the plan, and applies it to native society, thereby constructing English socialism. This time, the authorship of the dystopian society represents a distinctly dystopian project, rather than a utopian one, as is usually the case.

Andrei Cornea employs English characters to highlight their apparent remoteness from the Romanian context, yet they are recognizable through their contextualized language and sense of national identity. The novel offers a post-historical account of the communist era, analysed objectively ; reactions to this past vary, with some expressing nostalgia for a time that condemns post-communist capitalist society,

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<sup>44</sup> « Eu unul nu vreau să mă schimb. Nu vreau progres. N-am nevoie să mă reîmprospătez. Nu voi merge pe drumul uitării ca toți ceilalți neisprăviți. Niciodată. Ce bine că am consemnat totul, acolo ! [...] Iar dacă voi rămâne aici ultimul neîmprospătat, omul care depune mărturie, care nu uită ce nu se cuvine a fi uitat ». *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> « Winston Smith s-a refugiat într-o uitare de sine aproape deplină ». *Ibid.*, p. 140.

while others, like Winston and Julia, exhibit repulsion towards the end. In this narrative, the past is fabricated, distorted, or counterfeited. The protagonist claims to remember accurately everything that had existed before the fall of the regime, in contrast to other characters who relativize the past and succumb to muteness, oblivion, and ignorance. However, the transitional period following 1984 – the Orwellian moment that corresponds socio-ideologically to Romania's 1989 revolution – is annihilated for him, as everything becomes uncertain, suspended in a dense fog. While some details remain clear, the overall picture is obscured. Though Winston attempts to excavate the thread of memory, his recollections are not entirely faithful. Within the body of the novel, memory serves a self-reflexive function, as he emerges as the sole bearer of collective memory.

According to Andreea Mironescu, « if literature and memory are interrelated in any era, in the times of changing frameworks of collective life, such as post-communism, this relationship becomes self-reflexive. Revolutions establish a violent rupture with the past and its institutions »<sup>46</sup>. The characters suffer from impaired memory ; they recall unreal events while forgetting tangible occurrences. Memory is intended to be, if not dismantled, at least diluted or distorted : « old traces, stubborn as they are, are slowly erased and details disappear. Not by a specific, organised order, as used to be the case. No, now life erases them, the carelessness »<sup>47</sup>. In Andrei Cornea's novel, the nostalgia experienced by certain characters is ironically critiqued, as reflected in the statement : « this stupid nostalgia has become a national epidemic »<sup>48</sup>. « Today everyone is only for himself », comments the albino. « We treat each other like beasts. Selfishness. In Bibi's time, we used to help one another » and now, in the era of post-Bibism or post-communism, « everyone is secretly counting their money while claiming they have none. Kapitalismus », supposedly, « liberal economics... free to fall on our heads. What a predicament ! [...] To feed your family or go strawberry picking, you know where : all the way to Tarlanda or Transylvania ! Oh, what a bizarre England this has become ! »<sup>49</sup>. The Romanian landscape is transferred to

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<sup>46</sup> « [Dacă] literatura și memoria sunt intercorelate în orice epocă, în perioadele de schimbare a cadrelor vieții colective, precum post-comunismul, această relație devine una auto-reflexivă. Revoluțiile instaurează o ruptură violentă cu trecutul și instituțiile sale ». Andreea Mironescu, *Literatura ca memorie culturală. Romanul românesc în postcomunism*, Iași, "A. Philippide" Institute of Romanian Philology, 2015, p. 96.

<sup>47</sup> « [Urmele] vechi, oricât de încăpățânate ar fi, sunt șterse ușor-ușor și detaliile dispar. Nu prin ordin anume, organizat, cum se făcea înainte. Nu, acum le șterge viața, nepăsarea ». Andrei Cornea, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> « [Nostalgia] asta cretină a devenit o epidemie națională ». *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>49</sup> « [Toți] își numără banii în secret și țină că n-au de nici unele. Kapitalismus, cică, economie liberală...liberă să ne cadă-n cap. Halal ! [...] ca să-ți hrănești familia, să pleci să culegi căpșuni,

the West, while the West itself becomes nationalized, toponymical, and decentralized. This results in a diffuse relationship between real and fictional spaces, as explored in Westphal's concept of referentiality. Although the dystopian space-matrix is maintained, it is infiltrated by a distinct Romanian identity, effectively creating an autochthonized version of London. This leads to the de-regionalization of East-Central European memory and the de-peripheralization of Romanian society, facilitated by an invasion into the cultural centre, which simultaneously causes the centre itself to become decentralized, as London transforms into a reflection of Romanian space, incorporating local identity with imported foreign form<sup>50</sup>.

The assumption Christopher Mark McBride starts from in his book, *The Colonizer Abroad. American Writers on Foreign Soil, 1846-1912*, is that non-European, remote, insular spaces are accessed and transfigured by a colonizing power. The work explores how this new space is shaped by the principles and ideologies of those who inhabit it<sup>51</sup>. Every new place brings with it the necessity to construct a new world. In this instance, the "Briticized" Romanians are dystopically colonizing a Western space, reversing the traditional process of colonization, where the colonizing power becomes the colonized society.

Andrei Cornea articulates the cultural climate of the time and examines how cultural acts can influence the evolution of society. This is where the stratigraphy Westphal discusses comes into play, demonstrating the impact of time on the formation of this new space. Through this lens, we can observe how historical contexts shape cultural identities and the evolving dynamics between different societies<sup>52</sup>. In the novel's discourse, the socio-cultural layers are shaped not only by the period in which the text is written, but also by its connections to other eras in close temporal proximity, such as communist and post-communist society, as well as modernist literary models like Orwell's dystopia. This

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auzi unde : tocmai în Tarlanda sau Transilvania ! Vai, vai ce a ajuns bizara Anglie ! ». *Ibid.*, p. 16-17.

<sup>50</sup> See Franco Moretti, « Conjectures on World Literature », *New Left Review*, vol. 1, 2000, p. 54-68, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/i1/articles/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature>. [Last accessed : 05/08/2024]

<sup>51</sup> « After arriving at this new place [...] the need for "a 'clear land' where a 'new world' might be built". Only when the continent was "clear" of natives, settlers believed, could "superior" Anglo-Saxons assert their political, religious, and economic control over the new territory ». Christopher Mark McBride, *The Colonizer Abroad. American Writers on Foreign Soil, 1846-1912*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p. 2.

<sup>52</sup> « Places can only be perceived in the multidimensional volume of space-time, space elevated to the level of time [...]. If place is never confined to the present because of the winds of history, it does not display the same level of presence on its territory ». Bertrand Westphal, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

establishes the critical function of dystopian discourse and highlights the connections between alternative networks across different epochs. Consequently, post-utopia embodies a manifestation of multidimensionality<sup>53</sup>.

In this context, space acts as a polarizing force between the source society – the dual reality of the communist past and the fictional world of Orwell – and the target society of Romanian post-communism. The latter is shaped by both the former and individual sensory experiences. The utopian imaginary is intricately linked to the historical, geographical, social, and ideological contexts that define it. The dystopian project manifesting in society – characterized by regime oppression and persecution, propaganda, and secret police activities (such as those of the Securitate) – is recalled in a « post-utopia ». However, post-utopia, post-Bibism, and post-communism also come with shortcomings from the perspective of some characters, including the dire state of the current economy, reliance on imports from Tarlanda (due to the absence of factories), massive unemployment, political corruption, and violence.

The post-communist urban landscape is vividly illustrated : « The Future Today publishing house had its headquarters in a thirty-story high office building, recently constructed and seemingly still unfinished. The sidewalk in front of it had been neglected and not yet repaired, requiring visitors to squeeze through piles of weeds and jump over potholes that had been forgotten by the workers »<sup>54</sup>. This post-utopia will retract into the systemic core of dystopia, as people no longer believe in the value of truth, the educational function of history, God, or memory.

Andrei Cornea, alongside Winston Smith in his diary, metafictionally appropriates all the dystopian elements utilized by Orwell in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* : names, principles, characters, and concepts such as « Newspeak », which involves the suppression of words, restriction of vocabulary, and neutralization of rational judgment. Prominent slogans – such as « Ignorance is strength » and « Freedom is slavery » – along

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<sup>53</sup> « [Le] paysage apparaît ainsi comme une manifestation exemplaire de la multidimensionnalité des phénomènes humains et sociaux, de l'interdépendance du temps et de l'espace, et de l'interaction de la nature et de la culture, de l'économique et du symbolique, de l'individu et de la société. Il fournit un modèle pour penser la complexité d'une réalité qui invite à articuler les apports des différentes sciences humaines et sociales ». Michel Collot, *La Pensée-paysage. Philosophie, arts, littérature*, Arles, Actes Sud-ENSP, 2011, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> « Editura Viitorul azi își avea sediul într-un bloc de birouri înalt de treizeci de etaje, ridicat de curând și, aparent, încă neterminat. Trotuarul din fața lui fusese abandonat încă nerefăcut, așa că, pentru a ajunge la intrare, trebuia să te strecori printre niște grămezi de moloz și să sari peste niște gropi, uitate deschise de muncitori ». Andrei Cornea, *op. cit.*, p. 51-52.

with the figure of O'Brien and the names of state organizations (like the Inner Party, the Outer Party, the four ministries, and the Thought Police) are all referenced. The Orwellian fantasies projecting future scenarios are extensions of Winston's memories of the past. In this post-utopian society, the only remaining option is to « shout with the mob to live in peace »<sup>55</sup>, i.e. to disown the past, to assimilate oblivion. Julia, a former girlfriend of Winston's during the regime, observes with lucidity that « ignorance may not be power, but it is sometimes a blessing. This memory obsession of yours is a kind of curse – for both you and others. You want to compel everyone to know and remember everything that has happened, accurately and without omission. But perhaps those poor souls do not wish to know, because both forgetting and ignorance can serve as comforts and consolations »<sup>56</sup>. Winston finds happiness only after oblivion intervenes, which he perceives as a form of liberation. The writer ridicules post-revolutionary judgments and exposes the herd mentality fostered by a reprehensible political structure; individuals are transformed into marionettes, mere cogs in the system that has been created.

The present analysis proposes a recalibrated understanding of dystopia, one from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the other from the 21<sup>st</sup>, both positioned at a considerable distance from each other. Discussing the construction of such an image necessitates an evolutionary perspective on dystopia, particularly emphasizing the specificity of the Romanian literary landscape, where the tradition of dystopia traces back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Additionally, both case studies utilize the city and its various manifestations as generators of space. They explore constructions such as the Black Church, buildings that serve as headquarters for secret societies, the verger's house, libraries, multi-story apartment blocks, and pubs devoid of the leader's portrait. Both texts work to reconstruct spatial images employing a mental framework deeply embedded in the consciousness of the common individual.

In Baconsky's work, the surrealist elements evoke an overwhelming multiplicity of spaces, sometimes to an excessive degree. By overwhelming the reader with a barrage of surreal images and locations, Baconsky reflects the saturation of modern life with competing ideologies, uncertainties, and distractions. In a world where language and

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<sup>55</sup> « [Zbieri] cu gloata ca să trăiești liniștit ». *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>56</sup> « [Ignoranța] n-o fi putere, dar e uneori o binecuvântare. Chestia asta cu memoria la tine e un fel de blestem – pentru tine și pentru alții. Vrei să-i obligi pe toți să știe și să țină minte tot ce a fost, cu exactitate, fără pierderi. Dar poate că bieții de ei nu vor să afle, fiindcă și uitarea, și neștiința sunt mângâieri și alinări ». *Ibid.*, p. 98.

thought are heavily regulated, the embrace of the surreal allows for the subversion of dominant ideologies. By presenting a multiplicity of surreal spaces, Baconsky creates an opportunity for alternative interpretations of reality, prompting readers to question their perceptions and the structures that govern their lives. This act of subversion is critical in a post-utopian context, where the remnants of authoritarian control still linger in the collective consciousness. Cornea's writing favours austerity and a lack of decorative elements suggests a time erasure of collective memory. The primary danger posed by this erasure is the potential repetition of history, as forgetting can transform individuals into irrevocable victims of their circumstances.

In this context, post-utopia emerges as an apocalypse experienced by contemporary individuals, characterized by an intensified sense of alienation and the dissolution of boundaries that once provided security. The excessive dynamic of this environment cultivates profound anxiety, leaving characters vulnerable and exposed to the whims of chance, as the once reassuring space becomes a source of peril.

In this framework, post-utopia emerges not merely as a continuation of dystopian narratives, but as a complex realm where dreams of a better future confront the pervasive realities of alienation, disorder, and historical amnesia. It invites us to critically interrogate the boundaries of memory, identity, and agency within these spaces, ultimately urging us to reconsider our understanding of progress in a world where the past and present continually intersect. By grounding our exploration in specific locations and their cultural significance, we gain a nuanced understanding of how geography informs not only our literary narratives, but also our lived truths in the contemporary world.

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