

# IMAGINARY ELEMENTS OF CHRISTIAN ORIGIN AS REFLECTED IN THE SOCIALIST REALISTIC DRAMA

ALIN SERAFIM ȘTEFĂNUȚ\*

**ABSTRACT.** This paper aims to highlight the manner in which communist ideology and mythology superimpose over specific symbols of the Christian imaginary by replacing them with its prefabricated system of reading and comprehending literary worlds. As secular religions, dictatorial regimes directly compete with divinity aspiring to dethrone and substitute it in an effort of re-writing history with its humanitarian pretenses. Immediately after its inauguration in Romania, communism intended to create, by using all necessary means, a literary corpus of itself which would disseminate a coherent message with the supreme promise that it was to bring about heaven on earth. Their propaganda was formulated and conducted via literature and art as well, in the attempt to make this message intelligible and accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Drama was thus one of communism's favorite channels to impart its ideology to the masses, in the hope that the new plays would bestow the regime a human face.

**KEY WORDS:** communism, drama, rewriting history, false humanism, secular religion

## **Introduction**

In 1500, the famous German painter Albrecht Dürer created his masterpiece entitled "Self-Portrait". The artist depicted himself in the likeness of Christ, in his attempt to overlap his and Christ's image, convinced that in so doing the others would identify him with divinity. The painter looks in the mirror and sees God, a model for the coherence of the universe. According to Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, the individual, "the reflection and image of God, unveils as an active subject, in a representation both historic and transfigured" (Melchior-Bonnet 2000: 162). It is an experiment to notice how Dürer allegedly reproduced Christ's posture and expression, an endeavour that not far from his time would have been considered a blasphemy; he, however, lived in a new era, a time animated by the ideal of the universal man. The artist conceives that he is an instrument of divinity, an absolute sovereign of the canvas, which in turn is fully at his disposal, without restrictions. The artist's powers are deemed unlimited, and his freedom attains unimaginable heights, just like in the Antiquity. The creative act itself—with all that it entails: stepping before the canvas, choosing the colors, etc.—becomes a gateway

\* ALIN SERAFIM ȘTEFĂNUȚ (PhD 2017, University of Oradea, Romania) is Associate Lecturer in English Phonetics at Emanuel University of Oradea, Romania. E-mail: stefanut\_lin@yahoo.com\_

through which intangible realities enter this world, realities that come into shape due to the painter' awareness of his creative omniscience and his boldness in establishing his origins in direct descendency from God. In the words of Melchior-Bonnet, the mirror, a middle space, "calls for another reality within the closed space of the work. The invisible emerges from the visible, the infinitely large into the infinitely small in a *mise en abîme* that reproduces the process of creation" (Melchior-Bonnet 2000: 162). At the same time, the mirror gives birth to a dialogue between the artist and his creation and even the transcendent, in his attempt to deepen its meanings.

### **Communism and the Lack of Corporeality**

If applied to the communist regime, this picture unveils an establishment which, through its ideology and practices, has deeply marked the societies and mental structures of Eastern Europe. What happened when communists first looked in the mirror? What image did they see? What did it uncover? Based on the writing style in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto*, which is considered the cornerstone of communism worldwide, it can be said that the communist regime in itself had not yet existed in flesh by the time the manifesto issued, thus it is totally inadequate to call it "a ghost haunting Europe, the ghost of communism" (see Pleșu, Liiceanu, Patapievici 2014: 62-63). This idea is considered inadequate because the ghost is thought of as a posthumous sign of reality, whereas in 1848—when the *Communist Manifesto* was published, communism had not yet materialized (Pleșu, Liiceanu, Patapievici 2014: 63). If it is to look at itself in the mirror, communism must find itself naked, devoid of both form and content, however aspiring to create an image for itself, even if this entails repudiating or reversing the universal truths pertaining to Christian and Jewish religious tradition. The image communism finds in the mirror depicts a mere spectral shadow of the void it belongs to.

Approximately 350 years after Dürer painted his self-portrait, the absence of corporeality, of the tangible is acutely felt by communism, a reason for which, in all Eastern European countries where it becomes the official doctrine, it resorts to creating a face for itself, as it is dictated by the single party through its bodies. Deviation from the official guidelines is not permitted, as communism aspires to appear, gradually, as the secular savior religion *par excellence*. The foremost nature of society, specifically of capitalism and democracy, is strongly challenged by communism, which feels that power should be centralized in the hands of an authoritarian Messiah, who does not allow his followers to stray from the right way. Looking in the mirror, the Communist Party wishes to find itself exactly like the Messiah, blameless and above suspicion, regardless of the particular aspirations of members of society. Moreover, the inner life of the individual is negated in totality, as "the

new man” is perceived as a machine that labors at the foundation of the one true regime. The cosmogony is entire only when the image of society is unitary, when the malign tumors—represented by the bourgeoisie and anything that could pose a threat to communism—have been completely excised. Communism aims to rebuild the world, to create a Heaven on Earth to substitute any aspiration towards a transcendence that is impossible to control. The superposition over the Christian imaginary is obvious, in an attempt to pastiche and attribute new meanings to the Biblical genesis, non-existent in the eyes of communism. Man—at least the new man, who it would be desirable to find in society—is born along with communism. Communist *sapientia* takes shape in the shadow of Christianity, in spite of the former refusal to recognize the identity of the latter, while communist science is nothing but a pale and perverted reflection of the wisdom of the biblical texts. The sacred is replaced by the profane, and the generation of the latter’s holiness, forcefully anchored in the mundane, is attempted at any cost.

We can identify this regime’s need to colonize new territories, to annex spaces it does not have and are necessary for its complete affirmation. Due to the need to fill the void, the image in the mirror, communism attempts to seize domains of culture and civilization, and superimposes over them its own system of perception in regards to life and society at large. The image in communism’s mirror is a distorted one, hideous, represented through a false geometry of the senses and of thought. We are faced with a false reality that aspires to become the norm and monopolize the human being in an attempt to redefine the concept of man, an attempt carried out through the lens of a false humanism. In this attempt to gain a body, communism resorts, through any means possible, to monopolizing all domains of knowledge and substituting their old representations in order to create the space necessary for the affirmation of the triumphalist totalitarian regime. Communism seeks to compete with divinity through an exercise to create and recreate the human being, and to substitute the elements that come from the Christian imaginary with a series of new elements that ensure the substance of the official ideology. The communist regime operates like a parasite occupying its host’s body and, subsequently, fully assimilating it. The distortion of the words, of the Christian universe and the desacralization of its symbols or their infusion with communism’s own view of holiness are behaviors that are specific to the regime, and they are maintained throughout its entire existence, as if due to a constant need to re-update the meanings and to re-confirm its own ideology.

The emergence of communism as a secular religion was subject to an inspired analysis carried out by Vladimir Tismăneanu in his 2011 book, *Despre comunism: destinul unei religii politice (On Communism: The Fate of a Political Religion)*. The author captures both the context in which communist

ideology takes form, as well as its aspirations and limits. The central idea of the essay is that, in its capacity as secular religion, communism aspires to “a renovation of the human condition” by negating and overturning established values, and that, in its ideal form, it appears as an ample endeavor that surpasses the limits of the mundane (Tismăneanu 2011: 18). The role of Messiah is assigned to the proletariat, but the idea of the Messiah in itself, as it appears in Christian or Jewish theology, is rendered void by communism in an attempt to definitively wipe history, be it even mythical, and to create its own mythology where the central element is the new man, wholly obedient to the official ideology, who contributes to its materialization with their entire being. We are in the presence of an absolute Evil that, as Tismăneanu states, “falsifies Good in the name of universal happiness” (Tismăneanu 2011: 16).

### **Through the Veins of Official Ideology**

Literature and drama become—in the case of the communist regime—the veins through which the official ideology reaches the citizens, in a constant effort to build the new man. In the case of drama, through the presence of the audience in the auditorium, the effects of the performance of a certain play are much easier to gauge, and its success or lack thereof validates or invalidates the playwright from the point of view of communist ideology. Thus, an official dramatic literature and repertoire starts to take shape, whose purpose is to illustrate the achievements of the one true regime and its structures within various spheres of life. The canon is defined during this time exclusively by its relation to the official ideology and by the creation of socialist realist texts and plays. The written word must be chosen carefully and is proof of allegiance to the vision of the ideology, just as much as it can become incriminating proof and the basis for ostracizing the author. During this time, in the Romanian People’s Republic, which would later be named the Socialist Republic of Romania, functioned—as an official body controlling the imaginary created by various writers—the institution of censorship, which was attentively and pertinently analyzed by Liviu Malița (2016: 24).

Horia Lovinescu, a major post-war playwright, aims and succeeds through a significant amount of his drama to contribute to the creation of a philosophy of communism and to promote the image of a regime that is greatly preoccupied with the greater good of the human being, with general well-being. Through his drama, the author of *The Death of an Artist* (*Moartea unui artist*) attempts to legitimize the face of communism superimposing it on the face of God, and, thus, contributes to the creation of a new theology that is secular in nature. The pedagogical value and the quality that some of his dramatic texts have as tools for political education and re-education are easily recognizable. Ioan Stanomir, in an inspired analysis of the impact of Horia Lovinescu’s dramatic debut, notes that „the new man is built where one can

see, before a spectating public and critics contemplating the birth of a Lovinescu cleansed of the trespasses of his youth” (Stanomir 2016:222). Horia Lovinescu’s destiny itself in relation to the official ideology can otherwise be seen as a reenactment of Paul the Apostle’s encounter on the road to Damascus. The future playwright defends his doctoral dissertation on Rimbaud’s poetry in 1947, but chooses not to publish it for a sizable period of time, then makes his debut as a playwright—in 1953—with the play *Lumina de la Ulmi* (*The Light from Ulmi*), condemned for the lack of transparency behind the author’s allegiance, only for *Citadela sfârâmată* to secure him a place in the socialist realist pantheon of communism a year later and to confer to him the status of „engineer of souls” in a world found in the midst of a process of re-creation.

His most praised drama from the incipient phase of his creation, a clear indicator of Horia Lovinescu’s allegiance, *Citadela sfârâmată* is the play that established him and outlined his position as comrade to the regime. The drama presents the transformations that take place within a *petit bourgeois* family named Dragomirescu due to the institution of the communist regime. Each of the family members has a different view on this state of affairs, depending on their own life experiences and their own openness to change. As Ioan Stanomir notes, Horia Lovinescu’s intention, shared by other playwrights that were his contemporaries, to apply to “the social conflict a theological angle is obvious. Salvation is the challenge that the party offers to those who belong to the old world. Ascending up or descending into inferno are part of the path that each conscience is summoned to walk” (Stanomir 2016: 226).

What is interesting to analyze here is the path that the two sons of the Dragomirescu family, Matei and Petru, walk after the institution of communism. Matei, the eldest son, is the proponent of a philosophy of the subconscious that favors individualism over everything social and over collective action. Petru puts into action his brother’s philosophy and ends up being defeated by fate, losing his eyesight after participating as an aircraft pilot in World War II. What follows for him is a phase during which he comes into contact with his inner abyss and in which every day he waits for death. The days are dull, and the person held accountable for his state is his brother Matei, the one who proposed a philosophy of action, “the great escapes”, the search for happiness “beyond good and evil”, and affirmed the supremacy of the individual as the only reality, as the universe is just an illusion. Salvation is offered to him by the new social order through the teacher Caterina, who was sent to the Dragomirescu household after the nationalization took place, as she helps him rediscover the beauty of life. The way Petru relates to the threshold in a painting by Grigorescu in the first act is symbolic for this allegiance. When commenting on the painting, the youngest of

Dragomirescu's sons points to the different worlds spotted in the painting. On the one side, there is the dark interior, and on the other side of the threshold—a universe brimming with light and color. Petru's conclusion concerns his own life and highlights his refusal to accept life between two different worlds. His condition as a captive in purgatory is limited in time, which is due to him recognizing the new divinity and social reality, where the power belongs to the proletariat and not in any way to a bourgeoisie whose sun has long set.

We can find the words with which Jesus anointed Peter as the foundation of His Church in the *Gospel of Matthew* chapter 16, verses 15-18. When the Son of God asked Simon Peter who did he think the Son of Man was, Simon Peter answered: 16. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17. Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it" (NIV translation).

It is interesting to see how Horia Lovinescu's play unveils its meanings when analyzed in comparison to the above mentioned biblical text. To what extent does a transfer of meaning occur between the two texts? Moving past the choice of names for his characters, it can be said that Horia Lovinescu read the biblical texts and worked on them according to the official directives for literature proclaimed in 1932 by the Central Committee of the Soviet Union.

His choice of names for the Dragomirescu sons is not accidental, as their meanings show. The origin of the name Petru (Peter), a specifically Christian name, can be traced to the Hebrew language, where its literal equivalent is "stone, rock". Peter is the first of the 12 apostles, the son of Jonah and the brother of Andrew. Thus Petru—namesake for stone—symbolizes strength and coarseness. As Mircea Eliade states, the stone expresses "a manner of being absolute" and "in its grandeur and toughness, in its form and color, man encounters a reality and force that belong to a different world, *different* from the profane one that they are a part of" (Eliade 2013: 229). This need for holiness is exactly what communism sought for, this justified appeal to another world, to an idealized space. The sacred and the profane, the two concepts with which Mircea Eliade operates in his work, are redefined by the communist regime according to its own desideratum. The sacred has a profoundly tangible nature represented by the hand extended by the party, while any excess in philosophy or certain escapes towards transcendence are harshly sanctioned by the party, death being one of the solutions proposed in order to solve the issue of dissidents like Matei Dragomirescu. In the biblical text, Jesus is the one who changes the apostle's name from Simon to Peter, a name that comes from the Greek *petros*—meaning stone, a symbol of

wisdom. Thus, Horia Lovinescu's character has the necessary wisdom to recognize and accept the saving hand extended by communism, as opposed to his brother, Matei, who believes in "the magical function of the word" but is unable to show it in action.

### **Towards a Politically Shaped Heaven**

*Citadela sfârșită* presents the first years of communism, as its action is placed between 1943 and 1948. The play captures the collective efforts made for the new religion to come into prominence and also cursorily mentions the deficiencies and downsides that characterize these years. The great revolution, however, must target the inner life of the human being, the annexation of this territory that is apparently impossible to control. The anthropological overturn must happen in the deep structures of the human being. An entire belief system about life must be replaced with the new dogma, the dogma that guarantees general and absolute happiness. The fate of the youngest son of the Dragomirescu family is eloquent in this regard. After having directly been confronted with the harmful consequences of the philosophy of the subconscious and of the cult of individuality, he passes through purgatory, a place where he re-learns, thanks to the party, how to re-think life. The individual is abandoned in favor of the collective and the social. The physical disability that he suffers from, his blindness, is only in appearance an obstacle for the new regime. If he so desires, the individual can be helped by the party to find their place in society and prove their usefulness. Nobody is left behind as long as they accept to take the road to the promised paradise along with communism. The new man prevails, hurt, but trained by the asceticism that the grandiose socialist construction entails.

The change in social order is invoked by one of the characters who is, in appearance, a minor factor in the grand scheme of the text, Emilia, who sees in this change the materialization of God's will: "Every day, something changes. You can tell that our time has passed and their time has come. That is God's will" (Lovinescu 1978:136) The divinity that Grigore Dragomirescu's wife is referring to is superimposed over the image of Yahweh and is embodied by the single party whose will generates the course of history. This is a vengeful God, who sanctions any digression from the norm, but extends his hand to those who admit that they have strayed from the straight path outlined by the party. Bolshevik blessing only comes to those who choose the narrow and difficult path of commitment to the cause of communism.

The edifice of communism, in Horia Lovinescu's drama, is erected on the martyrdom—understood as mortal suffering—of the character Petru. He is the one who goes through a state of uncertainty, fueled by his inability to find his place in this new society, especially due to the ideas that his brother instilled in him. The credit for his salvation and re-instatement in society does

not belong to him, because—just like the Bible notices that Simon Peter knows the identity of the Son of God thanks to the divine intervention and not because of his personal abilities—salvation comes from the communist party, an absolute deity to whom Horia Lovinescu attempts to bestow a human face. The new Petru, the namesake of the apostle, retains from his forerunner the ability to recognize divinity and accept the hand it extends to him.

Petru represents the first communist from the series of “new men” in the dramatic oeuvre of Horia Lovinescu. He is the pillar of the world, the foundation on which an edifice is painstakingly erected, an edifice that the author never fully assumed, probably also because of a lack of true allegiance to the official ideology. The class struggle takes the form of a battle between good and evil, between the first Christians and their persecutors. The sprout of communism in the Romanian People’s Republic, recreated in *Citadela sfârșimată*, is traced in the view of official ideology to the dawn of Christianity, a time uncertain where the battle is fought at all levels.

The villains—from the point of view of the then political regime—in Lovinescu’s drama are more humanized and credible from the artistic standpoint than the heroes, who concede all too easily to the transformations affecting society with the onset of Bolshevism. As Romulus Diaconescu notices, Petru’s destiny is much too non-viable from a literary point of view (Diaconescu 1983: 85). His character is deprived of fate: he is a mere puppet in the hand of the playwright, who chooses to alter him as to give in to the new reality. Nevertheless, this acceptance occurs easily and lacks credibility. The existential trajectory of the young Dragomirescu changes drastically upon conceding like the rest.

Matei, the eldest son of the Dragomirescus, bears a name that obviously links him to one of the four Evangelists and is given an already established role by Horia Lovinescu in the construction of the communist soteriology. Far from being a simple victim of the regime, Matei embodies absolute evil from the point of view of communist ideology, the instigating element that must be removed from society at any cost. The decadence he exhibits, as well as his emphasis on individuality to the detriment of all that is social represent inimical behaviors, which must not reach the new society carefully constructed by the communist party. He is the remnant of another time, of mentalities that have no place in this heaven on earth imagined by communism, based on the idea of public property instituted by the Law no. 119 of June 11, 1948. This law is explicitly mentioned in Lovinescu’s play. At one point, Caterina, the teacher living in Dragomirescu’s house, is exhilarated by the news that “the nationalization has happened” (Lovinescu 1971: 51).

Petru's brother represents the tempter, sharing the same characteristics as the snake in Genesis, an evil that must be punished and whose presence demands heightened watchfulness from the new society currently in the midst of being built. Through the philosophy he preaches, he calls to action and also calls for the situation of the self "beyond good and evil". Essentially, he is the proponent of a form of self-idolatry that has no room in communist society. For Matei, reality and its structures, as known by those around him, are illusory and must constantly be called into question, even being negated as such. The philosopher of Dragomirescu family places himself in opposition to the divine order, as outlined by the single party policies of the communist era. At the same time, in the case of Matei's brother, the transition occurs from the world of ideas to the real world, while the punishment for the elder brother is multiple. This is plainly emphasized by his awareness of the errors of his own system of thought, which have led to Petru's loss of eyesight and, implicitly, the collapse of his whole philosophical setup. Matei, however, needs time to realize the overall failure, convinced as he is that the good he defended is superior to everything the others uphold. In *The Devil's Share*, Denis de Rougemont states that evil men are those who "believe that their own good is of higher value than the real good...; the work of the evil deceives them, precisely because they are the first they disappoint. The reality they despise shall seek its vengeance by its own nature" (De Rougemont 1994: 25). There are many shapes that this vengeance takes in Matei's case, and they all end in death, perceived by him as deliverance, as liberation, while those close to him feel that it is the supreme form of betrayal, a proof of falsehood and hypocrisy preached as dogma. As communist ideology is concerned, Matei's fate perfectly unmasks absolute evil, expressed by his denial of reality and his refuge in the intangible world of ideas. The punishment of this young nihilistic philosopher is viewed as exemplary: it starts with his onstage unmasking as a false prophet, because in the end, when he is of no use to the communist pedagogy, he is removed from stage in the most humiliating manner. Through Matei's death, his angel is also removed from the socialist universe, given that the totem of Matthew the Evangelist is an angel. Matei's death is not only the outcome of him being finally aware of his failure, but it also places him in the line of the damned, the most famous of them being Jesus' betrayer, Judas the apostle. A superposition of images and symbols also occurs here, as the communist dogma aspires to replace the images and meanings in the Christian imaginary with new ones that reciprocate their intentions, namely the creation of "the new man", who is perfectly controllable and wholly subservient to all directives coming from the party. The transcendence specific to Christianity is banned from the communist horizons as it is not material and cannot be controlled.

In his relationship to those around him, Matei cannot manage to breed anything other than suffering, and the realization of this reality subjects him to a long torture whose end cannot be anything other than death. The mirror of the past that Matei looks into does not correspond with what he discovers in the present or with the manner in which he had imagined the future. Disillusionment is omnipresent around him, and the image of Petru, who is physically affected by his brother's philosophy, is there to constantly remind him of the effect of his ideas applied at the level of the life lived.

When seen in relation to the twelve apostles, Matei is not at all a reflection of the disciple whose name he bears, instead representing Judas, the apostle who betrayed his master. The gospel preached by Matei, Horia Lovinescu's character, rebuilt based on the ideas that he champions in his relationships with those around him, ideas to which Petru and Irina, the woman he loves, especially adhere, is not reminiscent of the gospel by the apostle sharing Matei's name, but is instead a gospel whose chief principles are nihilism and self-idolatry. The human being is not seen as part of a community—a capital sin from the point of view of the official ideology—but as an individual who must fulfill themselves through themselves and not in any way through others or for others.

Matei from *Citadela sfârșimată*, this Judas of communism, is considered fundamentally in error for refusing to accept the state ideology and to actively defend its cause. Through his ideas, he instills in Petru a certain lifestyle based on action and the illusory pursuit of happiness, in a space “beyond good and evil” (Lovinescu 1971:127), which is in sheer opposition to the grand communist project. Matei is responsible for the betrayal of his brother and, implicitly, the official ideology. The acute realization of the errors in his own philosophical system does not secure him his salvation, because it is not accompanied by actions that prove his loyalty to the party's cause. Whereas in Petru's case a new identity can be spotted, the same cannot be said of Matei. To a great extent, he remains constant throughout the entirety of the play and is not affected by the change in political regime, a reason for which his end cannot be any other than the expulsion from the glorious universe that the proletariat is laboring to achieve. His definitive exit by hanging is reminiscent of the death of the apostle who betrayed Jesus and is, ultimately, the proof of the supreme defeat of the bourgeoisie and of a philosophy that is not in accordance with the party's ideal.

### **Conclusions**

The dramatic literature of Horia Lovinescu is much more complex than it may seem at first glance, with Biblical images, symbols and situations woven into the pages of his plays in an authentic way and contributing to the articulation of a paradise in the midst of dissolution, a dissolution whose

conclusion is postponed by an agony extended over half a century, an agony which best describes the essence of the communist regime. Throughout his entire activity, the playwright oscillated between a full acceptance and advocacy of communism and his subversive attitude which unfortunately he never fully embraced. In *Citadela sfârșimată*, the playwright's attitude is overtly biased, as his preferences lean towards the individual who manage to take on the new political dogma and defend it via discourse and action. For the author of the play *Moartea unui artist* (Death of an Artist), communism means the re-writing of the history of the chosen people, the re-conception of a millenary cultural paradigm through the point of view of the official ideology in a continuous attempt to re-sacralize a universe emptied of the presence of any form of transcendence. Divinity, in the case of communism, is embodied by the single party and the proletariat. Reading *Citadela sfârșimată* with this interpretation system in mind it can be stated that the author is keen on attaching a human face to communism, to dress in "shades the sad bare corpse", as Mihai Eminescu put it in his *Epigonii* (*Epigones*). In this case, this effort is portrayed in the communist ideology, which according to Derrida's understanding has a spectral nature. However, the saving hand of the party extends over those who belong to a world sadly remembered, a party seen as the Messiah, willing to forget past errors as long as the individual joins the others in building the socialist realism.

The social order presented in *Citadela sfârșimată*, back then in its first stages, depicts the heaven on earth that the communist regime promised to erect and share with all. This image is imperfect though, since the communists had to rebuild everything, including the collective mentality, as proven in Horia Lovinescu's play. The inner life of human beings had to be done with if it failed to be controlled and wholly submitted to the absolute political divinity. The new religion raised like the granite block of flats, resilient to external pressure and whose assembly could only be stopped from the inside due to the overall dispersion of allogeneic elements. Far from having been fully disseminated through its sympathizers, communism reveals itself in full expansion as the absolute panacea, within reach for all who welcome the single party ideology.

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