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The Denigration of Writers in Communist Romania

In George Orwell's *1984*, "Newspeak" was a new language emerging in the aftermath of totalitarianism meant to level down, brainwash and constrict the minds and lives of individuals living under that particular regime. It was designed to operate as a trigger towards the creation of a new reality, one in which the individuals would be stripped of their personalities and individualities and in which the only signified would be the subservience to the political regime. The fundamental objective was the transformation of the individual into a malleable puppet completely amenable to the powers that be. As is well-known, Orwell's *1984* was sadly visionary and the state and society depicted in his novel would take palpable form in the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe. In addition, in Communist Romania (1945-1989) the language of the Communist landscape was largely influenced by the totalitarian ideology borrowed from the Soviet Union (the NKVD directive) which was fulfilled with the help of the National Security Service (Securitate), members of the Communist party and ultimately mere individuals who had no choice but bow down to the regime. Communist Romania can best be described as a ghetto. There was little if any access to international information and news, the TV programs were scarce, people would only go abroad if they were on a mission from the Communist party or the National Security Service (usually to spy on the dissidents who were living abroad, in exile). Therefore, most of the times against their will, the people of Communist Romania were always exposed to an ideological discourse, one which would be later defined as "wooden" and heartless, nonsense talk which was the characteristics of the Communist ruler,

Nicolae Ceausescu and which managed to mind the brain of millions of people, to make them bow down to a heartless regime and to the only doctrine they knew about.

All this was made possible under the all-encompassing influence of the National Security Service (Securitate) which developed means of “persuasion” and mass control beyond even the imagination of George Orwell or Franz Kafka. Some of these means were torture, blackmail, calumny, psychological pressure, and last but not least, denigration. In Communist Romania, free speech, liberalism or bourgeois mentality were considered outcasts. Anyone who was accused (mainly through denigration) of these “crimes” was surveyed and a file was constituted for him at the National Security Service and was moreover assigned an agent or more who was responsible with reporting the individual’s every move, every idea or suspicious behavior. The consequence of this intellectual and cultural purging was that a great number of intellectuals, clergy, politicians, members of the ancient regime and mere individuals who were either against the Communist regime or who were simply turned in by neighbors, family or co-workers (or even their own children!) were arrested, tortured and killed in Communist prisons. All of this was made possible with the help of denigration, which represented a means of besmirching, discrediting, and ultimately condemning the person under attack.

Denigration, calumny, defamation, detraction were all means of identifying the “enemies of the regime” and wiping them out either by their social and moral assassination or arresting them and killing them. In Communist Romania, denigration became a habitual practice being used by the National Security Service agents, the press, the informants and the common people. It is worthwhile noting that denigration did not stop with the collapse of the Communist regime; nowadays it is pervasive throughout the press and public life.

One of the assumptions of this paper is that discourse, and by extension, denigration shapes the mindframe of a people and it affects the psychological and moral outlook of this same people. In Communist Romania, totalitarian discourse, denigration and wooden language impoverished the spirituality of a whole nation and the elimination of a whole generation of intellectuals represented the condemnation of Romania to decades of ignorance, and of the dislodging of all the good values established in Romania at the beginning of the twentieth century. The National Security Service and the Communist Party managed to create “the new man”, who lived in terror, fear of the other, was devoid of critical thinking and did not dare to dream of a better world. From an economic point of view, communist Romania was extremely poor, with rationalized food and minimum livelihood. Because of the lack of primary needs (food, home, family) as Northrop Frye called them, the Romanians could not tend to the secondary needs (art, literature, culture). Because all Western values were vilified, the life of the Romanian people was culturally impoverished. What the Romanian people was ceaselessly exposed to were the achievements of the Communist Party and president, both megalomaniac elements.

In these conditions the life of intellectuals who were not serving the interests of the Communist regime was not an easy one. They were marginalized, arrested and killed. During Communism, intellectuals were marginalized at best and tortured and killed at worst. There was a whole generation of brilliant intellectuals who were literally wiped out, “disappeared” and ruined. Their works survived because they were smuggled abroad by anti-Communist activists and translated there. The writers living in exile but also some of the more courageous ones living in the country publicly criticized the National Security Service and the members of the Communist party as well as singled out the denigrators of the time. However, not all intellectuals

were strong enough to not succumb to the blackmail and pressure of the National Security Service becoming informants in their turn. Thus, some of the informative notes at the CNSAS (The National Council for the Study of Security Archives) were written by intellectuals and writers who managed to forge true biographies which displayed erudition, scholarship and intelligence.

However, most of the intellectuals of the time opposed Communism (Ion Petrovici, Paul Sterian, Dumitru Staniloaie, Petre Pandrea, Dorin Hasnas, Valeriu Anania, Ion Caraion, Paul Goma, Anton Golopentia, N. Balota, G. Ivascu, D. Pillat, Adrian Marino, Mihaela Ghitescu, I. D. Sirbu, etc.) Their books were mainly published and translated in the West by various anti-Communist activists. Evidently, the authors of these writings were considered “enemies of the people” and were massively denigrated in the country and closely surveilled in their homes.

Denigration can be considered a type of hate discourse in that it involves the disparaging of the other and the annihilation of their social persona and dignity; the law punishes them both in theory but it rarely does so in practice. They are both common practices in nowadays’ public sphere. They are both political gestures in that they involve the suppression of individuals living in a certain political setting. They both negate otherness and moreover discredit and deny the other. However, denigration had its own particularities under Communism. It became cognate with forgery and mystification since many of the informative notes and articles by agents or journalists were inventions of a sick imagination which were attempting to discredit the individuals under attack by attributing them then degrading vices such as homosexuality or adultery. Therefore, it will be necessary to distinguish between hate discourse and denigration while also keeping in mind some of the teachings of those authors who have approached hate discourse. Hate discourse has been studied from a sociological point of view and from a

linguistic perspective. Hate discourse is approached mainly from the perspective of ideology and social practice and is considered a deleterious, evil activity which endangers democracy and the equal rights of the individuals living in the same country. Denigration managed to attain these objectives successfully, as most of the people who fell victim to this practice were considered social outcasts, enemies of Communism and under the radar of the National Security Service.

Deigration can also be characterized as wooden language which is the language that scholars after 1989 defined as the particular discourse of the Communist era which could be found in the president's addresses and discourses, in the National Security Service Archives or in the articles of Communist authors. Wooden language has been described as the result of years of brainwashing, terror and Communist propaganda. It is mostly defined as its profound lack of a signified and its use of particular signifiers from the Communist repertoire. Its main purpose is either to extoll or to denigrate. It can be found in the press, in informative notes, at public meetings and in public speeches which unfortunately can only partially if at all be recuperated. Like "wooden language", denigration uses stereotypes and clichés and it frames the person under attack into a minimizing context which is the projection of the denigrator's world. In the opinion of scholars who have dealt with wooden language, the discursive practices in Communism destroyed not only the mind and lives of individuals but also the moral substance of the Romanian people (Anghelescu: 2009). Semeniuc's article "The Linguistic Violence in the Totalitarian Discourse in Romania" discusses the violence involved in various Communist discursive practices. In the above-mentioned analyses "wooden language" is defined as dead language. However, denigration discourse is much more "lively", it is violent and aggressive, it is persuasive, insinuating and accusing.

Some of the questions this paper would like to raise are: in what ways is denigration an evil phenomenon? To what extent did it affect the moral texture of the Romanian people? What is the psychological profile of the denigrator? In order to tap into these questions we will look at two case studies of denigrated Romanian intellectuals, namely Mircea Eliade and Emil Cioran. Both Eliade and Cioran were exiles, the former living and working in the States and the latter in France. They were both targeted by the National Security Service due to their lack of sympathy for the Communist regime and for their visionary works. They became both famous in international circles and their value as philosophers did not go unnoticed even by the National Security Service which attempted to enroll Mircea Eliade in its service throughout the life of the philosopher. They were both followed and put under surveillance and surrounded by a whole net of informants. There were scholars who were trained abroad with the sole purpose of getting in touch with them and trying to find out as much as possible about their projects. In spite of this constant pressure neither Eliade nor Cioran ever gave in to become an informant. Moreover, their work and moral character were besmirched by authors who were servile to the regime of the time. In his "The Demolition of the National Pantheon", Vlad Hogeia reviews some of the denigrating writings by Communist authors who were preparing the ground for the censorship and moral assassination of Eliade and Cioran. As we will see these writings are passionate verging on ridicule in their subservience to the regime in their need to please the "party". Oscar Lemnaru for instance wrote the following on Mircea Eliade: he "used the German gun pointed at the back of the head of the Romanian people and made it his task to instigate to murder, to come to terms with the obscure forces of mysticism" (Hogeia). Eliade was chiefly accused of sympathizing with Fascist ideology of favoring the extreme right and thus endangering the Communist regime. As the quote above shows, Christianity was also targeted by Communism

and many intellectuals were imprisoned and tortured for being a Christian. Lemnaru doesn't fail to cover these flaws in both Eliade and Cioran: they were "hate instigators" who were ideologically "notorious Hitlerists, fascists" (Hogea). The immediate result of this kind of treatment was the censorship of these authors' works in Romania and the continuous surveillance of their lives abroad. The result of denigration was, most of the times, the social assassination of the denigrated person, who became an outcast around whom a whole net of informants was being constructed. Often times, this was the first step towards the imprisoning, torture and killing of the respective person. Eliade escaped prison and murder through exile but all their lives they were surrounded by agents of the Security Service who duly took down every detail of their daily lives. Their denigration in the press of the time led to their censorship in Romania but they became famous abroad and ultimately we can say that the work of denigration didn't reach its goal in their cases. But the denigrators continued their work. Zaharia Stancu, another author of the Communist regime noted the danger Eliade represented for Romania: "he is dreaming of other crimes, other murders, other arsons, other wracks" (Hogea). The imaginary of these depictions is grandiose matching the megalomaniac self-representation of the Communist party and leader. The enemies of the regime were represented in hyperbolic hues and their figures became larger than life in the informative notes of the Security or in the articles written by the Communist authors. Worst of all perhaps was the moral besmirching of these writers. In the eyes of Pavel Apostol, Eliade's *Myth of the Eternal Return* is "the nostalgia of the lost paradise of the primitive civilization acquires, in Eliade's conception, the clear meaning of the setting of animal paradise". In this way the author is accused of obscurantism, of opposing the "civilizing forces of socialism" but also of being less than human: "the nostalgic thirst of mister Eliade for animality the return to the animal paradise are the sure indication of the estrangement from humanity of

reactionary ideology” (Hogea). “Reactionary” was a key word in the literature of denigration and it was equated with being the enemy of the regime or with propagating dangerous ideology. Another way of denigrating Romanian writers was by accusing them of bourgeois mentality. Both Eliade and Cioran fell victim to this label. Moreover, they were depicted as inhuman, as loveless and negative. For instance, Emil Cioran’s work had the appearance: “of a cemetery where the corpses appeared and over which a barefoot and blond young man is running senselessly and sadistically”. For the same Zaharia Stancu, Emil Cioran was “interesting and nothing more” (Hogea). The denigrating discourse shows the paranoia of the regime who feared in the extreme the intellectuals and their capacity to change mentalities. We find notes of the paranoid in the press of the time: “Death apostles like Cioran together with another enemy of the new, socialist, form of life, which our people chose, Mircea Eliade, and with the help of the reactionaries from France are besmirching and discrediting progress, science and materialism especially against our regime of popular democracy” (Hogea). Of the two, Cioran is the most targeted, accused of insanity and negativity: “The deception, the ulceration are products of the most destructive fragment of the history of our century, which brought together ruins and crushed lives in its blind fury, they are the results of the thinker’s implication in the fanaticism of some ideas of transparent brutality” (Hogea). Most of the times, Eliade and Cioran are accused of those same characteristics of those displayed by the denigrating discourse: violence, negativity, slander and reactionary politics.

If evil is, as Badiou claimed, the “perversion of the good”, then denigration is an evil practice. It managed to discredit a whole generation of Romanian authors whose value was attested abroad in circles that did not choose to portray them as “reactionary” or dangerous. As can be grasped from the examples I quoted, denigration is a voluntary and conscious practice

which involves the total commitment of the denigrator and even at times his passion. It led to the incarceration of countless individuals, to their torture, social assassination and killing. Perhaps the denigrators believed they were doing the right thing: they were serving the Communist ideology which was endangered by Western doctrines and practices. They truly believed that they were defending the Communist party and their country of evil. Some were doing so out of opportunism to acquire a better social position or to play an important social and political role. Envy must have also been the cause of many a denigrating discourse. Like all evils, denigration spread like a cancer in Communist Romania. If your neighbor wanted to destroy you, he could: it was enough to tell the Security Service that you had criticized the regime and you were immediately called at the section and interrogated for hours or days. In a few decades the practice of denigration would take over the whole country: this meant the insulation from the other, a state of permanent paranoia as to whether you might become an enemy of the state, distrust in the national destiny and identity. Romania still hasn't recovered from the evil of denigration. Nowadays, most public figures are denigrated. The only thing that changed is that now it is being done overtly whereas during Communism it was also being done covertly. The whole moral substance of a nation was altered and affected by the practice of denigration and Romania is still awaiting a generation of intellectuals like the one that was destroyed by the Communist regime.

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