

The Ghost of Communism Past: The Birth of Post-Communist Gothic Fiction?

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Although Romanian writers, especially the “founders” of the Romantic age, were heavily inspired by German letters and philosophy in the nineteenth century, Romanian literature has never really accommodated the Gothic mode in fiction. The scarcity of Gothic narratives in Romanian fiction and the public’s lack of enthusiasm for the genre contrast with the fact that the region has provided ample material for Western Gothic narratives (Romania, as is well known, was often presented as a land of dark castles and aristocrats, as the home of count Dracula, of vampires and menacing Transylvanian forests, of luring sexuality and primal impulses). The absence of a significant Gothic tradition does not necessarily mean that writers in this country did not share an interest in the dark, the mysterious and the unexplainable in everyday life, but simply that the latter were traditionally relegated to the realm of low culture. Late in the communist era, after several decades of state-imposed socialist realism, magic realism emerged as a fringe phenomenon. When not censored, the artifices of magic realism served both as an escape from the stylistic strait-jacket of socialist realism and as a medium for thickly veiled criticism of the communist system. For many young writers, magic realism remained a style of choice into the first decade of the post-communist period, frequently as a means of dealing with the communist past. However, at least in the case of one of the most successful and critically-acclaimed contemporary Romanian authors, magic realism has gradually but markedly shifted into what I will call below “post-communist Gothic”. This article focuses on the way in which Doina Ruști, the renowned Romanian author, employs Gothic paraphernalia to write about Romania under the communist rule. The first part of the paper will provide a brief overview of Romanian literature under the dictatorial regime and its development after the fall of communism. It is here that I will talk about the use of magic realism as a reaction to the socialist realism imposed by the totalitarian regime. I will then briefly introduce Doina Ruști, an arguably unique voice in post-communist Romanian literature. The third and final part of the article will enlarge on the way in which Ruști’s novel *The Ghost in the Mill* marks an interesting break with magic realism. In particular, I will focus on the way in which Ruști resorts to an arsenal of Gothic motifs to come to terms with the haunting spectre of communism.

Romanian literature demonstrates a relative paucity in the realm of the purely fictional, partly due to the reading public’s predilection for and inclination toward products of memory, such as letters, journals, memoirs, or memoirs presented as fiction. Romanians seem to have had a rather difficult time conceiving of literature as works emerging solely out of the imagination (Negrici 156-7). Some relatively minor writers in the nineteenth century tried to create fiction entirely based on imagination, in an attempt at synchronization with Western Romanticism, but the reading public’s excitement for the mysterious and the sensational, for demonic characters and dark pasts, was soon repudiated by critical circles as forms of low culture.

During the first years of communist rule, the only literature accepted officially and encouraged passionately, sometimes violently, was the literature of “propaganda and demonstration”, a concrete embodiment of the political doctrine of those times (Negrici 140). The ideology of “socialist realism”, as it was officially termed, urged writers to reflect in their productions as accurately as possible the spirit of the people and their national (socialist)

realities. This attempt at levelling literary artefacts was part of a greater scheme, that of reinventing the nation, including its culture, along the lines imposed by the Stalinist regime (Crotty 151):

By 1952 Romania was subject to rigid totalitarian controls. No city resident was allowed to change his or her dwelling without permission, and all movement between towns was controlled by the communist militia. In the early 1950s an estimated 180.000 people had been thrown into labour camps, the most notorious was the Danube-Black Sea canal project which claimed thousands of lives ... It took thirteen years for collectivisation to be accomplished after the campaign to end landed property ... started officially in 1949. Some 80.000 peasants were imprisoned for their opposition. Armed resistance in the mountains continued sporadically through the 1950s... (Gallagher 47-8)

Everything that was seen as deviating from the norm of “the spirit of the people” was branded “rotten and corrupted”. In the name of a “healthy” Romanian literature (this attribute made quite a career in the 1950s), literary innovations were attacked, as they did not go along the lines of the true “spirit of the people” (Negrici 134). In effect, they would only represent “literary soap that doesn’t clean anything” – a somewhat ironic reference, since towards the end of the communist regime soap was very rare and cherished by the very people writers had been called faithfully to represent.

Despite its simplistic, plain, repetitive and stereotypical character, socialist realism was seen as the last, supreme stage in the artistic development of humanity. In an attempt to make art accessible to everyone, it excluded from the start the accidental and the particular, the detailed and the subtle, and more generally anything that could stand out as peculiar (Negrici 142-3). The party frowned upon authors who would not use popular, accessible language, who would show even a minor inclination toward poetic intimacies, naturalism, or eroticism, or who pursued entertainment value in writing psychological, detective or adventure fiction (Negrici 243). There were authors who tried to write against the grain (Alexandru Ivasiuc, for example, in the 1960s and 1970s), by infusing their works with fantastic elements in an attempt to break away not necessarily from realism, which has constantly been very dear to Romanian authors, but from socialist realism specifically. No less significantly, some writers would resort to fantastic and allegorical fiction in order to escape censorship or total ban, especially when they hinted at the grim realities of the communist era. Nonetheless, the literary standard was that of the so-called “obsessive decade”, when writers were forced to contribute to propaganda through their literary creations.

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, a lot of what had been written under the totalitarian rule was rejected, denied, and condemned, often vehemently. Radical negation and total denunciation seemed in order. The values – aesthetic and otherwise – promoted during the communist age were turned upside down as an anti-communist position was being crystallized. Condemnation became especially virulent when anti-communism was radicalized by the return to power of former second-rank communist apparatchiks. The first decade after the fall of the regime was marked by confusion and chaos, since none of the standards and ethics unanimously accepted before stood tall any longer. Nevertheless, in the period of confusion at the beginning of the 1990s, it became obvious that in breaking away from the “Siberia of the soul” (a metaphor used to describe realities in communist Romania), the Romanian people needed a new literature, one which would not carry over the blame of having served the old regime propaganda.

It is during this initial period after the fall of communism that the reading public manifested an interest for literature which stood witness to the atrocities and human suffering under the old regime. Once again, the ingrained predilection of the Romanian reading public for memoirs and confessions became manifest. Such works proved to be of great attraction – and if the author of the confessions or memoirs was not a professional writer, but rather an anti-communist activist or a victim under the communist rule, he or she was far more interesting and trustworthy. People now craved for the authentic, and many writers had lost credibility before the events in 1989. At first sight, it may seem counter-intuitive that people who had just managed to rid themselves of a totalitarian regime should yearn for literature laying bare their suffering. Nevertheless, the reconstruction of the past from the perspective of the present seemed like a vital necessity. After a decade of discovering and examining the wounds left by communism, the beginning of the new century ushered in an effervescence of fictional prose. New waves of young writers contributed decisively to the revival of experimental, fantastic fiction (Simuț), and the influence of Latin-American fiction particularly was obvious.

Magic realism is typically defined as a fictional mode employed by authors writing under totalitarian or dictatorial regimes, being common for works of fiction written from the perspective of the disempowered (Bowers 31). This style of writing realistic fiction, in which the unexpected occurs and tends to be treated as part of everyday life, has been usually seen as a way of breaking away from the constraints of linear time and hierarchical thinking – in other words, as a way of escaping the authoritarian modes of writing which dominated post-colonial or post-communist countries. Magic realism offers the writers the opportunity to attack the definitions and assumptions which underlie totalitarian regimes, by attacking the very pillars of the latter (Bowers 4). The topics of absolute power, terrorist dictatorship, or circular time were of great inspiration for Romanian writers in the twentieth century. Some of the writers under communism used magic realism as a reaction to socialist realism and totalitarian rule, as a reaction to the homogeneity imposed by the former. And in its capacity to undermine the establishment, magic realism constituted a powerful tool. As Bowers argues,

Magical realist texts are subversive: their in-betweenness, their all at oneness encourages resistance to monological political and cultural structures, a feature that has made the mode particularly useful to writers in postcolonial cultures and, increasingly, to women. (Bowers 64)

In an attempt to subvert the totalitarian regime and to challenge the established literary norm, Alexandru Ivăsiuc approached dictatorship in his novel *The Crab*, published in 1976, an allegorical political dystopia, a study of cruelty and terror. Francisc Pacurariu also chose tyranny as theme for his *The Last Journey of Ulysses* (1976). However, this form of resistance against the dominant ideology was rather limited and occasional, because of the all-seeing censorship and the threat of a total ban on one's writings.

Magic realism was not revived immediately after the change of regime in 1989. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the new century magic realism became for many young Romanian writers not just a different form of literary expression, but a style of choice: Bogdan Suceavă's *He Came from An Off Key Time* (2004), Florin Manolescu's *The Mystery of the Locked Room* (2002), Cornel Nistea's *The Innocence of the Snake* (2000), or Bogdan Popescu's *Lost Transcience* (2002), to name but a few (Mărieș-Leș 226). In their fiction, these authors return to (in most of the cases) rural Romania under the totalitarian rule. A good example is Bogdan Suceavă's *He Came from An Off Key Time* (2004), a novel written as a parody of how people were recruited to offer information to the Securitate, of the opportunistic behaviour of political parties during the

totalitarian regime, the complexes and suspicions of the Romanian Orthodox Church in relation to its Catholic “sister”, and the illusions caused by messianic leaders who were easily substituted by new ones when times ask for it (Gheorghe). Florin Manolescu’s volume of essays *The Mystery of the Locked Room* (2002) illustrates the will to go back in time in an attempt to rewrite history. For instance, in one of the essays, a character living in communist Bucharest (ironically depicted as a Balkanised site) wants to make a trip into the past, into the nineteenth century, more precisely, in order to fix a historical error. Another story is a comic account of conspiracy theory and the paranoia that comes with power (Marcu).

Writing her first novels in the first decade of the 21st century, Doina Ruști is a Romanian author with an obvious predisposition for fantastic fiction, which she blends with accurate depictions of Romanian realities. Her success with the literary critics was matched by her popularity with the general readership, which explains probably the relatively fast pace at which she has published over the past years. In what follows, I will argue that her novel *The Ghost in the Mill* represents an interesting break with the magic realism practiced by some prominent Romanian young authors at the start of the twenty-first century, and, further, that its Gothic mode serves the same purpose: a coming to terms with communism. I will therefore focus particularly on the way in which the paraphernalia of Gothic fiction is used for such a purpose.

Doina Ruști grew up in a village in the southern part of Romania, in a family of school teachers struggling to survive in the ruthless world of post-war totalitarian communism. At the age of eleven, she lost her father, who was murdered in mysterious circumstances which have, even to this day, not been elucidated. Her life as a child and teenager was marked by insecurity, trauma, oppression, and the absurd rules and laws of the dictatorial regime. At the same time, as the author herself confesses, the atrocities of the totalitarian regime blended with the folkloric background of her parents’ village, ruled by tales of ghosts, supernatural forces, and mysterious, subterranean spirits. This folklore, rich in superstitions and magical elements, seems to have especially influenced the writing of Ruști’s novel *The Ghost in the Mill*, which has brought her the coveted prize of the Romanian Writers’ Union in 2008. Indeed, Ruști’s self-portrait seems haunted by the dark, legendary, fantastic elements inherited in her upbringing: “Once, there was a place in Bucharest where wretches were hanged. When boredom struck the city, the prince took a couple of villains and put them in the noose to cheer the people up. And it worked. The square would fill with people, who then left behind part of the trepidations of their blood upon the soil of death. Today, where the gallows stood, there is a crossroads where cars bump into one another. This is where I live, at the top of a concrete building overlooking the former gallows where life and death blend into each other. Out of the bitumen crust still emerge the dusty ghosts of the hanged and someday one of them will climb up to my place, as relaxed and happy as a branch in the summertime” (www.romanianwriters.ro). Doina Ruști’s publications also include short prose, reviews, and memoirs. As an academic expert in symbology, she has published many non-fictional works, such as *The Cultural Press*, *The Subliminal Message in Current Communications*, *An Encyclopedia of Humanist Culture*, and *A Dictionary of Symbols in the Work of Mircea Eliade*.

The publication of *The Ghost in the Mill* was preceded and in a way anticipated by two other novels which break away with realist conventions and which cultivate the experimental fiction that emerged around the turn of the century. Her first novel, *The Little Red Man*, which brought her an Award for Debut and a Prose Award in 2004, tells a story of internet, love, the hardships of intellectuals under communism, the importance of subliminal messages, and the role of the imagination for survival. In it, a little red man of mysterious origins becomes the companion of

the main female character. Her subsequent novel, *Zogru* (2006), which has been recently translated into Bulgarian and Italian, displays an even more intense interest in extending the boundaries and transgressing the realm of the immediate and, ultimately, of the real. The novel is a story with Gothic roots, whose universe is populated by vampires, ghosts, the legendary Black Man¹ and Dracula himself as a special guest. In addition to containing classical figures of the Gothic, the world of the novel is seriously threatened by a killer virus, working its way in postmodern vein. The characters wander the world, from cemeteries to monasteries, forests, medieval castles, while Zogru, arguably a dark spirit who travels back and forth in time, offers the author the opportunity to let entire chapters from Romanian history play out before the reader's eyes. As a mixture of historical novel, fantastic fiction and predominantly Gothic elements, *Zogru* can be read as a parody of vampire stories (which, let us not forget, did not originate in Romania or Eastern Europe, though Romania has been quite popular for its blood-thirsty count Dracula and for horror stories related to vampirism and blood drenching). In the novel, the ghost of Dracula is good-humoured, though equally menacing, and the legendary Black Man turns out to be just a frightened child who got lost from his parents.

Ruști has always admitted to the autobiographical rudiments which provide some of the basis for her novels. When asked in an interview for a Romanian magazine whether her writings are in any way connected with her biography, she answered convincingly that “everything is connected with the biography of the author” (Pop). Ruști confesses that, in *The Little Red Man*, she told the story of her father's death, wrapping it up in layer after layer of narrative in an act of subliminal manipulation. In *Zogru*, some of the events narrated come from her own life or from the lives of people she knows. *The Ghost in the Mill* is written partly as a biography of her great-grandfather, a school teacher and disciple of Spiru Haret, the influential nineteenth-century thinker and the founder of the modern Romanian educational system. Ion Niculescu, the school teacher in the novel, is a re-creation of her great-grandfather. At the end of the volume, the teacher helplessly watches his entire book collection being burnt in his very own front yard, as a result of party orders.

Doina Ruști confesses that, in writing *The Ghost in the Mill*, she had always wanted to write in the tradition of the ghost story, yet to do it in such a way as to speak about her life experience under communism (Rotaru). Haunted by the ghost of the dictatorship, Ruști tries to exorcise it by translating the life of villagers in the southern part of Romania into a Gothic story of dark secrets, guilt, failed relationships and lost friendships, betrayal, murder, despair, and tyranny. The writer manages to construct an accurate image of countryside Romania under dictatorial rule by deploying Gothic literary convention even in the absence of a Gothic tradition in Romanian literature and, correspondingly, of a Gothic sensibility among Romanian readers. Her novel's use of Gothic ingredients renders the text darker, but also livelier and, somewhat paradoxically, strongly authentic.

The Ghost in the Mill is made up of three seemingly unconnected stories, each bearing a suggestive title. The first, “The Secret Life of Adela Nicolescu”, is constructed as a meta-story and encompasses many autobiographical elements. The heroine, Adela, discovers in a library a book which seems to tell the story of her life, including secret details of which only she knew. She pursues an investigation on her own and finds out that the author of that book, Florian Pavel, actually plagiarized the novel from one particular blog on the internet, suggestively named www.ghost.ro. This first part of the novel blends third-person with first-person modes of narration, as the text from the book morphs with Adela's thoughts, opinions, and visions, up to

the point in which one cannot tell the difference between Adela's narrative and the story in the novel she bought.

The heroine in Pavel's novel is the young daughter of a primary school teacher (much like Doina Ruști herself), who lives in a village in the south of Romania. Her life is marked by her secret relationship with a ghost, whom she names Max, after a young boy (Maxu) who died in the village mill and whom she believes to have returned to haunt her. Even though, at the beginning, the ghost appears episodically, soon the image of Max becomes all pervasive and in Adela's eyes everyone in the village, from her family to the local authorities, seems to take on Max's physiognomy. The first part ends abruptly, with a return to the first-person narrator, when Adela discovers that in the novel and on the blog her life story is incomplete.

The second part is bulkier, at over two hundred pages, and is indeed the most extensive in the volume. Entitled "The Mill", it is an objective, omniscient, third-person account of life in the village of Adela's childhood a few days after the Chernobyl explosion of 1986. All the inhabitants of the village, including the members of the Securitate (the communist secret police), the militia, the school teacher, the secret-police informants, and the peasants believe that there is a ghost in the mill – the soul of a boy who was murdered there. The community has by now created an entire mythology around the troubled soul in the red mill, which they now regard with a mixture of fear and anxiety, but also with awe and respect.

Besides the ghost in the mill, which the entire community believed existed, the novel also employs several more personal ghosts. Each person in the community thinks they have a ghost of their own, a double which nobody else can see and which torments them for their wrongdoings. At the end of the second part, the mill is demolished on the orders of the local head of the secret police in an attempt to destroy the ghostly entity thought to inhabit it. The demolition of the mill is felt by each individual inhabitant, irrespective of where they were at the hour the place was razed. When the bulldozers penetrate the "flesh" of the mill, the soul of the building spreads in the atmosphere and takes refuge in the souls of the people with which it had long been connected.

The third story is called "Two Days," and presents two episodes in the life of Adela's father, Ion Nicolescu, the local school teacher. The first is a joyful, luminous day in 1910, a time of liberal rule in Romania. The other is set in 1953, roughly half a decade after the coming of communism, and it concerns the dreadful incident to which the first part of the novel had also referred. It is in the account of these two days that the origin of the ghost in the mill is revealed, so the third part connects with and provides the link between the other sections in the novel. It is also worth noting here that even though the novel apparently focuses on the story of Adela Nicolescu and her family, there is in fact no main protagonist. Moreover, a state of amoralism or, perhaps more accurately, a sense of suspended moral judgment pervades the story: one cannot state that the characters are intrinsically good or bad, positive or negative, though each of them helps perpetuate in some way the common practices and thereby the prison camp that was Romania under communism.

Although several interpretations may be given to *The Ghost in the Mill* (it can be read as a novel about betrayal, guilt, survival, or the atrocities of communism), it has been argued that it is ultimately a novel about a single entity which haunts people and makes them wonder whether they have lost or won anything over the years – that is, a novel about memory (Axinte). The central ghost is a ubiquitous spectre which colonizes the minds of all individuals, stemming from their past deeds which now resurface in the shape of a troubling image. In so doing, it moves beyond the status of an individual haunting spectre and ultimately embodies the shadow of

history, where the shadow can be understood as a state of mind or the emergence of a ghostly phantom from the depths of the historical psyche (Savoy 174). Even though originating in different places, the manifestations of this spectral entity stem from a common source: people's frustrations, doubts, guilt, despair, unanswered questions, dread, hidden secrets and undisclosed desires. They are undeniably brought about by the climate of terror, by people constantly having to look over their shoulders to make sure they are not being watched, although they very well know they are, at all times.

The central spirit that haunts everyone in the novel is, somewhat transparently, the shadow of communist times. It is a spectre which everyone is aware of, which they all have and cannot escape. Everybody has grown accustomed to carrying it, they often crave for it and occasionally find relief in its manifestations. Individuals even find refuge in its takeover of their minds, to the point of being possessed by another consciousness, until the shadow of the dictatorial regime becomes the double of their existence. Even though it is despised and feared, the odd apparition gives individuals the impression that they are unique, and that they are part of a greater design than their individual lives and personal histories – as communism was often said to be. The spectral appearance is collective, and every member of the community has a ghostly presence following them everywhere. However, each individual has the feeling that their ghost is exceptional, that nobody else is aware of the shadow they carry, whether wrapped around their necks or noticeable on their brow, like guilt and failure. Just as events in the larger, actual history of a community are reflected in personal and group histories, so the shadow of communism haunts every individual and his or her family, friends and neighbours. Thus, the fears and megalomaniacal drives of each individual take the shape of a demon, a ghost who acts as a spiritual double to their concrete existences and represents remains of lost identities which haunt the individuals in key moments of their lives (Axinte).

The origin of this ghost, which soon manages to take possession of the entire village and to spread its gloominess over the entire community, is revealed in the final section of the novel. The eruption of the spectre is directly linked to the coming of communists to the village and to the beginning of the so-called "Systematization" – a 1980s plan which aimed at the systematic "replacement" of Romanian villages with rationally-designed socialist towns. The emergence of this process, aiming to destroy the last traces of traditional structures, the historical and spiritual patrimony of Romanians and of national minorities in this country, is identified in the novel with the haunting shadow which disrupts the quiet life of the community and imposes itself on them as an atrocity. Through "Systematization", the communists targeted individuals' last spaces of freedom and refuge, such as the family or local religious communities, which constituted obstacles for social homogenization, for creating the "unique working people" and the "new man" (Berindei 3). The novel refers explicitly to this event in the episode in which young communists come to the teacher's house to burn his book collection. The teacher's hopelessness and suffering transcend the immediate reality and are translated into what would soon become the shade of an era:

And then Ion Niculescu's agony erupted like lava, soared to the sky through the corn tassels, white and hovering, like a ghost... Afterwards, like a floating spirit, it moved in the same feather-like rhythm, over the frozen road, then close to the women standing still in the end-of-autumn haze. Through the fig branches he could see his desperate soul, helpless and surrounded, a ball of bile, sneaking like liquid through the broken window pane, inside the red walls, in the belly of the live mill, to meet its

other half, happy and warm, which had been waiting there for forty years.² (Ruști 423)

Moreover, the relationships between all members of the community are altered as a result of the violent way in which the new regime spread its tentacles over the village: the teacher has his book collection burnt by the two boys he had tried hard to help while they were in school, and Lucica, a local young teacher, is raped during a party by the very professor she cherished and respected while she was a student in the same school. All the while children are asked to tell on their parents to Securitate agents, and old friendships are destroyed because the survival instinct forced people to spy on their friends and neighbours. Slowly but implacably, the inhabitants of totalitarian regimes turn into accomplices of their own abusers and oppressors (Miroiu 210). From this moment on, the entire community becomes part of a collective history of suffering, remorse, hopelessness, abuse and fear, initiated by the spread of communism (“...our real decline started one night, when Ceaușescu visited Comoșteni” 114), paralleled by individual and group dramas.

Besides the haunting spectre of communism, there is another ghost, which comes to blend with the former, since they are both results of the atrocities perpetrated by the regime: Max, the ghost of Maxu, a young boy killed in the old mill in the village. Maxu’s murder is a mystery, even though apparently a murderer has been identified – but, as it turns out, the wrong one, a mere scapegoat meant to conceal the real killer, a very influential person who served the party. After Maxu was murdered, rumours were spread that the mill was haunted. It seems that the dark secret of Maxu’s death materializes into the spirit which apparently colonizes the old edifice. The spectral voice might be understood as an example of what Nicolas Abraham calls “the phantom”. He claims that the departed who are most likely to haunt people are those who were “shamed during their lifetime or those who took unspeakable secrets to the grave”, in other words the individuals who have been abjected by their culture and their descendents. The phantom “is meant to objectify, even if under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life ... what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others” (Abraham 171). A relatively similar theory defines the notion of the “crypt”. In Abraham and Torok’s opinion,

Inexpressible mourning erects a secret tomb inside the subject. Reconstituted from the memories of words, scenes and affects, the objectal correlative of the loss is buried alive in the crypt, as a full-fledged person, complete with its own topography. The crypt also includes the actual or supposed traumas that made introjection impracticable. (Abraham 130)

Maxu’s death acts as a disruptive element in the life of the rather small rural community and it provides the latter with a gap that can only be filled with stories of the imagination, feelings and memories, melted into the image of the threatening spirit which resides in the body of the mill.

As a traditional Gothic site, the mill holds some secrets from the past, which haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or in any other way at the time the story takes place (Hogle 2). In Romanian literature, especially in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, mills were not an uncommon appearance. In classics such as Gala Galaction’s “Călifar’s Mill” (1903), for instance, the old building is a very controversial site, said to accommodate the Devil, which lures many young, brave men, who never go back to their homes. Another classic, Ioan Slavici’s *The Mill of Fortune* (1881), introduces a mill as a symbol of prosperity and love, which soon degenerates into a place of domestic violence, revenge and

betrayal, eventually to be burnt to the ground. Just like most Gothic locations, the old mill at the heart of Ruști's novel is at once alluring and threatening for the people in the village. It represents on the one hand a protective space, a space that offers refuge and privacy (preferred by casual lovers and a perfect playground for children, also providing a haven for illegal transactions). On the other hand, the mill also embodies a mysterious, magic, and supernatural space, a place of old secrets buried inside its walls and a scene of odd hauntings (everybody in the village believed that it was haunted by the ghost of Maxu, the young boy killed while playing in its perimeter). The mill thus becomes an uncanny site, an instance of a familiar, recognizable location turned threatening and alien as result of a dreadful event.

In the novel, the image of the mill, looming large and menacing, acting as a reminder of the horrible murder committed inside its walls but also providing refuge when it was needed, is strategically placed at the heart of the village – much like Hawthorne's scaffold – so that it dominates the local landscape:

The mill stands tall in the middle of the village, an old building made of red brick. It is as tall as a two-storey block and at the end of it there are the stairs, like a winner's podium, with three steps on the sides... On its façade there is one round window, then five large windows which look like black mouths, and on the top floor there is another small window, like an eyehole. If you look at it from the front, it resembles a giant cross, or a giant with a ragged hat. (173)

The mill's central location confers it the aura of an axis mundi, and everything in the community seems organized around the enticing mill, to which everyone is eventually drawn, no matter how keen the initial resistance: "Only a few of them haven't entered the mill yet, after being called, drawn or even forced to sneak in together with the fresh air, which comes in to give up its breath in outbursts born out of the minor histories hidden in the corners of this building standing at the heart of the village." (174)

However uncanny, it is believed and accepted as a fact by everyone that the old building is inhabited by a ghost: "the mill was the most visited place, but also the most dreaded, as everyone knew it was the den of the spectre haunting the village and subjecting the souls of men" (174). Everyone looks for refuge and privacy inside the old building. But at the same time, because the place was known to offer shelter to people trying to sidestep the system, the mill is one of the places under constant surveillance. Hence, the freedom people sought under its roof was deceiving and illusory: "Within the red walls, under the spell of a ubiquitous ghost, no one could take the chance on freedom. ... Good and bad, without discrimination, they all cuddled satisfied under the same cover which carried the shrewd and shameless face of Max, a being as transient as all of them." (171)

People's impressions about the old mill and its inhabitant are diverse:

Some people would mention a ghost or an angel in control of the red walls. Others were convinced that what was in there was a lethal force, whose horn pricked the belly of the world. There were also accounts of spectres or unbelievable metamorphoses. ... There were all kinds of stories, about people happy to feel the heart of the mill, but also about people frightened and confused as if under the constant threat of death. (303-5)

The common denominator, however, is people's feeling that, be it good or bad, angel or demon, superstition or real fact, the mysterious inhabitant of the red mill was akin to them and shared their destiny: "No one doubted that within the red walls lay a spirit akin to their spirit, born out of the bliss or misfortunes of several generations" (378). It becomes therefore obvious

that what started as the young boy's haunting spectre soon merges with the collective shadow of the era and turns into a ubiquitous, all-encompassing spirit that troubles the entire community.

When the communists come to the village to unleash the "Systematization," the mill is demolished. For the villagers the world changes as everyone loses (and in some sense gains back) a tiny part of themselves:

the village was taken over by yellow bulldozers, followed by a swinging crane, and a couple of tractor trailers. ... It had taken more than a half hour for everyone to comprehend what was actually going on, until the iron claw of the bulldozer penetrated the red wall. ... People would come from everywhere, breathless and convinced that they were all witnesses of a crucial moment. Most of them were accompanied by their very own ghosts, and they could feel their hearts sinking with the shrinking heart of their ghost. (369-70)

The effects that bringing down the mill has on people is dramatic: "Nobody said a word, but they were all seized by a pain stuffed down their throats... Then the great transformation began." (373-4) Trapped in the mill for so long, the energy of unspoken suffering, which survived decades of communism in the shape of a spectre, is finally returning to the community from which it originated: "And then, one by one, everyone welcomed their ghost within the secret crevices of their souls. They received it happy and unperturbed, hidden away from the world..." (374-5). Villagers are shocked to see the enormous body of the old edifice taken down by bulldozers and some even interpret it as a punishment for their wrong-doings, in a fashion similar to the ways in which people interpret natural disasters. The young school teacher Lucica, for instance, believes it to be a consequence of her illegal abortion. Like most people under communism, she has become accustomed to living permanently with guilt, since, as Miroiu has argued, guilt played an important role in the annihilation of resistance to official politics (Miroiu 209). In fact, Lucica's case is more dramatic because she is a woman, a victim of rape, who becomes pregnant and who wants to discard the unborn child. This too was treated as a crime during the dictatorial rule. Under communism, women's oppression was twofold: they were subjugated by the state as well as by men. Their work-day was double: in state-assigned jobs and at home. Besides the fact that they had to obey the patriarchal rule of (communist) men, their rights over their own bodies were limited in a world in which abortion was seen as "intrauterine massacre," not only because it was a "perfidious enemy of the biological future of the people" and altered the "fulfilment of female destiny", but also because it allegedly undermined the independence of the nation, represented an abuse against the "mother country" and the "native land", and diminished the patrimony of the "father party" (Miroiu 209).

Writing *The Ghost in the Mill* in order to exorcise the haunting spectre of communist times, Doina Ruști marks an interesting break with the Romanian literary tradition. In tune with international trends, she follows the pattern of ghost stories to reactivate a dreadful past that would not be stifled or silenced. Through the intrusion of unexplainable spectres in the life of a rural community under dictatorial rule and through the central image of a threatening and luring old mill, Ruști manages to create a Gothic novel born out of a history of fear, secrets, betrayal, guilt and broken ties. In so doing, she moves beyond the magic realism to which many writers resorted in the late communist and early post-communist period in an attempt to escape the levelling pressure of socialist realism and the censorship that came along with it. Although her use of Gothic themes and motifs represents a deviation from both old and new Romanian literary norms, which have never really accommodated the genre, the negotiation of the collective past with the tools provided by the Gothic ultimately proved successful, bringing the author high

critical acclaim and international recognition. Ruști capitalizes on the genre's interest in individual trauma and unrest, in the shattered autonomy of the individual, in the loss of coherence, wholeness and in fragmented consciousnesses, in failed relationships, oppression and suffocating anxiety. She deftly adapts the seemingly unlikely Gothic toolbox to Romanian social realities before December 1989, making the most of the genre's tried and tested disquieting, disruptive potential.

NOTES

- 1 The Black Man is a darker, more frightening Romanian equivalent of the Bogeyman. The invocation of the Black Man is usually employed to scare little children who misbehave. The Black Man also has a lighter correspondent in Romanian culture (and elsewhere), the closer equivalent of the Western Bogeyman: the Bau-Bau.
- 2 All excerpts from Doina Ruști's *The Ghost in the Mill* are my translation.

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