

“The Lost Child” and “The Womanless Novel”

An Exploratory Proposal for a Revisitation of the History of the Romanian Novel

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IN 1827, Goethe wrote a short celebratory poem dedicated to the United States of America. Titled “Amerika, du hast es besser” (America, you are better off), it is the only poem showing a sign of the great man’s interest in the New World. Moreover, it was a contextual poem, a proper *Gelegenheitsgedicht* whose occasion was the one-year visit in the States (April 1825–June 1826) of Karl Bernhard, duke of Saxe-Weimar, the second son of his friend and patron, Karl August. After his return from the American voyage, Karl Bernhard offered Goethe his travel diary, hoping for a positive reaction before its publication, due in 1828. Which indeed came, and was indeed positive—the poem about America being its main content.

In the German original, the poem reads thus:

*Amerika, du hast es besser
Als unser Kontinent, der alte,
Hast keine verfallenen Schlösser
Und keine Basalte.
Dich stört nicht im Innern,
Zu lebendiger Zeit,
Unnützes Erinnern
Und vergeblicher Streit.*

*Benutzt die Gegenwart mit Glück!
Und wenn nun eure Kinder dichten,
Bewahre sie ein gut Geschick
Vor Ritter-, Räuber- und Gespenstergeschichten.¹*

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What I find striking in Goethe's little poem is the representation of American poets as "children" (*eure Kinder*), even more, children who need protection, not mature enough to deal with "tales of bandits, ghosts and knights." This infantilization of the poet, or rather of the prose writer (because the poem speaks about "histories," *Geschichten*), was a quite unusual trope, both in terms of the classical imagery, for which the composition of poetry (*dichten*) was associated with heroism (*arma virumque cano*, as *The Aeneid's* incipit famously put it), as well as in the terms of the then brand new Romantic poetry, which Goethe knew quite well, for which the poet was the embodiment of the rebellion, a demonic figure, as for example in Byron's *Manfred* (1817) or *Cain* (1821). The image of the poet as a fearful and vulnerable child, who needs protection in front of his own stories about "ghosts and knights," must have been a shocker for Goethe's contemporaries. And even more so since it was associated with the image of "America," whose successful revolution and wars were hardly corresponding to the childish image chosen by Goethe.

Approximately one and a half centuries after Goethe's poem, there came an unexpected confirmation of his anticipation under the form of a celebrated study of literary history—Leslie Fiedler's much discussed Freudian history of the American novel. Of course, Fiedler never mentions Goethe's little poem—if he ever knew about its existence. I am certain, however, that it would have amused him to see this unknowing anticipation (coming from The Great Man himself!) of the infantilization which Fiedler asserts to lie at the very core of the American narrative. First, Fiedler asks himself if there is such a thing as an "American novel";² he concludes that no sub-genre of the European novel has been invented in American fiction. However, he finds that there is "a real sense in which our [American] prose fiction is immediately distinguishable from that of Europe"—but this particular feature is, Fiedler contends, something "difficult for Americans to confess":

our novels seem not primitive, perhaps, but innocent, unfallen in a disturbing way, almost juvenile. The great works of American fiction are notoriously at home in the children's section of the library, their level of sentimentality precisely that of a pre-adolescent. This is part of what we mean when we talk about the incapacity of the American novelist to develop; in a compulsive way he returns to a limited world of experience, usually associated with his childhood, writing the same book over and over again until he lapses into silence or self-parody.³

This is what I half-jokingly called the confirmation of Goethe's anticipation about writers as "America's children": the identification by a literary critic (the *enfant terrible* of his generation, Leslie Fiedler) of childhood and juvenility as the most specific trait of American fiction, throughout its entire existence. The American novelist, says Fiedler, has all the traits of a perpetual child: on the one hand, he is always finding his own language, he is forever learning to talk, forever *beginning* (Fiedler's italics); on the other, they lack the necessary psychological expertise for adequately "treating the passionate encounter of a man and a woman"—thus, the American novel is either "womanless" ("the womanless *Moby Dick*," he writes sardonically and accurately, calling it "our great Romantic *Unroman*, our typical anti-novel") or fails in presenting "any full-fledged, mature women," its

feminine presences being rather "monsters of virtue or bitchery," exemplary "symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality."²⁴

Such an incapacity for romance cannot possibly generate American versions of the great sentimental novels; "where is our *Madame Bovary*, our *Anna Karenina*, our *Pride and Prejudice* or *Vanity Fair*?" laments Fiedler rhetorically, but (again) quite accurately. What it *can* generate is a world "not only asexual," but one "of fear and loneliness, a haunted world; and the American novel is pre-eminently a novel of terror," whose hero is "more motherless child than free man."²⁵ The Freudian mechanism through which horror replaces sexual experience is summarized by Fiedler as follows:

*horror is essential to our literature. It is not merely a matter of terror filling the vacuum left by the suppression of sex in our novels, of Thanatos standing in for Eros. Through these gothic images are projected certain obsessive concerns of our national life . . . Our classic literature is a literature of horror for boys . . . Our flowers of evil are culled for the small girl's bouquet, our novels of terror (Moby Dick, The Scarlet Letter, Huckleberry Finn, the tales of Poe) are placed on the approved book lists of Parents' Committees who nervously fuss over the latest comic books.*⁶

Thus, in Fiedler's terms, the American novel is a succession of gothic narratives, propelled forward not by a central romance, like in the European prototype, but by variegated forms of horrors (be it only "horror for boy"). A "womanless novel," unwilling or unable to treat "the passionate encounter between a man and woman," so that the feminine figures are "monsters of virtue or bitchery"—and its hero is "more motherless child than free man." And, in some other respect, an "almost juvenile" novel, stuck in a childhood it cannot escape, saying everything for the first time, always trying to learn its own language.

The American novel *selon* Fiedler: a womanless and childish narration of terror—always *beginning*.

2 • EVEN THOUGH at the time he wrote his history of the American novel Fiedler lacked, due to chronological fatality, Immanuel Wallerstein's terminology related to world-systems analysis, it is obvious throughout his whole 700-page study that he understood American literature as a semiperipheral one orbiting around the European core; for him, "to write, then, about the American novel is to write about the fate of certain European genres in a world of alien experience." For him, the American novel is explicitly the European novel set in a new scenery, developing in new conditions of life, in "a world without a significant history or a substantial past," "doomed to play out the imaginary childhood of Europe." Therefore, in its *punctum origo*, in its incipient conditions of existence, it is European—literally and in all the other meanings; it has to be considered within the European history of the genre in order to seize the strange alterations it has brought to its original prototype. In other words, "the American novel is only *finally* American; its appearance is an event in the history of the European spirit—as, indeed, is the very invention of America itself."²⁷

A model of literature transplanted in a new geographical and historical context, within “a social system, one that has boundaries, structures, member groups, rules of legitimation, and coherence”⁸—this is Wallerstein’s 1974 definition of the world-system. What Fiedler describes in his 1970 history of the American novel is indeed what Wallerstein will define in 1974 as the core-periphery mechanism, functioning in order to adapt a literary genre and some of its sub-genres to new conditions of existence. If he had written his study after Wallerstein’s, Fiedler might have found it useful to describe the American novel as semiperipheral in relation with the European one—which functions both as a model and as a source of anxiety of influence. One must immediately notice here that this core-periphery adaptive mechanism functioned not only in the European novel’s relation with its American offspring, but also in *all* its relations with the cultures neighboring Europe, from Russia to Turkey, for which Europe was an aspirational model—with the novel understood as one of the main vectors of Europeanization. One could think of a comparative study between the European novel and the transformation brought to it by each of these adaptive mutations; more precisely, the study should focus on the comparison of the mutations between themselves, on the manner in which each of these semiperipheral cultures adapted the European prototype according to its own needs and specificity. The result would be an application of what Earl Miner named “comparative poetics,” with the European novel as “foundational poetics”—and all the variants (American, Russian, Turkish, etc.) not only as historical and geographical adaptations, but also as “events in the history of the European spirit,” revealing as much about the importing cultures as about their common prototype.⁹ The present study is the outline of such an exercise in “comparative poetics” between the beginnings and early development of the American novel and those of the Romanian one, aiming at observing how these semiperipheral literary cultures operate strikingly similar mutations to the European prototype of the novel—and also trying to indicate the specific differences between these mutations.

It goes without saying that one can identify a similar anxiety of influence in relation with the European core literature(s) in *all* semiperipheral cultures influenced by it. Fiedler identifies it in the case of the American novel; but, if we look more attentively to the history of the Russian novel, or to that of the Turkish one, we can easily trace it—sometimes even to contemporary novelists. A remarkable example is Orhan Pamuk—whose confession regarding his troubled relation with Europe and European literature is triply important: *primo*, because Pamuk is a major writer, and any confession coming from him is highly significant in itself; *secundo*, because it illustrates precisely this adaptive tension between the Turkish semiperipheral literature and the European core one(s); *tertio*, because his confession makes a surprising connection between Turkish literature and Russian literature, revealing a similar attitude of the periphery towards the center. These are Pamuk’s own words, from a confessional text in *Other Colours*:

For people like me, who live uncertainly on the edge of Europe with only our books to keep us company, Europe has figured always as a dream, a vision of what is to come; an apparition at times desired and at times feared; a goal to achieve or a danger. A future—but never a memory. . . . I am one of many intellectuals on the edge of Europe obsessively engaged with

*this future . . . When Dostoyevsky published his impressions of Europe in a Russian newspaper a hundred and thirty years ago, he asked, "Of Russians who read magazines and newspapers, who does not know twice as much about Europe as Russia?" and then he added, half in anger, half in jest, "Actually, we know Europe ten times better; but I said 'twice as much' so as not to offend."*¹⁰

And again, towards the end of his rather short, but intense confession:

*For those like myself who live on its edge and sustain an obsessive interest in it, [Europe] is before all else a dream forever changing its face and character. My generation, and the generations that came before us, have for the most part believed in this dream more fervently than European themselves.*¹¹

The Turkish Pamuk, like the Russian Dostoevsky before him, and like so many other great novelists living at the peripheries of Europe before them, have their own personal stories about their relation with the European novel, or with European literature—in which they believed most of the times “more fervently than the Europeans themselves.” A history of the European novel mutating in other parts than Europe itself, from its peripheries to the Global South—a history of the non-European mutations of the European novel remains to be written. It would teach us all an essential lesson not only about what the novel is—but also about the meanings and limitations of being European.

3 RETURNING TO the early American novel in order to draw a comparison with the early Romanian one, we bear in mind Fiedler’s characterization of it: an incessantly *beginning* womanless and childish narration of terror—which builds into an American version of the gothic, quite different from the European one. In Europe, the novel of the period (early 19th century) was a mixture of gothic and baroque, geminating the disturbing occult of the former with the hypnotic and melancholic aestheticism of the latter. In his fundamental essay about Joseph de Maistre, Isaiah Berlin passingly (but accurately) synthesizes the “baroque novels of the time” as follows, while describing Baron Antoine-Jean Gros’s famous painting of Napoleon at Eylau:

*It represents a horseman of indeterminate origin, a strange, mysterious rider set against an equally mysterious background, l’homme fatal, in touch with secret forces, a man of destiny, coming from nowhere, moving in accordance with occult laws to which all humanity and indeed all nature is subject, the exotic hero of the baroque novels of the time—Melmoth the Wanderer, The Monk, Obermann—new, hypnotic, sinister and deeply disturbing.*¹²

A “womanless novel,” Fiedler writes—for the Romanian reader interested in the history of the Romanian novel, this sounds strangely similar to some notes by G. Călinescu regarding the said genre penned in an article titled “Câteva cuvinte despre roman” (A few words about the novel, 1938). The great critic offers here a list of six “essential subjects” of the novel; as one can instantly notice, only one of them deals explicitly with

the image of the woman, namely “the unsatisfied woman,” a belated slave of “romantic passion,” while the other five deal either directly with the man (i. “the ordinary ambitious young man”; ii. “the idealist ambitious”; iii. “the mature man,” consummated in “tardy erotic experiences”) or with non-specific categories (“the novel of the incapacity to adapt, leading not to lyricism, as in our novellas, but to envy,” and “the history of the man or of the female who, unaccomplished in their own lives, direct their energies upon their children, becoming hateful characters for the others and oppressive ones for their own progeny”).¹³ For Călinescu, the novel is obviously a literary object in which the woman is underrepresented or misrepresented, or in any case completely dominated by the male figure(s); as such, the novel can for him very well become “womanless,” not populated even by those feminine “monsters of virtue or bitchery” identified by Fiedler. It is too strange a coincidence—two eminent critics, a Romanian and an American one, the first active mainly before 1945, the latter after World War II, while thinking about the history of the novel in their respective cultures both reach the conclusion that their novel is “womanless,” or in any case that it can dispense with any remarkable feminine figure. Fiedler at least writes a few dozens of pages trying to explain why the “romance,” the “love story,” the “passionate encounter between a man and a woman,” central to the European novel, is not present in the American one—and the sexual tension is replaced by “horror for boys.” Călinescu, in his article, never seems to be bothered by the idea that the woman is so much under- or misrepresented in the novel; what Fiedler finds an absence needing an explanation is, in Călinescu’s case, a non-problem. Anyway, this striking similarity between the American and the Romanian novel is something which needs a more extensive investigation—the question being, of course, why an adaptation of the novel in this semiperipheral cultures, so different from each other in their historical conditions, had to be done with the diminution of the female figure. What were the reasons for which this mutation happened? Is it local, limited to the Romanian and American novel, due to some still unidentified shared specificity? Or is it something larger, maybe even global, having to do with all the novels which started their existence much later than the European prototype? Obviously, in order to answer these (and other similar) questions, one needs an extended comparison with what happens to the female figure and to “romance” in other avatars of the European novel (Russian, Turkish, Latin American, in the Global South, etc.) This could constitute the substance of a groundbreaking quantitative and comparative study.

Moreover, Călinescu’s six “essential subjects” of the novel are, as Andrei Terian convincingly shows in a comment on Călinescu’s article, an oversimplification of Balzac’s typology which comprised over 3,000 such “essential subjects” and character types.¹⁴ Thus, the list of necessary questions increases: what made Călinescu eliminate the female figures from Balzac’s “essential subjects”? Is the fact due only to the great critic’s misogyny—or does his misogyny meet some actual traits of the Romanian novel? Is the novel “womanless” only in our critic’s eyes—if so, why? Or is it (as Fiedler claims about the American novel) really devoid of female figures—and if so, why? And what has replaced “the vacuum left by the suppression of sex in our novels,” in Fiedler’s terms? The American critic thought, as we have seen, that horror (“for boys,” though) was the replacement of romance in his literature, leading to a peculiar type of American gothic.

What is then the replacement of romance in Romanian novel—if it really is as scanty in female figures as Călinescu thinks it to be? May it be a version of a Romanian gothic—if there is such a thing? What are then its distinctive features?

We may identify some tentative answers if we browse through Călinescu's *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (History of the Romanian literature from its origins to the present) and read what he has to say about the early Romanian novel. In what concerns Nicolae Filimon's *Ciocoii vechi și noi* (Upstarts Old and New), for example, Călinescu seems indeed to identify some kind of "Satanism typical to popular novels" which is fairly close to what we could call a Romanian gothic: "The characters display a Satanism typical to popular novels. The infernal heroes scream out loud their intentions and relish theatrically in their victories."¹⁵ In the novels of Filimon's successor, Călinescu openly admits that the family is the object of the novelists' observation rather than the individual (this also means the female individual—replaced by family as a whole); for example, a general conclusion on Duiliu Zamfirescu's novels states: "In *The Comăneșteni* novel cycle we find all that Zolaesque mixture of scientism and idealism. The observed object is not the individual, but the family and through it the nation."¹⁶ The same diminution of the individual (*y compris* the individual female) is noticed in the novels of Slavici:

*like in all pastoral milieus, the social order is separated by the State civilization and relies on personal pacts. . . . We have before our eyes silent people, hard to move, stubborn in their prejudices and customs, in which the collective thought is stronger than the individual one.*¹⁷

And so on. It is plausible that a systematic re-reading of Călinescu's history having in mind the effacement of the female figure in the Romanian novel, combined with the search of its particular replacement in the said novel, would lead to significant unexpected results, quite comparable with those achieved by Leslie Fiedler in the case of the American novel.

Undoubtedly, a systematic study should practice this re-reading on all our (few) major literary histories. In Manolescu's *Istoria critică a literaturii române* (Critical history of Romanian literature), for example, the results are just as remarkable. In the chapter dedicated to the emergence of the novel in Romanian literature, Manolescu reacts thus to an observation made in his history of Romanian literature by Mihai Zamfir, who claimed that Romanian prose around 1848 is dominated by Memory against Imagination:¹⁸

*The stylistic definition of memorialistic prose being correct in Zamfir (relative inability of epic invention, literaturization of the biographical and appeal to the document with non-literary purpose, such as the memoir, the epistle, and the scientific text), there remains to be discussed whether we can classify it as naive and mature, as the critic proposes. Negruzzi is no more naive (neither aesthetically nor psychologically) than Ghica, nor Kogălniceanu than Sion. Probably the most remarkable feature of our Romantic prose (except for the novel) is its Alexandrianism, the fact that it is from the beginning old in mentality and sophisticated in style.*¹⁹

What I find remarkable in Manolescu's reaction is his bracketed observation that the Romanian novel after 1848 is the *only* genre which is not "old in mentality"—an observation which can be consistently linked with Fiedler's description of the American novel as "almost juvenile." And then there is this crucial assessment Manolescu makes regarding the "lost child" as "the most characteristic figure" of the post-1848 novel—which is the exact correspondent of Fiedler's description of the typical hero of the American novel as "more motherless child than free man": "the suburbs have of course a *pendant* in the upper classes, from where usually comes the mythical figure, probably the most characteristic one, along with that of the 'lost child,' namely the 'philanthropist,' the rich benefactor."²⁰ The radical difference seems to be that, while in Fiedler's understanding this child-centered novel generated a "horror for boys" labeled by him as "American gothic," for Manolescu the "popular novel" in the era of post-1848 Romanian Romanticism is built from the stuff of fairy tales:

*What is really characteristic of post-1848 Romanticism is especially the formula of the popular mystery novel, and this one depicts society in a mythical and slanted manner. The conflict does not employ concrete and historically valid human figures, but rather exponential heroes, incarnations of religious and ethical principles. The mythology created by this popular novel is similar to that of fairy tales.*²¹

In American literature, "the motherless child" transformed the novel into "horror for boys"; in the Romanian one, "the lost child" turned it into a fairy tale.

4. NEEDLESS TO say, the present article is but an exploratory proposal for a revisitation of the history of Romanian novel—which to be examined not strictly *an sich*, as it was done until now, but in comparison with the mutations undergone by the genre in other semiperipheral cultures. As we have seen, even at a cursory survey, such as the present one, striking similarities can be identified, as well as telling differences; an extensive comparative study (following Earl Miner's understanding of "comparative poetics"), also based on quantitative research, could provide results not only relevant for the mutations of the genre and its evolution—but also capable of recalibrating our perception of what lies at the core of our own literature. □

Notes

1. In Daniel Platt's translation: "America, you've got it better/ Than our old continent. Exult!/ You have no decaying castles/ And no basalt./ Your heart is not troubled,/ In lively pursuits,/ By useless old remembrance/ And empty disputes.// So use the present day with luck!/ And when your child a poem writes,/ Protect him, with his skill and pluck./ From tales of bandits, ghosts and knights."

2. Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London: Paladin, 1970), 23–24: “Between the novel and America there are peculiar and intimate connections. A new literary form and a new society, their beginnings coincide with the beginnings of the modern era and, indeed, help to define it. . . . But is there, as certain continental critics have insisted, an ‘American novel,’ a specific sub-variety of the form? . . . far from being an anti-culture, we are merely a branch of Western culture; and that there is no ‘American novel,’ only local variants of standard European kinds of fiction: American sentimental, American gothic, American historical romance, etc. Certainly no single sub-genre of the novel was invented in the United States. Yet the peculiarities of our variants seem more interesting and important than their resemblances to the parent forms.”
3. Fiedler, 24.
4. As Fiedler’s paragraph is essential in understanding his book’s thesis, and as it will also prove instrumental in the case I am trying to build here for the Romanian novel, I reproduce it here in extenso, for a clearer view and understanding: “Merely finding a language, learning to talk in a land where there are no conventions of conversation, no special class idioms and no dialogue between classes, no continuing literary language—this exhausts the American writer. He is forever *beginning*, saying for the first time (without real tradition there can never be a second time) what it is like to stand alone before nature, or in a city as appallingly lonely as any virgin forest. He faces, moreover, another problem, which has resulted in a failure of feeling and imagination perceptible at the heart of even our most notable works. Our great novelists, though experts on indignity and assault, on loneliness and terror, tend to avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman, which we expect at the center of a novel. Indeed, they rather shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality” (Fiedler, 24).
5. Fiedler, 26.
6. Fiedler, 27–30.
7. Fiedler, 30.
8. Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century* (New York: Academic Press, 1974), 347.
9. For a clearer understanding of Miner’s terminology about what a “true intercultural process” of “comparative poetics” really involves, see Earl Miner, *Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990).
10. Orhan Pamuk, *Other Colours: Writings on Life, Arts, Books and Cities*, translated by Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2015), 190.
11. Pamuk, 192.
12. Isaiah Berlin, “Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism,” in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, edited by Henry Hardy (London: John Murray, 1990), 92.
13. G. Călinescu, “Câteva cuvinte despre roman,” in *Opere: Publicistică*, edition coordinated by Nicolae Mecu, vol. 3 (1936–1938), text edited, notes and commentaries by Alexandra Ciocărlie, Magdalena Dragu, Nicolae Mecu, Oana Soare, and Pavel Țuguî, foreword

- by Eugen Simion (Bucharest: Academia Română, Fundația Națională pentru Știință și Artă, 2007), 1477.
14. Andrei Terian, *G. Călinescu: A cincea esență* (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2009), 157 et passim.
 15. G. Călinescu, *Istoria literaturii române de la origini până în prezent* (Bucharest: Fundația Regală pentru Literatură și Artă, 1941), 315.
 16. Călinescu, 475.
 17. Călinescu, 450–451.
 18. This is Zamfir's hypothesis against which Manolescu reacts: "[Romanian prose around 1848] establishes its stylistics on the dominance of Memory against Imagination. If the latter represents the capability of creating and staging imaginary worlds, Memory is antipodal to Imagination. / In stylistic terms, Memory involves the narration of experiences directly lived by the author or by its characters; thus it is assignable to Memory the reproduction or reshaping of some documents—administrative, political, economic, historical etc.—non-literary *per se*." Mihai Zamfir, *Scurtă istorie: Panoramă alternativă a literaturii române*, vol. 1 (Iași–Bucharest: Polirom/Cartea Românească, 2011), 108.
 19. Nicolae Manolescu, *Istoria critică a literaturii române: 5 secole de literatură*, 2nd rev. and enl. edition (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 2019), 244.
 20. Manolescu, 326.
 21. Manolescu, 328.

Abstract

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The present article is an exploratory proposal for a revisitation of the history of the Romanian novel—which to be examined not strictly *an sich*, as it was done until now, but in comparison with the mutations undergone by the genre in other semiperipheral cultures. Even at a cursory survey, such as this one, striking similarities can be identified, as well as telling differences; an extensive comparative study (following Earl Miner's understanding of "comparative poetics"), also based on quantitative research, could provide results not only relevant for the mutations of the genre and its evolution—but also capable of recalibrating our perception of what lies at the core of our own literature.

Keywords

history of the American novel, history of the Romanian novel, comparative poetics, semiperipheral literatures, mutations of the European novel