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**FASCICULA  
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2025**

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Volume 32**



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Play and Literature :  
Aesthetic, Philosophical and Identity  
Dimension



# THE GAME OF SHADOWS. MIHAIL SEBASTIAN'S THEATER

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**Abstract:** *This article aims to investigate the playful dimension of Mihail Sebastian's theater, focusing on how play and games constitute not only dramatic devices (techniques), but also mechanisms for constructing and deconstructing identity and questioning reality. The analysis considers the four plays in his dramatic repertoire (The Nameless Star, The Holiday Game, The Last Hour, and The Island) and starts from the premise that, for Sebastian, play and games represent a fundamental aesthetic category through which the author artistically explores the tension between reality and unreality, constraint and freedom, the desire to escape and the need to confront reality. Essential structures of his theater, "ludus" and "paidia", as understood by Roger Caillois, fulfill a dual function: on the one hand, they open a temporary sequence of liberation, fantasy, and experimentation, in which the mask plays a primordial role in constructing the mirage, and, on the other hand, they expose and ironize the negative aspects. "locus" becomes a key concept through which the playwright inscribes himself in a modern tradition of playfulness, where it, synonymous with illusion, understood simultaneously as a space of freedom, a travesty of being, a critical/ satirical mechanism, and a solution for survival, is not the opposite of existential gravity, but rather the very means by which it is expressed and problematized.*

**Key-words:** game/ play, illusion, escape, Chronos, identity/ otherness

\*

## **Escapism and Illusionism**

Before becoming a playwright, as Mircea Tomuș observed (Tomuș, 1969, pp. 286-299), Sebastian had lived in the world of theater, written theater reviews, and debated issues related to repertoire, interpretation, and directorial vision in dedicated articles. A work of artistic maturity, bearing his unmistakable stylistic imprint, the four plays, "thinner, intellectualized farces with serious social and moral implications" (Crohmălniceanu, 2003, p. 385), are undeniably relevant today and absolutely captivating in their sensitivity and elegiac tone. They captivate

today's audience, which is very different from that of their first performances, perhaps precisely because of their slightly outdated "poetry" and "humanity" (Pop, 2007, p. 11). The audience, although not experiencing dramatic upheavals, can dream<sup>1</sup> alongside the heroes, stepping into their story<sup>2</sup>, while one eye laughs and the other cries. His atmospheric theater, "dreamlike, poetic"<sup>3</sup> (Grăsoiu, 1986, p. 180) possesses a lyricism which, far from being a simple compositional artifice, is the result of the writer's own unique way of looking at and understanding life (Râpeanu, 1966, p. 176). By no means "stuck in the realm of the frivolity of boulevard theater" (Mihăilescu, 2007, p. 10), it clearly stands out in the dramatic landscape shaped by Lucian Blaga (mythical) and Camil Petrescu (knowledge and its problems).

Happiness, with its many facets, becomes the overarching theme of Sebastian's dramaturgy. His heroes, *alter egos* of the author<sup>4</sup>, hypersensitive, maladjusted, and nonconformist, crushed between limits and limitations, obsessively desire it, stubbornly seek it, in an endeavor that requires escaping from a flat, confining, hostile, and alien, and "the acceptance of an illusory world, of imagination" (Crohmălniceanu, 2003, p. 385), condemned to be temporary: the seriousness of the game reveals the profoundly human nature of playfulness, but also its impossibility to last forever. Practicing escapism is equivalent to illusion, translated as dreaming, isolation (pushed to the limits of insularity), sublimation, denial in fantasy, the presence of the mirrored double and, above all, the mask<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> As Ion Vlad intuited, noting: "Moving away from direct quotation, the reader recomposes the text himself. It will belong entirely to us, we will hear it. We will hear our own replies, and the text ceases to exist in its old form." (Vlad, 1972, p. 257) As long as theater itself is nothing more than "spectacle, that is, mirage, that is, artifice", and "the mask expresses and satisfies this need to step beyond" (Mihail Sebastian, in an article in *Rampa*, September 22, 1935, p. 1, quoted by Narcis Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15), the spectator can detach himself and, depersonalized, partially identify with or become one with the heroes.

<sup>2</sup> For Sebastian, theater is "a fiction you believe in", "a game you participate in" (Sebastian, 1935, p. 1, apud Zărnescu, 1988, p. 14).

<sup>3</sup> We must not forget that the writer, in his capacity as essayist, critic, and theater chronicler, advocated for lyricism in theater, which was nothing more than a laboratory in which the sensibility of an era finds, formulates, and legislates its self-awareness: "Thought, poetry, meditation do not form [...] a mere unfortunate ballast of theater, but on the contrary, theater can only be saved as an art through poetry and thought." (Sebastian, 2015, p. 139)

<sup>4</sup> The author often spoke in the pages of his *Journal* about his stubborn search for an "ideal of happiness", equivalent to an "ideal of life" that was at least tolerable, if it could not be lived fully in all aspects of reality. Consequently, his avatar characters become spokespersons for the writer's permanent desire to give materiality to that tormenting What might have been, which marked his life (Sebastian, 1996, p. 402)

<sup>5</sup> The mask is a corollary of "the tragedy of a sensitivity that cannot be realized" (Sebastian, 1928, pp. 1-2), which "responds to our instinct for escape. An instinct like hunger, like thirst,

Some characters practice this game<sup>1</sup> “seriously” (in Huizinga’s sense, 2003: 43, “[...] the game has rules that are willingly accepted, it is freedom that satisfies ideals of expression and social ideals, it creates order, it is order.”) in a lucid, conscious way, because they exercise their imagination and are trained in illusion, while others act mechanically or instinctively or are completely unconscious. In their daring attempt to carve out a bearable pseudo-existence, where restrictions, inauthenticity, and illogicality can be combated through a metaphorical release, they must adapt the rules of the game to their own horizon of expectation and alter the facts of reality, playing with the axis of time and space, modifying their predetermined trajectory, far from their conventional linearity, dilating or contracting them until the limits are completely diluted, and with identity, by practicing a kind of agnosia. Only in this way can the mirage, with all its inherent provisionality, acquire the proof and validity of a pure experience.

Trained in the art of escapism, fervently practicing (self)deception, the characters in his melodramas, although they possess the inner strength to build a system of levers through which they can temporarily desert their own half-lives and apparently master the rules of the game of happiness, of real life, they will not emerge victorious from the battle against conformism and convention, continuing to merely exist rather than live, tasting failure with wounded sensitivity and loneliness. Although, “sensitive emotional reeds” (Grăsoiu, 1986, p. 199) have glimpsed the shadow of another kind of game played by the fairies and have experienced, as in a shadow theater, for a short period, the illusion of a projected life, they will ultimately capitulate in the face of opacity, triviality, loss of identity, and annihilation.

## **The Mirage and Its Illusions**

In Mihail Sebastian’s theater, acting and playfulness are not just simple dramatic devices (techniques), but also mechanisms for questioning and (de)constructing identity and benignly altering reality. Gifted with extraordinary sensitivity, the heroes of the four plays construct a tolerable pseudo-existence for themselves. Captive to routine, like sufferers condemned to immobility, they seek to live in an immediate unreality

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like love, a sumptuous instinct, of course, luxurious and expensive, but no less natural.” (Sebastian, 1935, p. 1)

<sup>1</sup> Which, according to Caillois’ definition, possesses all the constituent elements: it is free (unburdened by obligations), separate (delimited in time and space), uncertain (its course cannot be determined, as it allows for innovation/ improvisation), unprofitable (free), controlled (governed by rules), and fictitious (imagination or fantasy). (Caillois, 2001, pp. 9-10)

(similar to that described by Blecher), while the mask, the simulacrum, becomes the only desirable and bearable reality. By abdicating lucidity, play, the gamification of one's own life, can become a palliative.

The characters' ideals of happiness, seemingly different, are nevertheless similar in their essential features. Each of them achieves it in their own personal, highly individualized way: Ștefan Valeriu, from *Jocul de-a vacanța* (The Holiday Game, the title itself announcing the playful dimension), finds it in an isolated guesthouse in the forest, lost in the mountains, in an escape that completely breaks him away from his ordinary life; Mona, the unknown woman from *Steaua fără nume* (Star Without a Name), in a simple house in a dusty province, on the arm of a man who cannot afford the luxury of offering her a branch of white lilac in February ("I'm happy, my dear. Do you hear me? Happy. There is so much sun, so much light. And these flowers, look... they are the most beautiful flowers in the world. It's as if they all raise their heads at once and say, 'Good morning!'); Alexandru Andronic and Magda Minu, from *Ultima oră* (The Last Hour), on a journey in the footsteps of Alexander the Great; Nadia, from *Insula* (The Island), in an isolated place "...with lots of light, lots of blue, lots of sky... plants and flowers, and colors, and a wide horizon...". For the delicate Professor Miroiu, happiness lies in another galaxy ("There are evenings when the whole sky rustles with life... when, if you listen carefully, you can hear the forests and oceans murmuring on the last star — fantastic forests and fantastic oceans — evenings when the whole sky is full of signs and calls, as if from one planet to another, from one star to another, beings who have never seen each other are searching for each other, sensing each other, calling each other."), while Corina sees it as a constructed illusion of a desirable identity: "Maybe you're the Prince of Wales. Maybe I'm a great dancer. [...] Stay that way. What do you want me to find out about you? That you're a little engineer, or a little lawyer, or a little architect. [...] That all year long you've been saving money naively, which embarrasses you, so you can afford a month's vacation... [...] Let me be the stranger who breaks away from you, to return to a life of mystery..." Bogoiu finally lives his dream of being a sea wolf, while the trio on *the Island*, participating in a modern Robinson Crusoe adventure, delude themselves with the hallucinogenic effects of aspirin abuse.

Always waiting for something important to spice up their mundane lives, fill the void, or change the course of their destiny, heroes forget to live in the present. For them, ataraxia can be achieved if they obtain a precarious balance, peace, and calm, even if these are gained at the cost of renunciation or painful capitulation. Under the assault of the trivial and the opacity of a world in which they cannot or do not want to find their place, the heroes

fight their battles with the same weapons. If “in the formula of happiness, dreams and symbols play a special role” (Georgescu, 1964, p. 92), forgetfulness and feigned ignorance seem to be the key. Disguise, *qui-pro-quo*, a kind of endophasia combined with self-induced prosopagnosia (thought of in a metaphorical sense), and the shaping of the axis of time are the favorite tools of the participants in the game of life, which, far from being frivolous, represents a form of autonomous existence with its own rules.

Ștefan Valeriu, possessing both a propensity for play and experience, becomes the initiator of a collective experiment: within the isolated mountain villa, he establishes the rules of an “absolute vacation”, in which any reference to everyday life is prohibited, including professions, social roles, obligations, and even real names. By giving up their identifying details and completely abandoning themselves, the ordinary world is suspended, and the characters, despite their initial reluctance, enter an alternative reality governed by the logic of the game. This temporary reality is, however, a mental construct that inevitably takes on a utopian character. Although it promises liberation from external constraints, at the same time it tests the characters’ resistance to freedom. Each of the participants responds differently to this challenge: some experience it as a chance for reinvention, while others fear the consequences of the suspension of identity. The conflict in the play arises precisely from the fragility of the playful convention, which cannot withstand the pressure of aggressive reality.

In *Steaua fără nume* (The Nameless Star), the playful dimension acquires new subtleties. Diametrically opposed beings, Professor Miroiu and Mona, involuntarily overcome by an inexplicable desire to seek each other out, embark on a lamentably failed attempt to escape their own captivity into another universe. The relationship between the two protagonists is built through a game of imagination and conversation, relying on the seductive power of words and autosuggestion. The discussions about astronomy and infinity, in which the celestial enthusiast pleads passionately for a completely uneducated audience, are not just simple intellectual exchanges, but forms of existential disguise, in which each hides their frustrations and desires under the mask of a game of ideas. The unknown woman, coming from a sophisticated and decadent universe, and the young man, modest, caught between the limits of a monotonous provincial life, create, for only a few hours, a common space, governed by fantasy and the chimera of a domestic life for two.

In *Ultima oră* (The Last Hour), the game takes on a different tone: one of irony and satire, mocking the false freedom of the press and commercialism<sup>1</sup>.

In this play, Sebastian uses the playful device not necessarily to allow the heroes to escape, but to expose, ridicule, and criticize. Here, the playwright explores the world of journalism and university life, revealing the mechanisms of corruption, manipulation, and imposture. "ȘTEFĂNESCU: (contemptuously) Printed! (with a certain skeptical, jaded bitterness) A newspaper lives for a day. Less than that. A morning, an hour. A newspaper dies five minutes after it has been read." (Sebastian, 1965, pp. 328-329). Between the lines, the writer's own experience as a journalist and his familiarity with this volatile environment become apparent. The bitter retort hides, behind the ridicule, the disappointment of one betrayed by the pen. The characters engage in a constant game of appearances: journalists hide their obscure interests behind cultural pretensions, innocent teachers who are out of touch with reality get caught up in machinations, and the print media becomes the scene of a power game, where the rules are dictated by arrogant, unscrupulous moguls with money and influence. The innocence of the game of vacation, of happiness, or the poetic fragility of *Steaua fără nume* (The Nameless Star) are far removed from this grotesque masquerade. Irony and satire are here forms of the "serious game", revealing to the audience how fragile the boundary between truth and simulacrum is. For the first time in Sebastian's theater, "the visible conflict transcends the hidden areas of the ineffable soul, rising to the realm of the factual." (Tomuș, 1969, p. 298). This time, dreamers are no longer defeated by reality and no longer have to resign themselves to its onslaught.

Recruited from very different social backgrounds, the heroes of *The Island*<sup>2</sup>, caught in an extreme situation, find themselves forced to form a bizarre, completely unexpected alliance in order to ensure their escape. We witness a sensitive, lyrical retelling of Robinson's story, this time with three characters: a banker who possesses only useless checks, an injured soccer player, and a virtually unknown painter. Here, as in his other plays, Sebastian chooses to abandon the social fresco and focuses on psychology,

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<sup>1</sup> The playwright was aware of the risks he would be exposing himself to by publishing this latest dramatic production: "They fear that the entire press will be outraged. There may be some truth in that. In that case, the play will have to be signed by a completely invulnerable name. A debutant, an unknown, someone who can mitigate any attacks through personal effacement." (Sebastian, 1996, p. 441)

<sup>2</sup> References to *The Island* refer to the unfinished version of the play, as conceived by Sebastian, and not to the version completed, more or less successfully, by Mircea Ștefănescu (not Mircea Șeptilici, as erroneously noted in some of the exegesis).

which he probes carefully, using the precarious means of dramatic discourse, more restrictive than epic discourse. Seemingly lighthearted, on a second reading, the text generously opens up to the game of masks, to the idea of the contrast between appearance and essence in a world of illusions. *Migrantis aves*, driven by the single, impossible-to-ignore instinct to return home, disoriented, lacking landmarks, thrown by vicissitudes into inhospitable lands, the three characters in the play, now shadows of their former celebrity, elegance, talent, wealth, or beauty, place themselves under the imperative need to escape, mentally, from the sordid attic where they are locked in humiliation, far away, somewhere on the sea, in another isolation, in search of a paradise never known and yet lost.

### **The Shadows of Chronos**

At the end of his study, Jacques Ehrman concluded that play cannot take place in a reality with standard data, since it participates, with all the elements that form it, in playful activity. Therefore, it can never be neutral, objectified, subjectivized, or neutralized<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, the theorist postulates that, in the text, play and reality are inseparable, synonymous. In Sebastian's theater, the assiduous practice of play (defined by the playwright as an act of freedom), the construction of a scaffolding of illusions, is based, alongside the wearing of masks, with all the implications that this gesture entails, on the alteration of the coordinates of reality, especially the axis of time<sup>2</sup>. This change contributes to the creation of a world with loose boundaries, in an atmosphere of uncertainty, a moral/emotional/ existential space in which the characters search for their identity, meaning, and, ultimately, happiness. "Mihail Sebastian's plays are — a fact that has not been noted until now — almost *mythical* scenarios of the tragic clash between time and man." (Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15)

Memory and remembrance are among the forces acting on the temporal axis. In *The Island*, the present is all the more difficult to bear because the heroes cannot help but compare themselves to their glorious past. While Mona proves incapable of breaking ties with her former self, in

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<sup>1</sup> "Play is not played against a background of a fixed, stable, reality which would serve as its standard. All reality is caught up in the play of the concepts which designate it. Reality is thus not capable of being objectified, nor subjectified. However, it is never neutral. Nor can it be neutralized." (Ehrman, 1968, p. 56)

<sup>2</sup> "His characters have entered the pantheon of our national drama for their ability to add a paradoxical and contradictory soul structure to reality, for their extraordinary ability to play with language and transform theater into the art of supreme illusion [...]." (Băicuș, [https://www.academia.edu/44419132/Iulian\\_Baicus\\_Mihail\\_Sebastian\\_sau\\_lacomia\\_de\\_tragic](https://www.academia.edu/44419132/Iulian_Baicus_Mihail_Sebastian_sau_lacomia_de_tragic), last accessed on 25.05.2024).

the arms of a man for whom love and happiness are nothing but empty words, Ștefan Valeriu, faced with his lost former self, from whom he had unwittingly become estranged<sup>1</sup>, has painful flashbacks:

“ȘTEFAN: [...] I have occasionally sent flowers to a friend or girlfriend, but I have never delivered them myself. I would have died of shame. Look, just once, in Bucharest, last spring, it was March, I was coming back from work... I was in a hurry... around noon... It was sunny... and there were big baskets with yellow and blue flowers... gypsy women inviting you to buy... I was suddenly struck, I don't know where from, by the desire to wear a flower in that midday sun. How I suffered afterwards! From Corso to Capșa, it seemed to me that everyone was looking at me, pointing at me. I was carrying a few yellow flowers in my hand and they seemed to prick me. I was ridiculous, I was comical. Near the Military Club, in the crowd, I closed my eyes and... threw them away.” (Sebastian, 1965, pp. 77-78)

Time does not flow linearly, becoming elastic, and memories that creep in bring regret, nostalgia, and prevent entry and/ or remaining in illusion. When the past is relived and becomes present, not only does temporal perception change, but access to the mirage that guarantees the right to happiness is blocked. Amnesia, the abandonment of all the burdens of the year, are at the heart of the elaborate game proposed by Ștefan Valeriu<sup>2</sup>, who accuses others of not knowing how to forget, bringing automatism, obsessions, regrets, and former loves in their suitcases. Some understand his game, others do not (depending on whether or not they are capable of dreaming), but all accept it: out of conviction (Corina), out of constraint (Bogoiu), or simply out of indifference (the Major). The mechanism is only accessible to people who are spiritually prepared to receive it: Jeff deludes himself that he can forget his failure in mathematics; Corina wants to appear as a woman shrouded in mystery, sailing imaginatively towards the sunny shores of Italy, thinking of the unknown performer of Mozart's serenade; Bogoiu, a ministry official, who is addressed rudely by everyone throughout the year, asking him about the fate of their files, sails fantastically across the seas and oceans, at the helm of his own ship, but also of his own life. On the other hand, in Andronic's case, the past is a source of vitality. A “blasé guy” who “has no ambitions”, driven by the sole impulse to “spend all day with his nose in books”, oblivious to the universal flow of time, in his attempt to escape vertically through

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<sup>1</sup> “I met him once before, a long time ago. About twenty years ago. He hasn't changed much. [...] Since then, I've seen him a few times. 'In life', as they say. Less and less often... Further and further away... When I came here... I had lost him completely...” (Sebastian, 1965, p. 116)

<sup>2</sup> A particular type of *ludus* (controlled play), which, according to Caillois, differs markedly from *paidia*, i.e. spontaneous play.

history, taking refuge in his room, lost in individual time, slaloming through the ideas scattered on the papers on the table that Ana, the maid, never cleans, for fear of upsetting him. Because he failed in his attempt to identify with the great ancient conqueror, remaining an effigy, without three-dimensional relief, he decided, in the absence of another therapeutic solution, to focus exclusively on finding the truth: "ANDRONIC: It disturbed me. I was twenty years old. He was twenty-one, twenty-two when I met him. [...] I wanted to know who this man was. I wanted to write a portrait of him." (Sebastian, 1965, p. 300)

The future is often fraught with uncertainty. The characters are in a constant state of waiting for something that will fulfill them. For Madame Vintilă and Corina, this is a phone call that will confirm or save their romantic relationships; for Jeff, it is a resit exam; for Miroiu, it is a book that will decipher the mysteries of the universe; for Udrea, it is an English horn on which the completion of the symphony depends; while for the high school girls isolated in a dusty provincial town, another Sadoveanu-like place where nothing ever happens, the train is a promise of a possible but unlikely life. Dramatizing, flirting with the idea of suicide, Mona throws herself onto the tracks, waiting, but, as Ispas, the stationmaster, announces, the rules themselves, "It's no use standing on the tracks. There's no train coming to run you over until 11:35". Andronic, the pedantic professor, ridiculed by his students, also aims to publish a scientific article in a reputable journal, while imagining himself applauded on stage by an ecstatic audience:

"To feel hundreds of eyes fixed on you, thousands of eyes, waiting, calling, asking. To feel how your every word opens hearts, ignites imaginations, stirs passions... Your writing to pass from hand to hand, from person to person, your name to spread through the crowds, to mean something..." (Sebastian, 1965, p. 312)

The heroes of *The Island*, in their pseudo-detention in the squalid attic, dream of stadiums filled with people cheering at Bobby's match ("a match that depends entirely on me"), art galleries where Nadia's paintings are admired, and, meanwhile, under the oppression of an unbearable today, they demand a tomorrow where the sun does not rise without them, mentally projecting an island of Euthanasius. For all of them, waiting is that *locus amoebus*, the womb. Latency, potentiality translate into the chance for an existence that has not had a predetermined path. In contrast, certainty produces suffering. The future already known, immobile in its fixity, is not desirable. Just as Corina knows that Ștefan is "a little engineer, or a little lawyer, or a little architect", who will go "to the factory, or to the construction site, or to court", who has spent the whole year "naively saving

up for a month's vacation", and that she herself, who sews her own dresses, after dreaming for hours in front of a department store window, returns to a "modest, ordinary house", so too is Miroiu convinced that Mona's departure, despite all her promises to return, is final: "Because no star ever returns from its path". In turn, confronted with her image projected into a possible future, guaranteed by remaining in provincial stagnation, the heroine, abruptly cured of her erotic delirium, emerging from self-hypnosis, cannot accept becoming Miss Cucu, a shadow of the sensual, refined woman, the desire of all men. Her self-induced myopia must be canceled. An elegant accessory, she cannot find happiness with the professor, nor with Grig, but at least in the world of the latter, although a hostage to her own assumed status, she is perfectly adapted to her gilded cage. The protagonists of Sebastian's last play, although in crisis, with their very survival threatened, do not have the freedom to give up on life. When they abandon the struggle with fate, death (induced by drug abuse) seems to be the only way out, camouflaged by the mirage of an island of treasures:

"Given the blockade that had immobilized the three young people, nothing and no one could help them survive except their own will and desire to live. Taking refuge on the imaginary island [...] was by no means a solution [...], but amounted, this time, to an act of suicide." (Grăsoiu, 1986, p. 198)

Removing external pressure by abolishing temporal limits seems to be a necessary and sufficient condition for canceling out the effects of the past and avoiding predestination. Psychological, subjective time is opposed to objective time, as the desires, fears, expectations, or dreams of the characters shape their perception of Chronos. The clock and the calendar must be ignored, if not canceled. In *The Holiday Game*, the short holiday, stolen with long-term sacrifices, becomes a separate temporal zone, in which normal social rhythms are suspended, moments of contemplation or stagnation are created, guaranteed by plantar laziness as an ordering principle.

"If everyday, inauthentic existence, undermined by worry and anxiety, is under the sign of Chronos, of devouring time, symbol of *paternal authority*, play, *vacation*, reverie overturn the values of the daytime and establish the nocturnal regime of Anti-Chronos, of authentic existence." (Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15).

During a vacation, which is limited in time by definition, the passage of time seems slower, and moments expand, becoming denser, more

meaningful, seeming to extend beyond real life<sup>1</sup>, melting into perpetuity. Through the intervention of a mysterious figure, a woman from outside his world, the temporal and spatial dynamics change in Miroiu's world, an orchestrator of escapism in time, which he practices, for example, when he takes refuge in reading the long-awaited astronomy book; his escape from the monotonous, limiting present takes place in just one night, which, however, expands to encompass an entire life experience, lived to the fullest. Unfortunately, the loud ticking of the clock (or the horn of a luxury car!) marks the violent invasion of the real world. The painful failure of the dreamers will ultimately be due to the temporary nature of the mirage. On the contrary, in *The Island*, the heroes, who are cloistered, humiliated, reduced to poverty and loss of identity, want to compress the aggressive present, to reduce it to nothingness, building an impossible bridge between a yesterday in which everyone was a respectable, powerful person and a tomorrow in which all this could be revived. And in *The Last Hour*, under the pressure of the urgency of publishing the periodical (which, by definition, has a life limited to the present, as Ștefănescu points out), the ultimatum time is limited and shrinks. Important choices must be made in a matter of seconds, and destinies are (re)written under time pressure.

The exaggerated expansion of time can be interpreted as its suspension, to the point of timelessness. Imagining an idyllic phalanstery, a utopian farm governed by continuous harmony, Bogoiu, desperate to perpetuate the provisional, with all his illusions, even comes up with the bizarre idea of keeping Corina prisoner and pushing the boundaries of time beyond simple dilution, erasing them completely and projecting them into an idealized prehistory, towards an impossible matriarchy, in which time is abolished:

“And the seasons pass, and the years come, and we are always here, all four of us, on our little farm, like a ship sailing through the world, without stopping” (Sebastian, 1965, pp. 139-140).

The potential love story between Magda and Andronic, as well as their future experience as explorers of ancient ruins, is prolonged by the planned journey in the footsteps of Alexander the Great, beyond the present, into a kind of protohistory.

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<sup>1</sup> Ion Vartic pointed out: “In this program of re-naturalization of the human, intelligence is replaced by sensitivity, an instinctive-vegetal one. [...] Thus, ‘playing vacation’ means playing at forgetting, living without memories or aspirations, [...] without knowing ‘the exact time’ or ‘what today is, what tomorrow will be, and what yesterday was’; it means living like a plant, a single day, «a long, long, long one» that gives you the feeling of eternity.” (Vartic, 1982, p. 259)

The unification of temporal moments is possible when the characters realize the constant element, the repeatability, which leads them to understand, painfully, that there is no chance of escape.

“ȘTEFAN: I never laughed at you. Don't you see how many things connect us? Corina, trigonometry, Dupuis' logarithm, failing grades... Everything is the same today as it was twenty years ago. Everything is the same. It's as if we were two classmates” (Sebastian, 1965, p. 135).

By altering the perception of time, either through dilution or expansion, as circumstances dictate, the three men, facets of the same masculinity, captured at different stages of life (young, adult, mature), meet in psychological, not just chronological, landmarks and end up becoming mirrors for each other, linked by their love for Corina. Mona, on the other hand, realizes the real possibility of becoming a bitter Miss Cucu, a walking school rulebook, whose vitality and beauty will have been drained by a conventional, obtuse, and limited provincial life in a town that, “even if it sleeps... and sees us even in our sleep”, ready to label, after a summary judgment, and to standardize, through flattening.

Paradoxically, the slices of life manufactured through these processes are more intense, more desirable, and more real than a life burdened by redundancy and restrictions. Narcis Zărnescu also observes in his article that “true identity is hypothetical, imaginary, possible, *false*” (Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15). In the game with Saturn-Chronos, the drama of dreamers arises from the impossibility of telling the moment to stay. The re-semanticization of the temporal axis fails every time in their obstinate and emotional attempt to translate the emptiness of a repetitive life into the passionate pulsations of a fully lived experience. With their masks fallen, the heroes, after an illusory escape, will abruptly return to the cages of their own petty existences. Under the assault of the present, the temporary anabasis will turn into a painful catabasis, made permanent by (survival) in a simulacrum, while the illusion will have given them the only real life.

### **Je(ux) est un autre. The Game of Masks**

In Sebastian's imagined game, assuming a new identity (which is never a simple given, a stable “label”, but rather a process, a negotiation between how the character sees himself and how he is perceived and categorized by the rest of the world) comes as a corollary. Identity tension often arises between the desire for inclusion/ belonging and the feeling of otherness/ internal exile and marginalization. As Burke and Stets (2000, pp. 224-225) postulate, identity, which is constructed in the process of self-categorization or identification, places at its center the perception of the self

as occupying a position and a role circumscribed by it, with all the meanings and expectations generated by this role. Organically linked to the group they belong to, the characters are placed in situations that challenge their understanding of their own meaning. In situations of identity crisis, the characters can oscillate between what they feel they are, what they want to be, and what they are asked to be, between their prominent identity and their activated identity (Burke & Stets, 2000, p. 230). Practicing the game of illusion, be it *ludus* or *paidia*, the heroes of the four plays must abandon their social selves and create a *persona* that corresponds to their inner geography. Taking on the mask becomes a saving solution or a mechanism of defense or survival. Through it,

“identity is denied in favor of otherness, unity in favor of diversity. The mask simplifies and amplifies. It reduces and multiplies. It generates enchantment and conciseness.” (Zărnescu, 1988, p. 15)

The stranger, the man without a clear identity, is often present in Sebastian’s theater. The malicious character who insinuates himself into the domestic lives of the Weber villa’s residents, cutting off their ties to the outside world, does not initially have a known identity. Moreover, throughout the play, we realize that he is inhabited, in harmony, by the former Jeff, silenced by dreary repetition, and the future Bogoiu, aged by monotony. The unknown will only be given Mona’s name (Dumitriu, May 15, 1975, p. 4) at the end, when the assumption of identity marks the provisional and destroys the mirage. Anonymity (in her moving plea, Corina fights to preserve it, as a guarantee of remaining in the mirage: “Listen, Ștefan. Don’t ask anymore. I feel that if you ask again, I will answer. You might regret it... I know how to ask too. But I don’t want to. Who are you? Who am I? I don’t know.”) and a particular kind of prosopagnosia (“Sometimes you have to close your eyes if you want to live”, the author declares through Nadia’s voice) thus become a catalyst for the chemistry of illusion. To attain happiness, it is necessary to forget oneself and accept the masks of others. On the other hand, in *The Island*, the loss of identity causes suffering. Although at the beginning of the conflict, weary, disillusioned, and suffering from misanthropy, Manuel seeks isolation by renouncing his identity (“I stopped in your country for three days, precisely because no one knows me. I wanted a vacation. It’s so tiring when everyone knows you. [...] I wanted to be alone, to leave alone, I’m sorry I met you. But what do you want me to do? I have no choice.”) (Sebastian, 1965, p. 260), when, together with Nadia and Bobby, seen as alleged criminals, he is put in a hopeless situation, faced with the danger of imprisonment, his frustration is accompanied by a real fear of serving someone else’s sentence.

The outsider character, a copy of the playwright himself, becomes a leitmotif of the plays, in which the recurring theme is maladjustment. Ștefan Valeriu (through rudeness and boorishness), Mona (through sophistication), Alexandru Andronic (shy, airy, an innocent lost in the world of shady business) and the three companions in suffering from *The Island* (none of whom fit into the slum landscape) are at odds with the world. Their maladjustment forces them to adopt *alter egos* that make it easier for them to adapt. Under the mask of rudeness, the hero of *The Holiday Game* can hide his sensitivity, which Corina intuitively guesses. For the price of a vacation, he can remember, through Jeff, the freshness of his youthful enthusiasm and be an elegant, nonchalant, and courteous gentleman. Showing an appetite for the game of masks, which he had been playing for years, Bogoiu assumes his new identity as a ship captain, which he vocally asserts in the face of the assault of the two unwelcome vacationers. Marin Miroiu (“a good boy”, but who, in the view of the obtuse provincials, wastes his time reading) seems perfectly adapted to the town where express trains never stop. For one night, however, as his humble room is transformed into Aladdin’s palace (Grăsoiu, 1986, p. 190), the shy dreamer can become a seductive man with whom a refined woman like Mona can fall in love. At dawn, the beautiful stranger, identified to some extent with the nameless star, abandoning herself completely, understands that love means compromise (and she is no stranger to such a life) and that she must conform to social pressure and transform herself from a “luxury animal” into a housewife integrated into this world that mutilates through regimentation. Forced to work as a loader in the port in order to ensure his survival and that of his two comrades, the former millionaire from *The Island* chooses to hide this thankless role, assumed in his new imposed identity from his fellow sufferers and continues to wear his mask with dignity.

Although he is one of the few characters who has a coherent and consistent identity discourse, Andronic also seems to succumb to the temptation of the mask. Nicknamed Alexander the Small by his students, the university professor, who spent his youth researching the history of the great conqueror, is an idealist reduced to a miserable existence in a society dominated by influential, unscrupulous individuals. Undesirable, isolated in a messy apartment, finding no satisfaction in his life as a professor, experiencing an acute sense of uselessness, he is seduced by the mirage of academic success, by the temptation of false glory, of the ephemeral, which almost nullifies the ideal, purity, the eternal. Drawn into Borcea’s web, who puts the newspaper at his disposal, for a moment he allows himself to be

conquered by the superficial, mercantile world, “which encourages science only in panic” (Piru, 1958, p. 450).

Between these narrow limits, with social norms, stereotypes, labels, which impose masks and roles and exert pressure on the individual to conform, identity becomes fluid or fractured, as these conflict with the real *persona*, with the inner self, with free will, with the crisis of authenticity, and the organic need to achieve the ideal of happiness. Sebastian’s dramaturgy becomes a space for confession, in which his characters allow us to probe the mechanisms of the subtle interplay between identity and otherness. Although, occasionally, the heroes can shed certain facets of their personality like an ill-fitting garment, most of the time, the real self becomes a Nessus’s shirt, impregnated in their being. Their suffering, a spectacle of frustrated lucidity, stems from the ever-unfulfilled desire to be more/ someone else than they are.

### **The Message in the Bottle**

A key concept in Mihail Sebastian’s theater, play, seen not only as a compensatory refuge but also as a form of responsibility, forcing characters to confront themselves and the world, becomes a corollary of happiness, articulating the tension between the desire to escape and the need to face reality. Through this strategy, the playwright earns his place in a modern tradition of playfulness, where *iocus* (i.e. fantasy, mirage), understood as a privileged space of freedom, disguise, critical device, and survival solution, does not stand in antithesis to existential gravity, but represents the very mode through which it is expressed and problematized. The essential paradox is that play, situated on the fine line between *ludus* and *paidia*, reveals hidden tensions, contrasts between the individual and the world in which they try, fighting with the weapons of illusion, to live, and confronts freedom with its limits. The heroes of his comedies live in the world, but they are only physically part of it, for their aspirations point in a completely different direction. Conditional on the obligation to function in an obtuse society, the characters, after an existential syncopation based on autosuggestion, are forced to come back down to earth in order to survive. These individuals retreat only temporarily from the social turmoil, to their utopian islands, small isolated citadels. Outside these protective walls are the people who lay down the law, mechanisms driven by external forces, powerful voices calling them back to reality, and the heroes are defeated. Abstracted, for the duration of a dream, from the bewildering whirlwind of everyday life, they are the evaders who succeed, through imagination, by pushing the limits of (self)delusion, in making a pact with the provisional.

Avatars of the playwright, lucidly experiencing the drama of inadequacy, they understand that they will be disappointed.

“The last reserves of energy, patience, and modesty are expended (“how well we hide what we have to hide, how sadly we hide it”) in order to leave the stage, if not victorious, at least with dignity. Ștefan Valeriu silently watches Corina walk away, knowing he will never see her again, and Miroiu, with a supreme effort, leans over the atlas, retreating into his work. The heroes’ revenge is this detachment with which they accept defeat, this discretion, this refuge of submission, this concern for maintaining their composure. There are cries that must be stifled, memories that must be locked away, despair that must be concealed. A tragic revolt on their knees! Nevertheless, his heroes have a zest and a beauty. At first glance calm, dull, gray, their existence is stormy. In their world, they are conquerors.” (Elvin, 1955, p. 69)

Abandoning the clause of time line (chronology), juggling with the facets of otherness, the characters in *The Holiday Game* ensure themselves, for a short period of time, access to domestic happiness. Corina’s untimely departure is the signal for the end of self-hypnosis. *Ludus* must, in accordance with the rules of the provisional, end with the abandonment of masks. The meeting of the characters in *The Nameless Star* is a game of blind man’s buff between incompatible worlds: Mona seeks liberation from bourgeois conventions, while Miroiu escapes the routine of provincial life and gives himself the chance to give physical form to the star he senses in the sky. In the end, however, reality reasserts itself: their love cannot be consumed, and the game stops. The masks worn at night no longer fit in the light of day, they are uncomfortable, bordering on the ridiculous. In both plays, playfulness, which accentuates the tragedy of the human condition, serves to mark temporariness and reveal the potential of an impossible freedom. From this perspective, the creations illustrate the dialectic between play and disenchantment: it is precisely the ephemeral moment, lived with the intensity of incandescence, this temporal loop that interrupts the flow, that makes the return to everyday life more painful. *Paidia* has in Andronic a participant who not only does not know the rules, but is also unaware that he occupies this position in Magda’s skillful orchestration. The ultimate message of the play is a powerful statement in favor of the minuscule but nevertheless existing possibility, despite all obstacles, of triumphing in the battle against simulacrum, against inauthenticity, using precisely the levers constructed by the Procrustean world to stifle dreams. Quite apart from this, however, the heroes of *The Island* are forced to embrace their otherness (once sought after as a desideratum) imposed by a world at war, which isolates them. As the current masks are difficult to

wear, there is a need to sublimate ugliness into self-induced hypnosis, through which, traveling to the enigmatic island, a benevolent chimera, they can hope to become who they were before.

“Sick with lucidity”, like the author who created them, the characters are constantly searching for themselves and the means that can ensure their freedom. The saving solution through which they can fill the existential void seems to be the omnipotent and multifaceted escape: pushing the boundaries of reality, appealing to the potentialities of the imagination, which would allow them to break away from everyday life, as the writer himself hoped. Happiness, tasted for a moment, though within reach, slips through their fingers. Ultimately defeated in their reckless attempt to free themselves from the captivity of their own existence, the heroes conquer through the innocence and sensitivity with which they fight their battles, one of the elements that ensures and perpetuates the longevity of the works, preserving, unaltered by time, their extraordinary power of seduction. Mihail Sebastian’s plea, exhausted by struggle, recorded in *How I Became a Hooligan*, is a warm invitation to reflection:

“Every book is, in a way, an attempt to force the unknown. In whose hands it will fall, what agreements it will establish, what disagreements it will provoke — you don’t know. There is an endless series of unknowns that will decide its fate. There are resistances, opacities, accidents, and only beyond them do you hope to find certain questions that your book answers. Will it reach these questions? Will it answer them? Maybe yes, maybe no. It’s a matter of chance. Your message... may reach its destination, but it may also fall by the wayside. There are many chances to lose it. But those who don’t know how to lose with a clear conscience have no reason to write books” (Sebastian, 1990, p. 6).

Distinct voices of the writer<sup>1</sup>, his characters perform, on different tonal ranges, the same sober melody that accompanied the literary and existential journey of the one who knew how to lose with dignity, preserving the message in the bottle of the shipwrecked man, a promise of a distant but achievable possibility of salvation.

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<sup>1</sup> “There are two intellectuals in Mihail Sebastian: one troubled by the radical nature of certain existential and aesthetic solutions, assimilating new forms of thinking and participating in the intellectual drama of the era, and another (a kind of Ștefan, Miroiu, Andronic) who is a dreamer and incurable sentimentalist, still believing in an ideal order of life, but daring only to isolate himself from the rest of the world, avoiding open confrontation. The only things they have in common are their proud sadness and their belief in human values. One is a new, modern man, who lives his intellectual condition intensely and cerebrally, the other is the successor of the misfit from interwar literature; one looks at the world as a true intellectual, the other is a nostalgic, shy and lonely soul, who lives on an emotional level.” (Dumitriu, 1975, p. 7)

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**JOCUL DE ROL CA TERAPIE ÎN PSIHODRAMA  
GIMNASTICA SENTIMENTALĂ A LUI  
VASILE VOICULESCU**

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**THE ROLE PLAY AS THERAPY IN VASILE VOICULESCU'S  
PSYCHODRAMA  
THE GYMNASTICS OF FEELINGS**



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**Abstract:** *The paper analyzes the way in which Vasile Voiculescu, a writer and a doctor as well, experiments in a dramatic text scientific theories in the field of psychology, very modern at that time. It is about William James's theory of emotions and the theories about psychodrama formulated by Jacob Levy Moreno, which are tested in the play Gimnastica sentimentală (The Gymnastics of Feelings), a social satire at first glance, but which also speaks about the therapeutic role of the theater. If William James is mentioned in the text several times, it is not certain that Voiculescu was also aware of the research in the field of psychodrama – for several reasons explained in the paper – or it is just the intuition of the physician Voiculescu, also a theater lover. The paper seeks and demonstrates a series of intersection points between Moreno's theories and the dramatic construction proposed by the Romanian writer:*

**Key words:** psychodrama, Romanian theatre, emotios, acting, therapy

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„Lumea-ntreagă e o scenă și toți oamenii-s actori”  
(Shakespeare, *Cum vă place*, actul II, scena 7)

Om de știință, dar și scriitor, Vasile Voiculescu a păstrat mereu treaz ochiul rațiunii, chiar în povestirile sale „fantastice”. Scepticismul pozitivist se insinuează în cele mai cunoscute texte ale sale, conferind acestora exact doza de îndoială necesară plonjării în fantastic – după definiția dată conceptului de teoreticienii fantasticului. Există însă și texte care chiar experimentează, cu mijloacele literaturii, teorii științifice

în vogă, extrem de contextualizate, cum sunt piesa de teatru *Demiurgul*<sup>1</sup> sau proza scurtă, de anticipație am putea spune, *Lobocoagularea prefrontală*<sup>2</sup>. Aceste texte ne dezvăluie un scriitor extrem de ancorat în realitatea științifică și nu numai, a epocii, cu extraordinară intuiție istorică, un autor nu atât de literatură *științifico-fantastică*, cât într-o altă traducere a termenului de *science-fiction*, mai fidelă, de „ficțiune științifică”<sup>3</sup>.

Există însă un alt text dramatic – *Gimnastica sentimentală* – publicat tot postum, care propune o temă din domeniul psihologiei, mai precis al psihoterapiei. E vorba de o metodă de psihoterapie ce va căpăta mai târziu numele de *psihodramă*, dar care abia își tatona conceptele, metodele, eficiența în anii 1930-1940. Părintele psihodramei – o formă de terapie bazată pe jocul de rol – este considerat Jacob Levy Moreno (1889 – 1974)<sup>4</sup>, absolvent de medicină și de psihiatrie la Viena. La baza întregii sale activități în domeniul sociometriei (adică măsurarea relației în grupuri), al sociodramei (teatrul grupului) și al psihodramei (teatrul individului) se află, ca temă comună, accentul pe *joc* și acțiune. Mai jos vom încerca să analizăm modul în care elemente ale acestor teorii, experimentale atunci, pot fi descoperite în formă literară în textul lui Voiculescu și să vedem dacă ele sunt doar experimentate sau sunt și parodiate, așa cum a făcut de pildă și Camil Petrescu cu psihanaliza, în piesa *Profesor dr. Omu vindecă de dragoste*<sup>5</sup>. Trebuie să adăugăm însă faptul că nu știm dacă aceste teorii îi erau cunoscute lui Voiculescu sau e vorba și aici de o pură intuiție medicală a unui scriitor care a practicat cu adevărat medicina, pe teren, dublat de un excepțional observator al comportamentului uman și de o inteligență remarcabilă de asemenea. Așadar am avea trei direcții de abordare: fie vorbim de o transpunere literară cu titlu de experiment, fie de o parodie sau poate doar de intuiție. Am avea mai multe motive să credem că mai degrabă e vorba aici de intuiție. Astfel:

Până la emigrarea în Statele Unite (1925), Moreno a publicat mai puțin dar și mai puțin explicit sau articulat în legătură cu teoriile sale. Activitatea lui e mai mult experimentală. În 1921 fondează „Teatrul Spontaneității”, care va funcționa până în 1925 la Viena, mai întâi cu grupuri de copii, apoi și de adulți – proiect exportat mai apoi în SUA. Așadar, data de 1 aprilie 1921 este considerată data de naștere a

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<sup>1</sup> Piesa, care datează din 1943, dar e publicată în volum abia în 1972 de către Mircea Tomuș, nu are un model românesc, fiind prima utopie negativă de tip science-fiction din dramaturgia noastră.

<sup>2</sup> Text ce datează din 1948, publicat abia în 1982 de către Mircea Braga în revista „Transilvania”, iar în volum în 1986 (vol. *Gânduri albe*), după ce el fusese scos de cenzură din edițiile din 1972 și 1982.

<sup>3</sup> Cele două texte sunt analizate pe larg în articolul: Crenguța Gânscă - *Vasile Voiculescu. Author of Science-fiction?*, în „Analele Universității din Oradea. Fascicula limbă și Literatură Română”, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Evreu de origine, născut în România, crescut însă la Viena, capitala Imperiului Habsburgic atunci, emigrat la începutul anilor '30 în Statele Unite ale Americii, unde va pune bazele *sociometriei* și unde își va scrie lucrările sale fundamentale în domeniul sociometriei și psihodramei.

<sup>5</sup> Camil Petrescu parodiază mai mult decât transparent teoriile freudiene, declarând prin intermediul unui personaj; „*De altfel, nu cunosc decât un singur psihanalist adevărat și acesta este Marcel Proust*” (în piesa *Profesor dr. Omu vindecă de dragoste*).

*psihodramei*, chiar dacă ea nu este încă teoretizată. Mutația cea mai importantă pe care o face Moreno în psihiatria anilor 1920/30 este mutarea accentului de pe individ pe grup – temă pe care Moreno a și polemitat vehement cu Freud, a cărui psihanaliză se concentra exclusiv pe individ. Jonathan Fox, editorul lui Moreno, precizează însă că, deși ideile sale de bază erau deja formate la sfârșitul anilor '20, abia după plecarea sa în America el își va publica cele mai relevante texte, iar activitatea lui va stârni un interes semnificativ<sup>6</sup>. Deocamdată activitățile lui se înscriu în multele experimente de tot felul în toate domeniile, de după primul război mondial și putem doar bănui că Voiculescu avea cunoștința de ele. Este perioada în care este subdirector apoi director al Fundației Culturale, este căsătorit, are deja cinci copii, va căpăta în curând responsabilități în cadrul Radiodifuziunii Române, până în 1945, când este dat afară odată cu schimbarea regimului. După plecarea lui Moreno în SUA, cu atât mai greoaie trebuie să fi fost sincronizarea cu teoriile cele mai noi în domeniul fie și al medicinei, iar în 1946, când apărea primul volum din tratatul *Psihodrama*, pe cerul României dar și în viața lui Voiculescu se adunau deja norii. Îi murise soția, murise Ion Pillat prietenul său cel mai bun, istoria se arăta sumbră. Sunt anii reclusiunii sale sociale, ai atașamentului față de grupul de *Rugul aprins*, cu tot ce a urmat apoi. În 1959 când apare volumul II din tratatul lui Moreno, Voiculescu este deja întemnițat în închisorile comuniste, iar când în Europa are loc primul Congres Internațional de Psihodramă, la Paris, în 1964, scriitorul român nu mai exista deja.

Nu știm de când datează textul piesei în discuție, publicată abia postum, în 1972, dar puțin probabil ca la momentul scrierii ei dramaturgul să fi avut cunoștința sau să fi citit noile teorii despre psihodramă, formulate peste ocean. De altfel, editorul lui Moreno afirmă în ediția din 1987 publicată de el la New York, că deși a scris un număr mare de texte, Moreno

le-a publicat pe cont propriu. Lucrările sale nu au fost editate și nici distribuite în mod profesionist – spre frustrarea din ce în ce mai mare a celor interesați de ideile sale<sup>7</sup>.

Așadar, există o foarte mică probabilitate ca Voiculescu să fi avut cunoștință de aceste texte. Îl știa în schimb pe William James<sup>8</sup>, fratele scriitorului Henry James, psiholog și filosof american, considerat părintele psihologiei americane – pe care îl pomenește în repetate rânduri în piesa de teatru în discuție, cu a lui *teorie a emoțiilor*. De altfel, protagonistul piesei lui Voiculescu, profesor de psihologie și filosofie începuse cândva – ni se spune – o teză de doctorat despre filosoful american, nefinalizată, în schimb va deveni el însuși o replică autohtonă a lui William James,

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Fox, apud Jacob Levy Moreno, *Scieri fundamentale. Despre psihodramă, metoda de grup și spontaneitate*, traducere din engleză de Ioana Maria Novac, București, Ed. Trei, 2009, cap. *Detalii biografice*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>8</sup> William James a trăit între anii 1842 – 1910, așadar teoriile sale erau deja bine fixate pe tărâm științific, publicate și cunoscute inclusiv în Europa.

publicând în urma propriei experiențe studii pe tema emoțiilor și a metodelor de cultivare și de reactivare a acestora. Teoria emoțiilor a lui William James (Teoria James-Lange) susține că emoțiile sunt *rezultatul* interpretării răspunsurilor fiziologice la stimuli, și nu cauza lor. Conform acestei teorii, un eveniment declanșator (un stimul) produce direct un răspuns fiziologic (cum ar fi tremuratul sau creșterea ritmului cardiac), iar percepția acestui răspuns este ceea ce noi experimentăm ca fiind o emoție. Spre exemplu, nu tremurăm pentru că ne este frică, ci ne este frică pentru că tremurăm. Pe această linie, Voiculescu încearcă să demonstreze cu mijloacele literaturii dramatice, modul în care poți să-ți recuperezi emoții uitate, creând stimulul exterior care să le provoace, dar înscrie tot experimentul în formula psihodramei, adică a jocului de rol, mizând pe rolul terapeutic al teatrului.

Un lucru curios însă: Johan Huizinga formulează în celebra-i carte *Homo ludens* teoria conform căreia toate activitățile umane, chiar cele mai „serioase” sunt produsul componentei ludice, inerente naturii umane – exprimată și vizibilă mai ales în copilărie, interiorizată apoi și mai subtilă la maturitate. Pe tărâmul literaturii, teoreticianul dedică un capitol aparte suprapunerilor dintre joc și poezie și un altul formelor ludice ale artei – muzica, dansul, artele plastice. Deși unele elemente din *jocul poeziei* pot fi translatate și în sfera *jocului scenic*, totuși remarcăm faptul că filozoful olandez nu dedică un loc aparte teatrului, deși Thalia (comedia) și Melpomene (tragedia) sunt două dintre cele nouă zeițe ale artelor. Adică nu se face o legătură explicită între *ludic* și teatru. Și totuși, în multe limbi, termenii legați de joc se suprapun peste termeni legați de arta teatrală: în engleză *play* înseamnă a se juca, dar și a cânta la un instrument – lucru pe care Huizinga îl subliniază de altfel<sup>9</sup> - dar și *a juca* un rol, a juca pe scenă, iar prin conversiune înseamnă și „piesă de teatru”. În limba franceză tot verbul *jouer* (au théâtre) se folosește. În limba germană, *a juca teatru* se traduce „*theater spielen*”, unde e convertit *spiel*, adică joc (*zu spielen* = a juca/ a se juca). Și în limba română „a se juca” poate deveni „a juca” și atunci intră în sfera dramatică.

Revenind la piesa lui Voiculescu, pe care el nu o numește comedie, dar are toate datele acesteia, dramaturgul își transplantează subiectul într-un târg de provincie – topos predilect al comediei interbelice românești, populat de tipologii de asemenea „clasice” am spune: soțul blazat, redus la tăcere și micșorat sufletește într-o familie teorizantă, soacra autoritară erijată în cap de familie, soția – variantă a soacrei, copiii rebeli așteptând să scape cât mai curând din mediul sufocant al familiei și al târgului mediocru. Până aici e atmosfera binecunoscută din comedia interbelică.

Ion Ionescu e un umil profesor de psihologie și filosofie la un liceu din acest târg de provincie, nenumit. Poreclit Iofca<sup>10</sup> – apelativ ce ne amintește de *trahanaua* lui

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<sup>9</sup> Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, București, Ed. Humanitas, 1998, p. 247.

<sup>10</sup> Cf DEX : iofcă = un preparat culinar; un fel de paste făinoase, sub formă de pătrățele sau fășii, obținute dintr-un aluat nedospit din apă, făină, ouă și sare, care se consumă fiert.

Caragiale (de altfel, lecția lui Caragiale e vizibilă aici) – fusese printre primii elevi în clasă în timpul școlii, dar se însurase devreme și rămase îngropat în acest târg de provincie, în casa socrilor, unde soacra conduce și manipulează pe toată lumea, alături de soțul ei, fost militar cu ifose autoritariste. Locuiește pe strada... Coliviei numărul 13, un personaj episodic va spune eronat „strada Colivei” – ambele denumiri fiind mai mult decât grăitoare. Redus la ipostaza de „om fără însușiri”, fără opinii, fără reacții, Ionescu ajunge batjocura tuturor, așa cum îl descrie revoltat fiul adolescent al acestuia, Vlad, chiar din prima scenă:

E așa de moale...așa de fleț [...] E o otreapă ridicolă [...]... un tată de care ți-e rușine<sup>11</sup>.

În schimb Mara, fiica studentă a lui Ionescu, îl vede prin prisma omului adult, rațional, înțelept, care vede cu maturitate îndărătul aparențelor:

...ai un tată modest, cuminte și la locul lui [...] E un om sfios, obosit înainte de vreme, strivit de viață și muncă, numai ca să-și hrănească familia...

Așadar, încă înainte de a intra în scenă avem un portret suficient de amplu și nuanțat, dar și suficient de contradictoriu încât să stârnească curiozitatea spectatorilor. La apariția lui, în scenele imediat următoare, didascaliiile sunt cele care vorbesc despre personaj mai mult decât acesta, acoperit de limbuția celorlalte personaje care dau buzna: „tace și intră în scenă”, „moale”, „dă din umeri plictisit”, „dă din umeri plictisit și tace”, apoi, când vorbește, o face „sugrumat”, „cu gura încleiată” etc.

În casa Ioneștilor e așteptat celebrul actor Moldavian care face o descindere în târgul cu pricina, în căutarea foștilor colegi de liceu și în perspectiva unor proiecte culturale. Se dovedește că el e Flencheș, fost coleg de clasă al lui Ionescu, metamorfozat spectaculos în vedeta scenelor din capitală, acum numit Moldavian. Tot târgul acesta, în care „nu se întâmplă nimic” este într-o frenezie vecină cu isteria, se pregătește o primire triumfală, familia lui Ionescu – cu excepția acestuia – e activată de iminența extraordinarului și se exaltă la perspectiva ieșirii din plictisul cotidian, ca la intrarea într-o altă dimensiune a existenței. Și așa se și întâmplă. Soacra face un gest care deschide inconștient toată scena spre spectacolul lumii: deschide fereastra și strigă spre curtea vecină, lăsând să se vadă pregătirile în vederea neașteptatului privilegiu – în fapt „se arată”, se expune cu mândrie, expune toată scena pregătirii pentru sosirea oaspetelui, teatrului lumii, un teatru mare cât târgul, ca să-l parafrazăm pe Marin Sorescu<sup>12</sup>. Aceasta va fi scena pe care se va produce transformarea personajului principal.

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<sup>11</sup> Toate citatele au fost extrase din ediția Vasile Voiculescu, *Teatru*, Cluj Napoca, Editura Dacia, 1972, p. 77 – 202.

<sup>12</sup> În poezia *La strigat* din ciclul *La liliaci*, Sorescu vorbește despre teatralitatea lumii rurale, în care toate evenimentele se desfășoară la vedere, în fața celorlalți, într-un „teatru mare, cât satul”, cu o vocație și chiar cu o voluptate a expunerii.

Evident că un actor, și nu alcineva, trebuia să apară în scenă pentru a pune în mișcare un întreg mecanism de transformare a protagonistului și el o va face cu mijloacele care îi stau lui la îndemână și care l-au metamorfozat și pe el însuși, care l-au transformat pe Flencheș în Moldavian:

O dată cu intrarea lui Moldavian toată atmosfera se schimbă. E parcă mai mult aer, mai multă lumină. Toți se deschid, întineresc, simt mai ascuțit, vorbesc colorat, cu imagini, în ritm de versuri, fac gesturi largi și declamă, târâți de o vrajă pe măsură ce scena se lungeste.

Dintr-o dată avem nu numai primele elemente de psihodramă, dar chiar și viraje subtile spre sociodramă, căci sociodrama are de a face cu grupul, cu relațiile de grup, în care, potrivit lui J.L. Moreno, spectatorii sunt influențați de acțiunile psihodramatice – centrate pe individ – prin afinitățile dintre contextul lor de roluri și contextul rolului subiectului central<sup>13</sup>. În acest sens, Moldavian, obișnuit să treacă dintr-un rol într-altul, intră imediat în rolul așteptat de ceilalți, al gentleman-ului rafinat, politicos, darnic în complimente, distribuind fiecăruia exact rolurile existente aspirațional în subconștientul fiecăruia și având un efect hipnotic asupra tuturor: „Domnu-i vrăjitor. M-a deochiat. Mă doare capul” – va spune servitoarea. De altfel, Moldavian recunoaște imediat după ce rămâne singur cu Ionescu:

Eu am închipuit numai așa, o scenă de reîntâlnire, ca după 25 de ani... Un mic spectacol, pentru autoritate, pentru familie.

Așadar el joacă aici rolul regizorului și, fără ca ceilalți să o știe, îi antrenează într-un proces de bovarism invers, făcându-i să se dezvăluie nu așa cum își închipuie ei că sunt, ci așa cum sunt de fapt, căci „psihodrama poate fi definită ca știința care explorează <adevărul> prin intermediul metodelor dramatice”<sup>14</sup>.

De acum însă atenția lui Moldavian se concentrează pe umilul său coleg, într-un demers ce caută să readucă la suprafață resursele îngropate ale personalității sale, celelalte personaje devenind „euri auxiliare”, cum le numește Moreno, adică personaje ajutătoare necesare „jocului” propus de „regizor”, sau cum le numește mai plastic Moldavian „halterele mici”, căci acest joc se cheamă... *gimnastica sentimentelor*:

Sufletul? Sufletul are și el mădularele lui, care trebuie exersate zilnic și cu mare aplicare și atenție [...] Asta numesc eu gimnastica sentimentelor. Dacă nu o faci, te anchilozezi, prinzi burtă la suflet [...] Obezitate morală, rugină și îmbăcsire, până la atrofierea sufletului. Nu se mai poate mișca. Suflet amorțit de burghez [...] Sufletul are funcțiuni care nu trebuie uitate, lăsate în părăsire. Trebuie mereu să le ții în activitate, să le ții deștepte. Dacă nu ai prilej în lume, sau ca mine pe scenă, atunci în casă [...] Așa, **de joc**,

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jacob Levy Moreno, op.cit., p.54.

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

cum **se joacă** pisica, știi, cu orice ghem ca să nu uite cum se prind șoarecii. Faci simple exerciții de igienă sufletească. [subl.n – C.G.]

Așadar, pentru a deștepta o emoție, trebuie creat contextul, întocmai ca în teoria lui William James. Iar crearea contextului se face prin *jocul de rol* propus de psihodramă, dar nu pentru a transforma subiecții în actori, ci mai degrabă de a-i stârni pentru a fi pe scenă ceea ce sunt mai adânc și mai explicit decât par a fi în viață<sup>15</sup>.

Psihodrama înseamnă prin urmare o redescoperire de sine, prin explorarea tuturor resurselor afective ale subiectului. Moldavian aplică deci intuitiv și empiric tehnicile psihodramei. El este un practician, nu un teoretician:

Într-o seară **joci** pe Iago...urăști, forțezi această facultate normală a sufletului, așa cum ai exersa mușchii brațului, ridicând niște greutăți [...] Altă seară, **joci** iubirea, faci pe Romeo [...] E o gamă întreagă de **jocuri** pentru toate sentimentele. Le apeși, cum apeși clapele pianului. Tu le stăpânești pe ele acum, nu ele pe tine [...] Dar te prefaci numai, **te joci** [...] E de ajuns să ai imaginație. Închipuire... . [subl.n – C.G.]

Moldavian intuiește de asemenea extinderea *jocului de rol* terapeutic, adică trecerea de la psihodramă la sociodramă:

Tu ai aici un teatru întreg parteneri de mână întâia...Gimnastica asta le va folosi...tuturor: Căci la **jocul** tău ei sunt obligați să răspundă și faceți gimnastica sentimentelor toată casa. La nevoie aduci parteneri din afară, figuranți de aiurea<sup>16</sup>.

În continuare, Moldavian îi dă lui Ionescu indicații cu privire la decoruri, la vestimentație, care toate trebuie adaptate rolurilor ce urmează a fi jucate. Transformarea va începe în scena imediat următoare cu schimbarea numelui: „Trebuie să îți schimbi numele. Neapărat [...] Numele e mai al dracului decât pielea [...] Am găsit...Novus!”. Noul nume anunță în mod transparent metamorfoza.

O dată încheiat actul I, Moldavian se retrage din scenă lăsând loc de desfășurare metamorfozei lui Ionescu în Novus, așa cum odinioară mediocrul Flencheș se metamorfozare în vedeta Moldavian. Textul, comedie în fond, urmărește în scene construite pe comic de situație mai ales și pe o serie de *qui-pro-quo*-uri, jocurile de rol prin care protagonistul își schimbă pe rând atitudinea față de soție, soacră, socru, față de comunitatea mai largă a târgului, inspirat de portretele pe care le afișează în biroul său – al lui Erasmus și al lui Napoleon – și devenind încetul cu încetul ceea ce ar fi trebuit să fie dintotdeauna: un cap de familie adevărat, factor de echilibru și de decizie și un dascăl prețuit și respectat.

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<sup>15</sup> Jacob Levy Moreno, op.cit., p. 49.

<sup>16</sup> „Un pacient îl poate trata pe altul” – spune J.L.Moreno, în op.cit., p.80.

Comicul se amplifică exponențial atunci când metamorfozarea lui iese din decorul familiei pe scena mai mare a târgului, antrenând grupuri tot mai numeroase de „figuranți”: elevi și eleve de la cele două licee din oraș, cadre didactice, autorități locale. Novus devine un fel de guru pentru aceștia, instruindu-i în această *gimnastică sentimentală*, ce le va oferi tuturor revelații neașteptate despre ei înșiși. Constatând pe propria piele efectele benefice ale *gimnasticii sentimentelor*, toți intră într-o stare de fascinație față de noua postură a concetățeanului lor, gata să ia lumină de el, gata să îi facă diverse favoruri, într-un soi de adulație ce frizează iraționalul. Didascaliiile punctează de această dată și ele extrem de precis jocul de rol al lui Ionescu-Novus în relație cu „eurile auxiliare”: „luând atitudine prudent disprețuitoare”, „tace disprețuitor”, „calm, cu o atitudine autoritară”, „același joc de dispreț și autoritate”, „cu un gest napoleonian”, „demn”, „îngâmfat”, „serios”, „uimit”, „sfios”, „măreț”, „teribil”, „protector” etc. Iar pentru a nu uita convenția teatrală, rămas singur, Novus își analizează critic prestația: „Exercițiul cu soacră-mea aproape ratat. În rolul lui Erasmus, lamentabil. Așa o fi stat de vorbă Erasmus cu admiratorii lui?”

Moreno vorbește în teoria psihodramei și despre spontaneitate și catharsis. Spontaneitatea ar fi capacitatea „de a produce o cantitate nouă de emoție, gândire, acțiune pe care le solicită o situație nouă”<sup>17</sup> sau capacitatea „de a da răspuns adecvat într-o situație nouă sau un nou răspuns unei situații vechi”<sup>18</sup>. De aceea actorul profesionist, deși lucrează cu „produse culturale conservate”<sup>19</sup> – adică piese de teatru cunoscute, clasicizate, care nu mai au atributul noutății – este capabil să producă practic o piesă nouă (din același text) la fiecare reprezentare. „Profesionalizarea” lui Ionescu-Novus în jocul de rol se vedește în acest sens și în activarea spontaneității, în modul în care adaptează clișee culturale, deci „produse culturale conservate” la situația sa. Astfel, inspirat de celebra reacție a lui Napoleon ajuns în fața piramidelor egiptene, Novus exersează în oglindă postura autorității cazone, parafrazându-l:

Ostași, patruzeci de secole că privesc!... Fii la înălțime Novus! Sus inima! Douăzeci de ani de mizerie și înjosiri te privesc din vârful unei piramide de suferință și așteaptă dezrobirea...

Catharsis-ul va fi unul profund, căci Novus nu joacă o piesă cunoscută, pre-fabricată, care vorbește despre alții și în care realitatea e prezentată la modul simbolic, ci își joacă propria viață, el se prezintă pe sine, mobilizându-și toate resursele de spontaneitate.

Situația se complică pentru protagonist, atunci când jocul de rol începe să aibă efecte secundare, când fascinația în masă pe care o generase se transformă în isterie – „Târgul este intoxicat de o nebulă amoroasă” ce riscă să devină devoratoare, ca și în cazul lui Orfeu sfâșiat de bacante sau ca în romanul *Parfumul* al lui Patrick Süskind, în

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p.90.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p.92.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p.90.

care protagonistul, lipsit încă de la naștere de afecțiune își face un scop în viață din a obține elixirul iubirii, al îndrăgostirii, dar sfârșește prin a fi canibalizat din exces de iubire, într-o scenă suprarealistă de hipnoză și delir în masă. Aflăm că studiile lui Ionescu-Novus despre emoții și pasiuni au creat o adevărată școală – „marea mișcare a culturii sentimentelor” – că editurile se bat pentru viitoarele lui cărți, că i se pregătește bustul în grădina publică, că plănuiește chiar și o piesă de teatru cu titlul *Gimnastica sentimentală... Aici psihodrama cotește înspre meta-dramă, piesa vorbește despre geneza ei înseși.*

Novus e nevoit însă să fugă la București, să se ascundă, plănuind emigrarea în America. În jurul evadării lui se nasc povești fabuloase și Voiculescu ne demonstrează și aici, doar că în cheie comică, procesul nașterii „mitului”<sup>20</sup>. Este urmărit de alaiul de femei și de autorități care îl vor înapoi, viu sau mort. Evident, piesa e plină de săgeți satirice cu trimitere la realitatea socială imediată, iar finalul e unul fericit: împăcarea cu familia, regenerată și ea și recuperarea rolurilor sociale firești. Novus va deveni profesor de psihologie și caracterologie dramatică la Conservator, valorificând experiența practică acumulată, soția cochetează cu actoria, târgul este lăsat deocamdată să-și interiorizeze la rândul-i experiențele.

Explorând acest text, care poate avea și azi succes la public, pentru că la un prim nivel de lectură el este o comedie satirică în buna moștenire caragialiană, constatăm și un strat de profunzime, chiar livresc al acestuia, ce vine atât din deschiderea intelectuală a autorului, cât și, înclinăm să credem, din intuiția remarcabilă a acestuia. Modul ingenios în care dramaturgul recurge la teoria emoțiilor și apoi implică jocul de rol – tehnică de bază în psihodramă – în scopul creării „plus-realității”<sup>21</sup>, adică a contextului necesar producerii și exersării emoțiilor, este surprinzător și inedit în peisajul dramaturgiei românești interbelice.

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<sup>20</sup> O face și în piesa de altă factură, *Fata ursului*.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Jacob Levy Moreno, op.cit, p.52.

# PLAYING WITH SECRET REALITIES. PATRICK MODIANO'S *LITTLE JEWEL*

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**Abstract:** *Patrick Modiano's novel, La Petite Bijou, translated as Little Jewel, acts as an interplay between memory and absence, an interplay meticulously crafted by the style of the author and by his passion to evoke an unfinished story, full of ambiguity, where pessimism and hope are at odds. Unlike any other writer, Modiano succeeds in making game the domain of gravity rather than the domain of gratuity and of easy playfulness. The irony starts with the title and ends with the last page. Yet the novel does not contain an acid irony and the irony itself is directed at life rather than making fun of the choices of the main character. In the end, Thérèse has learnt that her mother's absence can be integrated as pain, shared pain interconnects people, while a bigger absence from her whole life was only a trigger of her mother's act of abandoning her.*

**Key words:** memory, absence, trauma, abandonment, game, play, irony, contemporary French novel

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Should a contemporary reader (re)discover a televised interview with Patrick Modiano, decades before his acclaimed Nobel Prize won in 2014,<sup>1</sup> such a reader is greatly surprised by the author's timidity. Modiano's natural verbal intonation shares (and makes room for) brilliant paradoxes. Comparing the past with the present, it looks like Modiano has continuously written indeed a unique grand book made of all the symbolical maps, puzzles, buried emotions he has published in all his novels and stories.

Instead of being assertive as a way to impose his literary universe, Modiano fears more what a (meta)literary discourse loses through publicity and persuasion. Patrick Modiano's universe is so genuinely made of *chemins* of vulnerability that the author cannot take other more technical and artificial routes, for fear they may crash the ingenuity of his characters. Everybody knows the old saying that the journey is more valuable than the destination or the specific outcome. This saying is valid for all

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5YKkikvlpLQ&t=14s>

people in times of rush, when the illusion of reaching more rapidly the destination looks like a new most sought-after prize. But Modiano's main characters are unique. There is a side of them either oblivious to some survival instincts or disengaged from temptations of testing the evil. Sometimes it is mere neglect or mere inertia. But other times it is pure ingenuity, as in the case of a girl once named *Little Jewel*, the eponymous heroine of the novel with the same title.

Thérèse Cardères is a 19-year-old young woman, daughter of Suzanne Cardères, alias Sonia O'Dauyé. The young lady is narrating her emotional life focused on an encounter that troubles her: a silhouette at metro station Châtelet, dressed in a yellow coat (*un manteau jaune*) seems to be her mother whom she had not seen for twelve years. Her mother's presence in the girl's infancy is strikingly powerful, yet the reader discovers that the mother preferred to retreat inside her solitude, showing absence when she was missed. Not even one gesture of affection happened, except the moment when it was played, as required by a film director. Mother was acting in a film, called *The Crossroad of the Archers* and in that film her daughter was acting too, playing the same role, that of a little daughter. The daughter had one line to say, her role was not the main one.

Let us not forget that Patrick Modiano's mother was a Flemish actress and his father was an Italian Jew, with complicated decisions of survival and collaboration during the WW2. (Magda Ciopraga in Angela Ion, 2012, p. 1060). Instead of having a little boy as the alter-ego of Modiano, he entrusted the little girl to be his narrator, with certain autobiographical aspects. However, all these aspects are fused together in the genuine and complicated soul of a little girl, a certain introvert with little openness for other meaningful relationships.

## Memory and absence

Modiano's novel, *La Petite Bijou*, translated as *Little Jewel*, acts as an interplay between memory and absence, an interplay meticulously crafted by the style of the author and by his passion to evoke an unfinished story, full of ambiguity, where pessimism and hope are at odds. Yet they are equal in this game, equality suggesting that Modiano's style of writing prefers sometimes equivoque to clarity. After all, when equivoque wins, this is not a real victory, it means neither of the two terms could win, this is a game through which irony is either rediscovered or incentivized. *La Petite Bijou* speaks about death and absence in different terms. Death and absence are inter-related. Could absence provoke death or could death be taken as an absence? This is the story told by Thérèse when she decides to turn her own life into an absence. This is her only fight. Nobody is involved in this fight with the exception of her mother. Suzanne or Sonia, her mother, was talented as a dancer and she kept this grace in the way she walks. That is why Thérèse thinks she can recognize her own mom when

wearing the yellow coat. But, in retrospect, her mother's story is punctuated by what her friend, Frédérique, said about her: 'A wounded racehorse on the way to the abattoir.'

Albeit amplified by vivid memories, the absence of her mother is so painful that Thérèse cannot gather the courage and detachment to see her other life encounters 'maternally', i.e. with empathy. The story of her mother's accident is hidden. Yet it must have been the story that rendered Frédérique's assumption very true. The accident was the severance of destiny. Thérèse was also a victim of a truck accident, but she recovered. This situation must have scared her mother very much, so she decided to send her away, in a way to abandon her. The daughter needed support and empathy, but mother was too immersed in her own pain and when she got scared, she decided to quit as a mother. A different route in which mother could have had some achievements as a dancer would have changed her destiny and the destiny of her daughter. The sad joke about the horse taken to abattoir would have been a nonsense. Mother teaches her daughter about absence in the worst way, because it means taking no responsibility, running from the painful emotions and replacing presence with absence. The daughter wants to fight this absence so intertwined in all her small decisions and all her life aspects. The desire is so ardent that, towards the end of the story, we know that the only thing that could beat this painful absence would be a bigger absence, an unexpected absence as the one of leaving no trace on the face of the world after a suicide.

Therese Cardères, the heroine of the novel, constructs all the thoughts and all the aspects to rediscover her mother, is she or is she not the woman in yellow coat but she cannot gather her courage to talk to the strange woman, she is so afraid of mother's reaction, maybe a reaction of prolonging the absence. At the same time, the protagonist is afraid of her own emotions. Her most anxious dream is that in which somebody from an institution, police or morgue, summons her to recognize the body of her mother. This means that all her mental constructions of the situation must crumble. It is impossible for her to give up the story she augmented with every new turn of the events or with every new painful reminder of absence. The daughter cannot give up the story she has been creating to compensate for her mother's absence, in fact for her mother's act of abandoning her child.

This nightmare appears also because Thérèse has invested now all her life, all her thoughts. Her main job is to babysit for a couple of hours. She has time, but she cannot battle her own emotions, she is forced to give in. The very powerful emotions make her sabotage her purpose, she succumbs. We may wonder what is the best decision?! As a sabotage, she takes no decision at all and she becomes very fearful of staying alone in such moments.

We know nothing about how Thérèse sees her beloved people. Father is never present or known. Uncle Borand, her mother's brother (or half-brother) is kind to her as a child. She would visit the garage again, after the 12-year gap, but she could

hardly recognize anything and she does not have the indications of how to find him. The little girl whose strange, absent-minded parents employed Thérèse as a babysitter, is someone who could miss her. The gracious lady who is her benefactor and who gives her the pharmaceutical treatment offered even to host her in good condition at a vacation house, without asking for anything in return, just because she chooses to be The Good Samaritan. There's also a love interest who gains more importance in her life and who is very gentle in his attempt of making gallant gestures. The polyglot fellow even gives her a poem called *Mother*, in Hungarian, a poem written by Jozsef Attila. There is nothing phony about this charming translator, he takes an interest in her well-being and her emotions, as if she were another mysterious language he would be eager to learn.

Memory is the anchor in the continuous chaotic movement of thoughts and of everyday activities, for Modiano's characters. We cannot expect cohesion to come from external actions and from a construction of the novel that could see the novel as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a monolith block. Logical construction has little to do with the characters in the absence of memory. Absence creates a vacuum which invites memory to jump in. For Modiano, absence and memory are a unique dichotomy. Together they contribute to the theme of identity. Paris is for the writer a receptacle of identity, an urban identity, as Elena-Brândușa Steiciuc notices. (Steiciuc, 2016, p. 231).

A precise map of Thérèse's errant motions could be traced. But as the maps of her present and especially past memories gets more precise, the overwhelming absence wraps the map. Absence becomes the ultimate clarity. How can be maternal absence beaten off from her life, banished for good? Not through the war of confrontation. Through another bigger absence from everything. Through a bigger more encompassing absence in the last scene of the novel.

For Modiano, memory has the effect of being a deeper reality than the present time. Present is not the time of reactions, but of overreactions and sometimes of a baby-step in the direction of connecting with another human being. Thérèse, a 19-year-old French young woman, sees a woman dressed in a yellow coat and she is sure that it is her mother, although she had received the information that her mother died in Morocco years ago, when she was just a child. She decides to follow the woman. One part of this game is healthy, her emotions are involved and she needs to confront the woman. The other part of her self is absolutely not healthy, the young woman becomes a female sniper in a figurative sense, she sees but refuses to be seen and to be unmasked. In this unhealthy part of the self, memory is replaced by obsession.

It must have been about twelve years since anyone had called me Little Jewel. I found myself at Châtelet metro station at peak hour. I was in the crowd heading along the endless corridor on the moving walkway. There was a woman wearing a yellow coat. The colour of the coat caught my eye and I observed her from the back on

the walkway. Then she headed down the corridor marked DIRECTION CHÂTEAU DE VINCENNES. Now we were all squashed against each other in the middle of the staircase, waiting for the barrier to open. She was standing next to me. I saw her face. She was so like my mother that I thought it must be her.

I remembered one of the few photos I have kept of my mother. It's as if a searchlight trained on her face had made it loom out of the darkness. I've always felt uneasy looking at this photo. Every time it appeared in my dreams, it was like an identikit photo that someone was showing me—a police superintendent, an employee at the morgue—so that I could identify this person.

I did not say a word. I knew nothing about the woman. She sat down on one of the benches in the station, away from the people jostling on the edge of the platform while they waited for the train. There was no room on the bench next to her; I stood to the side, leaning against a vending machine. Her coat had no doubt been fashionable at one time and its colour gave it a touch of flair. But the yellow had faded almost to grey. (Modiano, 2016: 1-2)

### **Modiano's auctorial games and the irony of human existence**

We tend to associate playing with fun. But Modiano knows how to use playing and attach irony to it. The very title of the novel proves it. Another subverted irony is the use of another Thérèse, older than herself, a kind of surrogate sister with maternal attitudes. This happened when Thérèse Cardères was at a boarding school. Then another little girl appears, with both parents acting very strangely in their own rented location, as if they were only camping. They want to help their little daughter, but they do not prioritize her, she is left with their absence and a new, understanding babysitter, Thérèse. But sometimes the babysitter is afraid of her own powerful destructive emotions that she has to find excuses about not doing her duties.

Unlike any other writer, Modiano succeeds in making the game the domain of gravity rather than the domain of gratuity and of easy playfulness. The irony starts with the title and ends with the last page. Yet the novel does not contain an acid irony and the irony itself is directed at life rather than making fun of the choices of the main character. Mother changes names so as to be nicknamed by her friends the Death Cheater. But this nickname is ironically severe if we consider Thérèse's ultimate act provoked by her mother. Suzanne or Sonia cannot keep her nickname straight in the face of destiny, by preventing her daughter's suicide. Fortunately, her daughter breathes again due to another irony of destiny.

Secret is the element that allows the writer to play with the reader and to use irony. We do not know mother's secret or whether she is alive other than in memories of the people who knew her. The lady who stays at the fourth floor has one of her mother's names, only one letter is slightly different. Is that enough to move all the obsessions around the wrong person actually? Or is her mother, indeed, and the daughter pays the rent for her mother's recent month of staying.

In Modiano's novel *Little Jewel*, the game is to use secrecy so as to offer a unique puzzle of feelings to the reader. But secrecy is not enough. The author is certain about leaving a difficult task on the shoulders of his characters: they must use the auctorial irony so as to bind the scenes together. Of course this does not work out very well. The irony is not a substance meant to fix things like a glue, but to offer a release or to offer a subversion or the necessary sarcasm as a revenge. We can parallel this situation with that of a chess player. Here the author is the master chess player. But he needs some assets. With Modiano's irony at play, Thérèse's story is nothing of fair play and accepted rules as in a normal game. The fair play is dismissed from the first moment. Her mother shows her no affection. The cruellest treatment from her mother is the moment when she sends her away, to be brought up by other distant people, mere acquaintances of the family. The little girl carries a sign around her neck saying her name and the address where she was sent to. This has a horrible impact on the little girl and on what she can achieve in life.

This painful memory is something that cannot be discarded. Like on her birth certificate that contained also her mother's real name, Cardères, the girl is bound to carry her own name and address indication like some strange burden. But this is also her identity. Had she disobeyed the rules and had she thrown away her name indication so as to escape humiliation, would Thérèse have had a better life? Certainly not, other dangers could have appeared. But discarding would mean that she follows the steps of her mother and this is what she does not want to do. Her mother was lying many times about her identity. The grandparents are not referred to, there is no common memory that could link our heroine to the root of her family through grandparents.

Patrick Modiano's commitment to literature is existential. Success has little influence on his credo. The buried emotions of his characters are always real. They stem from his autobiography, but his writing is not designed to elucidate such emotions or to show the reader the triumphalist way of curing them. The anxiety of passing through life stages and the ways in which a writer can make existence more problematic, not necessarily more pessimistic, are the hallmarks of Modiano's literary universe.

The opposite effect of the *society of spectacle* (in Guy Debord's terms) is to be met in Modiano's stories. Life is an *accumulation* of foreign spectacles (Debord, 2014:2). They witness the spectacle of the world but they can never be absorbed by it. Not even the "antagonists".

Mother in *Little Jewel* manifests like a beloved antagonist. The episode with the dog is the peak of fury. The thoughts reach that boiling point when the thought of punishing somebody with the desire to see her dead crosses Thérèse's mind. It will not happen. But the last act of this novel, the last act in full conscience is the suicide of Thérèse. Using the pills received from her benefactor, the lady who is a pharmacist.

There is also an act of betrayal in this suicide. The fact that mother cannot be made to be less absent, cannot be made to care or to be more affectionate is a late discovery of Thérèse. The voyage has granted the young woman a big story, told in/by her mind, a story of compensation. Through her suicide, the compensatory role reaches its end. There is no way to be there in the world and serve at something. All traces are gone, this is what Thérèse desires.

The last words of the novel are under the sign of irony. After playing all these years with malevolent irony, this time the switch of the narration includes something positive. Death does not come. The aquarium-like walls are due to the fact that there were no spare rooms at the hospital. Therese is in the chamber of premature babies, at a section of maternity, with her life in danger but alive, breathing and understanding what a new beginning means.

Even on the verge of suicide and in breathing again, there is no renunciation to authenticity on behalf of Thérèse. Feeling about in the depths of labyrinth, authenticity is Ariadne's thread. No even and no distortion take it away from Thérèse. Losing authenticity would mean condemnation to the obscurity of life, an obscurity impossible to be conquered. Keeping in touch with the raw and unbearable parts of one's existence makes room for obscurity, well interwoven in the texture of Modiano's novels. Yet the writer knows how not to make the desire to keep authenticity a chalice of fear. Modiano's characters thrive in finding the light within obscurity, as if this were a dim into which the torrents of memory could find a new flow and recalibrate.

The moment the daughter comes with the memory of the film for which she played a small part, we realize that instead of connecting the mother and daughter, the film only had the premise to set them apart. What interfered between them was another aspect of the playing, this time drama playing or acting.

The author turns the game in favor of life, just to revert irony again, in the very last shift of the written rows. It is hard to decipher what has happened through so many quick alternations of the story. Yet, after re-reading the story, one thing is sure: Thérèse has been given a new chance to love. The suicide could have taken her in the realm of death. But the title of the film in which she was near her mother was *The Crossing of the Archers*, a premonitory title. She passed on the other side while still alive, she crossed to the other realm, but the realm did not grasp her, the other realm rejected her, so she must continue her life among the alive people, hopefully with her lessons acquired.

One evening, in the same neighbourhood, near the Gare de Lyon, he had taken me to the cinema. It was my first time. The theatre seemed immense and was showing *The Crossroad of the Archers*, the film in which, a while before, I'd had a small role alongside my mother. I hadn't recognised myself on the screen and, when I'd heard my voice, I'd even wondered if Little Jewel was some other girl, not me. (Modiano, *Little Jewel*: 74)

Therese is present on a level of openness to love, that is why the translator Moreau-Badmaev, a friend and a possible boyfriend, at the same time, appears in her life. She is happy to be meaningful to him, even in small gestures, and she does not lie to him as blatantly as she does with other people. For example, she lies to the pharmacist lady. With this new young man she is in the beginning of love phase, the budding phase, and her fairy tale is distorted, her own mother had distorted her fairy tale, therefore she cannot wait for it to turn magically in her favour and to give her a new meaning in life.

### **The game and the regain of vulnerability**

Thérèse manages to find a trace after this situation of a projected encounter with her mother, a real trace this time. It is possible that the person in a yellow coat was indeed her mother, but it is probable that she was not. The daughter simply goes to one of the former apartments where they used to stay and asks the receptionist of the block of flats. It would be easy for her to have a discussion with the woman at the 4th floor, resembling her mother, yet the daughter cannot overcome her unconscious sabotage. Her fear is too deep-seated. She withdraws. Before she had spent almost all her money to pay her mother's debt for the rent. Thérèse is afraid of her mother's reaction. Her mother was always polite, yet she used to be abusive in retiring, excusing herself when the girl most needed her and also by sending her alone, as if her daughter were a parcel with the destination written on it, to be raised by somebody else. Thérèse cherishes the memory when she was called Little Jewel. This is her secret identity. Somehow this means that her mother might have loved her without showing it.

Thérèse's other secret is falling in love with a young man, a translator who speaks twenty languages and works for a radio department (possibly state-owned). His name is Moreau-Badmaev. His father, a Russian, is absent, too, from his life. His mother is French. A bookaholic, he has created a safe environment at his place, with dim light and radio green lights, safe for daydreaming and working, although he had not even stepped into the kitchen. Moreau-Badmaev refuses to tell his first name, maybe as a way to keep people at a distance. Intuitively, Thérèse knows that she should tell him about her secret name, Little Jewel, because that way she would be in her most charming self. She fails to do that, but towards the end of the novel, she succeeds in disclosing it. As expected, his reaction is to understand her, to see eye to eye with her, to cherish her even more because of this shared memory and to understand in few words what are her ways of harming herself. For him, she is like a new language worth-learning. They navigate through the difficulties of disclosing to each other something relevant but also hidden and they react happily when they reach the right words to describe their emotions and their values in life.

A more embedded secret about her love life is Thérèse's failure to stand up for herself or to react with more awareness to her feelings. A brief episode with a guy called Wurlitzer, met before knowing Moreau-Badmaev covers a huge pain. She accepted the guy just because she wanted an escape from her life, she accepted the compromise of being courted by a rich guy knowing that there will be a price for it, but she was in the numbed state of neither happy nor unhappy. The bitter taste after the inability to show her emotions and to defend them, even if they meant rejecting what she did not want is the price for not being able to see herself as the Little Jewel she once was.

Two other happy encounters compensate for the obsessive behavior stirred by the hypothetical proximity of her mother: a little girl who is her mirror at another age (seven maybe) and a pharmacist on duty, ready to help people like a good Samaritan. She finds a part-time job to babysit the little girl with rich and loveless parents. The young woman at the chemist's understands Thérèse's need for a human connection. The irony is that by giving more to these two encounters Thérèse could have had a healthier replacement of her sabotage tendencies. Patrick Modiano has also unintended ironies. One of them is his style of writing as if to invoke oblivion, the undoing, the deletion or the obliteration. Simona Modreanu exemplifies oblivion and forgetfulness associated with the intention of writing for Modiano (Modreanu, 2015:69). Jacques Derrida in his book, *Writing and Difference*, had many remarks about writing in the old Egypt as opposed to Greek logos, but also about the paradoxes of writing. Writing is *pharmakon* against oblivion. (Derrida, 1998, p. 377). But what if people rely too much on what they surrender to writing and they become careless about it, careless in the sense of separate, not belonging to that piece of writing anymore?

Derrida's problematization appears very distinctly in Modiano's writing. Yes, people could be too detached from their emotions after liberating themselves of these emotions through writing. But what should the novel retain then? It is very interesting how *Little Jewel* is so clear in telling the maps of her tribulations in Paris, yet she walks in a somnambulist way, as if she could barely touch the roofs of the building in Paris. Her emotions keep her floating and her vulnerability is the author's most precious asset. She is somebody's Little Jewel after all. She is the Little Jewel of the writer and of the readers.

Roland Barthes's famous essay "The Death of the Author" states that meaning does not originate in the writer's intention but in the interplay of signs. (Barthes, 1967:5). Is text a generative system? It very much has this quality, nowadays with the AI we see it at work. Therefore, it would be important for the author to keep his secrets quite hidden, because, in this "multi-dimensional space", namely in the text itself, "a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." However, it is Modiano's merit to know how to reveal the secrets of his characters. And it is his

perfect writing, although difficult at the first reading, that keeps intact the vulnerability of his main heroes and feminine protagonists. The secret of the novel *Little Jewel* is related also to the imitation inherent to any child.

Thérèse learns how not to instinctively imitate her mother's steps and dance through life like Suzanne. The child instinctively resorts to the imitation game. Scholars argue that imitation is not a peripheral behavior but the foundation of cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Play, as Huizinga sees it, is an activity that establishes an order in which freedom is expressed inside the limits of constraint. The paradox is essential: autonomy thrives inside declared, accepted regulations. (Huizinga, 1950:9). But, unlike in the case of dictatorship, for example, we can see that children's appointed rules do not have the burden of taking things too seriously. The stakes matter. In case of life threatening rules, even for a game, everything changes. Eugen Fink explains this very clearly: "Play stands opposed to the seriousness of real life, to care and work, to the concern for the salvation of one's soul. It appears as something non-serious and non-binding (...)" (Fink, 2016: 21)

Eugen Fink continues to stress the importance on the aspect of the game that can be taken as "non-serious".

While playing, the human being does not remain himself, does not remain in an enclosed domain of his psychic interiority- rather, he extatically steps out of and beyond himself, in a cosmic gesture and interprets the whole of the world in a manner that is suffused with sense. (Fink, 2016 : 44).

Thérèse learns that pain connects herself with other people and there is no use to escape pain. She can re-interpret the cage she is in, in the hospital, the glass-cage used for protection against germs. It is not the cage of glass that keeps her from reaching other people, but the cage in which she can learn how to integrate her pain and make her part of her emotions, because pain means also vulnerability, and the vulnerability is the gift of shared connection through the shared life miracles. Now, at the crossing the archers, but also after crossing through to the other side of life, near death, still breathing in the hospital, at the section of premature babies, she has liberated herself from the need to be like her mother or to be the opposite of her mother.

I was in a big glass cage. I looked around. There were aquariums in other glass cages. The pharmacist must have brought me here. We had arranged to meet at six o'clock in the evening to leave for Bar-sur-Aube. Inside the aquariums, I thought I could see shadows moving: fish, perhaps. I heard the noise of waterfalls, getting louder and louder. I had been trapped in icefields a long time ago, and now there was the gushing sound of them melting. I wondered what the shadows in the aquariums could possibly be. They told me later that there had been no more room, so they put me in the ward for premature babies. For a long time to come, I heard the noise of

waterfalls, a sign that for me, too, from that day on, life was beginning. (Modiano, 2016: 158)

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## KINGSLEY AMIS - A PLAYFUL LIFE

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**Abstract:** *He was the most prominent literary figure among political, cultural and social polemicists, appealing to the shifting tastes of elite and popular audiences alike. Widely remembered as a compelling person, a man of alarming appetites and energies, or as one of the funniest, cleverest or rudest men that most people had ever met, Amis enjoyed the status of a "celebrity" quoted in newspaper and periodicals, during a time when the devilish machinations of mass media had not yet given rise to the term's present-day negative or at least pejorative connotations. His work is of vital importance not only for its influence, but for the pleasure it affords, and the breadth and depth of its achievement. As for Amis the man, he was in life as he was on the page: commanding, invigorating, sparkling, and full of esprit.*

**Key words:** crisis points, compromise, humorous tone, national novelist, autobiographical experiences

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Detached from political causes and progress in their own lives, the protagonists of Amis's first novels *Lucky Jim*, *That Uncertain Feeling* and *I Like It Here* are partly rebels, partly victims, and partly clowns who seek a life of compromise with, or of escape from boredom, hypocrisy and ignorance. Although each novel carries a serious moral interest, the heroes generate laughter instead of tears because the reader is allowed to believe that through all this chaos there is an ordering of events, which will bring security and happiness. "The reader is left with picture of Amis as a conventional moralist whose characters, fly in the face of that morality." (Salwak, 1992: 60) That is the source of much of his irony and his comedy. "It has been said", Malcom Bradbury wrote in 1987, "that few contemporary comic writers can get free of the intonations of Amis..." (Bradbury, 1998: 206) The first sounding of those intonations would come from a hapless but lucky hero.

Amis's second novel *That Uncertain Feeling* has revealed traits familiar to readers of *Lucky Jim*, one of these being the humorous tone, which is not as striking as in Amis's earlier novel. When *Lucky Jim* was published, Amis had reached page 40 of

his second novel, *That Uncertain Feeling*, a practice that he followed with his novels ever since. This was finished by the end of the year and came out in July 1955. Throughout 1954, Amis was doing fortnightly reviews and articles, mainly for the *Spectator*, travelling regularly to London for interviews and continuing to fulfil his demanding commitments at the university.

Like many other writers, Amis had kept notebooks of ideas for many years. In his notebook for *That Uncertain Feeling*, dated September 1953, we come across a virtual dialogue between the author and his novels, doubled by plans and parts of the book. Amis wrote the first draft in two years, read it, made corrections, reviewed it, and started work on another draft. He worked hard to make his writing exact and allotted special attention to the sound of his prose so that there would be “no successive sentences that rhyme or boring succession of words that end with ‘ing’ or the like”. As he explains, “What makes something readable is a ceaseless attention to very small points that the reader isn’t aware of.” (*Economist*, 9 March 1991: 89)

When the novel appeared in August 1955, most reviewers agreed that it represented a step forward in Amis’s career. John Betjeman said that the novel made him laugh “even more than his first book”. (Betjeman, 26 August 1955: 8) While Philip Oakes wrote: “What Mr. Amis did is to break new ground, rather than trade on a gilt-edged reputation”. (Oakes, 1955:177-178) Amis later wrote about these pitfalls of “the second novel”:

Why is a writer’s second novel so often inferior to his first, so that a second novel that turn out to be, if nothing more, no worse than the first one is a cause for congratulation? Answer: because most ‘second’ novella were written earlier than the ‘first’, and after the successful appearance of the ‘first’, are pulled of the drawer, given a freshly-typed title page and bunged off to the publisher. (Salwak, 1992:88)

The plot is relatively simple. As Salwak Dale affirmed, the novel is “the Faustian struggle of the flesh versus the spirit, temptation versus man’s better nature.” (Amis, 14 July 1967) On the one hand there is John’s instinctive desire for loyalty; on the other hand there is a desire for infidelity and disorder. John Lewis, aged twenty-six, works in the library of Aberdarcy, a small southern Welsh town, making enough to support his wife, Jean, and their two young children in a dingy low-rent second-floor flat. His life takes a radical turn when he meets Elizabeth Gruffydd-Williams, whose husband, Vernon, is very rich, very influential and, fortunately for John, a member of the Town Council and the Libraries Committee. Most of the novel concerns John’s entry, with Elizabeth’s help, into the quasi-aristocratic world of Aberdarcy, and the degrading effect that this experience has on his character. He spends the greater part of this novel time considering the attraction and consequences of adultery with Elizabeth. In the end John’s experience has taught him

to prefer the simple but safer pleasures that spring from his father's warning: "Sobriety and decorum, let these be your watchwords." (Amis, 1985: 162)

As in *Lucky Jim*, the first hints about the protagonist are given in an opening comic scene. Some of the contempt that John feels towards his job comes from the description of his resigned and diligent performance and frustrating tasks, including for example, dealing with an expired library card:

"The Bevan ticket," I said. "has expired, and will have to be renewed". The middle-aged woman put a hand to her mitre-like hat and frowned across the counter at me. After sometime, she said: "Mrs. Bevan said she just wanted one like the one she had out last time".

I was used in this sort of thing, as indeed to every sort of thing that could go on here. "The Bevan ticket", I repeated in the same tone, or lack of one, has expired; and will have to be renewed."

My gaze, slightly filmed by afternoon drowsiness, swam, round the square, high room, fixing idly on the etching, or daguerreotype, or whatever it was, of Lord Beaconsfield's face which hung over the Hobbies and Handicrafts Section, Lord Beaconsfield had some connection with the founding the Library, which took place a long time ago. At the moment his likeness was glowing in a cloudy beam of late spring sunshine, and looked as if it wanted to be sick but knew that this would be wrong. I nodded imperceptibly to it. (Amis, 1985: 19)

Amis himself argued, "Like Jim Dixon, Lewis is involved in the business of learning that it is what you do that matters. Like Jim Dixon, he cares very much, even if he can't quite make the grade." David Lodge describes the similarity in somewhat different terms:

Like Jim Dixon, John Lewis is trying to reconcile his inner life with his outer life, but an opposite direction. Whereas Jim struggled to make his outer life realize his inner life of protest and romantic self-fulfillment, John Lewis seeks to discipline his outer life by the moral principles of his inner self. (Amis, 23 January: 1973)

Larkin liked the new novel in part, because it was so exclusively Amis's own. Amis, too, was an adulterer who loved his wife and family but in his former role, he was far more calculating than Lewis. Amis had met Robert Conquest in 1952 at a party in Chelsea, on the launch of a new PEN anthology of poems in which they both featured. However, their friendship had much to do with a shared taste for boozing. Just as frequently, after *Lucky Jim*, Amis would visit London on his own, to see publishers, to promote his own writing, or to fulfil tasks related to his regular work for the *Spectator* and the *Observer*. By the time, he wrote *That Uncertain Feeling*, he had also sent letters to Conquest with the request to borrow his other residence for adulterous relationships. Lewis plans his liaisons with Elizabeth with far less tactical precision.

In the previous year, 1956, marital relationships between the Amises had reached crisis points. He could never hope to keep his entire affairs secret, and Hilly found out about most of them. This had been happening during the completion of *That Uncertain Feeling* and the penultimate chapter of the novel is an accurate prediction of what happened with the Amises in October 1956. At the end of the novel, Lewis and Jean are reunited and this, too, was a prediction of what happened with the Amises by the end of 1956. There were further problems, but they managed to stay together. Finally, we find the Lewises' back in the mining village where Lewis was born. They are happy, and the inhabitants are apart from the Elizabeth's "Anglicized upper classes." (Amis, 1985:10)

The novel is not only about adulterous relationships - Amis's experiences of the class structure of south-west Wales were also the basis for Lewis's own account. Lewis's flat is a version of several dwellings rented by the Amises from November 1949 until Hilly's legacy when they afforded to buy a new house in The Grove in 1951. They were primitive places with shared bathrooms. For a while, Hilly, like Jean, had no other option but to bathe her youngest children in a kitchen sink. For the first six months of 1950, they shared a house with Amis's English Department colleague David Sims. He became one of the Amis's closest friends in Swansea and provided him with some of the background material for the character of Lewis. In the summer of 1951, Amis and Sims spent a week in New Tredegar making 800 school examination papers for the Joint Welsh Board. Amis needed the money, and liked the place, which also became Lewis's hometown to which he retreats with Jean at the end of the novel.

During these years, Amis and his colleagues at the university were paid less than many employees of the National Coal Board. Hilly, like Jean, had to find part-time jobs, the former washing up at a fish and chip café in the Mumbles. Amis had never been well-off, but his background in London, the home counties, Oxford and the army had been middle class and this was his first real encounter with working-class.

Margaret Aaron-Thomas was the social worker who, as Amis had convinced Larkin, might be cited as the real model for Margaret Peel of *Lucky Jim*. She was a friend of Hilly's, who would become Betty in his short story "Moral Fibre", a spin-off from *That Uncertain Feeling*. Her husband, John, owned the Newport Argus and a successful business in Swansea, and they were certainly in Amis's mind when he invented the Griffith-Williamses. On one occasion, the Aaron Thomases were invited to the Amises' house in the Grove for drinks and food. Lewis plays a similar game with his own experience of Swansea lifestyle, mocking the habits of the Griffith-Williams and contrasting them with the rough, but admirably transparent manner of the ordinary people of the area.

When *Lucky Jim* transformed Amis from a provincial academic into a national novelist, his credit with the sophisticated people from the region increased significantly. Jo Bartley, his colleague who had exchanged a Chair in India for a

lectureship in Swansea, introduced Amis to the Swansea Yacht Club, and while he had no interest in sailing he certainly enjoyed being talked about, and introduced to people in the club as a controversial author. Lewis plays a similar role. He is not a writer, but he is someone who enjoys existing on the margins of a comfortably exclusive social network. In chapter 3 Lewis and Jean are invited to a Gruffyd-Williams house party surrounded by local representatives of what he calls “anglicized Aberdarcy bourgeois” (Amis, 1985: 10) a phrase he uses four times in the novel.

At the Yacht Club Amis met Eve and Stuart Thomas. Stuart Thomas and Amis became friends, and remained so during the Swansea years and after Amis’s departure. Amis had long abandoned Communism, but he still voted Labour. At election time his house was full of posters, and Hilly used the family car to ferry elderly, infirm electors in hope of securing a gratitude vote for Labour. In *That Uncertain Feeling*, Dylan Thomas becomes Probert, a figure who threatens Lewis’s fragile relationship with Jean.

Like in his first novel, *Lucky Jim*, where many of the characters and situations were drawn from Amis’s personal experience, in his second novel he created John Lewis as an “experiment, as someone who was a version of himself but whose background and circumstances were different, differences which enabled him to become the person that Amis could never be.” (Bradford, 2001:130) Amis’s left-wing affiliation began as a rebellion against his family background, particularly his father. John Lewis is a socialist, but he demonstrates that his commitment is partly hypocritical and partly irrelevant to the things that trouble him, specifically his marriage and his ambitions.

Rubin Rabinovitz sees in *That Uncertain Feeling* strong parallels with the eighteenth-century novelist Samuel Richardson’s long-suffering heroine in *Pamela*. John Lewis, he says, “Yields his virtue, but at the end of the novel, tries to salvage his integrity”. Like Pamela, John:

must choose between virtue and worldly goods, and both of them have trouble making up their minds because they are sexually attracted to the people who tempt them. In both *Pamela* and *That Uncertain Feeling* the protagonist makes the conventionally moral choice in the end, though their experiences leave them somewhat tarnished. (Rabinovitz, 1967: 44)

When Lewis returns to the valleys, the conflict between his left-wing attitudes and the people he lives with is no longer an issue. Lewis’s is a lifelong struggle against that uncertain feeling, a continuing battle between integrity and human weakness.

The typescript of *That Uncertain Feeling* had been sent to Gollancz in early 1955. At that time Amis had no plans for his next novel but at the end of March received a telegram in Swansea from Hilary Rubinstein informing him that *Lucky Jim*

had won the Somerset Maugham Award of 500£, and reminding him that “If you don’t travel you can’t have the money”. Therefore, Amis took the entire family to Portugal. Amis would be able to fit the three months into the Swansea summer vacation, but he had no interest in foreign travel and no contacts abroad. The Amises had never been on a proper holiday since their marriage and Hilly was more enthusiastic about the prospect than Amis. John Aaron–Thomas said he would contact Signor Pintos Bassos, a businessman whom he and his wife had stayed with in Portugal.

They did not stay with Pintos Bassos but with one of his employees, a senior clerk called Billy Barley. In *I Like It Here* he became C.J.P. Oates. Barley’s wife and children, his Anglo-Portuguese background, his accent, appeared in the novel with autobiographical verity. The novel was written after Amis’s return to Swansea in September 1955, but there is no evidence that he had originally planned his period abroad as the basis for a work of fiction. Before he left Portugal, he had written a review article for the *Spectator* on Laurie Lee’s *A Rose for Winter* and Peter Mayne’s *The Narrow Smile*, as well as literary travel books, about their respective author’s experiences in Spain, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Amis wanted to write a non-fiction travel book that would undermine the assumptions. He abandoned the project because he realized that if it were to be taken seriously it would have to be based on personal experience of realities abroad. In the end, the only piece of non-fiction writing to be salvaged from the summer was a brief contribution to the *Spectator’s* 1956 travel supplement. Instead of a travel book he wrote a novel and used these real events to craft another story, entirely fictional, throughout which Amis puts forth opinions on literature and identity, which would have been central to his original project.

Garnet Bowen’s trip to Portugal is sponsored by the publisher, Hyman, and in return for a free holiday, Bowen is asked to elucidate a literary detective mystery. Hyman had recently received a manuscript from a person claiming to be the Wulfstan Stretcher who had published five acclaimed modernist novels in the 1930s and the 1940s. Along with his children and his wife Garnet Bowen travels to Portugal, but his family is unexpectedly called back to England to care for his mother-in-law. By this time, Garnet has located the mysterious Stretcher and stays in his house as a guest. In his wife’s absence, Garnet has a relationship with a beautiful Portuguese woman named Emilia. He also solves the question of Stretcher’s authenticity and finally, he returns home, because he “likes it here”, making a permanent resolution to remain in England. Bowen is an “abroad-hater” (Jacobs, 1995: 214) and like Amis, prefers the relative safety of his home. Like John Lewis, Bowen abandons the adulterous life and returns to a comfortable marriage, firmly believing that he is the same man that he was before.

English and American reviewers were not too impressed with the novel's achievements. They criticized the plot and characterization. G.S. Fraser called it "less a novel than a series of farcical incidents loosely tied to a travel narrative." (New Statement, 18 January 1958) Twenty years later Amis himself referred to it as "by common consent my worst novel" and explained that it failed because he had tried to "put real people in paper." In a 1975 interview for the Paris Review, Amis said that *I like It Here* "was written partly out of bad motives. Seeing that *That Uncertain Feeling* had come out in 1955, and it is now 1957 and there was no novel on the way, I really cobbled it together out of straightforwardly autobiographical experiences in Portugal, with a kind of mystery story rather perfunctorily imposed on that." (Barber, 1975:48) David Lodge calls the novel:

A most interesting example of a special genre; which perhaps begins with *Tristram Shandy*, and which is particularly common in our area. I mean the kind of novel, which is not so much turned outwards upon the world as inward upon literary art and upon the literary artist himself. I am thinking of such novels as Evelyn Waugh's *The Ordeal of Gilbert Pinfold* and Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. It is characteristic of such novels that the central figure is himself a writer, often with an autobiographical reference, that there is a lot of parody, many literary jokes, and much discussions of literary questions, and that in this way the author is able to get a surprising distance on his own literary identity. (Lodge, 1966: 261)

When he began *I Like It Here* in late 1955, Gollancz had just agreed to publish *A Case of Sample*, his first volume of poems appeared under an establishment imprint. In early 1956, the Fabian Society had commissioned Amis to write a pamphlet, which the following year would be published as *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, a skeptical assessment of the British labour government and its advocates.

Amis, as Richard Bradford said, toyed with the idea of bringing back Jim Dixon who would be sent to Portugal by his employer, Gore Urquart, and there meet an author called Kingsley Amis. Fielding was in his thoughts. He, too, had used his own name, yet had been both himself and a version of himself in a work, which mixed fact with fiction. Amis abandoned this idea because its twentieth-century manifestation would probably be viewed as a concession to modernist self-consciousness. Instead, Amis produced a book that was both a tribute to Fielding's narrative technique, and a pretext to interweave elements of his own life. (Bradford, 2001:140-141)

*I Like It Here* became a novel that Amis wanted to forget. He talks of it in his self-critical 1973 essay, but more significantly, that summer in Portugal is not mentioned in his *Memoirs*. The weakness of the novel is not the result of a temporary decline in Amis's abilities as a serious writer. They mark a stage of growth in which he was searching for themes of deeper implication. Beginning with *Take A Girl Like You*, Amis will leave behind light-hearted social comedy in favour of more pronounced realism, formal complexity and a more obvious moral concern. To many critics, his

next novel seemed to be a departure from the light fiction that they had come to expect from him.

In the same year of publication of *I Like It Here*, Amis arrived with his family, including his widowed father, in the United States as a visiting fellow in creative writing at Princeton University. He describes the experience as “one of the best years of my life, perhaps the most enjoyable, and crammed with incident”. (Amis, 1991:193) His class, for example, gave him “a lot of pleasure and also taught [him] about America and about literature”. (Amis 1991:197) In the house he rented in Edgerstone Road, Amis researched and wrote *New Maps of Hell*, began work on *Take a Girl Like You*, wrote four poems, and made notes on his American experiences and observations.

While at Princeton he delivered the Christian Gauss Seminars in Criticism on science fiction, a task he was well qualified for, since from the time he was a boy he had read every American science fiction magazine he could lay his hands on. Knowing that his audience would be a distinguished one, including Mary McCarthy and Dwight McDonald, he decided to research and compose his lectures. By the time he had found enough material for a book, he asked Hilary Rubinstein to publish it, and it appeared in the United States in 1960 and in England in 1961 with the title *New Maps of Hell: A Survey Of Science Fiction*. Amis develops an “analogy between science fiction and jazz” (Mosely, 1993:54) pointing out, that both developed in America in the 1930s:

Both have strong connections with mass culture without being, as I have to show in the case of science fiction mass media in themselves,

Both

have thrown up a large number of interesting and competent figures without producing anybody of first-rate importance” and “both jazz and science fiction have in the last dozen years begun to attract the attention of the cultural diagnostician, or trend-hound, who becomes interested in them not far or as themselves, but for the light they can be made to throw on same other thing.(Amis,1960:17-18)

Because of that uncertainty, the moral seriousness in *That Uncertain Feeling* is not readily discernible here. Its true merit, as David Lodge suggests, is its being a “gently comic explanation of why travel will not serve the literary purposes it is supposed to serve, of broadening the mind and opening new areas of experience.” (Lodge, 1966: 267)

Kingsley Amis's life, often described as "playful," was characterized by his role as a celebrated comic novelist, poet, critic, and a dominant figure in post-war British writing, according to Zachary Leader's biography "The Life of Kingsley Amis". While his life had its share of anxieties and phobias, his career was marked by satire and

humor in works like *Lucky Jim* and *The Old Devils*, and it was a "playful life" of sorts, full of contradictions and enduring charm

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# JULES VERNE, A WRITER PASSIONATE ABOUT FUTURE AND TRAVEL

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## JULES VERNE, UN ÉCRIVAIN PASSIONÉ DE L'AVENIR ET DU VOYAGE



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**Résumé :** À une époque où le voyage représentait une vraie hantise pour beaucoup d'écrivains (Chateaubriand, Hugo, Flaubert, Baudelaire, Nerval), le cas de Jules Verne est particulier, par sa passion pour l'avenir, au-delà de celle du voyage, notamment dans des espaces lointains, comme les États-Unis, le peuple américain étant pour lui celui de l'avenir. Si l'action ne se passe pas dans ce pays (Nord contre Sud), ses personnages y font au moins un séjour (*Le Tour du monde en 80 jours*). En plus, le Musée Jules Verne de Nantes est une preuve des préoccupations constantes du romancier pour les sciences et la technique. Quand il habite la ville d'Amiens, Jules Verne a la chance de se documenter dans une grande bibliothèque, qui se trouvait au rez-de-chaussée de sa demeure (à présent un musée qui lui est consacré). La rencontre avec l'éditeur Hetzel en 1862 marque le vrai début de sa carrière littéraire et depuis lors Jules Verne publie des romans à un rythme infernal, pendant 35 ans. En effet, la bibliographie de Jules Verne est une alternance de romans d'anticipation (comme *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, *De la Terre à la Lune*) et les romans historico-géographiques (Michel Strogoff), tandis que ses derniers volumes relèvent du type social. Jules Verne a été au courant avec les découvertes scientifiques de son époque et, en ajoutant des éléments d'imagination, il a créé le type du « roman scientifique d'anticipation ». Par exemple, le pouvoir de l'électricité, comme énergie de l'avenir, apparaît dans ses romans *Le Château des Carpathes*, *Robur le conquérant*. Jules Verne « a tenté un voyage extraordinaire: rendre la science culturelle. » (Philippe de la Cotardière) Au-delà de l'aventure comme sujet de ses livres, nous voulons étudier l'aventure des idées de Jules Verne, de sa correspondance, de son écriture. En effet, l'exercice de la littérature a été pour ce romancier la grande aventure, le bonheur absolu de son existence.

**Mots-clés:** voyage, aventure, science, imagination, roman

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Michel Serres, dans la préface au bel album sur Jules Verne, affirme que « pour vivifier l'interface entre science et société » il nous manque un écrivain pareil, qui sache rendre la science culturelle.

Avant de donner à l'œuvre de Jules Verne le titre général des *Voyages extraordinaires* (comme celui de la *Comédie humaine* de Balzac), l'éditeur Hetzel

l'avait appelée *Voyages dans les mondes connus et inconnus*. Ses textes couvrent une période qui va de l'Encyclopédie, au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, jusqu'à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les 62 romans et 18 nouvelles des *Voyages extraordinaires* font 22000 pages dans les éditions Hetzel avec 5000 illustrations. Cette œuvre comprend trois périodes marquant l'évolution de Jules Verne: le positivisme inspiré d'Auguste Comte, l'humanisme laïc prôné par la république nouvelle et la critique du scientisme.

Les quatre premiers romans (1863-1864) prouvent les préoccupations techniques et scientifiques de l'écrivain: l'emploi du ballon pour découvrir de nouveaux territoires, la conquête de l'espace sous-marin, le feu des volcans, l'électricité, la force du soleil, des comètes. Les personnages des livres de J. Verne sont des savants, des explorateurs, etc.

Des titres comme *Michel Strogoff*, *Un capitaine de quinze ans*, *Tour du monde en quatre-vingts jours* deviennent très populaires, jusqu'à les voir adaptés au théâtre, comme c'est le cas du dernier roman cité ci-dessus, en 1874. En France, ses douze premiers romans sont couronnés par l'Académie française. À l'étranger, la diffusion internationale de la maison Hetzel est très efficace et Jules Verne est traduit en plusieurs langues dès *Cinq semaines en ballon*. Le théâtre ajoute à ce début de popularité. En effet, *Le Tour du monde*, *Michel Strogoff* et les *Enfants du capitaine Grant* offrent le sujet pour des féeries à grand spectacle au théâtre.

Philippe de La Cotardière a montré dans son livre qu'entre 1878 et 1884, Jules et Paul Verne naviguent au large de l'Angleterre, de l'Écosse, en Irlande, sur les côtes de Hollande, d'Allemagne, du Danemark. Ils font le tour de l'Espagne, entrent en Méditerranée, visitent Alger, Tunis, Malte et la Sicile. À Venise, Jules Verne est accueilli comme un ambassadeur du progrès. À Rome, il est reçu par le pape, le 9 juillet 1884. (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004:25)

De la correspondance de Jules Verne et Pierre-Jules Hetzel, entretenue depuis leur rencontre jusqu'à la mort de l'éditeur (survenue en mars 1886), il reste plus de sept cents lettres. Par exemple, nous y trouvons des témoignages concernant le rythme de ce travailleur infatigable, que fut le romancier:

Je me lève tous les matins avant cinq heures – un peu plus tard peut-être en hiver – et à cinq heures je m'installe à mon bureau et je travaille jusqu'à onze heures. Je travaille très lentement et avec le plus grand soin... (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004: 26)<sup>1</sup>

Sauf ce rythme de travail, Jules Verne doit à son inépuisable curiosité les dimensions et la consistance de son œuvre. Un vrai appétit pour les nouveautés techniques et scientifiques, comme on pourrait caractériser tout le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. En plus, l'écrivain a toujours su varier les tons de ses textes, tout comme les sujets abordés. La

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<sup>1</sup> Toutes les citations n'étant pas accompagnées de nom d'auteur renvoient à ce livre-album consacré à Jules Verne

documentation a joué, comme pour Zola ou d'autres confrères, un rôle majeur: «L'après-midi [...] je me rends à la sale de lecture de la Société industrielle, et je lis autant que les yeux me le permettent.»

Ce travail acharné est apprécié pleinement par les lecteurs, par le monde littéraire par des syntagmes du type: «opiniâtre ouvrier des lettres», «un romancier prophète», «un vulgarisateur de merveilleuses nouveautés, qui apprit la géographie aux masses», «un inventeur de chimères». Le Musée Jules Verne de Nantes conserve cet univers fascinant de l'écrivain et invite les visiteurs à franchir le monde inconnu, à rêver aux découvertes de l'avenir. Surtout au jour du patrimoine, le musée est assailli par les admirateurs de ce romancier passionné de la science...

Après la mort de son père, Michel Verne corrige les manuscrits restés inédits et Louis-Jules Hetzel fait paraître, à titre posthume, encore 10 romans et un recueil de nouvelles, ainsi les deux fils achevant l'œuvre de leurs pères. Pourtant, la relation entre Jules Verne et son fils ne fut pas très bonne (Michel a périclité souvent le travail de son père) et cela explique le fait que dans ses romans la plupart des personnages enfants sont tantôt orphelins, tantôt à la recherche de leur père. Ce sont des enfants qui ont beaucoup de qualités, comme le héros du *Capitaine de quinze ans*; ils sont honnêtes, éduqués, fidèles. On conserve même le souvenir d'un jeune nommé Aristide Briand (1862-1932), que l'écrivain recevait souvent à bord de son yacht, ce qui provoquait la jalousie de son fils, Michel Verne...

Pour ce qui est du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, il est une preuve que la littérature peut représenter le moteur du progrès, que l'essor de la science, de la technique trouvent leur place privilégiée dans les écrits d'un Jules Verne ou d'un Zola; quant au premier romancier, il avait lu et apprécié le volume d' Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos*, Humboldt étant l'un des savants auxquels Jules Verne se réfère: dans *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers*, le capitaine Nemo possède les œuvres complètes dans sa bibliothèque du *Nautilus*. D'ailleurs, en pratiquant une hybridité formelle, Jules Verne a réuni dans ses romans plusieurs genres: le roman d'aventures, le récit de voyage, le récit d'anticipation.

Dans le film *Vingt Mille Lieues sous les mers*, le personnage Nemo, interprété par Michael Cane (1997), est décidé de ne plus dépendre du monde du dehors, car le capitaine Nemo aime la vie au plus profond de la mer; dans son bureau, il a un tableau intitulé *La Liberté*. Quant à l'engin *Nautilus*, il a des composantes fabriquées en neuf pays différents et expédiées sur une île déserte, ensuite assemblées de manière secrète. C'est une image de la diversité dans l'unité. D'ailleurs ce sous-marin est nommé «la bête», «créature», comme euphémisme significatif pour la peur des gens devant l'inconnu...

Jules Verne a adoré observer le fonctionnement d'une machine dès sa jeunesse. Ce goût lui est resté toute la vie, et, pour lui, contempler une machine à vapeur ou une belle locomotive est pareil à la contemplation d'un tableau de Raphaël,

affirme l'écrivain à l'occasion d'un entretien accordé à Amiens, en 1893 à Robert Sherar, pour *McClure's Magazine*. D'ailleurs, l'époque de J. Verne est l'âge d'or de la machine à vapeur et il signe un roman avec le titre *Maison à vapeur* (1879-1880), mettant en fonction un train routier, *Steam-House*, dont la locomotive a la forme d'un gigantesque éléphant, qui effectue un long voyage à travers l'Inde.

L'écrivain eut toutes les expériences possibles en matière d'exploration. On peut aisément observer que ses écrits couvrent une large variété des territoires, dont certains n'étaient pas encore explorables lors de son temps: non seulement celui terrestre, mais aussi celui de l'air (*Cinq Semaines en ballon*, *Robur le Conquérant*), sous-marin (*Vingt mille Lieues sous les mers*), de l'intérieur de la Terre (*Voyage au centre de la Terre*) ou cosmique (*De la Terre à la Lune*). Ce penchant pour la découverte de nouveaux espaces de l'imaginaire pourrait être expliquée aussi par sa passion pour les voyages. En 1867 traverse Jules Verne l'Atlantique à bord du plus grand navire de l'époque, le *Great Eastern*, un paquebot à vapeur de 211 mètres de long, transportant 28500 tonnes; d'ailleurs, les bateaux à vapeur sont omniprésents dans son œuvre. Les romans qui prouvent cette fascination sont *Une ville flottante* et *l'Île à éllice*. Un voyage effectué au Royaume-Uni en 1859 lui inspire le roman les *Indes noires* (1877), dont l'action se passe dans une houillère d'Écosse («Le pays le plus riche en charbon, c'est incontestablement le Royaume-Uni. Celui-ci, en exceptant l'Irlande, à laquelle manque presque absolument le combustible minéral, possède d'énormes richesses carbonifères –mais épuisables, comme toutes les richesses.») Pourtant, on pourrait relever aussi que Jules Verne n'a nulle part lancé son imagination au-delà de la civilisation humaine : aussi, sa création ne présente-t-elle aucun exemple de civilisation extraterrestre.

En tout cas, la seconde moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle est considérée en France «l'âge d'or de la vulgarisation scientifique», le goût de la science inspirant beaucoup d'écrivains. C'est l'ère de la Tour Eiffel, de l'acier, des moyens de transport nouveaux, voire dangereux, de l'exploration de la terre, du ciel et des mers ou océans, etc.

Xavier Coadic montre (Coadic, Xavier 1996:81) que le but des *Voyages extraordinaires* de Jules Verne est le perfectionnement:

Grâce aux nombreuses épreuves traversées et à l'entraide du groupe, l'apprenti développe des qualités restées cachées depuis la (première) naissance. À la fin du voyage, l'apprenti est devenu un homme, compagnon à part entière de tous les autres membres du groupe (essentiellement masculin, généralement).

Jules Verne a eu une grande passion pour la géographie; il était un fervent lecteur de la revue hebdomadaire *Le Tour du monde*, fondée en 1860 par Louis Hachette, il adhère en 1865 à la Société de Géographie. Il n'ignore rien des voyages d'exploration de son temps (par exemple, les expéditions au cœur de l'Afrique ou de l'Australie et dans les régions polaires). Les textes de J. Verne s'inspirent des récits de

ces voyageurs et surtout de ceux des navigateurs. Ce n'est pas par hasard que l'éditeur Hetzel commande à l'écrivain en 1866 une *Géographie illustrée de la France*, mais aussi une histoire mondiale des explorations maritimes, ouvrage en plusieurs volumes.

Mais ce qui nous frappe également est le style de l'écrivain: voilà un fragment suggestif tiré du roman *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1869-1870), le discours enthousiaste du capitaine Nemo:

Oui! Je l'aime! la mer est tout! Elle couvre les sept dixièmes du globe terrestre. Son souffle est pur et sain. C'est l'immense désert où **l'homme n'est jamais seul, car il sent frémir la vie à ses côtés. La mer n'est que le véhicule d'une surnaturelle et prodigieuse existence; elle n'est que mouvement et amour; c'est l'infini vivant**, comme l'a dit un de vos poètes. Et en effet [...], la nature s'y manifeste par ses trois règnes, minéral, végétal, animal. [...] **La mer est le vaste réservoir de la nature.** C'est par la mer que le globe a pour ainsi dire commencé, et qui sait s'il ne finira pas par elle! Là est la suprême tranquillité **La mer n'appartient pas aux despotes.** À sa surface, ils peuvent encore exercer des droits iniques, s'y battre, s'y dévorer, y transporter toutes les horreurs terrestres. Mais à trente pieds au-dessous de son niveau leur pouvoir cesse, leur influence s'éteint, leur puissance disparaît! [...] Là je ne reconnais pas de maîtres! Là je suis libre! (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004: 76)

Sans doute, pouvons-nous remarquer une fascination pour la mer, chez beaucoup d'écrivains du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, comme Chateaubriand, Nerval, Rimbaud, Flaubert, Maupassant. La mer est un symbole de l'évasion, de la liberté, du voyage fascinant, de l'infini... Dans les propos du personnage vernien nous voyons du pathos, des mots simples, des répétitions. Et toutes les impressions rapportées à la première personne du singulier, comme expression de la subjectivité. Et pour l'esprit curieux d'un explorateur téméraire. Mais la mer devrait rester aussi un espace qui rende responsables ses explorateurs («La mer n'appartient pas aux despotes»). Nous avons souligné les phrases, les mots qui composent un vrai poème en prose faisant l'éloge de la mer. Il y a même un *mythe de la mer libre*, une légende de la mer libre du Pôle, si longtemps discutée par les sociétés de géographie (v. aussi le volume *la Mer libre du Pôle*). Vu le sujet de ses romans, l'écrivain a prouvé une maîtrise parfaite du langage scientifique et technique, en faisant introduire ses lecteurs dans de nouveaux mondes de la connaissance : ainsi, la faune sous-marine et sa classification biologique sont détaillées dans *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* et *De la Terre à la Lune* lui fournit occasion d'une description du projectile utilisé et de la manière dont on l'a construit. À cette passion pour la science pourrait être rattachée la fréquence des explications causales fournies par Jules Verne pour tel ou tel phénomène physique. L'érudition scientifique de l'écrivain est prouvée aussi par une relative prudence avec laquelle il nous présente ses innovations, qui ne dépassent pas une certaine limite, telle qu'elle était entrevue par ce visionnaire qui garde, pourtant, sa lucidité.

En général, observe Xavier Coadic, il y a dans les écrits verniens deux niveaux de lectures: le premier pour les enfants, tandis que le deuxième cible plutôt les lecteurs avertis, plus expérimentés, en leur offrant le tissu profond des mythes, des légendes, des rituels ésotériques. Par exemple, dans *Les Indes Noires*, le jeune Harry, pour mériter l'amour de Nell devra subir les mêmes épreuves que Tamino de *La Flûte enchantée* de Mozart pour obtenir celui de Pamina. (Coadic, Xavier 1996:80)

Dans ses écrits, Jules Verne présente aussi le désert du Sahara, en s'appuyant sur Henri Duveyrier, très populaire dans la deuxième moitié du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle (il est l'auteur du premier ouvrage sur le pays touareg), cette lecture étant valorisée dans *Mathias Sandorf*.

Une autre page impressionnante est celle où le romancier décrit la capitale de l'Islande au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle; J.Verne a utilisé les observations de Jules de Blosseville, qui avait disparu en 1833; en ce qui concerne les volcans, actifs ou éteints, Verne avait une grande passion, et pour *Voyage au centre de la Terre* (1864), l'écrivain présente le volcan Sneffels, comme lieu indiqué par Arne Saknussemm pour arriver au centre de la planète:

La ville s'allonge sur un sol assez bas et marécageux, entre deux collines. Une immense coulée de lave couvre d'un côté et descend en rampes assez douces vers la mer. De l'autre s'étend cette vaste baie de Faxe, bornée au nord par l'énorme glacier du Sneffels [...] Entre le petit lac et la ville s'élevait l'église, bâtie dans le goût protestant et construite en pierres calcinées dont les volcans font eux-mêmes les frais d'extraction. [...] En trois heures j'eus visité non seulement la ville, mais ses environs. L'aspect général en était singulièrement triste. Pas d'arbres, pas de végétation, pour ainsi dire. Les huttes des Islandais [...] ressemblent à des toits posés sur le sol. Seulement ces toits sont des prairies relativement fécondes. Grâce à la chaleur de l'habitation, l'herbe y pousse avec assez de perfection, et on a fauché soigneusement à l'époque de la fenaison, sans quoi les animaux domestiques viendraient paître sur ces demeures verdoyantes... (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004:92)

Pourtant, Jules Verne n'échappe pas aux préjugés de son époque, comme nous constatons dans ce fragment des *Enfants du capitaine Grant*:

-Mais ces indigènes, demanda vivement Lady Glenarvan, sont-ils?..

-Rassurez-vous, madame, répondit le savant, [...] ces indigènes sont sauvages, abrutis, au dernier échelon de l'intelligence humaine, mais des mœurs douces, et non sanguinaires comme leurs voisins de la Nouvelle-Zélande. S'ils ont fait prisonniers les naufragés du *Britannia*, ils n'ont jamais menacé leur existence, vous pouvez m'en croire. Tous les voyageurs sont unanimes sur ce point que les Australiens ont horreur de verser le sang, et maintes fois ils ont trouvé en eux de fidèles alliés pour repousser l'attaque des bandes de convicts, bien autrement cruels. (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004:95)

Le romancier était fasciné par l'Amérique et son peuple, qu'il considère celui de l'avenir; plusieurs histoires s'y passent, par exemple *De la Terre à la Lune*, *Nord contre Sud*, *Les 500 millions de la Bégum*, tandis que certains héros font au moins un séjour là-bas, comme il se passe dans *Le Tour du Monde en 80 jours*. Apparemment dans un seul roman (*Le Volcan d'or*), les Américains ne sont pas décrits dans des couleurs favorables... (Rinciog, 2005:13). Mais les descriptions des paysages sont magnifiques et enthousiastes sous la plume de Jules Verne, comme celle des chutes du Niagara, spectacle qui captive l'écrivain et figure dans le roman *Une ville flottante* (1870

Regardez! s'écria le docteur.

Au sortir d'un massif, le Niagara venait d'apparaître dans toute sa splendeur. [...] Le soleil, en frappant ces eaux sous tous les angles, diversifie capricieusement leurs couleurs, et qui n'a pas vu cet effet ne l'admettra pas sans conteste. En effet, près de Goat-Island, l'écume est blanche; c'est une neige immaculée, une coulée d'argent fondu qui se précipite dans le vide. Au centre de la cataracte, les eaux sont d'un vert de mer admirable, qui indique combien la couche d'eau est épaisse; [...] Les vapeurs y tourbillonnent. J'entrevois, cependant, d'énormes glaces accumulées par les froids de l'hiver; elles affectent des formes de monstres qui, la gueule ouverte, absorbent par heure les cent millions de tonnes que leur verse cet inépuisable Niagara. (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004: 98)

Plus tard, dans *Robur le conquérant* (1886), Jules Verne évoque de nouveau ces cascades impressionnantes:

*L'Albatros* se mirait dans l'immense glace du lac Ontario. [...] Pendant un instant, un bruit majestueux, un grondement de tempête monta jusqu'à lui. [...] Au-dessous, en fer à cheval, se précipitaient des masses liquides. On eût dit une énorme coulée de cristal, au milieu des mille arcs-en-ciel que produisait la réfraction, en décomposant les rayons solaires. C'était d'un aspect sublime.

"Les cataractes du Niagara!" s'écria Phil Evans, [...] Une minute après, *l'Albatros* avait franchi la rivière qui sépare les États-Unis de la colonie canadienne, et il se lançait au-dessus des vastes territoires du Nord-Amérique. (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004: 98)

Nous sommes séduits par l'enthousiasme des personnages verniens en ce qui concerne les avantages des nouveautés techniques, comme c'est le ballon, vanté par le docteur Samuel Fergusson, dans le livre *Cinq semaines en ballon*, et considéré le véhicule idéal de l'aventure:

Avec lui, tout est possible; sans lui je retombe dans les dangers et les obstacles habituels d'une pareille expédition; avec lui, ni la chaleur, ni les torrents, ni les tempêtes, ni le simoun, ni les climats insalubres; ni les animaux sauvages, ni les hommes ne sont à craindre! Si j'ai trop chaud, je monte, si j'ai froid, je descends; une montagne, je la dépasse; un précipice, je le franchis; un fleuve, je le traverse; un orage, je le domine; un torrent, je le rase comme un oiseau! Je marche sans fatigue, je

m'arrête sans avoir besoin de repos! Je plane sur les cités nouvelles! Je vole avec la rapidité de l'ouragan, tantôt au plus haut des airs, tantôt à cent pieds du sol, et la carte africaine se déroule sous mes yeux dans le grand atlas du monde! (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004:124)

Si Jules Verne avait écrit ses romans de nos jours, peut-être ses personnages auraient été des robots, animés par l'intelligence artificielle! En tout cas la source des romans de cet auteur est une prodigieuse imagination pour représenter le monde de l'avenir! Naturellement, le progrès scientifique a fait de telle sorte que maintenant Jules Verne peut n'être plus lu comme un écrivain d'anticipation, bien que ses intuitions restent géniales; aussi, à présent le public-cible de ses écrits serait composé surtout de jeunes. Cela pourrait être expliqué aussi par le fait que ses romans privilégient l'action et accordent moins d'attention à l'exploration psychologique.

Certes, l'écrivain a volontiers adhéré à toutes les découvertes de son époque, comme par exemple la «Société d'encouragement pour la locomotion aérienne au moyen d'appareils plus lourds que l'air», dont il devient l'un des membres les plus actifs; il est élu censeur (commissaire aux comptes) le 20 mai 1864. D'autres écrivains y viennent le rejoindre, parmi lesquels Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas père et fils, George Sand, Hector Malot.

Si nous pouvons dire d'une certaine façon que nous sommes tous des enfants de Jules Verne - car nous sommes tous en quelque sorte épris de l'avenir et de ses surprises -, on pourrait ajouter qu'un grain de folie est toujours nécessaire pour y aboutir...La grandeur de l'homme est même dans cette apparente folie qui pousse le monde toujours plus loin dans son devenir! La science sans imagination ne serait rien... «Pour Jules Verne, au contraire de la morale, la science est neutre, comme l'est la technique. Sa raison, à supposer, comme le pense Marcelin Berthelot, que la science ait une raison autonome, ne peut se substituer aux règles de l'éthique.» (Cotardière de la, Philippe 2004:170).

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# GAMIFIED SELVES: TRAUMA, PLAY, AND COMING OF AGE IN *ENDER'S GAME AND READY PLAYER ONE*

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**Abstract:** *The complex landscapes of games, narratives, culture and pedagogy, have never been more important in an interconnected and digitalized environment. This article contends that play works not as distraction or evasion per se but rather as a vital storytelling and identity constructing tool for trauma, cultural memory, and adolescence. Alternatively, online and virtual play spaces serve as sites for monitoring morality, exploring identity, and shifting from passive voyeurism to active participation both in the self and within the world. As such, just as playing—whether “real” or “cyber”—has become the dramatic metaphor for growing up in a gamified world. We will look at what role the motif of the game and play plays as a central metaphorical and structural fundament for the processes through which young protagonists in Orson Scott Card’s Ender’s Game and Ernest Cline’s Ready Player One shape their identity and act in digitally mediated environments.*

**Key words:** identity, young adult, games, cultural memory, gamification, storytelling, coming of age, trauma

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## **Foundations of Play and Game Studies**

The notion of play – an activity often posited as separate from "real" or "ordinary" life – is central to game scholarship. One of the key metaphors of this literature is the “magic circle,” which originated in Johan Huizinga’s classic study *Homo Ludens* (Calleja, 2012: 2; Huizinga, 1955: 10–11). This idea, prevalent throughout the field of games studies, presents the game world separated from the “real” world, or the ordinary world (Calleja, 2012: 2). Huizinga’s range of “play-element” was indeed very wide and extended across many different cultural fields such as law, war and poetry for example, and it has for instance been observed how legal proceedings have a play-character and how riddles were used as a way of

getting at knowledge (Huizinga, 1955: 78). He asserted that "culture arises in the form of play, that it is played from the very beginning" (Huizinga, 1955: 46).

But this classical dichotomous perspective in regards to play and reality has been highly criticised, notably in the area of digital games. Theorists such as Copier, Lammes, Malaby and Taylor have challenged the usefulness of the "magic circle" term, particularly when it is used in relation to digital games (cited in Calleja, 2012: 2). They contend that the notion of depth involves normative underpinnings concerning the experiential quality of gameplay and problematic implications for one to comprehend digital interactive experiences (Calleja, 2012: 2). This is the proposition that I am exploring in the paper, which is that the metaphor that we used in order to understand something may be actually misleading us in that understanding, the mischaracterization being true of the magic circle, according to Gordon Calleja (Calleja, 2012: 3). This spatial marker of the magic circle is not even something that Calleja deems to occur in digital games (Calleja, 2012: 7). He asserts that the "dichotomous view on the relationship between play/games and the real world does not survive close analysis" (Calleja, 2012: 6), claiming that in digital games, unlike physical games, rules are largely upheld by "machine code" rather than "social agreement" (Calleja, 2012: 7, 10). As a result, players' lived experience seeps, to varying extents depending on the circumstances, into their game experience and the game's experience into theirs, and we are presented with a more porous rather than fixed boundary between the game world and reality.

Jacques Ehrmann radicalizes this critique when he claims that Huizinga and Callois are mistaken in taking for granted a "reality," a "neutral and objective" point of reference against which play is oriented (Ehrmann, 1968: 33). Ehrmann claims that "there is no 'reality' (ordinary or extraordinary!) outside of or prior to the manifestations of the culture that expresses it" (Ehrmann, 1968: 33). He is well known for claiming that "play, reality, culture are synonymous and interchangeable," and that "the distinguishing characteristic of reality is that it is played" (Ehrmann, 1968: 56). This view suggests that every theory of communication is also a theory of play and of games (Ehrmann, 1968: 56). Ehrmann also contests the stereotype that in a game "it is the player who plays", suggesting instead that "players may be played; that, as an object in the game, the player can be its stakes (*enjeu*) and its toy (*jouet*)" (Ehrmann, 1968: 55). This perspective renders inoperative the "subjectivity-objectivity dualism" (Ehrmann, 1968: 56).

The "lusory attitude," an idea made manifest by Bernard Suits in which players knowingly enter into an "experiential mode that was apart from ordinary life," (qtd in Calleja, 2012: 8) is also connected to the magic circle concept. But this becomes a "problematically circular argument" (Calleja, 2012: 8) when one is considering digital games, particularly single-player games, where to adopt an inefficient means of playing is precisely what makes an activity game like – and

where it could follow that some activities are not games if players do not have to choose to be inefficient. Ethnographic studies also suggest that this split of game-experience from outside-world experience is "not found in the situated study of gamers" (qtd in Calleja, 2012: 9). This theoretical perspective emphasizes how play and games, particularly those played online, are entwined with and influenced by cultural contexts and lived experiences rather than being disconnected from reality.

Game studies' theoretical discussions, which usually reference cultural studies, stress the importance of critically and constructively considering important ideas and underlying metaphors in order to advance the field (Calleja, 2012: 1, 5). Scholars of game studies advocate for a "qualitative and critical analysis of computer games as 'texts,'" using textual analysis as a foundation to investigate how texts construct meaning (Roach, 2015: 29–31). This approach illustrates how games' interactive elements subvert conventional notions of authorship and meaning, making them appropriate for literary studies (Roach, 2015: 31–32).

## **Play in Digitally Mediated Environments and Hyperreality**

Since computer games became popular in the 1980s, they have sparked new scholarly debates that go beyond the conventional literary analysis (narratology). This has forced researchers to come up with new approaches to the "richness and differences of the game space" (ludology), as Roach asserts (Roach, 2015: 7). Concerns about the medium's cultural effects were also raised by this shift (Roach, 2015: 7). The concept of gamification, or "the introduction of play elements into other kinds of activity," has influenced a wide range of social interactions in the digital age, from political life and activism to corporate operations and educational practices (Condis, 2016: 15; Roach, 2015: 28). Jane McGonigal's influential work, including her TED Talk and book *Reality Is Broken*, underscores the "untapped power of the game" and positions it as a force that can "make a better world" (McGonigal qtd in Roach, 2015: 1). But this generalized excitement also betrays an "anxiety surrounding the breakdown of that binary" between play and work, common distinctions become increasingly fudged, where "play becomes everything to which it was opposed. It is work, serious, morality, necessity" (Roach, 2015: 2, 11). This phenomenon, what critics called a "playbor," is part of a "complex matrix of interwoven and overlapping struggles for power" (Roach, 2015: 11).

In this context - a field increasingly shaped by new digital media - the problematic of hyperreality is of specific importance. As one can see in Ernest Cline's *Ready Player One*, hyperreality is an "artificial reality that feels real" (Dalimu et al., 2020: 2). It is a "combination of delusion and reality, truth and error, and the past and future are all fused into one and become a new reality so it is difficult to distinguish" (Dalimu et al., 2020: 237). This hyperreality is largely a result of

technology, which provides new ways and means of experiencing and acting radically differently from life in real (Dalimu et al., 2020: 2). The OASIS in *Ready Player One* is a good example for this (Dalimu et al., 2020: 2). In this dismal future world, many people choose the OASIS over the real world because their real lives are "awful and dilapidated" (Yu-xin, 2023: 165). The virtual world offers "attractive visuals, pleasant feelings and unlimited imagination," making it difficult for users to differentiate between reality and imagination (Dalimu et al., 2020: 3-4). The OASIS thus becomes an "emotional refuge" and an "escape from Wade's economic and social insecurities," a place where one can find unlimited opportunities and everyone can achieve their desires (Oripeloye, 2024: 1392). This ease and thrill make more and more people like to stay in the virtual as they can escape away from the "awful life in the real world" (Yu-xin, 2023: 167).

This sharp contrast between the "broken and chaotic real world" and the "wonderful and colorful virtual world" in *Ready Player One* raises a crucial question: the potential for human beings to be "enslaved by technology" and "lose themselves" (Yu-xin, 2023: 168). The book is also a parable on the perils of escaping real space in favor of the seamless virtual immersion (Yu-xin, 2023: 169). But it's not just escapism: it's also that the system ties game mechanics into the very formation of the world itself. Game rule elements and goal elements are often used to build the fictional world in Hollywood science fiction movies such as the film adaptation of *Ready Player One* (Xiong, 2023: 436). Mechanistic, or "rigid rules," provide the "framework for the characters' actions," maintaining internal consistency of the science fiction universe (Xiong, 2023: 436-37). However, a "humanistic view" can be generated, in which players import "rules of humanity in a real human world" into the game, e.g. help among friends (Xiong, 2023: 437). The "free-form rules," in turn, can prioritize human nature and justice and can promote innovation in the world system (Xiong, 2023: 437). The idea of "infinite games," the point of which is to perform "the keeping of the play going" as opposed to winning, entails "divergence" in the story, different meanings, and implications in what may be done or what a system or situation "may mean in the future" (Xiong, 2023: 436, 440). This is illustrated by Wade's decision to shut down the OASIS server two days a week (in the movie version), in which real-world experiences take precedence over uninterrupted virtual involvement. What this demonstrates is how gameplay can rise above simple mechanics to effect a game or indeed, a world, a work of fiction to its core – humanistically.

While Wade's decision to restrict access to the OASIS shows a preference for ethical reality in the real world over virtual flakiness, it also highlights a broader conflict between play as immersion and identity construction in digital culture. The OASIS is a rich intertextual zone that has been developed over decades of media history, particularly that which is significant in gaming subcultures. It is more than

just a game universe. To fully grasp the implications of Wade's actions, however, we must comprehend the cultural framework that is forming around the OASIS and how *Ready Player One* uses an intertextual discourse to create a world in which mastery of digital lore is a sign of power.

With frequent references to a "geeky canon" of classic video games, cyberpunk literature, films, and comic books, *Ready Player One* is firmly rooted in the digital gaming subculture (Condis, 2016: 8). With reference to James Halliday's character, the novel specifically organizes the subcultural group's entire body of knowledge in the manner of a "alternative literary canon" (Condis, 2016: 3). Halliday's "egg hunt" serves as a teaching tool, a "classroom" where readers can discover the history of "gamer-dom" and demonstrate their "geeky credentials" by becoming proficient in these foundational texts (Condis, 2016: 3). Reading must be viewed as a kind of "playing through" of the text, akin to playing video games, in order to master this canon, which calls for the ability to perceive and yet read, arrange, and interpret these texts competently (Condis, 2016: 2). In the novel, "gunters" (short for "egg hunters") look at the knowledge of Halliday's canon and perceive it as a form of "social currency and status" (Condis, 2016: 6).

But even as *Ready Player One* venerates a joyful, participatory fan culture in the context of the canon that is Halliday's canon, it also cannot help but reckon with the thorny issue of canon formation itself. The valorization of certain media artifacts as capital raises questions about who gets to decide what has value in a subculture and on what terms. The egg hunt, as inclusive as it is in theory, establishes lines that separate the "real" from the outside does-not-ins: the ones who can't master, or parse, the canon. Here, the text has begun to dismantle the exclusivity that such formalizations of taste or cultural hierarchy are always entangled with questions of social privilege and historical moment.

All canon formation - whether of "high" or "low" culture, is 'fraught' simply by virtue of the exclusionary decisions it entails, but also - as we will see - by the decision in which form of cultural production units or 'tokens' of cultural capital are to be counted (Condis, 2016: 7). These move whether or which may serve without necessarily excluding, or in which manner expert classes may be distinguished from the populace as a whole, are shaped by specific historical material conditions (Condis, 2016: 7). These concerns about cultural worth and narratological sovereignty also map onto the novel's plot structure. Apart from the overt games references, the story structure of contemporary science fiction, including *Ready Player One*, can be explored through the application of tools such as Propp's morphological theory of the folk tale (Putra, 2022: 120). Originally applied to the investigation of the fairy tale, nonetheless, this technique is possibly capable of shedding some light on the more complicated narrative structure of contemporary

fiction, with many a subtler layers of story than traditional oral discourse, though some sequences of functions can be altered (Putra, 2022: 121).

That said, Propp's analysis of narrative structure is not sufficient by itself to explain the sociopolitical undercurrents that shape *Ready Player One's* world. The ease with which the novel taps into familiar narrative roles is complicated by its housing within a dystopian setting – a world of ecological disaster, corporate authoritarianism and pervasive disenfranchisement. In a sense then, the novel is on a border between nostalgic play and critical commentary, engaging with dystopian traditions that speak to fears in the world. These are themes that situate the novel not just within speculative fiction but within the larger tradition of literature daring to probe the sociocultural fallout of technological progress and systemic disintegration.

Thus, *Ready Player One* is also a text that dovetails with the genre of dystopia, echoing its concern in contemporary anxieties concerning environment resource depletion, hyperaccelerating globalization, and societal collapse (Hanssen, 2017: 46; Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 53-55). Dystopian stories often reflect on the "mutation of dystopian identity" since they make use of the fears of a specific time period (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 55). Writers employ different terms to describe their imagined "AGES," such as Orwell's "age of uniformity," Bradbury's "age of the disposable tissue," Towfik's "dark ages," and Rushdie's "Age of Anything-Can-Happen" (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 63). Such stories often have a "little man's perspective," creating a "nearly real world" that can lead characters toward "madness" as they try to cope with societal challenges (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 56). Dystopian YA novels, in particular, often act as a revised Bildungsroman, showcasing personal growth in a postmodern world which is no longer necessarily marked by multinational capitalism (Korsnack, 2015: 25).

Games themselves act as a primary metaphor and medium for that act of identity formation in both *Ender's Game* and *Ready Player One*. Wade and Ender must grow up, make sacrifices, and define themselves by defining who they are not—against systems of control—in that virtual world, which is a high-stakes, gamified environment that mirrors larger ethical quandaries in meatspace. In these tales, games transform from simple escapism into self-discovery crucibles and coming-of-age situations where learning to play, lose, and make morally sound decisions are all intertwined.

This combination of dystopian setting and ludic form also demonstrates how speculative fiction consistently reimagines adolescence as a deeply political and ethical journey, in addition to a mental one.

## **Identity Construction, Adolescence, and Trauma through Play**

In these texts, identity formation and coming-of-age are profoundly modulated by the theme of game and play, particularly for a young protagonist facing challenging circumstances. For example, vulnerable protagonists who fight "constant environmental, social, and political challenges" are the hallmark of Young Adult dystopian fiction, as exemplified by shows like *The Hunger Games*, *The Maze Runner*, and *Divergent* (Hanssen, 2017: 41). These stories frequently include a shift from helplessness to "self-sufficiency, responsibility" and frequently address the "adolescent quest toward identity" (Hanssen, 2017: 45, 47). Indeed unlike traditional YA where rebellion is internal to society, in dystopian YA protagonists often "leave home and mak(e) one's way in a hostile and challenging landscape" (Hanssen, 2017: 46). The traditional liminal space—the wilderness in most of these narratives—functions as an essential "holding area where the characters are able to redefine their notion of home to a healthier one" (Hanssen, 2017: 48).

The protagonist in *Ender's Game*, Ender Wiggin is "split" or forced to fit an "either-or fallacy" (Sander, 2013: 83) as "half Peter and half Valentine" (Card, 1994: 19) (his brother and sister) -an aggressor, violent identity (Identity A) or a caring, empathetic one (Identity B) (Sander, 2013: 83). The book grapples with the (to me at least) somewhat difficult issue of intent vs. action, as Ender keeps doing evil, up to and including accidental genocide, without murderously evil intent, and thus harboring incredible guilt and self-hatred. Traumatized throughout his training, he is driven to the 'brink of suicide' (Sander, 2013: 86). The story discredits the idea that "only intentions matter in making such judgments," (Sander, 2013: 82) insofar as Ender feels the guilt of his actions despite counter-arguments of innocence.

His story is one of coming to terms with this horror, of recognizing the implications of his deeds, and learning to redefine himself afterwards - beyond the dangerous duality to a more holistic and complete being. This internal struggle aligns with Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an "unclaimed experience," a happening not fully known and absorbed at the time of its occurrence, which, unaccountably, returns to the lives of survivors in the form of insomnia, literal nightmares and repetitive reenactments (Caruth, 1996: 7-8). Sigmund Freud's books *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism* investigate this repeated occurrence of suffering and how devastating events appears to be repeating in the lives of those that had those experiences (Caruth, 1996: 5, 11). Freud's own writing of *Moses and Monotheism*, characterized by the repression of a history and "extensive repetition," becomes in itself a trauma site in which history is shown to be complicit in a traumatic construction (Caruth, 1996: 17).

Literary, psychoanalytic, or theoretical texts, for example, "both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience" (Caruth, 1996: 4).

The language of trauma is itself often "literary" language, at once resisting transparent comprehension and asserting to achieve it (Caruth, 1996: 5). This is because trauma exists in a twisted grip of knowing and not knowing, testifying to the tenacity of some other "forgotten wound" out there beyond any attempt at conscious theorization or thematization (Caruth, 1996: 5). This speaks to how, as an understanding of a nightmare within a broader theory of dreams, trauma theory addresses the traumatic effects of external realities on symbolic systems (Caruth, 1996: 59, 62).

Literary theorist, such as Paul de Man finds that the philosophical project of drawing a distinction between language and empirical law paradoxically results in the production of fiction each time an effort is made to write about a "direct or phenomenal reference to the world" (Caruth, 1996: 76). De Man's examination follows the manner by which the "figure of a falling body" figures as a crucial instance for apprehending referential resistance and the performative construction of discourse in Kant and Kleist (Caruth, 1996: 5). This underscores that trauma is not only an outside event, but is also a "possibility inscribed in experience," an "unexpected interruption" that transmits what is most accidental and unique to its actual occurrence (Caruth, 1996: 115). The problem, therefore, is to figure a crisis whose characteristic is not a "mere" knowledge but the proof of a knowledge and demand for witness as well (1996: 5; 136). In clinical discussions of language and trauma, a way of incorporating trauma is to make trauma become part of a "meaningful (and thus sensible) story," yet Caruth encourages thinking other relations in this vein, particularly when trauma is "what is not known or not fully experienced" (Caruth, 1996: 117, 137). This connection leads to recognition that history is not and cannot be exclusively one's own, it is what we recognize as "the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth, 1996: 24).

Caruth's idea that trauma is an unassimilated experience which refuses to accommodate a narrative can lead us to think differently about how people work through internal injury and express that outward. Nowhere is this more poignant than in dystopian fiction, where individual trauma is frequently paralleled by societal collapse. The protagonists of these tales live in broken worlds in which personal and communal pains easily blend. Indeed, the psychological impact of dystopian realities featuring dislocation, surveillance, and existential despair reverberates with the post-traumatic symptoms as outlined by Caruth. So dystopian heroes are often driven by coping mechanisms that are a form of that struggle to reframe trauma, ascribe meaning to it (or not survive without it).

The "little man's perspective," (common in many works belonging to the dystopian genre), assists in building a "quasi-real world"; it lures the personages into difficulties, it pushes them "towards madness" (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 56). In these tales, heroes frequently turn to the drugs or alcohol to distract them from a

life of inactivity, impotence or out of despair (Bezrukov and Bohovyk, 2022: 58). Dystopian YA texts provide a "sanctuary" and aid in developing both analytical skills and environmental awareness (Hanssen, 2017: 43, 49, 53). Above all, play becomes a critical developmental vehicle for grappling with trauma, cultural memory, and the strains of adolescence.

The young characters' escape into altered states or escapist activities certainly can be understood as a reaction to the unprocessable nature of their surroundings, as a desperate ploy to construct an other for the self, or perhaps a self for the self in a reality where they can exercise agency. What becomes clearer from this response is that digital play, quests and building of avatars are not distractions but important strategies of identity formation in this instance. In other words, as seen in *Ready Player One*, Wade Watts doesn't seek out drugs to escape his harsh reality but he immerses himself in the OASIS. His journey, built around the tropes of a classical hero's quest, demonstrates how game worlds can function as narrative and therapeutic conceits for working through trauma, transforming the self, and renegotiating cultural identity.

Additionally, Pandu also theorizes that the protagonist of *Ready Player One*, Wade Watts follows the "monomyth" structure. Wade starts off as an "antisocial and awkward" orphan in a "terrible" dystopian world (Pandur, 2020: 22) and undertakes a "cyber adventures" quest in the OASIS (2020: 21), in the hope of winning a legacy and ultimately "bring balances in his ordinary world" (2020: 21). The OASIS acts as a "getaway" (2020: 21) from his real-world surroundings, allowing him to embody "idealized masculine traits" through his avatar, Parzival (Oripeloye, 2024: 1388). This is a process of "gamification of identity," where Wade's persona is formed through "competitive gaming culture," with success measured by "intelligence, skill, and cultural knowledge" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1388-89). This requires being fluent in a "geeky 'canon' of texts" that define "gamer" identity, which, as Megan Condis argues, disproportionately reinforces "heteronormative white masculinity" based on expertise and control over technology (Condis, 2016: 4).

But this "idealized masculinity" as described in the OASIS is disclosed as "ultimately unsustainable" and "fragile," (Oripeloye, 2024: 1394) as it is dependent on the "artificiality of the virtual world" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1388). Wade's "reliance on the OASIS as a source of identity and power" underscores its "precariousness" as his "real-world vulnerabilities" contrast sharply with his "virtual success" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1391). The ability to "control over the virtual body" through avatars, while offering temporary "empowerment" ultimately mirrors and re-inscribes the unpalatable social stereotypes rather than setting manacles off citizens free (Oripeloye, 2024: 1393). This "technological escape" from real-world insecurities and emotional pain, while providing a "temporary refuge" can also lead to "entrapment" and "isolation" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1392, 1395) disconnecting individuals from physical and social

realities. True emotional growth, the stories suggest, is only possible outside of these virtual borders, by confronting the complexities of real-life relationships.

## **Ender's Game: Play as a Crucible for Identity and Weaponization**

In Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game*, the concept of "game" is intrinsically woven into the narrative, serving as the primary mechanism through which Ender Wiggin's identity is shaped and manipulated. Ender is, from the start, a product of genetic engineering, chosen explicitly for a military training programme (Sander, 2013: 83). His being a "Third" is a government-licensed experiment, and his life has been "programmed" as a pre-destined "game" since birth.

In the world of the novel games can be understood as covert training and psychological manipulation. The entire Battle School system is structured around "games". Colonel Graff, the director of Battle School, openly admits to deliberately manipulating Ender's environment to produce a specific outcome: the best military commander. He isolates Ender from the other boys and even nurtures hatred for him because "isolation is — the optimum environment for creativity" (Card, 1994: 115) and that "when the officer prefers you, the others hate you" (Card, 1994: 26). This calculated mental manipulation is part of the "game" meant to make Ender stronger and more determined. The subtraction of Ender's monitor, a device that lets the adults to "watch through his eyes" and "listen through his ears" (Card, 1994: 1), is described as "the final step in your testing to see what would happen if the monitor comes off" (Card, 1994: 15). Graff's cold words that his job is "to produce the best soldiers in the world" (Card, 1994: 27) and "not to be friends" (Card, 1994: 27) screams manipulation in the core of every interaction, reducing each character's relationship with Ender into another piece on the board in Ender's game. With this manipulation Ender's choices become choices under the duress of conscious intent and forced action.

In such circumstance the identity negotiation occurs through physical and digital play. Ender's early physical altercations are immediately reframed within this "game" motif, fundamentally shaping his emerging identity. His savage struggle with Stilson, in which he stomps him relentlessly "viciously," (Card, 1994: 6) after eking out a victory, is seen by Ender as a means to "win this now, and for all time" (Card, 1994: 6). For a sociopathic character, the evidence of this pragmatic ruthlessness contrast with rules of "manly warfare" (Card, 1994: 6) is the military's sign of his potential as indicated by Graff's words, "It isn't what he did...It's why" (Card, 1994: 15). His subsequent showdown with Bonzo Madrid in the shower echoes this: Ender engages in battle with deliberate use of force, knowing that the only way to make the cycle of contending stop is to "hurt Bonzo enough that his fear was stronger than his hate," (Card, 1994: 162) a determination that ultimately results in

Bonzo's death. These times where he physically "fights" serve as violent "game" deciding trials, and solidify his self as a decisive, calculated, and ultimately lethal individual.

The "Giant's Drink" game part of the "Free Play" (Fantasy Game) mind game is an especially significant virtual space for Ender's construction of identity as well as his confrontation with trauma. This computer game, which tests "a child's persistence at this game of despair to determine his level of suicidal need," exemplifies the incredible traumatic impact of Ender's training (Sanders, 2013: 86). Since time and again he is forced to play a rigged game from which he could never emerge alive, Ender rebels against his situation. Rather than selecting either of the poisoned drinks, he opts to "kick one over, then the other, and dodged the Giant's huge hands as the Giant shouted, 'Cheater, cheater!'" and then "dig in the Giant's eye" (Card, 1994: 51).

This act of refusal and "murder" in the game is a forceful refusal to passively accept one's fate, and a strong assertion of the self leading him to "Fairyland," a place "nobody ever comes" (Card, 1994: 51). "Victory," is swiftly followed, however, by intense self-loathing: "I'm a murderer, even when I play. Peter would be proud of me" (Card, 1994: 51). The narrator's framing of Peter's (his cruel brother's) face appearing and dripping blood with a snake's tail coming out of its mouth in the mirror in the video game the End of the World, explicitly connects Ender's violent actions to his worst fear: to become like Peter, his sadistic brother (Card, 1994: 91). It is on the playing field, then, that his submerged terrors and guilt over his role in causing the pain are dredged up in an explicitly horrendous fashion, in which he is made to face his own nascent "killer" persona.

The Battle Room, the primary "play" space for combat training, also serves to develop Ender's persona. He rises to the top when he questions traditional practices, such as falling back on a "feet-first attack position" (Card, 1994: 80) and just "knows" the slippery nature of null gravity. He is forever innovating, and guides his "green army" to unheralded success (Card, 1994: 131). It's during this period that displays the transformation of a bullied child to a respected leader through the use of his superior intellect and strategic genius that he developed from "playing." Then, he's playing a game where the rules are frequently "staked" against him by the teachers, forcing improvisation and creative solutions that reflect the injustice of his experience in the real world. This relentless spawning in of an oppressive and unfair world adds to the psychological tightrope Ender finds himself walking, leading him more and more into the territory of "the end always justifies the means" applying brutal efficiency to his every action, in a climate of constant adaptation. This, however, ironically feeds his traumatic burden.

The culmination of all of this trauma manifests in an ultimate deception, where play is used as a mask for reality. This deep merging of reality and simulation

happens at the peak of the novel. Ender learns that all of his simulated battles, starting from his Command School years, were actually real battles against the Buggers (an alien race). His last “test” where he faces a greater force and employs the “Little Doctor” (a molecular disruption device) to obliterate the Bugger homeworld is not a game but actually the Third Invasion. The devastating truth shatters the illusion of play and leaves Ender with the horrifying understanding that he is a “killer” of unprecedented proportions, guilty of xenocide. Graff’s subsequent explanation—that they “tricked” him because someone with “that much compassion could never be the killer we needed”— captures vividly the glaring ethical vacuum resulting from their manipulation (Card, 1994: 230). The “game” was a necessary falsehood to exploit his genius and empathy for the act of xenocide, illustrating how a “gamified world” can turn the innocence of childhood into a weapon.

In a few different ways, Card tries to remove Ender from blame. For one, he does not get put on trial and people say to him “It wasn’t your fault” (Sander, 2013: 83). Regardless, Ender does not accept this form of absolution since, in his own words, “all of his crimes weighed heavy on him” (Card, *Ender’s Game*, 1994: 238, also quoted in Sander, 2013: 83). The eventual act of “leaving Peter behind on Earth” and shifting the name “Ender” for “Andrew” represents his attempt to psychologically detach himself from the identity of a Peter-like aggressor (Sander, 2013: 84). Yet, even as the Hive Queen “forgive(s) (Ender and the humans) for our death,” Ender himself “cannot” forgive himself, showing how deep his struggles run, despite intent (Sander, 2013: 88). Thus far, his function as “Speaker for the Dead” is to help himself cope with the wounds of his past by trying to understand and articulate the lives and deaths of others (Sander, 2013: 83, 88-89).

## **Ready Player One: Play as Escape, Cultural Immersion and Rebellion**

Ernest Cline’s *Ready Player One* depicts a bleak future where the virtual world of OASIS, a “massively multiplayer online game” has progressed into “a new way of life” serving as an “escape for most of humanity” from a heavily dystopian world (Cline, 2011: 1-2, 57). Within this reality, the idea of play serves not only as a means to escape but also an essential cornerstone of existence, a relentless universal game of competition enabling unprecedented power and wealth.

The OASIS offers unrestricted personal liberation providing users the ability to “create an entirely new persona for yourself, with complete control over how you looked and sounded to others” (Cline, 2011: 57). Wade Watts, the protagonist, lives in severe poverty and squalor in the real world, residing in “a vertical maze of trailers” (Cline, 2011: 22). The OASIS grants him an avatar, Parzival, through which he is free to be someone else entirely, unshackled from his flesh-and-bone

limitations. This virtual identity enables him to surpass constraints in his life and participate in a high-stakes "game" which offers the possibility of winning Halliday's fortune and dominion over the OASIS. Freedom provided in the OASIS draws special attention: "your anonymity was guaranteed" (Cline, 2011: 57). Users are allowed to shed their real-life identities and vulnerabilities, fostering self-construction within the digital realm. The OASIS becomes a refuge and an "escape hatch into a better reality" (Cline, 2011: 18): an environment where anything and everything is possible, and wishes can be fulfilled.

The "gamification of identity" is a major theme in the novel in that Wade creates his masculine persona through his digital avatar, Parzival (Oripeloye, 2024: 1387). The OASIS is based on a competitive gaming culture in which avatars complete challenges, quests, and puzzles in order to achieve mastery. Between its virtual gaze, success in its virtual universe is measured by intelligence, skill, and cultural knowledge, and serves as a way of reinforcing the ideal of competitive, performance-based masculinity (Oripeloye, 2024: 1389). Wade's progressions as a "gunter" (egg hunter) in search of Halliday's Easter egg serves as a "hero's journey" and a "rite of passage," which correlates his masculinity with capabilities of outwitting and outcompeting his competitors, both individual rivals and the corporate behemoth IOI (Oripeloye, 2024: 1389). The competitively driven society is a continuation of an ideology of traditional masculinity which requires and necessitates that in order to not just survive but succeed, an individual must outperform others (Condis qtd in Oripeloye, 2024: 1389). Yet the novel critiques dependence on technology and virtual bodies as a way of escaping real-world insecurities, even as it recognizes that this escape may offer a temporary empowerment but will "hinder personal growth and reinforce unhealthy coping mechanisms" (Oripeloye, 2024: 1393). And this is what makes the performance of hyper-masculinity in OASIS fundamentally unsustainable: it depends on the artifice of digital reality to be held together (Oripeloye, 2024: 1389).

The "Hunt for Halliday's Easter egg" captures the imagination of people concerning 1980s pop culture. It effectively demonstrates the prejudices and inclinations of its creator, James Halliday. Wade (Parzival) spends his life trying to master these cultural phenomena, stating that "after five long years, the Copper Key had finally been found, by an eighteen-year-old kid living in a trailer park on the outskirts of Oklahoma City. That kid was me" (Cline, 2011: 9). "The harder a game was to beat, the more I enjoyed it. And as I played these ancient digital relics, night after night, year after year, I discovered I had a talent for them" (Cline, 2011: 64). Halliday serves as the "dungeon master" throughout the quest, which is figuratively referred to as a "Dungeons & Dragons module" writ large (Cline, 2011: 66). This illustrates the intense immersion in retro culture, which in this instance serves as a tool for identity formation.

Wade defines himself based on his understanding of the past, and Halliday's journal and *Anorak's Almanac* act as the "Bible" for solving the puzzles. As a result, the text's significance supports the notion that this particular culture is essential. The *Adventure* Easter egg, the *Tomb of Horrors* D&D module, and the *WarGames* film are just a few examples of the games and cultural allusions that contain the key clues. As a "game" mechanic, a player must possess both gaming skills and cultural literacy in Halliday's selected era.

The novel itself is designed as a "ludic novel" that "requires game-playing and puzzle-solving of readers," immersing them in intertextual references and riddles (Condis, 2016: 2). Devoted fans are encouraged to achieve "100% completion" by seeking out and mastering the referenced works (Condis, 2016: 4). This "geek canon" tends to highlight and support "heteronormative white masculinity." It shows how, historically, those backgrounds dominated early gaming culture, particularly among college-educated men (Condis, 2016: 4).

The novel's "Flicksyncs," where players literally perform lead parts from movies like *WarGames* (1983) and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), explicitly reward accurate reproduction of characters' dialogue, accents, and gestures, especially those mimicking "young, straight, white male protagonists" (Condis, 2016: 12). Engaging in this way helps create a more inclusive (even participatory) memory of culture, pushing back against the postmodern idea that there's a gap in our historical understanding.

The contest in *Ready Player One* is not merely a game; it carries "life-and-death stakes". The appearance of the Sixers, a corporate entity (IOI) whose "sole purpose is to exploit loopholes in the contest rules and subvert the intention of Jim's will" (Cline, 2011: 118), brings about an explicit ethical conflict. The Sixers use "hacked immersion rigs" and "support teams" to gain an unfair advantage, reflecting on a moral corruption that can infest a gamified world when real-world stakes are introduced (Cline, 2011: 156).

Parzival's journey turns him from a loner into a leader. He chooses to "wage war against the entire Sixer army" by uniting "every single gunter on the grid" (Cline, 2011: 309). What is impressive is his transformation from a relatively passive user to an active agent in deciding OASIS' future, and by extension, their own. These virtual battles are brought to life as actual acts of resistance and liberation. Wade's most galvanizing action in the film adaptation (and, for inheriting the OASIS) is the following: he goes back into the real world, seeks out love, in turn, he closes the server two days a week because he wants people to live for real in the real world. This is a significant change from being indifferent to the physical world and the others in the beginning, and now he is contributing to and formulating healthier and more grounded revolutionist-like use of technology for everyone. It is a movement

from passively watching a codified game to an active agency that can affect both virtual and off-line cultures.

## **Comparative Analysis: Blurring Boundaries and Emerging Agency**

Both *Ender's Game* and *Ready Player One* effectively deploy game and play as a motif to address identity formation, coping with trauma, and the move to empowerment in the gamified sphere; they are not, however, doing the same thing.

Both novels examine the pleasures and complexities of play and the consciousness of a self in the world, yet they differ in their staging and situating of the boundary between game and reality. Two theories—the “magic circle” of Huizinga and a critique of that concept by Calleja— are specifically useful here. In *Ender's Game*, the game world is sequestered carefully (Ender is tricked into thinking his simulations are benign), adhering to Huizinga's concept of an isolated, distinct “magic circle.” In contrast, *Ready Player One* embodies Calleja's claim that digital games do not feature such a strict border; rather, the permeable relation between the real and the virtual is naturalized and even wanted. These disparate treatments of permeability between play and reality not only shape the characters' emotional growth, but also bring to light the larger social-ethical consequences of digital submersion.

In *Ender's Game*, the line between game and life is a secret at first, a treacherous subterfuge unveiled as the climactic revelation so that Ender is compelled to confront the incalculable carnage with which his “victories” are associated. From the moment he is born, his whole years growing up is a lie created to develop a weapon and to find that out is cause for intense mental stress. In *Ready Player One*, the barrier is not immediately penetrable, but users also consciously decide to go to a digital reality that ends up becoming their primary reality, not just because the real world is an unlivable dystopia, but also because in the virtual world they can actually have power and pleasure. The OASIS provides a sense of fulfillment, it is almost indistinguishable from physical reality, and whatever is won during Halliday's quest it directly influences real-world power and wealth. This sums up a fundamental difference: one world uses games to conceal reality, the other uses games to supplant it.

The reduction of permeability or shading-off of the boundary between game and life as seen in these texts has far-reaching implications for the way trauma is produced and incorporated. Turning to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory we can observe Ender's trauma as the belated recognition whereby Ender's “play” has had actual consequences—his nightmares and self-hatred are an effect of an experience not fully taken in at the moment of its occurrence. For Wade, however, the trauma comes before the game; it is a part of his lived material circumstances — poverty,

neglect, environment collapse. His withdrawal to the OASIS becomes an escape valve as well as a crucible in which he reinvents himself. Accordingly, the games in each novel work in different ways with trauma: in *Ender's Game*, games induce trauma; in *Ready Player One*, games are the realm through which trauma is worked through.

Indeed, in *Ender's Game* "play" involves trauma from the very beginning; each "win" in the game becomes a step closer to identifying Ender with the persona of a "killer," and, the joyless success pushes Ender deeper and deeper into psychological and moral turmoil. His nightmares are the literal result of the violence that happens in his "games", and he's forced to feel guilty for it while everyone else denies what's happening. For Wade in *Ready Player One*, the OASIS and the Hunt are an escape from an already-traumatic reality (poverty, parental death, and the world falling apart). Though his digital persona, Parzival, gives him strength and temporary relief from the world's problems, the outside world and the interferences from IOI still work their way in, having real-life consequences (such as his home being destroyed) either way. Both protagonists work through trauma by playing games, but in Ender's case the trauma is *inflicted* by the games, whereas Wade's trauma is *alleviated* or *channeled* by them, illustrating two different ways in which the ludic and the traumatic can relate.

The link between game and trauma in Ender's Game can also be fruitfully understood in terms of gamified adolescence, where the context for emotional development is not support, but weaponization. The conditions of the Battle School constitute a variety of ludic panopticon where every moment of play is also a test of utility, value and obedience. It's not just trauma that Ender is negotiating; he is made to personify a militarized form of selfhood within an intensely surveilled game system. His identity is formed not in a natural way, but through high performance under constant stress. His recursive execution of a game involves actions are performed under the pressure of a threat. This enforced "play" is an echo of Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as a "repetition that defies narrative," as Ender repeats violence without being offered the space to engage with it (Caruth, 1996: 7–8). Instead of serving as respite or therapeutic simulation, the ludic space in *Ender's Game* becomes a traumatic feedback loop — a vicious rite of passage without consent. Thus, while Ender and Wade may both undergo a process of personal growth and change through play, in *Ender's Game* we can more fully see the price to be paid for institutionalized games and their use to manipulate, rather than facilitate, adolescent identity construction.

But trauma is not the sole marker of the protagonists' arcs. Both stories describe a transition from psychological disconnection to the coming-into-being of an agent of change—punctuated by effective ethical decision-making up inside gamified systems. This echoes Bernard Suits's idea of the lusory attitude (that we

can choose, accept game rules, one of the basic condition to play meaningfully) and the idea of Ehrmann that players are not only agents, but can also be “played” by the system. In *Ender’s Game*, Ender fights the system at first within its bounds, but later he manipulates it and goes beyond it, thus asserting his autonomy. Wade also transitions from passive fandom to ethical leader, and from a reclusively solo existence, eschewing the exploitative corporate lack of identity that permeates the OASIS. These in-game decisions also show how gamified spaces paradoxically both restrict and facilitate ethical development.

Both novels portray digital spaces as battlegrounds of moral choices. Ender repeatedly makes choices within the game and he seems to ignore and/or break rules, as well as go against principles (e.g., kicking Stilson while down, killing the Giant). His actions, while morally grey and leave him riddled with guilt, are portrayed as “killing for the sake of survival or ultimate victory,” emphasizing the necessity of the morally grey thinking his environment enforces on him. He progresses from a boy who so readily follows orders to a leader who must learn to disobey them tactically, such as his manipulation of Bonzo’s authority. Similarly, Wade’s quest brings him face to face with the villainous machinations of IOI, and rather than abiding their unscrupulous business tactics he recruits a team of like-minded “gunters” to preserve the “honor of Jim’s game” and defend the soul of the OASIS. This active resistance – fueled by what is at stake in the virtual world – is a compelling indication of his growing agency, thus demonstrating more meaningful and emergent action can take place in and through games.

## Conclusion

*Ender’s Game* and *Ready Player One* deploy the motifs of game and play not just as narrative devices in themselves but as ontological and ethical paradigms that bring about determining the main characters’ change/evolution from players who are played upon into active agents themselves. By reconciling theoretical concepts such as Huizinga’s magic circle, Ehrmann’s cultural performativity of play, Calleja flexibility of the game/reality binary, and Caruth’s concept of trauma as unassimilated experience, one can safely assert that the novels demonstrate how ludic structures function as mediators of identity, trauma and ethical becoming. In *Ender’s Game*, the enclosed simulation with its deferred effects makes blatant the game of weaponized innocence and the moral obscenity of manipulation. In *Ready Player One*, the OASIS’s open virtuality makes it difficult to distinguish play from life at day one, meditating on the pleasures and perils of digital immersive culture from the get-go.

These speculative fables reach past escapism to assert that games aren’t merely escapist; they are on the vanguard of how we as individuals grapple with loss, create significance and imagine new types of life. The heroes’ transformations

from victimization to empowerment, from social isolation to collective purpose, from virtual immersion to analog activism, reflect broader cultural anxieties concerning teenagers, tech and moral culpability in a gamified society.

By placing game mechanics at the heart of their protagonists' formation, both novels reveal how a gamified adolescence reconceives the classical Bildungsroman in a technologically saturated world. Play is no longer a boundary that separates childhood from adulthood, but it is the very condition of coming of age. In these stories, play is not a mode of behavior — it's an ontology — a medium of being, knowing and acting. Furthermore, the already embedded references to pop culture, simulation, and subcultural cachet, generate an *active cultural memory* in this outlet through its *interactive dimension* that ask readers to take part in the ethical and aesthetic bequests of the past and present. These ideas begin to reconcile theory and story, and advocate for speculative fiction as an essential means to reframe identity, trauma, and ethical agency in a culture more and more ludic, and more and more mediated.

They ultimately show that play is not an escape from reality, but a generative being-in-the world, in which new identities are produced, cultural memories are preserved, and ethical selves are imagined. In our hypermediated world, play — whether onscreen or in story — still feels to me one of the most essential tools of survival, resistance, and change.

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# ERNEST GAMES. THE POLITICAL DIMENSION IN HERMANN HESSE'S NOVEL *THE GLASS BEAD GAME*

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**Abstract:** *Hermann Hesse's life and work was connected to Romanian intellectuals and from such circumstances derives the research interest in this study. The Romanian perception of the author's literary and essayistic works has been branded by two distinct voices: the first being the dissemination of his work through translations and research by Romanian researchers, and the second being the academic examination of his oeuvre by researchers, that have Romanian origins. Within the Romanian borders the extent of the academic research of the author's work remains limited to a small circle of specialists, in comparison to the case of Thomas Mann. Nevertheless, the reception of his novel The Glass Bead Game in Romania is but one further reason to focus on his work within the academic debate on the literary motif of play/game. The following investigation will seek to establish which game is actually played in The Glass Bead Game, this being the fundamental question of this undertaking. The approach to the novel itself will be in an indirect manner, through the lens of a preliminary written text – The Political Introduction to The Glass Bead Game, which offers a reading perspective, that reveals the novel as an allegory of a political message and various power games. The Glass Bead Game explores and expounds on the utopian and safe playground of the academic province of Castalia, in which the writer tests and elaborates on themes regarding the balance of forces in a social and political hierarchy. In terms of game theory, the present study proposes a reading key based on Huizinga's book Homo Ludens.*

**Keywords:** Hermann Hesse in Romania, political game, second version of the preface to the *The Glass Bead Game*

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"If play cannot be directly referred to the categories of truth or goodness, can it be perhaps included in the realm of the aesthetic?" (Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 1949, 7)

## 1. Hermann Hesse in Romania

The reception of Hermann Hesse in Romania is shaped by a distinctive combination of biographical fascination, political censorship and the philosophical kinship to Romain Rolland's vision of *humanism*.

Due to the research purpose of this study, the chronological presentation of the publications and translations of Hermann Hesse's work will not get primary attention,<sup>1</sup> it is rather relevant to analyse the possible categories of dealing with the author in our country. The reception process is carried out by two different categories of public: the literary or cultural critics and the public in Romania, and the literary critics and readers with Romanian origins, who are active and live outside the national borders. The two categories are represented by two extraordinary personalities who also shaped the international research on Hermann Hesse's work.

The nationally bound category stands out through the personality of the Germanophone intellectual from Timișoara, professor and writer Rudolf Hollinger, who conducted an almost one-way correspondence with Hermann Hesse between 1957-1960. According to professor Mihaela Zaharia, who in 2023 edited this letter exchange in four languages<sup>2</sup>, Hollinger received from Hesse only one written line, in addition to numerous postcards and books. Hollinger's letters reveal his fascination for the work of the German writer, whereas the gifts from the German Writer stand for his appreciation of his reader-admirer. Hollinger makes different attempts to translate the poetry of Hermann Hesse, but the texts never see the light of print. Hollinger's efforts towards a broader reception of Hesse's works in Romania was followed by the late Germanist George Guțu and by Ioana Pârvulescu, both of whom provided deeply comprehensive analyses in the prefaced novels translated into Romanian.

Ioana Pârvulescu, Romanian writer and literary critic, offers a layered comparative approach in *Dilema* (1995), juxtaposing *Das Glasperlenspiel* with Kafka's *Der Prozess* and *Das Schloß*. She positions Hesse's magisterial protagonist Josef Knecht as a counter-image to Kafka's tragic subjects, identifying "Castalia" – a name which she reads as derivative from the Kafkian *Castel* – as a province of spirit and

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Hesse has been already known to the Romanian public since the interwar period, through a number of mentions and biographical portraits. The largest one was published in *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* 1944 1/XI, where Petronela Negoșanu offers a well-documented description of Hermann Hesse's life and its importance for the understanding of his novels. Negoșanu asserts the stereotypical approach to his work, by presenting him as a traditional writer, which continues Jean Paul's preference for nature: „Scriitorul german de circulație europeană, Hermann Hesse, este ultimul cavaler din șirul glorios al romanticilor. El este pe linia lui Jean Paul, de care îl leagă iubirea de natură, și de neliniștile inimii [...] Hermann Hesse nu iubește lucrările de mare format (sic!) [...] Mai mult ca niciunul dintre poeții contemporani, Hermann Hesse este înrădăcinat în tradiție. [...] Pentru a înțelege însă mai bine firea ciudată a poetului, însingurarea lui nu numai literară ci și omenească, cât și înrudițiile sale spirituale, trebuie să cunoaștem familia din care se trage” (RFR 1944 1/XI, p. 72). This research direction, that from the contemporary point of view is not based on philological scientific rigor, will be difficultly surmounted by the Romanian scholars and readers of Hermann Hesse.

<sup>2</sup> Zaharia, Mihaela (Ed.), *Rudolf Hollinger: Briefe an Hermann Hesse / Scrisori către Hermann Hesse / Lettres à Hermann Hesse / Letters to Hermann Hesse*. Translated into Rumanian and French, and commented by Mihaela Zaharia, translated into English by Roxana Ilie. Iași, Ars Longa Publishing House, 2023.

suggesting that Hesse's utopian narrative rehabilitates "good" in a Kafkaesque world. Pârvulescu's analogical method opens avenues for dialogizing Hesse's narrative structures within the Central European Modernism, based on rigorous philological research instruments. Although Ioana Pârvulescu argues the similarities between the two writers only from a chronological point of view, the fact that Hesse wrote about Kafka's novels in his essay collection *Eine Literaturgeschichte in Rezensionen und Aufsätzen*,<sup>3</sup> is known to specialists. Hesse began his work on the *Glasperlenspiel* in 1931, and by that time he had already wrote about Kafka's *Der Prozeß* and *Das Schloß*. Regarding the research focus of this study, one could say that Hesse's game vision grew along with his essays about Kafka's work. Hesse states in 1935, that Kafka's novels „spielen ein lebensgefährliches und unentrinnbares Spiel, mit wunderlichen, komplizierten, vermutlich sehr tiefen und sinnvollen Spielregeln, deren völlige Kenntnis aber in einem Menschenleben nicht erreichbar ist, und deren Geltung, je nach Laune der unbekanntem herrschenden Mächte, beständig schwankt.“<sup>4</sup> (Hesse 1935, 477)

Moving into the wider Romanian critical landscape, Andrei Pleşu deploys Hesse's works in mainstream literary and popular discourse. Pleşu, as a leading philosopher and public intellectual, uses in *Dilema Veche* (2009), the figure of Josef Knecht to typify what he frames as German hierarchical discipline and the structure of the "German spirit." This reading tends to flatten Hesse's spiritual complexities into cultural stereotypes, though Andrei Pleşu captures exactly the central aspect of the social criticism undertaken by Josef Knecht against Castalia, i.e. its lack of flexibility and authentic organic growth,<sup>5</sup> but without mentioning this aspect of the novel.

The translator of the novel, Ion Roman<sup>6</sup>, offers a surprisingly fresh reading key, although in his preface to the translation still reverberates some early stereotypes about Hermann Hesse. Roman, having the advantage of posterity, understands and describes Hesse's poetical evolution and renders thus the possibility to read his work beyond his childhood or his psychoanalytical sessions.

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<sup>3</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Gesammelte Werke 12. Schriften zur Literatur II*, edited by Volker Michels, Frankfurt am Main 1970. Pp. 477- 491.

<sup>4</sup> Free translation by VB: The novels play a life threatening and inescapable game, with whimsical, complicated, probably profoundly meaningful rules, which remain beyond the comprehension of a person. The validity of these rules changes constantly according to the mood of the unknown political powers.

<sup>5</sup> Other Romanian researchers of Hermann Hesse's work: Lucia Gorgoi, Mihaela Zaharia, Petra Korry, Veronica Buciuman. All the above are Germanists and regard the novels of Hermann Hesse from a literary theoretical point of view.

<sup>6</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Jocul cu mărgele de sticlă*, trad. by Ion Roman, Editura pentru Literatura Universală 1969, also RAO 1997 and 2013.

The second category of reception consists of critics and readers outside the national borders. Within this context the personality of Joseph Mileck draws attention. Joseph Mileck (1922–2022) was an eminent scholar of Hermann Hesse, whose early connection to Romania formed a meaningful part of his life and academic trajectory. Born in Sanktmartin, a German-speaking village in Romania's Banat region, Mileck spent his childhood both in Romania and Canada after his family emigrated in the 1920s. His Romanian roots continued to shape his worldview, educational resilience, and multilingual capacity. After excelling academically in Canada and the United States, Mileck completed his doctorate at Harvard with a dissertation on Hermann Hesse's *Steppenwolf*, launching a remarkable career as a Hesse scholar at the University of California, Berkeley. He authored the influential monography *Hermann Hesse: Life and Art* (1978) and which remains a foundational work in most Hesse studies up today.<sup>7</sup> His work sets the trend for the autobiographical approach to Hesse's novels and defines the thematical vein of his novels, research direction that can also be traced in the studies of Romanian scholars.

While in Romania there has been devotion and careful editing of correspondence and translation work, several fundamental perspectives in the Romanian context remain underexplored or superficially treated. The post-communist years allow a diverse, yet still associative or anecdotal, critical approaches to Hesse's work, as seen in major national journals; translation efforts remain fragmentary, and a cohesive Romanian Hesse scholarship never materializes, excepting the monographies by Petra Korry and V. Buciuman.

The Romanian critics regard the novels and poetry of Hermann Hesse as rather subdued to Central European psychoanalytical traditions or to a rather simplified dualistic point of view upon the German Romanticism and Classicism. Hermann Hesse's political position and his interest for historical development did not constitute a focal point of scientific reading and criticism in Romania. Nevertheless, Hermann Hesse reveals a far more balanced political position within the context of both World Wars than his writer fellow Thomas Mann. Hermann Hesse's declared and explained pacifism was deficiently interpreted in Romania as passivism, which is strongly contradicted by the facts regarding Hesse's projects during the World Wars. Thus, during the 1st WW, he provided the German soldiers with books to read in the tranches, it was a gesture of support and profound humanitarianism, but also a form of joining the army. After this experience his pacifism deepened to such an extent that during the 2nd WW, he supported only the peace process, by offering shelter to Jews escaping the Nazi-Germany. Even his last wife, Ninon Ausländer, was a born Jewish Czernowitzer.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.poetsinthegarden.com/poets-in-the-garden/joseph-mileck-may-28-1922-december-23-2022> [last seen on 07.10.2025].

The next part of this study concentrates on showing that Hermann Hesse also played a political game when writing his Nobel Prize winning novel, *The Glass Bead Game* and that the Nobel-Prize-Committee recognized his narrative intention.

## 2. Which game is being actually played in *The Glass Bead Game*?

### 2.1. Theoretical clarification

Conceptually, the game-philosophical hypothesis operates on the assumption that any human experience can be carried out and reflected upon within the field game in the most profound manner possible, but without serious consequence. Accordingly, activities such as war and politics are categorized by the Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga as games carried out on a real playground with consequences. Games and playing thus become a function of culture:

If we find that play is based on the manipulation of certain images, on a certain "imagination" of reality (i.e. its conversion into images), then our main concern will be to grasp the value and significance of these images and their "imagination". We shall observe their action in play itself and thus try to understand play as a cultural factor in life. (Huizinga 1949, 4)

Huizinga supports his thesis regarding games as cultural factors by analysing language games, and even the terms *fun* and *ernest*, which pose difficulty when translating them into other European languages.

The great archetypal activities of human society are all permitted with play from the start. Take language, for instance – that first and supreme instrument which man shapes in order to communicate, to teach, to command [...] by naming [things] we raise them into the domain of spirit [...] Behind every abstract expression there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Thus, in giving expression to life, man creates a second, poetic world alongside the world of nature. (Huizinga 1949, 4)

Hermann Hesse explores in his novel the fine line between play and non-play, because the turning point of the action, where the main character seems to have failed the life plan as game master, is in fact the reminder, that not everything is a game, that the *Glass Bead Game* fails to reassure its universal function of preserving valuable cultural and scientific thought. The pseudohistorical description of the game reveals the same aspects, that Hermann Hesse drew attention upon, when writing about the novels of Franz Kafka, i.e. the game is life threatening and inescapable, with whimsical, complicated, profoundly meaningful rules, which remain beyond the comprehension of a person. The validity of these rules changes constantly according to the mood of the unknown political powers.

In the attempt to summarize the story of this novel it would be appropriate to say that the glass bead game is an institutionalised form of experiencing different solutions to contemporary societal and political crises. The utopian construction of

pedagogical province relies on the argument, that within his perimeter the game is being kept in its most authentic form and thus allowing the mankind to preserve its cultural goods. The actual story of Joseph Knecht is preceded by a preface, which draws attention through the distancing narrative effects and its intentionally constructed pseudoscientific tone and display of arguments. But this published version of the preface is the fourth version of this fragment.

The literary fragment, entitled *Die politische Einleitung zum Glasperlenspiel* presents the writer in a manner that deviates from the prevailing perception of Hermann Hesse's literary and ideological position within the neo-romantic movement of the early twentieth century. Beyond the historical perception this fragmentary version of the introduction to the novel, reveals a narrative tonality which is less burdened by aesthetical exercise allowing the message and the political attitude to shine through authentically. The fragment was published in 1934 in the December issue of the Berlin newspaper *Neue Rundschau*, just as other chapters of the novel saw the print between 1938 and 1942 due to Hesse's publisher Peter Suhrkamp.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2. The underlying game

The *Political Introduction to the Glass Bead Game* critiques the profound degradation of intellectual and moral standards in the education system, including the university, of a certain era, despite the presence of a few high-calibre scholars. This moral decline and intellectual irresponsibility led to "tragic-hilarious or corrupt" (Hesse 1932, 486) circumstances in higher education, exemplified by students engaging in unauthorized protests, strikes, and even threatening professors' lives. To illustrate this state, the text presents two examples of major works by fictitious German professors, published around 1950, which became notorious as curiosities.

Professor Lankhaar's *The Lie About War Guilt* is a massive, two-volume work (over 1,500 pages in quarto format) published at the age of 82. He dies immediately after its presentation, with the poignant detail that the "consciousness of his own high mission" (Hesse 1932, 487) supposedly kept him alive. The book was a belated, 35-year-late attempt to refute the accusations levelled against the German people and their leaders by their enemies during the WWI. These wartime insults, which had been widely forgotten or mocked by the rest of the world by 1950, included calling the Germans "Huns" "vandals" and "cannibals" and blaming them solely for the war's outbreak. With a "playful enthusiasm" (idem) Lankhaar used similarly unflattering terms for the opposing nations (e.g. "false Gaul", "cowardly Briton", "Italian traitor") to

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<sup>8</sup> Michels Volker: *Zur Aktualität von Hermann Hesses »Glasperlenspiel«*. Studii din ediția jubiliară a romanului »Das Glasperlenspiel«, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2002, p. 21.

argue for the absolute innocence of the German people, Emperor, generals, and diplomats. He offered “clear” documentary proof that the sole culprits were a French king long dead, Louis XI, and an obscure French official, Théophile Delcassé.

While this bizarre and abstract work by a “decrepit old man” found virtually no readership abroad and was met with “respectful pity” and silence by the European press, in Germany, though also unread, it gained a reputation lasting “almost two centuries”. The text explains this lasting notoriety by noting the book’s function as a “mine of gold for political *condottieri*” (political mercenaries) who used it to fuel their internal conflicts, coups, and speeches, thus continuing the cycle of political and intellectual abuse.

Professor Schwentchen's *Green Blood* deals with the intellectual environment, which was corrupted by a new myth about the “green blood”, invented by a conspiratorial youth leader and adventurer named Litzke (known as the “secret emperor” of Germany). This myth was designed for a youth generation already “unaccustomed to thinking” due to pre-existing racial legends. The generally spread fear and terror prevented official contradiction of this legend. People knew their lives were at stake if they incurred the wrath of the fanatical youth, showing the extent of societal and academic intimidation. Schwentchen, whose actual university chair was for tennis science (a reflection of the university’s absurd lack of focus), not philology, cited figures like Zoroaster and Manu and borrowed words from Sanskrit, Sumerian, and Greek – languages he himself couldn't read. This academic legitimization of the “green blood” myth, leveraging his university authority, allowed Schwentchen to achieve his goal: he was promoted to the highest hierarchical levels.

This political introduction does not bare the marks of the aesthetic distancing effects of the final version, and it is clear in its discussion of the time of Hermann Hesse’s life, thus offering the key to understanding the fact, that the novel’s message is political rather than philosophical or aesthetic.

The kernel ideas of this fragment will be stylistically polished and enunciated in the final literary version of the novel, but the considerations on the Aryan theory are further codified in the work of fiction, in contrast with the rather transparent referentiality in the political fragment. In the published novel the chronist uses language characteristic of the era of the Catholic Inquisition to describe the national-socialist atmosphere and mentality of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany. The mechanisms of self-censorship are recognizable in the following fragment from the fictional work:

Viața intelectuală a epocii foiletoniste ar putea fi asemuită cu o plantă degenerată, care și-a pierdut vlaga dând lăstari hipertrofice, iar corecturile ulterioare, cu retezarea plantei până la rădăcină. Tinerii de acum [castalieni], care doreau acum să se dedice studiilor intelectuale, nu mai înțelegeau prin aceasta a ciupi câte ceva pe la universități, unde profesori vestiți și buni de gură, dar fără autoritate, să le prezinte resturi din vechea cultură superioară; ei trebuiau să

începe cu aceeași strășnicie, ba chiar mai strășnic și mai metodic decât o făceau cândva inginerii pe la politehnici. Luau piepțiș un urcuș anevoios, erau obligați să-și purifice și să-și întărească puterea de gândire cu ajutorul matematicii și al exercițiilor scolastic aristotelice, iar în afară de aceasta trebuiau să renunțe cu desăvârșire la toate bunurile considerate până atunci de către învățații mai multor generații ca vrednice de obținut: câștigul bănesc rapid și lesnicios, celebritatea și onorurile publice, elogiile presei, căsătoriile cu fete de bancheri și industriași, răsfățul și luxul în viața materială. Scriitorii cu opere trase în tiraje mari, cu premii Nobel și vilizoare drăguțe la țară, medicii faimoși, cu decorații la cheutori și valeți în livrea, academicienii cu neveste bogate și saloane pline de strălucire, chimiștii cu fotolii în consiliile de administrație din industrie, filosofi cu fabrici de foiletoane și conferințe în săli arhipline, cu entuziaste aplauze și buchete de flori – toate aceste figuri dispăruseră și nu au mai apărut până astăzi. Firește, mai existau și acum mulți tineri dotați, pentru care acele figuri rămăseseră totuși modele vrednice de invidiat, dar căile spre onorurile publice, spre bogăție, celebritate și lux nu mai treceau prin amfiteatre universitare, prin seminarii și teze de doctorat, în ochii lumii profesiunile intelectuale, decăzute, dăduseră faliment, iar prin aceasta spiritul își recucerise capacitatea de dăruire ispășitoare și fanatică. Talentele care năzuiau mai mult spre strălucire și huzur trebuiau să întoarcă spatele preocupărilor intelectuale, căzute în dizgrație și să-și aleagă acele profesii pe seama cărora fuseseră lăsate prosperitatea și profiturile materiale. (Hesse 2013, 46-47)

Describing the same intellectual and educational crises the narrator does not attack one or two personalities but goes into only apparently significant details regarding different types of intellectuals. The comparison of the good Castilians on the one side, who managed to save through their intellectual endeavours the European culture from the feuilletonistic era with their predecessors, who made by their superficiality the existence of the Castilians and of the glass bead game necessary, is also almost undetectable and can be easily overseen by a superficial reader. This parallel softens the critical tone, but it cuts even deeper through irony and detachment. The narrator decides to depict the intellectuals of the criticised era by virtue of their possessions rather than of what they are. The usage of this rhetorical strategy the narrator achieves two key objectives with a single action: he paces the narrative's rhythm and tonality, thus giving voice to a more mature and credible chronicler figure, that chooses the distanced narrative modality. This distancing enables the narrator to his second achievement, the conveyance of the message that for the intellectual of the feuilletonistic period, scholarship and learning do not represent attributes of their being or aspects of identity, but mere possessions, superficial credentials in form of unauthentic paper titles and diplomas.

The serious narrative tonality, used in the description of the Castilians, ends in the point, where the reversed irony introduces a serial enumeration of different variations of the same human profile – individual existences build on possessions not on authentic living and being. Paired with the usage of diminutives this reversed or hidden irony conducts the tropic parallelism toward a negative hyperbola. This diplomatic language games are both necessary and intentional. Reading the direct,

almost invective form of addressing from the *Political Introduction to the Glass Bead Game*:

Chiar și în vremurile acelea trăiau câțiva învățați de mare clasă, însă în ansamblu școala, inclusiv universitatea, se degradaseră la un nivel îngrozitor de lipsă de responsabilitate, iar imperativele moralității intelectuale parcă fuseseră uitate. Drept exemplu pentru circumstanțele tragico-hilare ori corupte, în care se aflau școlile înalte (ale căror învățăcei demonștrau, făceau greve, amenințau viața profesorilor după bunul plac ș.a.m.d.) menționăm aici două cărți impunătoare ca volum a doi profesori germani, apărute în jurul anului 1950 și care și-au dobândit un oarecare renume în calitate de curiozități.<sup>9</sup>

it becomes clear, that the construction of the fictional narrator figure was supported by a deeper authorial intentionality.

The actual game at play was Hermann Hesse intention of breaking the walls of the German censorship, to disseminate this message to a broader public and to prevent the Great War, which he had predicted in his writings from this period. This rhetoric of a masque-play is well known to the Romanian reader of literature from the communist era, the de-masque process being the touchstone of rhetorical artistry. The remaining question to be addressed is whether Hesse feared for his safety the same way the Romanian intellectuals did when refusing to succumb to the totalitarian regime? Rudolf Hollinger's resonance to the writings of Hermann Hesse was not a coincidence, the life in the first years of communist regime in Romania, needed an adequate form of expression, and Hesse provided his readers with a model of less dangerous modes of expression and articulation of authentic knowledge, feeling and thinking.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Discussion and concluding considerations

1914 and the WWI represent a period of *risveglio/Erwachung*<sup>11</sup> in Hermann Hesses political attitude, this being the moment when the young writer distances

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<sup>9</sup> Free translation by VB of the following fragment: „Es lebten zwar auch damals einige Gelehrte von hohem Rang, doch war im ganzen die höhere Schule einschließlich der Universität auf einen schlimmen Grad von Verantwortungslosigkeit gesunken, und die einfachsten Gebote intellektueller Redlichkeit schienen vergessen worden zu sein. Als Beispiele für die rührend-lächerliche sowohl wie für die verderbte Seite dieser Zustände an den Hochschulen (deren Schüler damals übrigens nach Belieben streikten, demonstrierten, die Lehrer am Leben bedrohten usw.) nennen wir zwei um 1950 erschienene umfangreiche Bücher deutscher Professoren, welche beide als Kuriosa eine gewisse Berühmtheit behalten haben.“ (Hesse 1932, *Politik des Gewissens*, p. 486)

<sup>10</sup> See Gerginova Zlatka. Traum namens Hermann Hesse, *Balkanistik Worlds* 2025/ 1, p. 341-343. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14226321>,

Url: <https://www.ceeol.com/search/viewpdf?id=1339588> [last seen on 15.09.2025].

<sup>11</sup> Mauro Ponzì: *Il mito della giovinezza*. Roma 2002. p. 262, 263.

himself from the general aggressive pan-Germanic positions, joining the pacifist's positions, as militant through culture and moral, intellectual stance.

Hermann Hesse's political writings are less known and discussed, because, like many active and renowned intellectuals, Hermann Hesse expressed opinions before World War I that he later renounced. The writer's political thinking is formulated through open letters and diaries and focuses on the fate of his nation, which he does not simply abandon by retreating to Switzerland, but accompanies historically with significant gestures related to the specifics of his work. Thus, due to health problems, he was not enlisted in the German army during World War I but was tasked with collecting and distributing books in a library for prisoners and war wounded. During World War II, Hermann Hesse gave refuge and help to many Jewish families from all over Europe, but especially to the relatives of his wife, Ninon Hesse.

One of his political writings, entitled *O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!* – with direct reference to Friedrich Schillers *Ode to Peace* – will open the door to a massive public disdain and criticism, which threatened the writer into historic and aesthetic insignificance, and worse into losing his German audience. Joseph Mileck in *Hermann Hesse. Life and Art*, draws attention to the ambivalence of the discourse in the essay *O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!* (O friends, not these tones!) as well as to the contradictions in Hesse's political views. Mileck also repeats Hesse's defence arguments, according to which he placed himself in the service of a neutral humanity and all intellectuals should stay away from politics and follow his example.<sup>12</sup> However, the biographer refrains from claiming that this essay was an awakening moment, because his novels often reveal a deep discrepancy between humanistic expectations and historical and social observation, this being an indicator of the fact that the *risveglio / Erwachung* was rather a process not a moment.

As the critic Egon Schwarz observes, nowhere is the inner tension more palpable than in the Hessian relationship between his own individuality and morality and the behaviour of the German people on the world stage at that time. Hermann Hesse as many other German writers saw their primordial cultural matrix destroyed.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy in the biography of the German/ Swiss writer that he does not define his national identity simply by belonging to a people, but rather to a culture, which he tries to enrich by original appropriation. It is in this context that the political version of the *Introduction to The Glass Bead Game*, should be understood.

The discussion focuses on ways historical games are exposed through literary veiling. The author was aware that the direct attack on Nazi ideology and practices, which clearly emerges from the lines of the *Political Introduction*, would

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<sup>12</sup> Also see Buciuman, Veronica. *Sinceritas. Der poetologische Begriff in Hermann Hesses Prosawerk*. Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang 2010, p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Egon Schwarz: *Hermann Hesse und der Nationalsozialismus*. In: Bauschinger, Sigrid, Reh, Albert: *Hermann Hesse. Politische und wirkungsgeschichtliche Aspekte*. Franke, 1986. p. 60.

have drawn the attention of the German authorities to the activities of his family, firstly their friendship to Jewish intellectuals and then during the war their direct support for Jews crossing Europe through Switzerland to seek refuge. Despite the writer's attempt to avoid this strategic mistake, his publisher Suhrkamp did not obtain official approval for the publication of the novel in Germany, as he had previously done with other writings by Hermann Hesse. Parts of *The Glass Bead Game* appeared previously, episodically in Swiss publications, thus with unremarkable impact on the German public. These circumstances also led to the writer's deep disappointment, so that he did not travel to Stockholm to pick up his Nobel Prize distinction.

The message regarding the monstrosity of the social, political, and cultural processes of the era – especially the year 1931, when Hesse had already began the research and writing the first lines of the book, years in which the writer confessed in his correspondence his conviction that German society was heading towards another war, much more devastating than the first one. Hesse profiled himself not as a deserter who takes refuge in a geography that offers him safety, but as a faithful cultivator of the German spirit, which he tries to save in and through his work.

The above considerations help us understand why Hermann Hesse chose to modify the text of the *Political Introduction* to his allegorical utopia from *The Glass Bead Game*, his motives going beyond aesthetic intentions.

In short, through his writing, Hermann Hesse exposes the imposture and mass manipulation by the perpetrating intellectual and political instruments of the National Socialists' propaganda, which used to refer to successful human models by means of a cliché-based language, public discourse based on sophistry, and a lack of courage in expressing one's opinion.

Focusing on his fictional oeuvre, whose utopian form proves to be a successful political camouflage, he conveys the desired message to all those who possess the code to decipher it. It is evident that, in the absence of consideration for the political substratum of the message, the work is a dense and challenging novel to comprehend. From the perspective of the multiple codification of the narrative discourse, the work can be regarded as a forerunner of postmodern literary construction. An analysis of the political version of the introduction to *The Glass Bead Game* reveals thus the construction of narrative mechanisms as a serious game, which just like in the case of a war, is made with the intention of becoming a process or phenomenon carrying consequences in the society, and not directly for the author.

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# TUDOR VIANU: THE REFUSAL OF THE LUDIC IN STYLISTIC RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** *This paper examines Tudor Vianu's conception of stylistics as a discipline grounded in humanistic and ethical values rather than in the playful or purely aesthetic dimensions of artistic creation. By analyzing Vianu's theoretical writings, as well as his critical interpretations in *Arta prozatorilor români*, the study highlights his consistent rejection of arbitrariness and formal experimentation detached from moral significance. Tudor Vianu defines style as the form in which a spiritual attitude is expressed, emphasizing order, unity, and intellectual responsibility in both art and its interpretation. The article argues that his approach to stylistics represents a synthesis of aesthetic and ethical principles, transforming artistic expression into a mode of knowledge and a manifestation of moral consciousness.*

**Keywords:** stylistics, ludic dimension, Tudor Vianu, humanism, artistic expression

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## The Fundamentals of Tudor Vianu's Stylistics

A leading figure in interwar Romanian culture, Tudor Vianu is distinguished by his vast body of work, which lies at the intersection of philosophy, aesthetics, literary criticism, stylistics, and cultural theory. In an era marked by tension between modernism and humanist tradition, T. Vianu stands out as a spirit of balance and rationality, reaffirming the moral and cognitive value of art. In a period of cultural effervescence, the author of *Aesthetics* established the coordinates of areas of research that had been little explored in Romania until his studies. These were aesthetics and stylistics, areas he approached with the meticulousness of an explorer determined to map with surgical precision the new territory that appeared before his eyes. Responsible and aware of the importance of his endeavor, T. Vianu excludes, at least apparently, any element of the ludic from his research.

The presence of the irrational in the world (and works of art are part of this realm) should not demoralize the initiatives of reason. The fact that the literary phenomenon is perhaps irreducible in its ultimate depth should not prevent us from reducing it as much as we can. (Vianu 2010: 12).

This quote, selected from *Arta prozatorilor români* (*The Art of Romanian Prose Writers*), is more than a justification of the method used in the aforementioned volume. It represents T. Vianu's constant attitude in life, culture, and his research work. Regardless of the field he approached, the poet, literary historian, aesthetician, moralist, stylist, comparatist, and professor, T. Vianu maintained the same positions of humanism of classical origin and dimension, for which the universe represents a reducible mystery, a material organized by the human spirit, by its reason defined by order and balance.

His stylistic concept, formulated in works such as *Probleme de stil și artă literară* (*Problems of Style and Literary Art*), *Problemele metaforei și alte studii de stilistică* (*Problems of Metaphor and Other Studies in Stylistics*), *Arta prozatorilor români* (*The Art of Romanian Prose Writers*), *Estetica* (*Aesthetics*), is based on the idea that style is not a mere embellishment of expression, but a manifestation of spiritual personality and a form of moral order. Among all the fields of research addressed by the author of the first treatise on aesthetics in Romanian culture, stylistics most clearly denotes the need for discipline, rigor, and accuracy that "sometimes unsettles the conscience of literary critics" (Vianu 2010: 11).

In this context, what we might call the „refusal of the ludic” appears as a fundamental attitude in T. Vianu's thinking, defining his position towards the aestheticizing and formalist tendencies of the era. For him, art is not reduced to the gratuitous play of forms or pure aesthetic pleasure, but implies a spiritual responsibility and participation in the order of values. The refusal of the ludic thus expresses an axiological option: the rejection of aesthetic autonomy in favor of an integrative vision, in which beauty remains in solidarity with goodness and truth. Marin Bucur rightly considers that through his stylistic work, the author of *Aesthetics*, who was the first in Romania to teach a university course on the philosophy of culture, contributed to the promotion of beauty through research and applied study of the text (Biberi 1966: 254). Moreover, he

made beauty and goodness, as two of the highest aspirations of the human condition, an ideal, and in its name he educated, alongside the great men of culture who served higher education in his time, all those who today understand and feel literature (Bucur in Vianu 1965: 12).

This position places T. Vianu close to an ethical aesthetic, in which the artistic act is inseparable from its moral significance. Unlike modern aestheticians of artistic gratuitousness - from Croce to Valéry - for whom creation is a game of free spirit,

Vianu advocates for an art of balance and measure, rooted in reason and culture. Style, in this perspective, becomes a way of ordering the world and expressing the spirit in an intelligible form, not a field for playful experimentation. Therefore, the analysis of playfulness in T. Vianu's stylistic conception allows us to understand more deeply the humanism that runs through his entire work. In an era of modernist ruptures and aesthetic relativism, T. Vianu proposes a model of responsible art that does not renounce beauty, but subordinates it to truth and inner balance. This article aims to examine the theoretical foundations and implications of this attitude, placing it in the broader context of interwar culture and stylistic attitude, as defined by the author of *Arta prozatorilor români*.

Tudor Vianu's entire aesthetic and theoretical conception is articulated around a humanism of form and value, which places art in the sphere of spiritual responsibility. The author of *Arta prozatorilor români* does not view style as a mere formal peculiarity of language, but as an expression of man's moral and cultural personality, a way in which the spirit manifests itself in order and meaning. Eloquent in this regard is the article *Atitudinea stilistică (The Stylistic Attitude)*, included in the volume *Studii de stilistică (Studies in Stylistics)*, edited by Sorin Alexandrescu and published in 1968. Thus, the humanistic dimension constitutes the theoretical core of the author's stylistics in *Aesthetics* and recovers the rationalist and ethical tradition of European culture, giving aesthetics a normative function. In this context, the rejection of the ludic elements does not appear as a denial of creativity, but as a limitation of aesthetic gratuitousness in the name of truth and inner balance. T. Vianu thus proposes a model of art that goes beyond formal play and opens up to knowledge, culture, and morality.

## **Tudor Vianu's Approach to Stylistics**

Understanding the rejection of the playful dimension in Tudor Vianu's aesthetics and stylistics requires, first of all, clarification of the theoretical framework in which his thinking about art and expression was formed. The stylistic concept does not appear as an isolated system, but as the result of a complex intellectual evolution, situated at the confluence of the philosophy of values, German idealistic aesthetics, and the European humanist tradition. An analysis of the formation of this concept allows us to understand how the author of *Arta prozatorilor români* came to consider style as an expression of a moral and spiritual order, rather than as a product of play or formal chance.

Tudor Vianu's interest in the study of style originated during his intellectual formation, more precisely during his doctoral studies in Germany. His contact with the German academic environment, deeply marked by the philosophy of values and idealistic aesthetics, provided the young researcher with the theoretical framework for understanding artistic language as a form of expression of the spirit. In this context,

Marin Bucur rightly observes that Vianu's doctoral thesis - *The Problem of Valorisation in Schiller's Poetics* (1924) - "is fundamentally a work of stylistics" (Bucur in Vianu 1965: 9).

T. Vianu's focus on the study of style and the development of a stylistics with a philosophical vocation represents one of his most significant contributions to Romanian and European literary theory in the first half of the 20th century. His interest in stylistics did not arise from a purely linguistic or literary concern, but from a need to understand artistic expression in relation to personality and spiritual values. Therefore, his approach to stylistics comes from the direction of cultural philosophy and aesthetics, not from philology in the narrow sense.

During the interwar period, stylistics was a rapidly developing field, situated between linguistics, aesthetics, and psychology. The works of Charles Bally, disciple of Ferdinand de Saussure, and Karl Vossler had a major influence on the young T. Vianu. However, his thinking did not passively adopt these models, but integrated them into his own humanistic and rationalist vision. While Bally emphasized the affectivity of expression and Vossler privileged the spiritual dimension of language, T. Vianu sought a synthesis between expression, reason, and value. In *Probleme de stil și artă literară*, Vianu systematically formulated for the first time the principles of a value-based stylistics, in which artistic expression is interpreted as a reflection of a moral and cultural order. For him, style is "the expression of personality in language", but this expression is neither accidental nor playful; it presupposes a discipline of the spirit and an awareness of the values that order the creative act. Hence his constant rejection of aesthetic conceptions that reduce art to formal experimentation or the autonomous play of language. Thus, T. Vianu's approach to stylistics is defined by an axiological integration: he transforms the study of style from a technical analysis into an anthropology of expression, that is, into a reflection on how humans manifest themselves as moral and cultural beings through language. In this sense, stylistics becomes for Vianu a science of the spirit, situated at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics.

Compared to contemporary trends in linguistics, T. Vianu's approach is deeply normative. It is not limited to describing means of expression, but seeks to determine the criteria of value that give a style the quality of being authentic, meaningful, and beautiful. At a time when modern art tended towards fragmentation, irony and playfulness, Vianu proposed a re-founding of expression based on rational and ethical values. For him, the stylistic act is not a formal exercise, but a form of expressive morality - a way in which the spirit becomes visible in order, clarity and balance. This position explains why, in his view, the ludic - understood as absolute freedom of form - is rejected: not because art cannot be free, but because true freedom is exercised within the limits of value. Therefore, Tudor Vianu's approach to stylistics is not a simple extension of his aesthetic concerns, but an attempt to establish a

discipline of expression capable of unifying the aesthetic, ethical, and intellectual dimensions of creation. In this sense, Vianu is not only a theorist of style, but a philosopher of expression, for whom the study of artistic language becomes a meditation on the human condition and the meaning of culture.

Sorin Alexandrescu identifies "classicism of attitude" as a trait of the personality of the author of *Arta prozatorilor români*, which subsequently extended to all areas of his activity, with a particular emphasis on stylistics, as this

most acutely denotes the need for discipline, rigor, and objectivity of the scholar, eager to subject the unsettling fluidity of reality to a classifying and comprehensive reason that is precise and playful, almost impersonal in its movement (Alexandrescu in Vianu 1968: 3).

The first systematic elaboration of the concept of style can be found in T. Vianu's chapter on Style in *Aesthetics*. Style is defined as "the unity of aesthetic structure in a group of works related to their agent, be it the individual artist, the nation, the era, or the cultural circle" (Vianu 1996: 142). The definition highlights the relational and integrative nature of style, conceived not as ornamentation or formal idiolect, but as a principle of spiritual coherence. The stylist also emphasizes that:

unity and originality are the two most particular ideas that merge in the concept of style. Therefore, the mixture of disparate and unassimilated things, confusion and anarchy are devoid of style (Vianu 1996:142).

In this sense, style does not express the arbitrary freedom of form, but the harmony between diversity and order, between individual expression and universal coherence. The rejection of confusion and unassimilated mixture reveals the ethical dimension of the author's conception of aesthetics: for him, style is a form of spiritual order, a discipline of expression that rejects playful chaos and formal gratuitousness. Through this definition, Vianu approaches the classical ideal of measure and balance, but reactivates it in modern terms, integrating it into a general theory of values. Style thus becomes a category of the spirit, situated between the aesthetic and the moral, between creative freedom and rational rigor - the place where artistic expression is transformed into a manifestation of culture.

In his study *Research on Literary Language and Style in the Period 1944–1959*, Tudor Vianu analyzes the causes that led to the relatively late emergence of stylistics as a distinct branch of linguistics. He observes that, for a long time, linguists focused on the historical development of language, on the phonetic, morphological, and lexical transformations that can be traced over time. This diachronic orientation, dominant in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, stemmed from the influence of comparative linguistics, which was particularly interested in the origin and evolution of Indo-European languages. In this context, the expressive dimension of language was neglected for a long time. Tudor Vianu shows that it was only when linguistics turned

its attention to the study of living language and the communicative and expressive functions of language that the theoretical framework necessary for the emergence of stylistics was created.

It was only at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the redefinition of the concept of style, that a convergence between the evolution of language science and interest in expressiveness took place. The new theoretical framework allowed language to be understood not only as a system of rules, but also as a means of expressing subjectivity. In this context, Vianu asserts that style can be studied through linguistic means and adopts the definition of stylistics as a linguistic discipline with aesthetic implications, situated at the border between linguistics and aesthetics. Tudor Vianu's approach to stylistics is therefore based on linguistics, but with a profound aesthetic orientation. As early as his article *Limba literară* (*Literary Language*, published in *Masca timpului*, 1926), Vianu advocates a realistic conception of literary language, considering that the language of characters must reflect their social and psychological condition. He emphasizes that fidelity to the human and social reality of the era is also manifested at the linguistic level, through the adaptation of speech to the character's typology and environment.

During this period, the stylist's notation still has an intuitive and impressionistic character (although the critic later vehemently rejects impressionism as a method of analysis), relying on aesthetic sensitivity and cultural observation rather than a systematic method of language analysis. Tudor Vianu relies more on value judgments and artistic perception of expression than on rigorous instruments of linguistic analysis. However, this stage prepares the ground for the further development of his thinking, which, in about fifteen years, will take the form of a scientific and methodical approach to literary language and style, integrating modern analytical tools and paving the way for a comprehensive stylistics, situated between linguistics and aesthetics.

## **Defining and Redefining the Concept of Style**

In Tudor Vianu's thinking, the definition of the concept of style reaches theoretical maturity in *Aesthetics*, a work in which the author brings together and systematizes the ideas previously formulated in *Problems of Style and Literary Art*. The chapter on style is one of the central points of the volume, as it marks the moment when the stylist transforms stylistics from a descriptive discipline into a philosophical-aesthetic one, anchored in the theory of values and in the general conception of culture. For T. Vianu, style is not a simple ornament of language or a technical category of art, but a form of manifestation of the human spirit. Through this definition, he shifts the emphasis from the level of individual expression to that of spiritual coherence: style is not only a personal trait, but also an expression of cultural unity. It can belong to an author, an era, or an entire civilization, to the extent that these

instances manifest a recognizable aesthetic structure, governed by the same order of values. By opposing the "mixture of disparate things", T. Vianu implicitly delimits a rejection of aesthetic ludic, understood as an arbitrary mixture of forms, conventions, and effects lacking unity (Vianu 1996: 142). For him, art is not a formal game, but an order of meaning, a construction that expresses the inner balance of the creator. In this sense, *Aesthetics* confirms the humanistic orientation of his thinking: the artistic act becomes a form of spiritual self-discipline, and style - the expression of this discipline.

The concept of style, in T. Vianu's view, has a dual nature: on the one hand, it is an aesthetic category (the formal organization of the work), and on the other hand, it is an ethical category (a measure of inner order). This way of thinking brings together classical rationalism and modern sensibility, offering a dynamic and comprehensive definition of style as an expression of spiritual personality within cultural values. By extending the notion of style from the individual to the collective level - artist, era, nation, civilization - the stylist anticipates a cultural perspective on aesthetics, close to the philosophy of German culture. In this interpretation, style becomes a form of spiritual life, an expression of the unity between the individual and the community, between creation and tradition.

At the end of the chapter on style, T. Vianu emphasizes that artistic value cannot be separated from the coherence of expression, and that coherence always implies reason, measure, and responsibility. Therefore, his aesthetics reject the playful temptation of experimentation and the pleasure of formal play, affirming instead an ethic of expression. In this vision, style becomes the meeting place between beauty and goodness, between creative freedom and moral order - that is, the highest expression of human culture.

As we have already seen, in his analysis of the concept of style, the writer pays special attention to the balance between the individual and historical dimensions of artistic expression. After defining style, he adds a fundamental nuance: "True style is one in which individual originality harmonizes with that of time and society" (Vianu, 1996, p. 143). This statement marks a subtle but significant change in the perspective of the author of *Aesthetics*. If up to this point the emphasis had been on the universal and ordering dimension of style, now the idea of style as a synthesis between the individual and the collective, between the creative freedom of the artist and the spiritual structure of his era, appears clearly defined. Therefore, T. Vianu understands style as a form of mediation between personality and context, between the singularity of expression and cultural solidarity.

The notion of "individual originality" will become, in his later writings, a focal point of his reflection on art. Vianu will focus on the individual writer as the bearer of a unique stylistic vocation, in which not only the temperament but also the moral and spiritual structure of the creator is expressed and in studies that follow the direction

opened up by *Aesthetics - Style and Destiny, Poetic State and Poetic Form, Problems of Metaphor*, the idea of style is refined and takes on existential significance.

In *Style and Destiny*, the writer investigates the relationship between the artist's personality and the stylistic configuration of the work, arguing that the creator's destiny is reflected in the form of his expression. Style is therefore not a mere aesthetic result, but a projection of inner destiny: expression becomes the way in which man asserts himself in the world and orders his experience. This perspective highlights the anthropological dimension of style, seen as an expression of a consciousness that seeks meaning and balance.

In *Problemele metaforei*, Vianu explores one of the most subtle dimensions of style - metaphor as an act of interpreting reality. For him, metaphor is not a simple rhetorical device, but a form of poetic thought, a way of revealing profound relationships between the spirit and the world. Following José Ortega Y Gasset, Tudor Vianu considers that metaphor represents "an essential means of knowledge" (Vianu 1957: 44). This view confirms that, in the Romanian researcher's system, style is not a means of analyzing language, but a method of knowledge, an instrument through which the unity between reason and sensitivity is expressed.

It is easy to see that in his writings following *Aesthetics*, Tudor Vianu develops a humanism of expression, in which style becomes the meeting place between individual personality and the spirit of the age, between creative freedom and the order of values. While in *Aesthetics* the emphasis was on the normative and collective dimension of style, in his later studies he turns his attention to the creative subject, to the drama and vocation of those who seek to transform inner experience into artistic form. Through this evolution, T. Vianu does not abandon the principle of order, but humanises it: true aesthetic coherence is not achieved through formal conformism, but through the harmony between the individual and universal spirit. In this sense, style becomes a central category of culture, defining not only the way in which one writes, but also the way in which man understands himself as a creative being.

The stylistics course taught by Tudor Vianu at the University of Bucharest between 1942 and 1943 represents an essential stage in the formation and consolidation of his conception of artistic language. This course can be considered an attempt at synthesising the method, as it brings together the observations, principles and theoretical insights acquired throughout his career as a critic and aesthete. Although it was not published in its entirety at the time, the course material had a profound influence on the study of literary language in Romania. The main merit of this course lies in the fact that it anticipates, in nuce, almost all the directions of research that T. Vianu would later develop in the field of stylistics. In this context, the writer also attempts to strike a balance between the linguistic and aesthetic approaches, asserting the need for stylistic analysis not to be limited to the description of forms, but to pursue their spiritual and cultural meanings. The stylistics course thus

becomes a methodological reference point, heralding the maturation of his thinking and paving the way for his later studies devoted to literary language, expression, and artistic value.

In 1955, the stylist published his study *Cercetarea stilului (The Study of Style)*, a text that marked the moment of theoretical maturity in his reflection on artistic language. In this work, T. Vianu revisits and systematises a series of older ideas, already outlined in his course on stylistics, including the concept of "word zones" - the distinction between the intellectual core, i.e. the logical meaning, and the expressive notes, i.e. the affective and aesthetic values attached to meaning. This perspective confirms his constant interest in the unity between thought and expression, between the communicative and aesthetic functions of language. A defining moment of the study is the formulation of the first principle of stylistic research, according to which: "the particularities of expression that it studies are not simple facts of observation, but facts of appreciation, values" (Vianu, 1968: 42). The author emphasizes that stylistics is not reduced to a mechanical description of linguistic structures, but involves an axiological dimension - each particularity of expression has an aesthetic, spiritual, or cultural value. Consequently, the study of style involves a critical and aesthetic evaluation of the means of expression, not just a simple inventory of them. The stylist thus advocates a real, objective understanding of literary works, based on a rigorous analysis of language, as opposed to impressionistic criticism, based on subjective impressions and emotional reactions. Tudor Vianu rejects both excessive formalism and psychological exaggerations, proposing a balanced method in which aesthetic interpretation is based on concrete linguistic data. In this sense, the study *Cercetarea stilului* is one of his most important contributions to the foundation of a stylistics capable of combining the analytical rigour of linguistics with the depth of aesthetic appreciation.

It is easy to see that Tudor Vianu's vision of style is characterized by an obvious synthesis, resulting from the convergence of three major fields of culture: linguistics, aesthetics, and the philosophy of value. In his view, stylistics is not an isolated discipline, but a frontier science that combines the objective analysis of language with the subjective interpretation of the values expressed through it. Thus, style becomes a point of confluence between the structure of language and the expression of the human spirit. Through this integrative perspective, Vianu goes beyond the limits of the two dominant trends of the time: on the one hand, linguistic formalism, which studied only the mechanisms of expression, and on the other hand, critical impressionism, which focused on the reader's emotional reaction. Instead of these unilateral approaches, he proposes a synthetic method, in which linguistic facts are viewed simultaneously as forms and values.

## Tudor Vianu and the rejection of the ludic

The concept of style, in which individual freedom is harmonized with the order of cultural values, organically anticipates Tudor Vianu's critical attitude towards the ludic dimension of art. If in *Aesthetics* and in his later studies style appears as an expression of spiritual discipline and creative responsibility, then opposition to aesthetic playfulness is no longer a mere theoretical reaction but, rather, a logical consequence of a system of thought based on the idea of unity, measure, and moral meaning of expression. In this context, the rejection of gratuitous formal play becomes an affirmation of an ethic of art, in which beauty is not separated from goodness, and the act of creation is defined by gravity and awareness of value. In the writer's theoretical system, stylistics is not a science of expressive play, but a form of knowledge of the spirit through language. The rejection of the ludic therefore concerns not only the content of art, but also the method of approaching it. For T. Vianu, stylistic research must remain faithful to an ideal of rational order, conceptual clarity, and interpretive responsibility, avoiding the temptation of hermeneutic play or critical relativism. In the context of interwar culture, this attitude constitutes a distinct position from the orientations that dominated European literary criticism. If modern aesthetics tended to transform the analysis of style into a game of interpretative variations, Vianu restores its axiological and cognitive character. In his view, the study of style cannot be reduced to a mechanical description of figures of speech, nor can it become a free exercise of critical subjectivity: it must express an order of the spirit, a reflection on the values that structure artistic expression.

For the author of *Arta prozatorilor români*, interpretation must follow the logic of the spiritual order revealed by the text, rather than substituting it with the play of critical subjectivity. It excludes any playful conception of artistic language, because it reduces style to its axiological essence: the expression of a coherent spiritual position. Hence the rejection of playfulness in stylistic research - the rejection of the idea that style analysis is a space of freedom without rules or arbitrary invention. This position is constantly manifested in his theoretical and critical writings. In *Style and Destiny*, he emphasizes that the researcher does not have the right to treat the work as an experimental object, but must penetrate the spiritual intimacy of the form, respecting the structure of meaning of the text. In the same spirit, the studies *Poetic State and Poetic Form* and *The Problems of Metaphor* confirm the choice of a stylistics of rigor and intellectual responsibility, in which interpretation becomes a means of knowledge, not a game.

The rejection of the ludic in stylistic research can also be explained by T. Vianu's philosophical background. Educated in the climate of German thought, he associates cultural science with the ethical seriousness of the research spirit, which orders the world through concepts and values. Like Wilhelm Dilthey, for whom the study of art was a form of understanding life, the Romanian author conceives of style

analysis as a hermeneutics of order, not as an aesthetics of play. Consequently, in his case, the expression "rejection of the ludic" takes on the meaning of rejecting interpretive relativism and affirming the normativity of value.

This perspective places him in opposition to aesthetic theories that exalt the autonomy of language or the playful nature of creation - from the modernist conception of "art for art's sake" to the aesthetics of play formulated by Johan Huizinga in *Homo ludens*. While Huizinga sees play as the origin of all forms of culture, Vianu argues that true culture requires transcending play through consciousness and discipline. Artistic creation, like its study, finds its meaning not in absolute formal freedom, but in the search for unity and meaning. Through this attitude, Tudor Vianu constructs a veritable ethic of stylistic research. The act of interpretation is not a free exercise of taste or imagination, but a form of intellectual responsibility towards the meaning of the work. The rejection of playfulness means, in essence, assuming the cultural seriousness of the critical act: recognizing that art, as an expression of the spirit, cannot be understood through play, but through the effort of reason and cultural empathy. Therefore, Tudor Vianu's stylistic research becomes a model of hermeneutics, based on the belief that all artistic expression is organized around a central value - that of spiritual order. In this order, the interpreter does not play, but seeks meaning; he does not improvise, but understands. The rejection of the ludic elements is, therefore, the expression of a mature critical consciousness, which transforms the study of style into a form of knowledge of the human and an act of fidelity to culture.

In *Arta prozatorilor români*, Tudor Vianu offers one of the most representative applications of his stylistic principles, demonstrating that the rejection of playfulness does not only concern the theory of expression, but also the interpretation of the aesthetic and moral behavior of literary characters. Analyzing Camil Petrescu's novel *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* (*The Last Night of Love, the First Night of War*), the stylist observes, with critical finesse, certain moments in which the attitude of the characters, especially Ela's, descends from the register of psychological and spiritual gravity to one of frivolous play.

The episode in which Ela, not understanding the philosophical concepts explained to her by Ștefan, in a gesture of childish exuberance, throws down pillows at him, is interpreted by Vianu as an "eclipse of good taste", a stylistic and moral crack in the construction of the novel. (Vianu 2010: 404). For him, this scene is a dissonance of tone, a deviation from the spiritual unity of the work. In a novel based on introspection, lucidity, and intellectual drama, the introduction of a moment of gratuitous play alters the expressive coherence and seriousness of the experience. With this observation, T. Vianu confirms his constant rejection of playfulness: for him, the artistic act - whether it be creation or representation - must remain faithful to ethical and aesthetic standards. Playfulness, manifested through frivolous gestures,

emotional levity, or ironic detachment, contradicts the demand for spiritual authenticity that defines, in his view, true art. This position derives from a more general principle of T. Vianu's thinking: authentic beauty is inseparable from good taste, and good taste, in turn, is the expression of a moral and intellectual order. Ela's gesture, seemingly banal and domestic, becomes a sign of inner imbalance and superficiality, a form of degradation of the existential style. Through this reading, the stylist reaffirms his conception that art must express the seriousness of spiritual life, not the ephemeral play of emotions. His attitude towards the scene in Camil Petrescu's novel is not only an aesthetic reaction, but also a statement of principle: in the universe of culture, play becomes problematic when it suspends meaning, when it destroys the order and coherence of form. Consequently, Tudor Vianu's rejection of playfulness manifests itself here as a double critical attitude: theoretical - in the sense of rejecting formal gratuitousness - and hermeneutical - in the sense of rejecting gestures without spiritual value. He thus transforms stylistic analysis into a form of ethical and aesthetic judgment, faithful to his ideal of culture as an expression of the gravity and dignity of the spirit.

Overall, Tudor Vianu's rejection of the ludic proves to be more than an aesthetic choice: it is the expression of a unified vision of culture and art, based on the idea of rigor, moderation, and spiritual responsibility. Whether he defines style as "the form in which a spiritual attitude is expressed" or analyzes a literary scene such as that in *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război*, T. Vianu remains faithful to the same principle: art cannot be a game without consequences, and its study cannot be an arbitrary exercise. He rejects playfulness where it dissolves the coherence of expression or degrades good taste, because behind every form of artistic expression he seeks the order of the spirit, the authenticity of experience, and the moral meaning of beauty. As a natural consequence, the rejection of playfulness becomes, on a theoretical and critical level, a form of fidelity to the dignity of culture: for Tudor Vianu, the seriousness of expression does not mean austerity, but respect for the act of knowledge through art. This conception opens the way to the ethical dimension of artistic expression, where aesthetics and morality come together under the sign of the same exigency - that of inner unity and spiritual truth.

In Tudor Vianu's thinking, the aesthetic dimension cannot be separated from the ethical one. The artistic act, like stylistic research, implies a spiritual responsibility: form becomes the expression of a consciousness, and beauty - the manifestation of the moral order of the spirit. Authentic beauty means order, and order implies a value choice, an inner discipline of creation. This conception gives style an implicit ethical function: it is not just a mode of expression, but a way in which man affirms his dignity and balance. In opposition to the playful and relativistic tendencies of modernity, T. Vianu proposes a vision of art as a form of knowledge and morality, in which the seriousness of expression does not exclude sensitivity, but ennoble it through clarity

and meaning. Therefore, the writer's rejection of the ludic becomes the expression of a humanistic belief: that art and culture must remain spaces of lucidity, truth, and respect for value. In this perspective, aesthetics does not oppose ethics, but continues it - as a higher form of the spirit's responsibility to the world.

Nicolae Manolescu speaks of a "sadness of erudition" in Vianu, given that he displays an obvious inclination toward generality and makes an "erudite detour" around texts (2015: 805). Manolescu's formulation subtly captures the melancholic balance between intellectual rigor and the need for human understanding that defines his entire critical and theoretical work. (Manolescu 2015:805). This "sadness" expresses an acute awareness of the limits of reason in the face of the mystery of art and life. Vianu is clearly a spirit of synthesis and generality: in everything he writes, he seeks the unifying principle, the connection between the facts of culture, the common pattern of values. Instead of sticking to a specific analysis of the literary text, T. Vianu tends to discover its universal meaning, framing it within a system of aesthetic or moral thought. Hence this movement of thought that surrounds the literary work with a vast network of concepts, analogies, and references, without leaving it entirely, but also without dwelling on concrete details. For the author of *Arta prozatorilor români*, the literary text is not only an object of analysis, but a pretext for reflection on value, on the destiny of the spirit, and on culture as a whole. "Sadness", a dimension of depth, thus comes from the tension between the desire to understand everything rationally and the awareness of the impossibility of exhausting the meaning of a work of art.

Tudor Vianu's stylistic concept is based on a humanistic vision of art, in which artistic expression becomes the visible form of an inner and moral order. For the author of *Arta prozatorilor români*, creation and aesthetic research cannot be reduced to the play of forms or playful spontaneity, because they require rigor, clarity, and spiritual responsibility. From this perspective, art is a form of human knowledge through language, and style is the manifestation of the balance between creative freedom and the discipline of value. In this way, his aesthetics propose a culture of expressive gravity, in which beauty is identified with truth and the dignity of the spirit. The relevance of the Romanian stylist's conception lies in the model of balance it offers between analysis and judgment, between freedom of interpretation and respect for meaning. In an intellectual context often dominated by relativism or fragmentarism, Tudor Vianu's thinking remains a benchmark of unity between ethics and aesthetics, reaffirming the role of art and culture as forms of moral and spiritual knowledge.

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# HOMO LUDENS IN THE RUINS: THE PLAYFUL REIMAGINATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN SOUTH AFRICAN NOVELS

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**Abstract:** *This paper delves into how post-apartheid South African fiction functions as a ludic narrative that challenges the idea of a reconstructed national identity. These stories, existing in the space between the wreckage of apartheid and the still-hopeful promises of freedom, do not only bring back the trauma but transform it through sarcasm, metafiction, and the mixing of genres. With this occasion, the concept of Homo Ludens turns out to be a cultural agent that deals with contradictions and new possibilities. In this way, literature becomes a theatrical space where identity is not something that comes from the past or is forced upon you, but it is an improvised one – a mixture of joy, chaos, and morality. This playful overhaul of identity themes resonates not only with age-old symbols but also with contemporary issues.*

**Key words:** Homo Ludens, ludic narrative, metafiction, national identity, post-apartheid South African fiction, trauma and transformation.

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## 1. Introduction

The concept of Homo Ludens, one of the first instances where it was associated with philosophical significance by Johan Huizinga in his book with the same name, continues to shed light on the primary role of play in human culture, not just as fun or an escape but as a source of language, ritual, and symbolic expression. When the human being is seen as one who plays then he is no longer that person who keeps the distinctions between the sacred and the profane, the structured and the spontaneous, the imposed and the improvised intact.

Play, when related to literature, especially that produced by historical rupture, does not show itself as mere frivolity but as a method, at once aesthetic and existential. South African writing after the fall of apartheid exhibits a clear inclination towards narrative play that is not only restricted to formal experimentation or irony

but also extends to the very aspects of voice, memory and time. This research is committed to that playful energy and it is suggesting that such kind of fiction not only signifies but also enacts the dis-integrated becoming of national identity.

Before one can plot the Ludens figure within the map of South African letters, it would be necessary first of all to reflect again on the stakes of play in culture in general. Johan Huizinga's report, while ground-breaking, frequently shifts towards the ritualism of classical antiquity and competitive games, thus underplaying the aspects of play during periods of historical oppression and collective trauma. However, even in such a restricted capacity, his vision of play as a deed beyond the realm of material demand—an act managed by voluntarily embraced regulations and taking place in a confined area and time—gives a highly original way for readers to grasp how narrative fiction might operate in postcolonial conditions. Moreover, we find that Jacques Ehrmann, in his paper for *Homo Ludens Revisited*, locates play at the center as a power that can turn inside out the ideological fortress, „a point that echoes strongly with literatures that stand silent against authoritarian pasts” (Ehrmann 1968: 41).

Storytelling, in these cases, should not be seen as merely a passive portrayal but rather as an active, at times playful, revision, especially when official histories become suspect or lie in ruins.

Post-apartheid South African literature is not known for anything but its focus on memory, loss, and the moral complexity of freedom. However, the post-94 novelists mostly do not choose the politics of witness but rather take a turn towards aesthetic indeterminacy. The narrative devices consisting of the unreliable narrator, metafictional commentary, typographical play, and ironic distancing are not just superficial decorations, but also decisive ones, which simultaneously enact an epistemological uncertainty below the surface.

The same is apparent in *Ways of Dying* by Zakes Mda where the carnivalesque nature of the work visceral mixes death, laughter, and survival, or in *The Restless Supermarket* by Ivan Vladislavić where language loses its vigour and the absurdity of the bureaucracy takes control of the order. It should be noted that these works focus on historical legacies but do not settle into either moralistic or linear resolutions. The authors, instead, present identity as a perpetual game that is intricate, recursive, and most of the time, unresolved.

Our paper is about the ludic aspects of these narratives and how they affect not only the aesthetical features of these narratives but also their very concept of identity. It advances the idea that play, instead of being a mere mask or diversion, becomes a central means of dealing with the unfinished work of imagining community in a society characterized by rupture. The aim here is to show how post-apartheid fiction turns identity from being the recoverable core into an on-the-spot performance within the linguistic, cultural, and historical boundaries. By doing so, this study

broadens its scope to include the general theoretical frame of the Homo Ludens and Identity Construction theme, which questions whether play can be considered only as a feature found in literature or as a factor that determines the reshaping of self and nation.

## **2. Literature review**

The link between play and identity, which Huizinga had mapped out in his work *Homo Ludens*, keeps on being a major source of interdisciplinary reflections, especially in areas where the cultural production meets the historical rupture. In his work, Huizinga focused on the sacred origins of play, but current concepts-makers have added new dimensions to the story, regarding the political and the aesthetic spheres. In his book *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, Brian Edwards maintains that the ludic authorship helps the writers to undermine the dominant position and to regain the creative freedom, which is particularly true in the case of censorship or any ideological trend.

However, in the context of the South African literary tradition, the game-theoretic structures are performing even more complicated functions: they do not only disrupt the narrative but also reshape memory.

The likes of Rita Barnard, in *Apartheid and Beyond*, have singled out the engagement of irony and literary performativity in the post-apartheid corpus, although the particular contribution of playful elements as forces for reconstructive memory still remains largely unrecognised. The ludic, instead of a complete withdrawal into the world of fantasy, is a kind of a serious artistic response to socio-political upheaval.

## **3. Research Methodology**

Our paper attempts a detailed examination of literary texts with regard to post-apartheid South African novels and analyses how the use of ludic devices such as structural play, irony, metafiction, and genre experimentation allows the authors to depict new configurations of national identity.

The main texts used here are *Ways of Dying* by Zakes Mda, *The Restless Supermarket* by Ivan Vladislavić, and *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes, each of which was selected for its innovative language and narrative form. The methodology does not rely very much on the application of external theory, which is often done in a simplistic way, but rather it emphasizes an internal reading of the text while being open to ideas from the relevant critical frameworks.

Thus, for example, we see that in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, Graham Huggan points to how „the attraction of difference from a cultural perspective could become a new kind of game, i.e. that of becoming easily marketable” (Huggan 2001: 69), a suggestion, which, in the light of South Africa’s literary economy, allows further

exploration. The question is not merely what these novels reveal about identity but rather how they depict it - how form, voice, and rhythm are among the factors that trigger ludic tension between memory, imagination, and belonging.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework**

When we speak of identity through the lens of *Homo Ludens* we completely change the conventional perception of the self as a constant essence and instead, we see it as a living, theatrical personality that through playing out the ritual-type acts gradually comes to be distinguished from the others. Even though Johan Huizinga's landmark work *Homo Ludens* still plays a major role in explaining the anthropological and cultural ubiquity of play, its paradigm becomes more relevant when one looks at the cases of severe historical changes and narrative rebuilding.

Paying attention to these arguments, Huizinga separates play from simple entertainment by his insistence on voluntariness, adherence to rules and the generation of meaning through play, thus all cultural phenomena - language, law, religion - are basically ludic in their nature.

However, the key point making his theory so much valuable for arts is the acknowledgment that the production of literature is not done on a need-based principle but on rhythm, formal constraints and the pleasure of the artist's imagination instead. Historically, fiction becomes a part of a new one playing as it patterns, „creates the symbolic worlds, and deals with the spatial and temporal aspects on the basis of the set limitations" (Huizinga 1977: 45).

Yet, what makes it so necessary to explore is the question of play's significance in postcolonial-cultural production, where on the one hand, the empire's ruins and, on the other, the scars of violent repression affect the shape and the way it is understood. In such cases, identity cannot be tracked down to a stable story, but rather it is formed through the temporary, often playful reconstructions.

The point is that in the world of post-apartheid South Africa, fiction first of all becomes the country's representation, then, it goes further to invent narrative experiments that actually undermine the official memory. Moreover, we find that in *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha points out:

the performative instability of identity as one of the crucial aspects of the article, that is, the cultural meaning which comes at the times of transition between repetition and reinvention (Bhabha, 1994: 86).

The narrative becomes the voice that plays the multiple or ironic roles, temporality is not linear anymore and if one goes further and looks at genre conventions, they may find themselves being broken not only for a stylistic effect but also for epistemological purposes.

While at the same time, the ruins left over from apartheid are not only historical; they still exist in a symbolic form, and fiction is very often present in these ruins playing in the shadows, hunting for the patterns that do not accept closure.

When seen through this frame of reference, the ludic is not a means to avoid the pain of life but a way to show the resistance, criticism, and ethical imagination. Works like *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes never remove play from the equation but rather paradoxes are increased: the use of magical realism and the blending of genres provides a venue where the characters' identities are ambiguous, fluctuating, and are metaphorically connected with breakdown of the urban in a post-transitional society.

In the same manner, Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* changes the strictness of grammar and linguistic pedantry into a ludic mechanism that at the same time jest and lament the disappearance of the language of apartheid's bureaucratic order. These acts are not without reason; they indicate that even the very nature of form becomes a battlefield for ideologies and play, instead of being just a means of concealing, is the one through which the contradictions of the national becoming are unveiled.

Should it be that in the past the sacred was the one to give play its ontological legitimacy, then in a secular and somewhat confused cultural landscape, fiction's playful devices are the only way through which the meaning is reasserted. Identity in these works of art is not something that is passed down to the characters but it is a contingent, oftentimes ironic construct. The stressing of play as both a method and a mode of subjectivity is in full accord with the larger issue as to how *Homo Ludens* could be a source of cultural self-understanding in the time of rupture and transition.

## **5. Play as Narrative Strategy**

Post-apartheid South African narratives are recognized for their frequent use of playful mechanisms that are not only visual enhancements but are also seen as ways of dealing with those aspects of the identities that have been shattered and presenting the historical narratives in a new light. The aspects of the genre, the manner of working with the structure, and the deliberate rejection of the linearity together do not just belong to the formal side of the play; they are also the signs of the, narrative revolt that discard the frameworks of meaning imposed by others. Examples of such are *Kafka's Curse* by Achmat Dangor and *Playing in the Light* by Zoe Wicomb that demonstrate blending of genres as an active voice, thus, the authors of these works can easily integrate the different spheres of myth, memory, and history. These books do not develop their themes through causal logic but use associative layering that makes readers play an active role in co-constructing the meaning - one that mirrors the ludic unpredictability of identity in a postcolonial context.

Besides that, the use of irony and satire acts to involve the reader more by introducing that contradictory feature that, simultaneously, glorifies and laments, the politics of race and representation. Language, in these novels, is not an empty space but a battlefield where conflicts, recoveries, and playful misdirection take place.

Also, we observe that with *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, Njabulo Ndebele in his essays calls for

the subversive potential of the everyday and employs irony to break down the dominant heroic mode of the struggle narrative (Ndebele 1991: 46).

As an illustration, in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* by Phaswane Mpe, satire is that instrument which is capable of both depicting the post-liberation disillusionment and retaining the ludic sensibility that never actually becomes totally cynical. The absence of a definite end or a moral lesson is a typical feature of a playful narrative ethics reorientation - one where the reader has to figure out how to interpret conventional rhetoric by reading between the lines.

Metafiction is the domain for such ludic strategies, where an author not only tells a story but at the same time in a different way acts as if they were playing another game. An example is *The Restless Supermarket* by Ivan Vladislavić, which is among those novels that go beyond bringing the methods of the story to the fore and actually demonstrate that the plot and the characters have been made up by the author. The narrator, who is often self-conscious and not completely truthful, toying with the reader's assumptions, thus making the process reading to be converted into a kind of knowledge puzzle. Metatextual works

make people aware of the conflict between representation and reality because they implement one more feature - the audience is cognizant of their artifice (Hutcheon 1988: 6).

Consequently, the reader is now neither a passive recipient of meaning nor just a spectator but a player in the field of interpretation who has to reconstruct the fragments, crack the irony, and haggle over the changing opinions.

The methods of narration are not solely the author's aesthetics; they demonstrate that the author is concerned about the instability of the character in a world where the intimate and the social have been separated and united again several times. The ludic impulse that propels the author to such fiction is both cathartic and creative - it permits the writer to tear down the prevalent narratives at the same time as he tentatively opens up new ones for the recreation of the self.

## **6. Literary analysis from South African Literature**

Until now, the South African literature post the regime of racial segregation had its idiosyncratic and experimental designs for its characters very often to be not only

the genre as a style but also the way of dealing with their broken and sometimes, by using the fragmented and experimental transformation of reality as well.

The innovative book by Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* has conceived a city where death is metamorphosed into one of the carnival acts with Toloki, a man who considers himself "professional mourner," as a character that represents a mixture of tears and laughter. The carnivalesque elements that invigorate the plot are not an escape from the world but an enactment of survival, where the interplay of the grotesque and the joyful assists in executioning.

Nevertheless, from the first angle, they look like absurdity, but upon a closer analysis, they could mean the artist's ludic morality of life, as a symbolic resistance that interrupts the usual victimization narrative and becomes the theatrical mourning that re-presents the victims. As both Nuttall and Coetzee have remarked, Mda's texts frequently "shift the movement of tragic events into grotesque play" (Nuttall & Coetzee 1998: 145), thus creating a theatrical stage of post-traumatic identity re-negotiation.

The change of ludic is lucidly shown in Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*, where the characteristic of the play is not by body or rite, but by language. The protagonist of the narrative, Aubrey Tearle, who is irrationally committed to linguistic purity and the correcting of mistakes, both in the restaurants, and public signs is the way in which he takes back the rapidly changing public sphere. Still, the typographical pranks and the novel's aesthetic, that goes by the rule of the anachronistic fastidiousness are no merely nostalgic; they are essentially the dramatization of one of the crises of semiotic authority in which the playful use of letters raises the question of the accuracy of the words' inherited meanings and forces one to pay attention to the frailty of national unity. Within the play of metafictional devices, the reader is transformed into an actor who determines the route through the complicated text, thus suggesting that identity in the post-apartheid city is not based on the stable properties but, rather, features the playful nature of the disputed symbols.

*Zoo City* of Lauren Beukes is another narrative that demonstrates the ludic disassembly of identity through the combination of the three genres - noir, dystopia, and magical realism. This story speaks about Johannesburg which is the place of the "animalled" people that were punished for their past crimes by combining the elements of the three genres. Here, the familiar animal is a symbol of two opposite aspects that are a burden and a totem, one that connects the mythological and the real in this lively system of signs. Beukes' nonconventional dystopian narrative is very far from a standard one; her mixing of genres and breaking down the linear time through the digital interface, song lyrics, and strange characters, which have the same logic as video games and virtual environments, are some of the ways she accomplishes it.

So, Zinzi December, the main character, turns into a ludic persona herself - without stopping the real time, she is traversing a city that has changed and is like a labyrinth, solving the enigmas, and making new personalities. The novel's ludic aspects do not just attract the reader to the multiple interpretive layers but also to the ludic theme as it displays identity, in a broken and hierarchized society, that is not something stable or tightly fixed, but rather always being playfully negotiated.

## **7. Reimagining the Nation through Play**

After the systemic fragmentation, literature comes to the fore as one of the most essential places in which the nation, a complicated symbol in itself, can be visualized anew thanks to the theatrical interaction between ritual and play. The culture of post-apartheid fiction has its setting in what can be referred to as the ruins of culture. These are areas affected by very sad things from the past that the nation has had and where different views on what happened are shared. It, however, simultaneously signals these wrecks as lands with new possibilities for social re-enactment. Narrative here is the new mode of ritualized play through which communities can revisit, reshape, and resignify their common identity.

We also find that Victor Turner, in his research on ritual processes, points out the concept of liminality of these places, "where what is usual for the time being disappears to give way to the transformation and creativity" (Turner 1969: 95).

The fictional storytelling event is thus a ritual laminate, a playful but very deep and meaningful gesture of the nation as a continuous process of becoming rather than a fixed entity. Via literature, repetition, variety, and symbolic gestures work as a medium of constant negotiation of belonging which, at the same time, is both a holy and a worldly one.

Such a playful recasting of national identity leaves behind deterministic narratives that confine individuals and communities within pre-scripted historical or ethnical lines. It, instead, points to identity as momentary, complex, and eternally evolving. Post-apartheid novels deal with this complexity by incorporating hybridity, ambiguity, and indeterminacy as necessary features of the future self.

This approach is very much in line with Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space where identity comes from cultural negotiation and the playful displacement of characters (Bhabha 1994: 56).

The ludic aspect of fiction serves as a means to visualizing the future not as a continuation of the past trauma or political tirades but as open to improvisation and new alliances. The status of being endless here is what makes the readers want to join the active meaning-making process. Therefore, they become more convinced of the fact that identity is not something you receive but something you perform and do so dynamically. Thus, literature turns into the laboratory of new society where the new possibilities of coexistence are not merely imagined but also enacted.

Nevertheless, the acceptance of the ludic element in the stories dealing with the horrible past has not only the advantages but also limitations. It is a thin line that separates the use of the characters as means for the constructive play and the trivialization of the matters. The process of beautifying the character of the trauma can sometimes lead to the risk of losing the call for the ethical urgency of the issue. The problem is to find the way by which the playful narrative strategies may avoid detachment or they may be so ironic that they hide, instead of showing, the importance of the historical suffering.

This struggle is visible in controversies about postmodern attitudes towards identity and memory. The opponents there talk of relativism and of a danger that political accountability might get lost.

Also, Susan Suleiman, in her work on memory and narrative, also gives a warning that "play may not become a tool of evasion which diminishes the demand for justice though play can open spaces for dialogue and reinterpretation" (Suleiman 2006: 104).

Post-apartheid literature, therefore, is like a cat walking on its bridles: Its ludic means are necessary for renewal and resistance, but they still require the ethical care to make sure that the history and the identity of the past are not converted just to entertainment.

In the end, the use of play for a dramatic recreation of a nation foregrounds the need for keeping a balance between creativity and responsibility, improvisation and remembrance. Ludic engagement with identity ruptures the conception of it as a single entity and suggests a more pluralistic and dialogic way to understand community while still demanding that the playfulness remain connected to the ongoing ethical work of bearing witness to the painful past.

## **8. Conclusion**

The research and the analysis presented in this paper clearly show that the use of play in post-apartheid South African literature is a key tool that allows authors to represent identities in areas dealing with the consequences of the past and current social changes.

The study of the ludic from carnival-like engaging in Mda's *Ways of Dying*, to humorous linguistic invention in Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket*, and to the mixing of dystopia and realism in Beukes' *Zoo City* - all these reveal that narrative play acts not only as a mode of form but also as a critical way of dealing with the intricacies of both national and personal selfhood. This paper identifies that the characters of the child, trickster, and fool hold the conflict of innocence and subversion, as they suggest symbolic routes allowing post-apartheid identities to be reconstructed not only with laughter but also with seriousness.

The precise use of irony, metafiction, and ritualized storytelling verifies that play represents a means by which the different features of the world, i.e., the sacred and the secular, could be entangled, thus facilitating the rise of identity forms, which are provisional but resilient.

Through the use of play, this study also places a significant contribution to the general area of literature and identity; the authors highlight that this represents one of the central but frequently undervalued aspects of cultural construction. The current research accentuates the need to take into account ludic modes as important locations for the simultaneous emergence of power contestation and creativity.

In addition, we find that Johan Huizinga's seminal notion of *Homo Ludens* is still fundamental for the comprehension of play presence not only in children's activities but also in adult cultural productions, hence revealing the performative nature of identity itself. Compared to this, the article turns fiction of the post-apartheid era into a new reference point encompassing interpretive moves of narrative strategies where the distinctions between the sacred and the profane, the serious and the playful, the historical and the imagined are not clear.

The outcomes of the present work may point among others to the roads leading to further research, which would imply crossing points of play, technology, and digital cultures in contemporary African literature.

This study shows that play is not marginal or trivial but an integral human and identity shaping practice. The ludic element in post-apartheid literature calls for a re-evaluation of narrative and cultural theory, enabling scholars to study play as a shifting and transformative site of belonging.

As literature of a different kind succeeds in weaving the playful along with the ritualized and sacred, it collides with the revolutionary and modern energies of a protest and opens boundless imaginative spaces, allowing identity to unfold as a performance that is an ever-evolving and restless composition, and inviting us to look historically at the wounds we are not so much appealing to heal as to confront.

Play through literature, as it combines the ritual's holy moments with the revolutionary, protest, and modern energy, opens vast spaces for imagination, where history's wounds may be dealt with and not healed, and where identity, rather than being a closed matter, becomes an ever-changing, inventive performance.

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# THE ILLOGICAL AND THE PLAYFUL: THE ROLE OF WORDPLAY IN BECKETT'S POSTMODERN THEATRE

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## L'ILLOGIQUE ET LE LUDIQUE : LE RÔLE DES JEUX DE MOTS DANS LE THÉÂTRE POSTMODERNE DE BECKETT



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**Abstract :** *This study explores the intricate interplay of illogical structures and wordplay in the postmodern theater of Samuel Beckett, focusing on how these elements redefine the stage as a space for philosophical and aesthetic experimentation. Beckett's works, including *En attendant Godot*, *Fin de partie*, and *Premier amour*, systematically disrupt classical dramatic conventions through illogical sequences, paradoxical dialogues, and cyclical actions. Such devices do not merely serve stylistic purposes; they function as mirrors of the human condition, exposing the fragility of communication, the instability of meaning, and the existential uncertainty inherent in life. The analysis emphasizes the role of nonsensical language as both a comedic and philosophical instrument, revealing the limitations of rational thought while provoking reflection on the vulnerability and solitude of human existence. Wordplay, meanwhile, destabilizes language, highlighting its arbitrariness and creating a musical, rhythmic dimension that oscillates between comedy and tragedy. These techniques transform language into a medium capable of conveying profound emotional and intellectual experiences, making the spectator an active participant in a dynamic encounter with absence, contingency, and human perseverance. By combining illogic, nonsensical discourse, and playful manipulation of language, Beckett constructs a postmodern poetics in which meaning is constantly deferred and the audience is invited to engage with the void as a site of reflection. His theater does not merely recount events but embodies the tension between presence and absence, sense and nonsense, revealing the precarious yet profoundly vital nature of human life. In this context, Beckett's work is emblematic of postmodern theatrical innovation, challenging traditional narrative structures while simultaneously offering a rigorous meditation on language, temporality, and existential experience.*

**Keywords:** Illogic; Nonsense; Wordplay; Postmodern Theater; Samuel Beckett; Language; Absurd; Existential Reflection; Musicality; Human Condition.

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### Introduction développée

Le théâtre beckettien se caractérise par une exploration profonde de l'illogique et des jeux de mots, délibérément détachés de toute dramaturgie centrée sur le

progrès narratif ou sur une psychologie linéaire des personnages. Beckett ne cherche pas à raconter des histoires où la logique ou la causalité guideraient les actions ; au contraire, il met en évidence l'absurde, l'aporie et la redondance stylistique, transformant le langage en un espace de liberté où se confrontent les contradictions et les limites de la communication.

Le langage, dans ses œuvres, cesse d'être un simple outil de transmission de sens pour devenir un terrain de jeu et de réflexion, où la structure même de la scène classique est remise en question et où le spectateur est invité à s'interroger sur la nature de la parole et de l'existence. L'illogique beckettien ne se réduit pas à un simple non-sens : il surgit dans le cadre de contradictions internes, où les personnages contestent ou répètent leurs propres répliques, transformant la discussion en un automatisme qui révèle le vide lexical. Ce procédé met en lumière la crise du langage et son incapacité à exprimer pleinement le monde contingent et la complexité de l'expérience humaine. Ainsi, la parole, plutôt que de clarifier, souligne la fragilité de toute communication et la solitude des individus confrontés à un monde dépourvu de repères certains.

Les jeux de mots occupent une place centrale dans cette démarche. Ils symbolisent le vide des significations et la nature instable du langage contemporain. À travers les échanges des personnages, Beckett expose les contradictions et les déformations de la réalité, révélant que la parole est à la fois comique, ludique et profondément philosophique. Les jeux de mots, par leur ambiguïté et leur sonorité, détournent la fonction traditionnelle du lexème et invitent le spectateur à réfléchir sur l'arbitraire du signe linguistique.

Le langage devient alors un instrument capable de faire émerger le non-sens comme une réalité constitutive de l'existence, où chaque mot, chaque répétition, chaque paronomase révèle la faillibilité de notre compréhension du monde. La répétition incessante, qui traverse les œuvres de Beckett, traduit l'incapacité du sens à se stabiliser. Les gestes et les paroles des personnages s'enchaînent dans une boucle où l'action ne progresse pas selon une logique classique, mais où l'absurde ontologique se dévoile dans toute sa force. Cette structure dramatique particulière fait émerger une vision de l'existence où le temps, le langage et la communication sont marqués par l'échec, mais où cette limitation devient elle-même matière à réflexion et à intensité esthétique.

Ainsi, l'illogique et les jeux de mots ne sont pas de simples artifices : ils constituent le cœur d'une esthétique postmoderne où le langage se déstructure pour mieux révéler le vide existentiel, la solitude et les contradictions de l'homme. Beckett offre un miroir dans lequel se reflète la condition humaine contemporaine, marquée par l'incertitude, l'angoisse et la quête de sens dans un monde qui en est dépourvu.

Ses personnages, profondément humains, incarnent cette difficulté à communiquer, à exister pleinement et à trouver un sens durable à leur expérience. Le

théâtre beckettien, par la mise en avant de l'absurde et de la fragilité du langage, invite le spectateur à reconnaître la dimension tragique et comique de la vie, tout en proposant une réflexion sur le rôle du langage, de la narration et de l'imaginaire dans notre perception du réel. En définitive, Beckett ne se contente pas de déconstruire le théâtre classique : il propose un univers où l'illogique et le jeu de mots deviennent les instruments d'une méditation sur la condition humaine, transformant le vide, la répétition et le non-sens en moyens privilégiés pour sonder les inquiétudes, la solitude et l'angoisse qui traversent la vie contemporaine. Son théâtre est un espace de liberté, où le langage, libéré des contraintes de la logique et de la linéarité narrative, permet d'explorer la fragilité, l'humour et la profondeur existentielle qui habitent chaque être humain.

### **L'illogique comme structure dramatique dans le théâtre beckettien**

Dans le théâtre de Samuel Beckett, l'illogique ne se contente pas de briser la logique : il en devient le cœur, la structure essentielle qui donne forme à l'œuvre. Beckett ne cherche pas simplement à surprendre ou à dérouter le spectateur ; il façonne un univers où la raison et la linéarité narrative sont systématiquement mises à l'épreuve, révélant la fragilité de l'existence humaine et l'incapacité des individus à communiquer pleinement. Les personnages beckettien ne sont pas des figures abstraites : ce sont des êtres confrontés à l'attente, à l'angoisse et au vide de leur condition, dont chaque geste et chaque parole reflètent la lutte quotidienne pour donner un sens à leur vie dans un monde dépourvu de certitudes.

Dans *En attendant Godot*, Vladimir et Estragon oscillent entre espoir et désespoir, répétant des gestes qui semblent vains, échangeant des dialogues où la logique se dissout, et attendant un personnage dont l'arrivée pourrait, en théorie, donner un sens à leur existence, mais qui ne vient jamais. Dans *Fin de partie*, Hamm et Clov évoluent dans un espace clos, où le temps semble suspendu et où le langage devient une mécanique répétitive, presque ritualisée, qui révèle l'impossibilité de transmettre un sentiment ou une vérité complète. Dans *La Dernière Bande*, Krapp, confronté à ses enregistrements passés, expérimente l'érosion du temps et du langage, et dans *Premier amour*, les dialogues absurdes et les jeux de mots mettent en lumière l'isolement et l'incompréhension qui habitent chaque relation humaine.

L'illogique beckettien, loin d'être un simple artifice, incarne ainsi la condition humaine dans toute sa complexité : l'homme moderne est à la fois fragile et obstiné, seul dans sa quête de sens, cherchant désespérément à comprendre un monde qui lui échappe constamment. Chaque répétition, chaque contradiction, chaque silence devient un témoignage de cette fragilité, une manière pour Beckett de rendre sensible au spectateur l'angoisse, l'incertitude et la solitude qui traversent l'existence. Le

spectateur, confronté à ce langage déstructuré et à ces situations sans résolution, est invité à ressentir le désarroi des personnages, mais aussi à réfléchir sur sa propre expérience de la communication, du temps et du vide existentiel.

En ce sens, l'illogique beckettien n'est pas un simple style : c'est une manière de vivre et de faire vivre la condition humaine, où le sens n'est jamais donné, mais toujours recherché, questionné et remis en jeu à travers le langage et la scène.

## **L'absurde et la remise en question de la logique narrative**

Dans *En attendant Godot*, Vladimir et Estragon se trouvent dans une attente interminable et énigmatique, attendant un personnage nommé Godot sans jamais savoir réellement qui il est ni pourquoi il est attendu. Cette situation absurde dépasse le simple comique ou l'intrigue insolite : elle illustre de manière poignante la quête universelle de sens dans un monde dépourvu de signification intrinsèque. Les répétitions incessantes des dialogues, les hésitations et les non-sens des personnages traduisent l'impuissance du langage à établir une communication authentique, et créent une atmosphère où le temps semble suspendu et l'existence suspendue à un événement qui pourrait, en théorie, donner un sens à la vie, mais qui n'arrive jamais. Henri Lemaître note : «Les personnages utilisent les mots comme un passe-temps, tant l'environnement a perdu son sens».<sup>1</sup> Cette remarque souligne l'idée que le langage chez Beckett n'est plus un vecteur de vérité ou d'action mais un espace de jeu, de distraction et de tentative de survivre dans le vide. Les personnages semblent conscients de l'inutilité de leurs paroles, et pourtant ils persistent à parler : leur dialogue devient ainsi un témoignage de l'obsession humaine pour la communication, même lorsqu'elle est vouée à l'échec.

Cette stratégie dramatique constitue une rupture radicale avec le théâtre classique, qui repose sur la progression narrative et la cohérence psychologique des personnages. Martin Esslin, pionnier de l'étude du théâtre de l'absurde, affirme : «Le théâtre de l'absurde se distingue par une rupture totale avec des genres plus classiques tels que la tragédie, la comédie ou la tragi-comédie»<sup>2</sup>. Esslin met en évidence que Beckett ne cherche pas à raconter une histoire linéaire, mais à exposer l'expérience humaine dans sa dimension existentielle et chaotique. Chaque dialogue, chaque silence, chaque geste est pensé pour révéler la vacuité et l'incertitude de la condition humaine. Cette rupture avec les normes classiques renvoie aussi à la philosophie existentialiste et à l'angoisse de l'absurde telle que Camus la définit, où l'homme, confronté à l'absence de sens ultime, doit trouver sa propre manière de vivre et de créer du sens, même dans l'inconnaissable.

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[1] Lemaître Henri : *En Attendant Godot*, Paris, Haitier, 1984, p.72

[2] Esslin Martin : *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, Anchor Books, 2004, p.34

D'autres critiques soulignent la dimension métathéâtrale de cette absurdité. John Pilling remarque que Beckett « transforme la scène en un lieu où l'attente et le langage deviennent l'action elle-même »<sup>3</sup>. Ici, l'intrigue traditionnelle est remplacée par un mécanisme dramatique où l'ennui, le vide et la répétition deviennent porteurs de sens : le spectateur est invité à expérimenter la même attente et la même incertitude que les personnages.

Susan Stanford Friedman ajoute que « le non-sens et l'illogique ne sont pas des artifices comiques, mais des moyens de rendre perceptible la condition humaine dans sa vulnérabilité »<sup>4</sup>. Cette lecture humanise les personnages : ils ne sont pas des pantins absurdes, mais des êtres en proie à la solitude, à l'angoisse et à la recherche de sens, ce qui confère à leur dialogue répétitif une dimension profondément humaine.

Enfin, Maurice Charney souligne que la structure répétitive et illogique de *Godot* « oblige le spectateur à vivre l'expérience de l'attente et de l'absurde, non seulement comme un concept intellectuel, mais comme une expérience sensible et émotionnelle »<sup>5</sup>. Le théâtre beckettien devient ainsi un miroir où se reflète notre propre confrontation avec le vide, l'incertitude et la temporalité de notre existence.

En somme, l'absurde et l'illogique chez Beckett ne sont pas de simples stratégies narratives : ils constituent un outil philosophique et esthétique pour sonder la condition humaine. Le langage y est à la fois instrument et limite, révélant que la communication humaine est toujours fragile et que la quête de sens est indissociable de l'expérience de l'angoisse et de la solitude.

## **Les jeux de mots et le langage dégradé : la faillibilité du langage**

Dans le théâtre de Samuel Beckett, le langage n'est jamais neutre : il devient à la fois un instrument de communication et un terrain d'expérimentation de l'absurde. Les jeux de mots, les phrases à double sens et la dégradation progressive du lexique reflètent l'incapacité du langage à transmettre une vérité stable, tout en donnant au spectateur une expérience esthétique profondément singulière.

Dans *La Dernière Bande*, le personnage de Krapp écoute ses cassettes enregistrées des années auparavant. Les mots qu'il prononce semblent s'éroder avec le temps, se contredire et perdre leur substance. Ce phénomène met en évidence la faillibilité du langage et son caractère intrinsèquement subjectif. Philippe Birgy observe : « Beckett met en scène l'incompréhension d'un lecteur ou d'un spectateur

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[3] Pilling John: *Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 56

[4] Susan Stanford Friedman: *Postmodern Parables: Beckett and the Ethics of Representation*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 112.

[5] Maurice Charney: *Beckett: Plays and Critical Perspectives*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 88.

face à une langue qui ne va plus de soi»<sup>6</sup>. Cette remarque souligne que Beckett transforme le langage en objet dramatique : il n'est plus un simple vecteur de sens, mais un matériau malléable, fragile et potentiellement trompeur. Les jeux de mots, loin d'être de simples curiosités stylistiques, deviennent des instruments philosophiques qui montrent comment le langage peut s'effriter et perdre sa capacité à relier pleinement les êtres humains entre eux.

Dans *Premier amour*, le recours à des paronomases et à des constructions syntaxiques complexes accentue cette dimension : les dialogues deviennent labyrinthiques, absurdes, et souvent comiques, mais toujours porteurs d'une réflexion sur l'isolement et la solitude humaine. John Pilling note que

Beckett utilise le langage comme un outil de mise en abyme : les mots se réfléchissent les uns dans les autres, révélant simultanément leur puissance expressive et leur incapacité à représenter fidèlement la réalité<sup>7</sup>.

Cette manipulation du lexique s'inscrit dans une stratégie plus large : Beckett explore la tension entre le langage, la mémoire et le temps. Comme le souligne C. J. Ackerley, «la répétition, l'érosion et l'ambiguïté des mots permettent au théâtre de Beckett de montrer la fragilité de l'expérience humaine, où la mémoire et la parole sont toujours incomplètes»<sup>8</sup>. Ici, les jeux de mots et la dégradation linguistique ne sont pas des artifices : ils deviennent le miroir de l'incertitude et du désarroi des personnages, et, par extension, de l'expérience humaine contemporaine.

La critique française Anne-Sophie Ceretti insiste également sur le rôle philosophique du non-sens : «Les phrases paradoxales et les répétitions verbales de Beckett transforment le langage en une méditation sur le vide ontologique ; chaque mot est à la fois présence et absence, signifiant et insignifiant»<sup>9</sup>. Cette lecture humanise les personnages : leurs dialogues absurdes deviennent une manière de rendre sensible leur solitude, leur désir de communiquer et l'impossibilité de le faire pleinement.

Enfin, Maurice Charney complète cette perspective en notant que «le langage beckettien, fragmenté et auto-référentiel, met en lumière l'arbitraire du signe et l'impossibilité d'un discours pleinement transparent»<sup>10</sup>. Le spectateur, confronté à cette instabilité lexicale, est invité à ressentir l'expérience de la communication dans sa dimension la plus humaine : hésitante, incomplète, parfois comique, mais toujours profondément signifiante.

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[6] Philippe Birgy : *Beckett et la langue des maîtres*, in Littérature, Paris, 2012, p. 91.

[7] John Pilling : *Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 104

[8] C. J. Ackerley : *Beckett: A Study of the Major Works*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 78

[9] Anne-Sophie Ceretti : *Beckett et le langage du vide*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2010, p. 132.

[10] Maurice Charney : *Beckett: Plays and Critical Perspectives*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 96.

Ainsi, les jeux de mots et la dégradation du langage chez Beckett constituent une exploration radicale de la faillibilité de la parole. Ils révèlent l'incapacité de l'homme à maîtriser pleinement le monde par le langage, tout en offrant au théâtre une dimension ludique et philosophique, où l'absurde devient un vecteur de réflexion sur la condition humaine.

## **Le non-sens comme vecteur philosophique et esthétique**

Chez Beckett, le non-sens ne se limite jamais à un simple effet comique ou à un jeu de style : il devient un véritable vecteur philosophique et esthétique, un outil permettant de questionner la nature même de l'existence et de la communication. Dans *Fin de partie*, les personnages Hamm et Clov sont enfermés dans un espace clos, un univers réduit à ses éléments essentiels où la parole et le geste semblent isolés de toute logique conventionnelle. Les dialogues sont rythmés par des répétitions, des contradictions et des silences prolongés, traduisant l'expérience humaine de l'attente, de la souffrance et de l'incapacité à communiquer de manière pleinement significative.

Theodor Adorno commente cette dynamique singulière : « Dans *Fin de partie*, Beckett explore les limites de la compréhension rationnelle, mettant en évidence la fragilité de la pensée et du langage »<sup>11</sup>. Cette citation souligne que le non-sens chez Beckett n'est pas gratuit : il révèle les limites de la raison humaine et la précarité du langage, qui ne peut jamais transmettre une expérience totale ou définitive. Le non-sens devient ainsi un instrument de réflexion sur la condition humaine, où l'absurde n'est pas seulement une structure dramatique mais une expérience existentielle.

John Pilling insiste également sur le rôle du non-sens comme moteur esthétique : « Beckett transforme l'absurde en une poétique de l'incompréhensible, où le langage est à la fois source de confusion et de profondeur philosophique »<sup>12</sup>. Ici, le non-sens est conçu pour provoquer chez le spectateur une double réaction : à la fois une perplexité initiale face à l'illogique et une prise de conscience progressive de sa valeur réflexive. Chaque répétition, chaque paradoxe dans les dialogues de Hamm et Clov agit comme un révélateur : le langage, loin d'être transparent, expose ses propres limites et met en lumière la solitude ontologique des êtres humains.

Susan Stanford Friedman souligne que le non-sens a une fonction éthique et philosophique :

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[11] Theodor W. Adorno : *Beckett: Eine Ästhetik der Regression*, in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, Paris, 1966, p. 157.

[12] John Pilling : *Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 121.

Les absurdités répétées, les contradictions et les silences dans le théâtre de Beckett ne sont pas un refus de sens, mais un moyen de rendre perceptible la vulnérabilité et l'imperfection inhérentes à toute communication<sup>13</sup>.

Cette approche humanise profondément les personnages : Hamm et Clov ne sont pas de simples marionnettes absurdes, mais des figures humaines confrontées à l'angoisse du temps, de l'isolement et de l'incommunicabilité. Leur dialogue répétitif, ponctué de gestes mécaniques et de silences, devient une forme de méditation dramatique sur la fragilité de l'existence, où le non-sens n'est pas une fin mais un moyen de rendre tangible l'expérience de l'absurde.

Maurice Charney complète cette lecture :

Le non-sens chez Beckett ne se limite pas à la rupture stylistique ; il transforme la scène en un espace où le spectateur partage l'expérience de la frustration, de l'angoisse et de l'attente avec les personnages<sup>14</sup>.

Ainsi, dans *Fin de partie*, le non-sens devient un langage philosophique, capable de traduire la complexité de l'expérience humaine, de révéler le vide ontologique et de transformer l'absurde en une esthétique à part entière. Il constitue une critique implicite du théâtre classique, où la narration logique et le progrès dramatique dominaient, en proposant un théâtre où le sens n'est jamais donné mais constamment interrogé et redéfini.

Chez Beckett, le non-sens dépasse largement le simple effet comique ou le jeu de style : il devient un instrument philosophique et esthétique permettant de sonder la condition humaine et les limites de la communication. Dans *Fin de partie*, Hamm et Clov évoluent dans un espace clos, réduit à ses éléments essentiels, où le langage et le geste se détachent de toute logique conventionnelle. Les dialogues, rythmés par des répétitions, des contradictions et des silences, traduisent l'expérience humaine de l'attente, de la souffrance et de l'impossibilité de communiquer de manière pleinement signifiante.

Lionel Abel souligne que le non-sens chez Beckett « crée une tension entre ce qui est dit et ce qui est ressenti, transformant la scène en un espace où le spectateur participe à l'angoisse et à l'incertitude des personnages »<sup>15</sup>. Cette lecture insiste sur l'effet immersif de l'absurde : le spectateur n'est pas seulement témoin, mais acteur involontaire de l'expérience de la communication défaillante.

Charles Marowitz propose une approche complémentaire : Beckett utilise le non-sens pour rendre perceptible le vide ontologique et le poids du temps sur les

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[13] Susan Stanford Friedman : *Postmodern Parables: Beckett and the Ethics of Representation*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 118.

[14] Maurice Charney : *Beckett: Plays and Critical Perspectives*, New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 101.

[15] Lionel Abel : *The Drama of the Absurd*, New York, Doubleday, 1963, p. 88.

êtres humains. Le langage fragmenté et répétitif est une manière de rendre dramatique l'expérience de l'existence<sup>16</sup>.

Marowitz met en évidence que l'illogique chez Beckett est un outil dramatique et philosophique : il permet de rendre sensible la temporalité, la solitude et l'angoisse existentielle.

Anthony Cronin souligne l'éthique du non-sens : «Les dialogues absurdes et les répétitions chez Beckett ne sont pas un refus de sens, mais une invitation à contempler l'imperfection intrinsèque de la communication humaine»<sup>17</sup>. Cette perspective renforce l'idée que le non-sens humanise les personnages : Hamm et Clov ne sont pas de simples automates, mais des figures vulnérables confrontées à la fragilité de l'existence et de la parole.

De plus, Ruby Cohn, dans une approche complémentaire à celle de Cronin, observe que «l'absurde beckettien transforme la scène en un espace musical et rythmique, où le silence, la répétition et les contradictions verbales deviennent des instruments de réflexion sur la condition humaine»<sup>18</sup>. Ici, le non-sens agit non seulement sur le plan intellectuel mais aussi sur le plan sensoriel, créant une expérience à la fois esthétique et philosophique pour le spectateur.

Enfin, Lois Oppenheim ajoute :

La fragmentation du langage et le recours systématique au non-sens sont une manière pour Beckett de rendre tangible l'angoisse existentielle, en exposant le spectateur à la vulnérabilité du sens et à l'échec de la communication<sup>19</sup>.

Cette analyse souligne que le non-sens n'est pas un simple décor verbal, mais un moyen de donner corps à l'expérience humaine, où l'absurde, le vide et le langage dégradé deviennent un miroir de nos propres inquiétudes et de notre solitude.

Ainsi, *Fin de partie* illustre la fonction philosophique et esthétique du non-sens : il permet de traduire la complexité de l'expérience humaine, de révéler le vide ontologique et de transformer l'absurde en une véritable poésie dramatique. Beckett propose un théâtre où le sens n'est jamais donné de manière définitive, mais constamment interrogé et redéfini, confrontant le spectateur à la fragilité de la communication et à l'expérience de l'existence.

## **Les jeux de mots dans le théâtre postmoderne beckettien**

Chez Samuel Beckett, le jeu de mots n'est pas un simple exercice de virtuosité ou une distraction humoristique : il devient une véritable stratégie dramaturgique et

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[16] Charles Marowitz : *The Theater of Beckett*, New York, Grove Press, 1971, p. 102.

[17] Anthony Cronin : *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*, New York, Harper & Row, 1996, p. 145.

[18] Ruby Cohn : *Just Play: Beckett's Theater*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 67.

[19] Lois Oppenheim : *Beckett and the Art of the Absurd*, London, Methuen, 1983, p. 59.

philosophique. Hérités à la fois de la tradition shakespearienne — où le calembour est souvent une arme dramatique — et du nonsense britannique incarné par Lewis Carroll ou Edward Lear, les jeux de mots beckettien bouleversent l'attente du spectateur. Ils dévoilent que le langage n'est pas un outil transparent de communication, mais un matériau instable, fragmenté, toujours menacé par le silence ou l'absurde. Beckett, en cela, se situe pleinement dans une perspective postmoderne : il déconstruit le langage de l'intérieur, tout en révélant sa puissance créatrice.

## **Le jeu de mots comme fissure dans la logique du langage**

Les jeux de mots chez Beckett introduisent une faille subtile dans la texture du discours, une sorte de glissement où le langage perd son évidence. Le mot devient étranger à lui-même, comme s'il révélait soudain son arbitraire. Dans *En attendant Godot*, Vladimir et Estragon répètent des formules anodines, mais celles-ci, détournées par le contexte, se chargent d'une valeur paradoxale : «On s'en va ?» — «Oui, allons-nous-en» — et pourtant, ils demeurent immobiles. Ici, la parole possède une apparence performative mais échoue à générer l'action qu'elle annonce. Le langage devient promesse non tenue, pure oscillation entre l'intention et le vide.

Hugh Kenner a justement souligné cette ambiguïté fondamentale : «Le mot chez Beckett est toujours sur le point de se trahir ; il promet un sens et le retire aussitôt, créant une oscillation permanente entre signification et vide»<sup>20</sup>. Cette remarque met en lumière le caractère insaisissable du langage beckettien : loin d'offrir une communication claire, il se retourne contre lui-même, dévoilant sa propre fragilité.

On pourrait dire que le jeu de mots devient, dans ce contexte, une figure de l'échec. Les répliques prennent la forme d'une mécanique qui se grippe sans cesse : elles produisent un effet comique immédiat, mais ce comique se renverse rapidement en une impression d'impuissance et d'absurde. Ruby Cohn, grande spécialiste de Beckett, insiste sur cette tension : «Les calembours et équivoques de Beckett ne sont pas de simples ornements humoristiques ; ils démontrent que les mots ne correspondent jamais totalement à ce qu'ils prétendent désigner»<sup>21</sup>.

Là encore, le jeu de mots n'est pas décoratif mais structurel : il révèle une vérité plus large, celle de l'impossibilité d'atteindre une correspondance stable entre langage et réalité. Ainsi, chaque fissure ouverte par le calembour ou le décalage sémantique agit comme une métaphore de la condition humaine : les personnages parlent pour combler le silence, mais ce langage, au lieu d'unir, produit davantage de

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[20] Hugh Kenner : *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1961, p. 142.

[21] Ruby Cohn : *Back to Beckett*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 88

solitude. Comme l'écrit Anthony Uhlmann : «Les glissements de sens, les mots à double entente, exposent le caractère instable de toute communication et replacent l'expérience du spectateur face à l'énigme de l'existence»<sup>22</sup>.

En somme, le jeu de mots chez Beckett creuse un écart entre le signe et le sens, entre la parole et l'action. Il transforme le langage en un miroir brisé, où l'on distingue à la fois l'éclat de la drôlerie et la profondeur d'une inquiétude existentielle.

### **Une musicalité du mot : du comique au tragique**

Si les jeux de mots font rire dans le théâtre beckettien, ce rire n'est jamais innocent ni gratuit. Il est fragile, suspendu, presque angoissé, comme une ultime tentative de conjurer le silence. Ce rire est moins une délivrance qu'une respiration dans un univers saturé d'attente et de vacuité. Dans *La Dernière Bande*, cette ambivalence apparaît avec une intensité singulière : Krapp, vieillard solitaire, réécoute ses propres enregistrements et s'attarde sur certains mots, qu'il répète, mâchonne, détourne jusqu'à les vider de leur sens. La sonorité prend le pas sur le signifié ; le langage devient musique, rythmique fragile entre la voix présente et l'écho du passé. Raymond Federman note avec justesse : «Les répétitions verbales chez Beckett n'ont rien d'une simple insistance ; elles créent un effet de cadence, un mouvement proche de la musique, où l'oreille prime sur l'intellect»<sup>23</sup>.

Ce que Federman met en évidence, c'est l'importance du mot comme son, comme matière musicale. Beckett semble orchestrer ses dialogues comme une partition où le sens s'effrite, mais où la musicalité demeure. Le spectateur est invité à écouter plutôt qu'à comprendre. Dans ce jeu, le comique et le tragique s'entrelacent sans jamais se dissocier. Un mot répété peut provoquer le rire par son absurdité, mais ce même rire se retourne aussitôt en malaise lorsqu'il devient l'écho lancinant d'une solitude sans remède. Edith Kern a souligné cette ambivalence fondamentale : «Chez Beckett, l'humour verbal est toujours à deux tranchants : il libère le spectateur par le rire tout en lui rappelant la désolation et la dérision de l'existence»<sup>24</sup>

Ce constat humanise profondément l'effet de la musicalité du mot : derrière la légèreté apparente du calembour, il y a une gravité qui touche directement à la condition humaine, faite de répétition, de fragilité et de perte. C'est pourquoi le langage, chez Beckett, ne doit pas être envisagé seulement comme un vecteur de sens mais comme une expérience rythmique et émotionnelle. Comme l'écrit Hélène

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[22] Anthony Uhlmann : *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 57.

[23] Raymond Federman : *Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1965, p. 203.

[24] Edith Kern : *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970, p. 264.

Albaret : «Le mot beckettien, dans ses jeux et ses reprises, n'est pas tant un signe qu'une vibration ; il transforme le silence en matière dramatique»<sup>25</sup>.

Ainsi, la musicalité du mot opère une véritable translation du registre comique vers le registre tragique : elle installe le spectateur dans un espace intermédiaire où le rire se brise en inquiétude, où le jeu de mots n'est plus un simple divertissement mais une manière d'affronter l'inexprimable.

## **Le jeu de mots comme résistance au silence**

Dans l'univers beckettien, le silence n'est jamais une simple pause ; il est une menace constante, un vide qui s'impose et que les personnages cherchent à combler. Les jeux de mots, par leur caractère ludique et dérisoire, apparaissent alors comme des tentatives désespérées pour repousser ce silence envahissant. Le langage n'est plus une communication stable mais une sorte de «bruit vital», un bourdonnement fragile qui empêche le néant de s'installer.

Dans *En attendant Godot*, Vladimir et Estragon multiplient les quiproquos et calembours sans autre finalité que de « passer le temps ». Le jeu verbal n'a pas pour fonction d'éclairer une situation dramatique, mais de maintenir le flux de paroles, comme si cesser de parler revenait à sombrer dans l'inexistence. Stanley Gontarski souligne cette dimension de survie : «La parole, même réduite au jeu de mots, fonctionne comme un rempart contre l'effondrement total ; elle ne transmet pas du sens mais retarde l'expérience du silence absolu»<sup>26</sup>. Ici, le jeu de mots agit comme un mécanisme de résistance, une façon de donner l'illusion d'un lien entre les personnages. L'échange verbal devient une sorte de rituel contre le vide, où le moindre mot prononcé, même absurde, affirme encore une présence au monde.

Ruby Cohn insiste sur ce rôle défensif du langage : «Dans le théâtre de Beckett, les mots n'existent pas tant pour être compris que pour remplir l'espace sonore, pour masquer la fracture toujours menaçante du silence»<sup>27</sup>. Cette remarque éclaire un aspect profondément humain : parler pour ne pas se taire, plaisanter pour ne pas se confronter au néant. Les jeux de mots, dans cette perspective, ne sont pas des ornements esthétiques, mais des outils de survie ontologique. De manière plus philosophique, Herbert Blau relève que cette tension entre parole et silence est constitutive du tragique moderne : «Beckett dramatise la fragilité du langage : à travers ses jeux de mots, il montre que parler, c'est lutter contre l'effacement, contre le silence qui nous attend tous »<sup>28</sup>

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[25] Hélène Albaret : *Le Théâtre de l'absurde et la musique du langage*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1998, p. 147.

[26] Stanley Gontarski : *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1985, p. 88.

[27] Ruby Cohn : *Back to Beckett*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 156.

[28] Herbert Blau : *The Impossible Theater: A Manifesto*, New York, Macmillan, 1964, p. 132.

On comprend alors que les calembours et les glissements sémantiques ne sont pas des effets gratuits mais des gestes vitaux, comparables à une respiration. Dans *Fin de partie*, Clov répète des répliques absurdes et mécaniques, mais cette répétition même maintient un rythme, une continuité qui empêche l'effondrement total de l'univers clos où il évolue.

Ainsi, les jeux de mots ne sont pas de simples éclats comiques : ils traduisent la condition de l'homme contemporain, condamné à parler pour combler le vide, à se réfugier dans le langage même lorsque celui-ci n'assure plus de sens.

## **Le jeu de mots comme déconstruction du signe linguistique**

Chez Beckett, le jeu de mots ne se réduit ni à l'effet comique ni à une stratégie de résistance contre le silence : il touche au cœur même de la conception du langage. En multipliant les équivoques, les paronomases et les glissements de sens, Beckett met en évidence l'arbitraire du signe linguistique, c'est-à-dire l'écart irréductible entre le mot et la chose qu'il désigne. Le langage cesse alors d'être un outil fiable de communication pour devenir un matériau instable, autoréférentiel, qui se retourne contre lui-même.

Dans *La Dernière Bande*, Krapp s'amuse à répéter certains mots, les isolant de leur contexte, comme pour les dépouiller de leur signification habituelle. Le mot devient un son, un objet étranger qui échappe au contrôle du locuteur. C'est ce que note Maurice Blanchot : «Le mot chez Beckett ne se rapporte plus à une chose, mais à lui-même ; il devient un signe qui témoigne de son propre vide»<sup>29</sup>.

Cette remarque éclaire la démarche postmoderne de Beckett : faire vaciller la confiance dans le langage en montrant que le signe ne garantit jamais le sens. Les jeux de mots, en dédoublant ou en annulant la signification, matérialisent cette instabilité au cœur même du discours.

De même, Jean-Pierre Sarrazac insiste sur l'importance de ce processus dans l'évolution du théâtre contemporain : «Beckett libère le langage de sa fonction de représentation pour en faire un matériau scénique à part entière, dont le jeu de mots révèle la dimension arbitraire et fragile».<sup>30</sup>

Ainsi, le spectateur n'est plus face à une intrigue portée par des dialogues explicatifs, mais devant une parole qui s'interroge elle-même, qui exhibe son incapacité à dire le réel. Cette « déconstruction » linguistique anticipe, d'une certaine manière, les analyses de Jacques Derrida : «Chez Beckett, le mot se déconstruit, se dissout dans son propre jeu, révélant que la vérité du langage est sa différence, son

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[29] Maurice Blanchot : *L'Entretien infini*, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 342

[30] Jean-Pierre Sarrazac : *L'Avenir du drame*, Paris, Circé, 1999, p. 214

écart infini avec le réel»<sup>31</sup>. Ici, le jeu de mots n'est plus seulement une ruse comique ou un mécanisme de survie, mais une véritable stratégie esthétique : montrer que toute tentative de fixer un sens stable est vouée à l'échec. Le signe linguistique, loin d'être un instrument de clarté, devient le lieu où se manifeste le manque, l'écart et l'instabilité constitutive de l'existence humaine.

Enfin, Anne Ubersfeld résume bien ce rôle paradoxal : «Le jeu de mots, chez Beckett, détruit le langage tout en le rendant audible ; il met en scène une faillite mais aussi une jouissance, celle d'un théâtre où le mot s'avoue incapable et pourtant nécessaire»<sup>32</sup>

Dans cette perspective, les jeux de mots apparaissent comme des micro-scènes de la déconstruction : chaque fois qu'un mot se retourne sur lui-même, qu'il échappe à son rôle référentiel, Beckett rappelle que la scène n'est pas un lieu de certitudes mais un espace d'expérimentation où le langage se met à nu dans sa fragilité.

## **Le jeu de mots comme expérience existentielle et éthique**

Chez Beckett, le jeu de mots ne se limite pas à un procédé linguistique ou à une prouesse stylistique : il devient une manière d'exprimer la condition humaine dans toute sa précarité. Les personnages ne jouent pas avec les mots pour s'amuser, mais parce qu'ils n'ont plus rien d'autre à quoi se raccrocher. Le mot, même déformé, même vidé de son sens, devient un ultime refuge contre l'effondrement du monde.

Dans *En attendant Godot*, les échanges absurdes entre Vladimir et Estragon, fondés sur des répétitions ou des glissements comiques, révèlent une humanité fragile qui lutte contre le désespoir par le langage. Comme le remarque Georges Steiner: «Chez Beckett, l'humour verbal n'est pas une échappatoire, mais une lucidité tragique : il nous fait rire de la misère pour mieux en révéler l'âpreté»<sup>33</sup>. Ce rire, né du jeu de mots, prend ainsi une dimension éthique : il ne dissimule pas la souffrance mais permet de la supporter, de la partager avec le spectateur.

De la même manière, dans *Fin de partie*, Hamm et Clov multiplient les répliques absurdes, contradictoires, parfois volontairement grotesques. Mais derrière la légèreté apparente, il y a une tentative désespérée de maintenir un lien, même bancal, entre deux êtres condamnés à la solitude. Martin Esslin souligne cette dimension existentielle : «Le comique du langage beckettien n'est jamais gratuit ; il est un instrument de survie, une façon de créer, dans le non-sens, un fragile espace de communauté»<sup>34</sup>. Dans cette perspective, le jeu de mots devient un geste de résistance,

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[31] Jacques Derrida : *L'Écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 267.

[32] Anne Ubersfeld : *Lire le théâtre II : L'école du spectateur*, Paris, Belin, 1996, p. 198.

[33] Georges Steiner : *The Death of Tragedy*, Londres, Faber & Faber, 1961, p. 324.

[34] Martin Esslin : *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, Anchor Books, 2004, p. 45.

non seulement contre le silence, mais aussi contre l'inhumanité. Il oblige à reconnaître que, même défaillant, le langage reste notre seul moyen de relation.

À ce titre, Alain Badiou propose une interprétation audacieuse: «Beckett fait du jeu de mots une éthique de l'existence: à travers lui, il montre qu'il faut persévérer, dire encore et encore, même si rien n'est garanti, même si le sens se défait»<sup>35</sup>. Ainsi, l'usage du jeu de mots ne relève pas seulement d'une esthétique postmoderne: il constitue un geste profondément humain, où la fragilité du signe linguistique reflète la fragilité de l'être lui-même. Le spectateur, en riant de ces échappées verbales, participe à cette expérience: il prend conscience que l'existence est faite d'instabilité, mais qu'il est toujours possible d'y répondre par un mot, même absurde, plutôt que par le silence.

Anne Beer va dans le même sens en notant «Le langage chez Beckett n'est pas détruit: il est exposé dans sa faillite, et cette faillite elle-même devient une forme d'humanité»<sup>36</sup>. On comprend alors que les jeux de mots ne sont pas de simples ornements de style, mais des expériences à part entière: ils donnent à voir, à entendre et à ressentir la fragilité de l'homme moderne, tout en lui offrant une voie de résistance éthique — parler encore, même dans le vide, même sans certitude.

## **Le jeu de mots comme matrice du théâtre postmoderne**

Le jeu de mots, chez Beckett, est bien plus qu'un procédé linguistique ou dramaturgique. Il constitue une matrice fondamentale de son théâtre, où le sens se défait pour mieux se reformuler sans cesse. En ce sens, Beckett inaugure une forme de modernité radicale — ou plutôt une postmodernité — où le langage, loin d'être un simple instrument de communication, devient un espace d'expérimentation, de fragilité et de vérité existentielle.

En tordant les mots, en les vidant de leur valeur référentielle, Beckett révèle la précarité de toute tentative humaine de donner un sens définitif au monde. Mais paradoxalement, cette déconstruction ouvre un espace nouveau: celui d'un théâtre où le spectateur n'est plus face à une « histoire » mais plongé dans une expérience du langage. Jacques Derrida l'exprime de manière éclairante: «Beckett déconstruit le langage de l'intérieur: il le fissure par ses jeux, mais cette fissure n'est pas destruction. Elle est la condition même de la possibilité d'un dire encore, malgré tout»<sup>37</sup>.

Ainsi, le jeu de mots devient une manière de « survivre » au silence et à l'absurde. Là où la logique échoue, le mot tordu, déplacé, répété, ouvre un espace de résistance. Comme le note Ruby Cohn: «Dans les mots disloqués de Beckett, il y a

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[35] Alain Badiou: *Beckett: L'Incrévable désir*, Paris, Hachette, 1995, p. 89.

[36] Anne Beer: *Beckett at the Limits of Language*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 211.

[37] Jacques Derrida: *L'Écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 412.

toujours un éclat d'humanité : c'est l'homme qui trébuche en parlant, et qui, ce faisant, montre qu'il est encore vivant»<sup>38</sup>. Le rire que suscitent ces jeux n'est jamais innocent : il naît d'un déséquilibre fondamental, d'une vérité douloureuse sur l'existence humaine. Mais il est aussi un rire partagé, qui relie spectateur et personnage dans la reconnaissance commune de cette fragilité. En ce sens, le théâtre beckettien s'inscrit pleinement dans la logique postmoderne : il refuse le grand récit, la cohérence stable, la résolution dramatique. Il propose à la place une expérience — celle d'un langage qui se défait et se refait sous nos yeux, dans le jeu. Le jeu de mots devient alors le symbole même de cette entreprise : un signe qui échappe, qui glisse, mais qui, par ce glissement, révèle une vérité essentielle sur la condition humaine.

Comme l'écrit Hans-Thies Lehmann, en élargissant la réflexion à la scène contemporaine : «Le théâtre postdramatique hérite de Beckett cette manière de transformer la langue en matière scénique : elle ne raconte plus, elle se joue»<sup>39</sup>. On peut donc conclure que, dans le théâtre postmoderne beckettien, le jeu de mots est à la fois un instrument esthétique, une expérience philosophique et un geste éthique. Il traduit l'impossibilité de dire le monde, mais il affirme en même temps la nécessité de continuer à le dire, même dans l'absurde, même dans le silence qui guette.

## Conclusion partielle

Dans le théâtre de Samuel Beckett, les jeux de mots occupent une place centrale, non comme simples effets comiques, mais comme instruments essentiels de sa poétique. Chaque calembour, chaque glissement de sens ou répétition crée une tension dans le langage, oscillant entre signification et vide, et montre combien la parole est fragile et instable. Cette instabilité met en évidence les limites de la communication et plonge le spectateur dans l'expérience directe de l'absurde, où le langage devient matière sonore et rythme plutôt que simple vecteur de sens.

Les personnages de Beckett — Vladimir et Estragon, Hamm et Clov, Krapp — utilisent le langage pour remplir le silence et retarder le néant. Les jeux de mots deviennent un moyen de résister à l'effondrement du monde et de maintenir un lien fragile entre eux. Même l'humour verbal, léger ou absurde, révèle la solitude et l'angoisse des personnages, tout en offrant au spectateur une lucidité tragique sur la condition humaine.

Cette dimension verbale possède également un caractère musical et dramatique : les sons, les répétitions et les déformations des mots créent un rythme propre à la scène beckettienne. Le langage devient un matériau scénique, transformant la parole en expérience sensorielle, où le spectateur ressent l'absurde, l'angoisse et l'isolement.

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[38] Ruby Cohn : *Back to Beckett*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973, p. 276.

[39] Hans-Thies Lehmann : *Théâtre postdramatique*, Paris, L'Arche, 2002, p. 119.

Philosophiquement, les jeux de mots illustrent l'impuissance du langage à saisir pleinement la réalité, tout en affirmant la nécessité de continuer à parler. Ils incarnent la persévérance humaine : même lorsque le mot échoue à transmettre un sens stable, il reste un outil pour affronter le monde et affirmer la présence des personnages dans l'espace.

Enfin, ces jeux de mots reflètent la logique postmoderne du théâtre beckettien, où le sens n'est jamais donné mais toujours interrogé. La scène devient un lieu d'expérimentation, où l'absurde et la solitude se manifestent et où le spectateur devient participant.

Ainsi, le jeu de mots chez Beckett remplit une triple fonction : esthétique et musicale, existentielle et philosophique. Il n'est pas un simple ornement, mais le cœur de son théâtre, transformant le non-sens en vecteur de sens et révélant la fragilité et la richesse de la condition humaine.

## **Conclusion générale**

Le théâtre de Samuel Beckett bouleverse les conventions classiques en transformant la scène en un espace où le langage cesse d'être un simple outil de communication pour devenir un médium d'exploration de la condition humaine. Par l'illogique, le non-sens et les jeux de mots, il dévoile la fragilité de l'existence et interroge le sens, la temporalité et l'expérience humaine. Les personnages évoluent dans des univers où la pensée rationnelle est déjouée, où les actions se répètent et les dialogues sont paradoxaux. Ces mondes illogiques traduisent l'incertitude, la solitude et l'angoisse existentielle, et invitent le spectateur à ressentir l'existence dans toute sa complexité.

Le non-sens ne se limite pas à un effet comique : il devient un instrument philosophique et esthétique. Les dialogues absurdes révèlent les limites du langage et de la raison, confrontant le spectateur à l'échec de la communication tout en ouvrant une réflexion sur la vulnérabilité humaine. Les jeux de mots, quant à eux, fissurent le langage, mettent en évidence son arbitraire et créent une musicalité oscillant entre comique et tragique. Même en faillite, la parole reste un vecteur d'expérience, un signe de vie et une manifestation de la persistance humaine.

La dimension musicale et rythmique du langage, perceptible dans des œuvres comme *La Dernière Bande*, transforme chaque mot en matière scénique, où le spectateur écoute, ressent et expérimente plutôt que de comprendre rationnellement. En combinant illogique, non-sens et jeux de mots, Beckett propose une esthétique postmoderne où le sens est toujours différé. La scène devient un lieu d'expérience, un miroir de la fragilité et de la richesse de l'existence humaine.

Ainsi, le théâtre de Beckett ne se contente pas de raconter des histoires : il invite à vivre le langage et l'existence, à percevoir l'absurde et la solitude, tout en reconnaissant la capacité de l'homme à persister et à créer du sens malgré

l'incertitude et le vide. À travers l'absurde, le non-sens et le jeu verbal, Beckett révèle un monde fragile mais infiniment vivant, offrant au spectateur un théâtre à la fois exigeant, poétique et profondément humain.

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Play and Learning:  
Pedagogical and Linguistic  
Perspectives



# PLAY AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**Abstract:** *Observing children engaged in play, we immediately realize how play is one of the most authentic expressions of childhood, and how deeply rooted it is in children's nature, involving spontaneity, concentration, imagination, and joy. Through play, children explore the world, roles, relationships, and rules, learn naturally, have meaningful experiences, and develop skills essential to their cognitive, emotional, and social growth. Play, contrary to popular belief, is not just a way for children to pass the time; it is a way of being, of communicating, and, above all, a way of learning. Moreover, play is a fundamental human experience, independent of age and from this perspective, it is crucial to integrate play into schools with traditional learning methods. This paper will analyze the characteristics of play and its implications from a psycho-pedagogical perspective, connecting it to the educational context, and seeking to enhance its value as an effective educational and learning tool for all ages.*

**Keywords:** play, learning languages, informal learning, young learners.

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## **1. Learning languages and the role of intrinsic motivation**

Institutionalized formal learning is still the preferred method of foreign language teaching in many schools: lectures, summative assessments, memorization of grammatical rules, limited oral conversation, etc., often accompanied by a lack of student interest, despite the importance of the subject. This approach partially ensures the transmission of linguistic knowledge, but it presents a series of limitations that reduce its effectiveness and risk creating learning confined to the school context, neglecting the students' broader experience.

One of the main limitations is that motivation for formal learning tends to be linked to the pursuit of external rewards (e.g., grades) more than for other, less formal, types of learning. (Johnson, Majewska, 2022). This kind of stimuli orient

assessment towards extrinsic objectives, distancing it from intrinsic motivation, which instead coincides with completing an interesting task while demonstrating competence and autonomy.

Unfortunately, this model prevails in formal teaching, as students study English to avoid failing or to obtain a high grade. When formal motivation is based almost exclusively on these aspects, engagement declines, and students speak English not to communicate but only for the grade they will get. Growth in skills and knowledge depends solely on incentives that, once completed (for example, after compulsory education), cause such growth to collapse. It would be more effective, however, to stimulate students by fostering intrinsic motivation to learn English, as this motivation stems from the pleasure of performing an action, without any specific reward. Specifically, intrinsic motivation is that which comes from within the individual and allows a person to be motivated by the pleasure of the learning process itself or by the desire to feel better. It is understood that, by favoring the intrinsic instead of the extrinsic one, the learning process would be more profitable as well as engaging, and therefore it is believed that intrinsic motivation leads to better learning results than extrinsic motivation.

- **Play as a remedy for *foreign language anxiety***

While extrinsic motivation through grades can be effective as an initial incentive, it loses its effectiveness over time, sometimes even producing counterproductive effects, so it should be limited to a short duration. Combined with this is the phenomenon of *foreign language anxiety*, the anxiety that occurs when a foreign language is learned in formal situations, particularly when the learner has little or no ability to communicate in that language. This anxiety is an affective variable often linked to foreign language learning, and it causes fear of communication, fear of judgment, and reduces spontaneous participation (also because the language is practiced only in abstract school activities and inauthentic contexts). Furthermore, the formal setting favors students who adapt to standard teaching methods, but penalizes those with different timeframes, rhythms, needs, and backgrounds, who are more likely to develop resistance to the language.

It is essential to promote strategies geared towards intrinsic motivation, which enhance a sense of autonomy and competence, reduce dependence on external rewards, and contain anxiety. This would transform academic motivation into an authentic and engaging drive for learning English, as well as being the perfect basis for enhancing play as a support for the language journey, in conjunction with informal learning.

Informal learning is therefore the perspective we should strive for. It represents

[...] the ongoing process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from daily experiences and exposure to the environment ... Generally [it] is unorganized and often unsystematic; yet it accounts for the great bulk of any person's total lifetime learning, including that of even a highly 'schooled' person (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 3).

Individuals activate themselves autonomously, following concrete needs such as being able to express themselves or having to solve a problem. This outlines this type of learning as intrinsically motivating since it responds to real needs, unlike formal learning, where extrinsic objectives such as grades or passing an assessment test prevail.

This approach also fosters self-regulation and metacognition: the former is the process by which learners set goals for their own learning and then seek to monitor, regulate, and control cognitive processes, motivation, and behavior in order to achieve those goals. Metacognition coincides with the ability to monitor, evaluate, and understand what needs to be done to improve learning performance. Essentially, people learn to set goals, plan actions, monitor progress, and reflect on results: all fundamental skills for lifelong learning.

Interesting in this context could be the iceberg metaphor outlined by John Seely<sup>1</sup>, in which the surface layer represents formal or explicit knowledge, acquired in the classroom, and the hidden layer of the iceberg represents tacit or informal knowledge, constructed outside of school. According to the American author, tacit (informal) knowledge is more extensive and long-lasting than explicit (formal) knowledge.

The difference between formal and informal learning lies in experience, as informal learning arises from everyday experiences such as problem-solving and conversation with others. It occurs through trial and error, immediate feedback, direct observation, active reflection, and modeling. In this context, mistakes become opportunities for learning rather than failure, fostering the natural and profound acquisition of skills.

However, despite its centrality, informal learning is still too invisible in the institutionalized school context, dominated by formal methods that fail to recognize its value. Informal experience must be enhanced by integrating it into the curriculum at all levels and grades, but at the same time, informal learning, without the rigor and organization of formal activity, becomes unmanageable and of little educational value. The goal is therefore to combine spontaneity and structure, and play can be the perfect solution, the "bridge" between the two perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details see <https://www.johnseelybrown.com/CJKoh.pdf>. Last accessed 12.10.2025.

## **2. Play and language teaching from very young learners to adults between benefits and challenges**

The need to begin learning a foreign language (in the case of Italian schools, English) at an early age has been extensively studied. However, the concept of play-based activity has rarely been discussed in relation to pre-primary language learning, but in light of what has been stated in the previous paragraphs, it seems clear that it is an extremely effective strategy for promoting language acquisition in the early years of life.

As neurosciences demonstrated, the infant brain exhibits high levels of plasticity and strong neurosensory receptivity, and this cognitive openness is combined with an emotional attitude conducive to learning, in which the desire to experiment prevails over the fear of making mistakes.

In this scenario, play emerges as the ideal educational strategy for learning a foreign language, such as English, also because play is a complex activity characterized by intrinsic motivation, spontaneity, creative freedom, and pleasure: all central elements for supporting effective language learning.

According to Garvey's definition, which describes play as an "affective behavioral system" ( Garvey, 2009) capable of engaging emotions, behaviors, and relationships within a dynamic and open context, it is clear how it lends itself naturally to language learning. It creates a safe and motivating environment, in which the student can experiment, without external pressure, with a new linguistic code, discovering the pleasure of communication within their ZPD. (Vygotskij, 1987).

Language play enables an effective blend of formal and informal learning, overcoming the limitations of the traditional model based on lectures and the memorization of abstract rules. In a playful context, language is used in meaningful and concrete situations, where students perceive English as a tool for action and interaction, not as a school subject. Furthermore, through play, authentic scenarios can be created, which foster the development of communicative competence. In this way, play promotes situated learning, where language is linked to lived experience rather than decontextualized exercises.

Another benefit of using play as a teaching strategy in ELT concerns the emotional and motivational dimension: play helps reduce foreign language anxiety, which (as previously mentioned) can limit spontaneous language use in formal situations. Within play, mistakes lose their negative connotations and become an integral part of the learning process, encouraging active participation, boosting self-esteem, and strengthening children's confidence in their own communication skills.

Furthermore, play allows for the development of transversal skills beyond linguistic ones, such as cooperation, respect for rules, problem solving, and creativity. This enriches the linguistic experience and contributes to the child's overall

development, integrating cognitive, emotional, and social aspects. Play therefore represents the natural link between a child's spontaneous predisposition to language learning and the need to structure effective educational programs in preschool. Thanks to the playful experience, language acquisition becomes an authentic, motivating process that respects the developmental characteristics of preschool age.

Especially in preschool, where games are an integral part of daily life, play presents itself as a methodological choice consistent with the child's characteristics and needs, proving essential for truly effective language teaching.

A key aspect in analyzing methodologies for early English teaching concerns the specific challenges inherent in preschool, which limit their implementation. International literature agrees that starting foreign language learning early is not, in itself, a guarantee of success. Indeed, in the absence of a well-structured learning program, the benefits of early exposure are severely limited.

At this level, children's exposure to English (when taught) appears to be often formally focused and limited to teacher-led activities, such as repeating linguistic elements, singing songs, and playing games. While acknowledging the value of these activities, an approach based solely on them is ineffective and, in fact, unlikely to foster genuine communicative competence in children in the language being taught.

Added to this, there are some important curricular and professional challenges: in many contexts, the introduction of English in preschool (and even primary school) preceded the development of appropriate curricula and materials, while there are insufficient opportunities for specialized training and professional development in EFL teaching. The result is a lack of consistency between the educational objectives established at the institutional level and the actual operational resources available to schools. This imbalance negatively influences the quality of the educational offering, with direct repercussions on the linguistic experience of children, who are often taught by less experienced and less qualified teachers.

Another critical issue concerns the fragmented nature of exposure to the English language: English teaching is usually dissociated from other aspects of the school curriculum, and limited to lessons lasting approximately 30-45 minutes once or twice a week (Robinson, Murão, 2015:17). This approach reduces language learning to an isolated, poorly contextualized experience, hindering the emergence of authentic familiarity with the language. On the contrary, early learning is only effective when experiences are continuous, integrated, and meaningful. Without a constant and contextual presence of the language in daily school life, the risk is that children will be offered superficial contact, which does not translate into learning.

Alongside these organizational and methodological limitations, there is also cultural resistance among some families and teachers. Some educational staff and parents believe that introducing English at such an early age could negatively

impact the development of the native language, or interfere with other aspects of child development, such as social and emotional skills, which are considered to be more important than the acquisition of a foreign language. Although scientific research has largely refuted these fears, demonstrating that early bilingualism not only hinders but actually strengthens general linguistic skills, these beliefs persist in many educational contexts, fueling low motivation and underinvestment in the potential of language teaching.

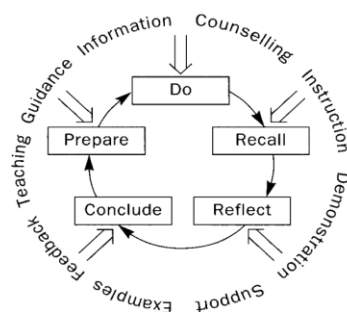
For these reasons, English teaching in Italian preschool system is still hampered by structural, methodological, and cultural factors. The lack of an integrated pedagogical vision, the weakness of specific training, and the fragmented nature of the experiences offered hinder the achievement of truly effective early learning. To overcome these limitations, a systemic approach is needed, involving initial and ongoing teacher training, as well as constructive dialogue with families. Only in this way can English become a genuine educational resource, capable of enriching the development of preschool children.

- **Play and language teaching beyond preschool**

Play is the preferred tool for learning English in preschool, but its effectiveness does not end at this age. Play could also play a central role in primary and secondary school, as well as in adult language learning contexts, adapting to the different learning needs of students.

In support of this, it is important to revisit the concept that the ability to use a language appears to be more of a skill learned through practice (similar to playing soccer or riding a bicycle) than a collection of data learned and then applied. Linguistic ability, therefore, is consolidated through the active and situated experience of the linguistic code, just as occurs with some complex motor skills such as riding a bicycle. In this sense, language is not just a set of theoretical knowledge to be memorized, but a practical skill, a communicative *savoir-faire* that is refined in real-world contexts, through interaction.

Just as we learn to ride a bicycle by falling and trying again, language learning requires a context in which students can actually experiment, make mistakes, receive feedback, and communicate with purpose.



Teaching and the experiential learning cycle

Even in the experiential learning highlighted by James Scrivener (Scrivener, 2009: 20) in the figure above, the first step in learning is doing something (Do), which coincides with concrete experience, living a situation, and actively participating, followed by various phases of reflection. The same cycle provides some important conclusions for language teaching: give students the opportunity to do things independently, allow for practical experience in doing things (for example, in using language rather than simply listening to language lessons). Making mistakes and learn from them is part of the learning process as well.

The above model perfectly fits the playful teaching of a foreign language across all age groups, as it values concrete action, fosters implicit language acquisition, and promotes active, motivating, and situated learning. Language learners seem to need a number of things beyond simply listening to explanations. Among other things, they need opportunities to play and communicate with the language itself. In this context, play proves to be an ideal tool for all ages, not only because it actively involves the student by activating the experiential learning cycle, but because it offers realistic and motivating contexts in which to use a foreign language, ensuring deep and lasting linguistic acquisition.

Even if learning through play is often thought to be more appropriate for preschool settings and incompatible with primary education, play-based learning is widely recognized as a valuable pedagogical practice within schools, primary classes often lack the opportunity to integrate play-based learning activities nor the resources necessary to support them. (Xiaoyan, Kangas 2024)<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, primary school is still too tied to a formal learning methodology, when, in reality, play is very present in children's lives. Playful activities such as role-playing, Bingo, Scrabble, dramatizations, digital storytelling, picture books, and board games can stimulate motivation, engagement, and attention (in addition to naturally consolidating vocabulary and grammatical structures).

It is also important to keep in mind that the transition from preschool to primary school involves a complete change in learning styles, as children move from a context where they're free to move and play freely to the one where (in most cases) they must sit still at their desks, passively listening to the teacher. In this context play could be an effective way not only to promote language learning, but also to ensure continuity from one school level to the next.

While in elementary school, simple activities such as reading picture books, using puppets, or simple movement games are effective in capturing and maintaining attention, the situation is different in secondary school and with adults. In these latter

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<sup>2</sup> For more details see

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004279.2024.2416954#abstract> . Last accessed 12.10.2025.

two contexts, the challenge is not so much attracting attention as overcoming psychological barriers, leveraging prior skills, and giving meaning to learning, and gamification can be a valuable support in this regard. The risk of appearing childish, banal, and inappropriate must be avoided at all costs, making the activity a support for language learning. This is also because the playful element does not negate the seriousness of the language learning process, but rather enhances it.

Alongside board games and dramatizations, more complex play experiences could be offered, such as guided debates, peer-to-peer conversations, or cooperative activities. However, this often fails to happen, partly because of the widespread belief that converting learning activities into games can detract from their seriousness. In reality, seriousness lies not in the formality of the teaching proposal, but rather in the motivation and active participation demonstrated by students, which ensure a more lasting internalization.

Even in adult language learning, play plays a strategic role, despite the persistent prejudice that associates it exclusively with childhood. Playful activities are, in fact, a powerful tool for reducing anxiety and frustration, common among adult learners, as they foster a more informal and collaborative learning environment. Through professional role-playing games, traditional games, language escape rooms, board games, interactive quizzes, and word games, adult learners have the opportunity to use language in real-world communicative situations, stimulating oral production and linguistic reflection. Games like Taboo or Pictionary stimulate conversation and vocabulary retrieval, while Story Cubes requires participants to create a story from random images, fostering creativity and narrative ability while strengthening linguistic fluency. Gamification, which involves the use of video game techniques and theories that allow us to "redesign" people's experiences in non-gaming contexts. It is not about transforming activities into games; the basic concept is applying game logic (use of avatars, challenges, missions, levels, scores, etc.) to activities to make them more engaging. This proposal is based not only on Koster's Fun Theory, according to which people more easily modify their behavior when they're having fun, but above all on learning by doing.

### **3. Conclusions**

This shift from formal passive learning to learning "through play" can transform the approach to a foreign language into a more playful but less rigorous experience: students do not just memorize vocabulary or grammatical rules, but activate their communication skills, reflect on their language choices, and receive immediate feedback in realistic simulated contexts.

In language learning, the student's emotional involvement is an essential condition, and play succeeds in ensuring this, while dynamically promoting the

development of linguistic skills, demonstrating that it is not simply a form of childish entertainment. For this reason, both for young learners and adult language training, using games could be an excellent strategy for maintaining high motivation and engagement, while simultaneously promoting language learning.

At all ages, play proves to be a powerful teaching strategy, capable of combining engagement, fun, and learning not just merely an embellishment of the learning process, but a fundamental component in achieving student success.

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# TEACHING ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE VOCABULARY AT THE A1 LEVEL THROUGH GAMES: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** *This study investigates the role of language games and gamification in teaching Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) vocabulary at the A1 level, within preparatory year. Starting from the necessity of acquiring a minimum repertoire of 500-800 basic words, the paper highlights the limitations of traditional methods based on mechanical memorization and proposes the integration of lexical fields and ludic activities as an essential teaching strategy. The research was conducted on a group of 10 international students, and the results showed a significant increase in productive vocabulary (from 40 to over 400 words) and receptive vocabulary (up to 600 units), higher lexical retention (70% compared to 55% for traditional methods), as well as reduced language anxiety and increased motivation. The findings emphasize that language games should not be regarded as mere recreational activities but as a central strategy in vocabulary teaching, capable of fostering cultural integration, authentic communication, and active learner engagement.*

**Keywords:** Romanian as a foreign language, A1 level, vocabulary teaching, language games, lexical fields, gamification.

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## 1. Introduction

Teaching foreign languages has become one of the fundamental priorities of contemporary education. In a society characterized by globalization, academic mobility, and cultural diversity, knowledge of foreign languages is not merely an advantage but a necessity. Vocabulary plays a crucial role in the process of language learning. No matter how well grammatical structures are mastered, authentic communication is impossible without a basic lexicon. For this reason, vocabulary instruction must be placed at the core of teaching practices, especially when learners are developing their initial tools for communication.

For the A1 linguistic level, the reference documents – *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language* (Nation, 2001), *Nivel prag* (Moldovan et al., 2002), *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, 2003)*, and *A Minimalist Description of the Romanian Language* (2016) – establish several basic competencies. At this level, the learner should be able to use familiar, everyday expressions, introduce themselves, and respond to simple questions about personal life. They should also be able to interact in a basic way with interlocutors who cooperate and speak clearly, relying on a minimum vocabulary of approximately 500–800 words.

The difficulties of vocabulary teaching are multiple. On the one hand, mechanical memorization of word lists does not guarantee their transfer into active use. On the other hand, the absence of context causes these words to be perceived as isolated elements, which are difficult to remember and apply. In addition, many learners face language anxiety, which reduces their willingness to use newly acquired words in communication.

Krashen (1982) argues that learning occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that also contains new elements. Long (1996) emphasizes the importance of interaction and negotiation of meaning, which create opportunities for vocabulary acquisition. Within this framework, language games and gamification strategies provide innovative solutions. They stimulate motivation, create a relaxed atmosphere, reduce anxiety, and facilitate vocabulary consolidation through varied and contextualized repetition.

International studies confirm these benefits: Nguyen et al. (2024) show that games enhance motivation and engagement; Abdelhadi (2020), through an experimental study, demonstrates the superiority of games in vocabulary teaching; Saleh and Althaqafi (2022) confirm long-term lexical retention. In addition, Ersöz (2000) and Deesri (2002) provide practical examples of effective games, while research conducted in Romania (Săftoiu et al., 2022; Tonț, 2022) demonstrates their applicability in teaching Romanian as a foreign language (RFL).

The aim of this article is to analyze, within both a theoretical and an applied framework, the role of language games and lexical fields in teaching Romanian vocabulary as a foreign language at the A1 level. We begin with classical and contemporary contributions regarding the role of vocabulary and games in the learning process, then examine the fundamental lexical domains for A1, and finally propose a teaching methodology based on language games and gamification.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. The Importance of Vocabulary in Language Acquisition**

Vocabulary represents the foundation of any process of language acquisition. Without a minimal lexicon, learners cannot understand basic messages or construct

simple sentences. As Nation (2001:13) states, knowledge of words is essential for successful communication, since communication cannot rely solely on grammatical structures but requires meaningful lexical units.

Over time, the status of vocabulary in foreign language didactics has varied. In the structuralist tradition, the emphasis was placed mainly on grammar and the automatization of structures. Vocabulary was regarded as a secondary, supportive element. Only with the development of communicative approaches did vocabulary become a central object of teaching (Harmer, 2007), with researchers now accepting that it constitutes the core of communicative competence. Through the hypothesis of comprehensible input, Krashen (1982) demonstrates that vocabulary plays a decisive role: without understanding lexical units, the message cannot be perceived. Comprehensible input is dependent on lexicon, and linguistic progress requires exposure to new words in familiar contexts (i+1). Long (1996), in the interactionist theory, shows that vocabulary is consolidated through negotiation of meaning in real communicative situations. Empirical studies confirm this central role. Laufer (1997) emphasizes that vocabulary is the strongest indicator of language proficiency, even more important than grammar. A lack of vocabulary negatively affects all four skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) whereas a rich lexicon enables comprehension and production of messages even in the presence of grammatical errors.

Reference documents for foreign language learning highlight a common set of competencies expected at the A1 level. The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (2003) defines this level as one in which the learner can use familiar, everyday expressions, produce simple statements to meet concrete needs, introduce themselves, and respond to questions about personal details (for example, where they live, the people they know, the things they possess). Moreover, the learner can interact in a basic way with interlocutors who are willing to cooperate and who speak slowly and clearly. Nation (2001), in *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, estimates that approximately 500–800 lexical units are necessary at this level, forming the core of the basic vocabulary. Locally, the *Minimalist Description of the Romanian Language* (2016) provides an organized list of about 600 fundamental words and expressions, structured into thematic lexical fields covering the essential domains of communication. Meanwhile, Antonela-Carmen Arieșan-Simion states that “the lexical inventory of Romanian as a FL/L2 at the A1 level contains 845 words” (Arieșan-Simion, 2022: 203).

An important aspect to be mentioned here is the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary refers to the words a learner recognizes and understands when encountering them in context. Productive vocabulary, on the other hand, designates the words a learner can actively use in speaking and writing. Nation (2001) points out that receptive vocabulary is always

larger than productive vocabulary, and the transition from receptive to productive occurs through active practice and repeated exposure to words in varied contexts.

Vocabulary also has an affective dimension. Language anxiety often arises from the fear of not finding the appropriate word in conversation. Therefore, vocabulary teaching is not only a cognitive matter but also a way to enhance learners' confidence in their ability to communicate.

Consequently, vocabulary cannot be regarded as an accessory to grammar. It represents the central element of language acquisition, enabling both the comprehension and the production of messages. In teaching Romanian as a foreign language at the A1 level, building a basic lexicon is essential for achieving communicative objectives. This requires a methodology centered on lexical fields and on activities that transform vocabulary from passive knowledge into active competence.

## **2.2. Play as a Pedagogical Tool**

The integration of play into the educational process has a long tradition and a solid theoretical foundation. Play is not merely a recreational activity but a complex practice with cognitive, social, and cultural functions that contribute both to personality development and to learning.

Huizinga (2023:39), in his classic work *Homo Ludens*, defines play as a constitutive dimension of human culture: *"Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing."* Thus, play is a universal activity, prior to and independent of social institutionalization, which makes it a fundamental instrument for the natural development of language.

From a psychological perspective, Vygotsky argues that play creates the zone of proximal development, where a child or learner can achieve performances beyond those attainable individually: *"In play, a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself"* (Vygotsky, 1978:102). Applied to foreign language teaching, this principle demonstrates that play provides a framework for linguistic experimentation in which learners can surpass their limits and use vocabulary in a creative and spontaneous way.

Wright et al. (2006), in their seminal work *Games for Language Learning*, demonstrate that language games support learning by stimulating motivation and reducing anxiety. Moreover, the authors emphasize the psychological and affective dimension of play: *"Games provide a way of helping the learners to experience the language, not merely to study it"* (Wright et al., 2006:2). This idea is also confirmed by Ersöz (2000), who shows that games not only increase attention and participation but also reduce inhibitions: *"Games are highly motivating because they are amusing and at*

*the same time challenging.*” In a similar vein, Deesri (2002) argues that games are activities with clear learning objectives: *“They are not just a diversion, a break from routine activities, but a way of getting the learner to use the language during the game.”*

Thus, the literature shows that play simultaneously fulfills several functions in the didactic process: cognitive (facilitating memorization and knowledge transfer), motivational (stimulating interest and the enjoyment of learning), social (creating cooperation and authentic interaction among learners), and affective (reducing language anxiety and supporting active participation).

### **2.3. Gamification and Educational Innovation**

Gamification is defined by Deterding et al. (2011) as the use of game-design elements in non-game contexts. In education, gamification translates into points, badges, levels, and missions that stimulate motivation and engagement. Faiella and Ricciardi (2015) also show that gamification contributes to reducing anxiety and increasing intrinsic motivation.

In Romania, Săftoiu et al. (2022) applied gamification in teaching Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) for academic purposes, using applications such as ClassDojo, GooseChase, Storyjumper, Wordwall, and Kahoot. The results indicated increased student engagement and effective vocabulary consolidation. In the same vein, Tonț (2022) confirmed that software tools used in RFL teaching and learning activities improve the Romanian communicative competence of non-native speakers.

## **3. Language Games and the Role of Lexical Fields in Teaching Vocabulary at the A1 Level**

### **3.1. The Concept of Lexical Field and Its Relevance for RFL**

In linguistics, the notion of a *lexical field* refers to the set of lexical units that belong to the same semantic domain and are organized around a common core of meaning. This structuring facilitates the cognitive processes of memorization and vocabulary retrieval. According to Nation (2001), grouping words into thematic domains allows for rapid consolidation of vocabulary and supports the development of active lexicon.

For A1-level learners of Romanian, organizing vocabulary into semantic fields is crucial, as it enables them to immediately relate new knowledge to everyday experiences. For instance, learning words from the field of “food” becomes more effective if these are associated with images, tastes, smells, and real-life contexts (e.g., “at the market” or “at the restaurant”).

### 3.2. Language Games as a Strategy for Activating Vocabulary

Language games are defined by Wright et al. (2006) as educational activities that combine rules, interaction, and competition to stimulate learning through engagement. Although they were initially used in teaching English as a foreign language, numerous studies have demonstrated their effectiveness across diverse cultural contexts and at various proficiency levels. Abdelhadi (2020), in an experimental study, confirmed that learner groups instructed through games achieved superior results in vocabulary acquisition compared to groups using traditional methods. The findings revealed not only an increase in immediate test scores but also longer-term lexical retention. Saleh and Althaqafi (2022) replicated these conclusions in preschool settings in Saudi Arabia, showing that vocabulary games produced lasting effects even after several weeks. Săftoiu et al. (2022) and Tont (2022) demonstrated that thematic games applied in Romanian language courses for foreigners stimulate engagement and foster the creation of a learning community, supporting both linguistic and intercultural competences.

### 3.3. The Main Lexical Fields at the A1 Level

At the A1 level, the most frequently addressed lexical fields are those that correspond to the learners' immediate needs. Platon et al. (2014:19–22) suggest the following domains:

- **Days, months, hours:** Days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday; Months: January, February, March, April, May, June, July, August, September, October, November, December; Hours: quarter, half, o'clock.
- **Weather:** warm, cold, sun, wind, snow, clouds, to rain, to snow.
- **Personal information:** Family: mother, father, grandfather, grandmother, son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, cousin, nephew; Address: apartment, street, city, village, country; Identity documents: passport, identity card.
- **Personal characteristics:** Physical traits: tall, short, thin, beautiful, blond, brunette; Personality traits: good, bad, hardworking, lazy, intelligent; General appearance: elegant, sporty.
- **Education:** school, university, student, course, break.
- **Professions and the professional sphere:** Professions: teacher, doctor, nurse, pharmacist, engineer, painter, police officer, actor, waiter, driver, shop assistant; Workplace: office, colleague, to work.
- **Parts of the body, personal hygiene, health:** Body parts: head, neck, hair, eyes, nose, ear, mouth, teeth, hand, foot, body, skin; Personal hygiene items: toothpaste, toothbrush, soap, shampoo, shower gel, towel, toilet paper, tissues; Treatment: medicine.

- **Clothing, footwear, accessories:** Clothes: trousers, blouse, shirt, T-shirt, sweater, skirt, dress, hat, gloves; Footwear: shoes, sandals, boots; Accessories: bag, backpack, tie, watch, ring.
- **Colors:** white, black, yellow, blue (dark, light).
- **Housing:** House, garden and yard: house, apartment, building, garden, yard, garage, gate; Rooms: living room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, office, hallway; Furniture: table, chair, wardrobe, bed, sofa, desk, bookcase, sink, bathtub; Appliances: refrigerator, stove, washing machine; Dishes and cutlery: dishes, pot, plate, mug, bowl, glass, spoon, fork, knife, teaspoon; Household activities: to wash clothes/dishes, to clean.
- **Food and drink:** Main meals: breakfast, lunch, dinner; Dishes: soup, French fries, rice, steak, salad, omelet, sandwich, pasta, pizza; Spices: salt, pepper; Baked goods: white bread, brown bread, multigrain bread, pretzel; Dairy: milk, yogurt, cheese, butter; Vegetables: tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, onions, potatoes, carrots; Fruits: apples, pears, bananas, oranges; Meat: chicken, pork, beef, fish; Sweets: sugar, honey, cake, biscuits, chocolate, ice cream, jam; Drinks: still water, sparkling water, tea, mint tea, coffee, juice, wine, beer;  
Quantities/packaging/containers: kilogram, gram, liter, packet, bottle.
- **Daily activities:** to wake up, to wash, to get dressed, to eat, to go, to work, to study, to cook, to undress, to go to bed.
- **Sports and leisure activities:** Sports: football, basketball, handball, volleyball, tennis, skiing, swimming; People, objects, places: player, footballer, ball, swimming pool, gym; Leisure activities: to run, to dance, to play the piano/violin/guitar, to walk, to watch TV/a movie, to paint, to draw, to read, to play, to visit, to travel.
- **Vacations:** Destinations: seaside, mountains, lake; Accommodation: hotel, cabin; Tourist attractions: museum, castle, church.
- **Transport:** Means: bicycle, car, taxi, bus, train, subway, airplane, ship; Places: station, parking lot, railway station, airport, waiting room, ticket booth, information office; Objects: ticket, luggage.
- **Nature:** Animals: dog, cat, chicken, pig, cow, horse, elephant, giraffe, bear, lion; Plants: tree, fruit tree, flower, grass; Landscape and natural formations: sea, mountain, lake.
- **City:** Shop: client, price, cash desk, expensive, cheap, to buy, to sell; Market: vegetables, fruits, to want; Restaurant: table, client, menu, bill, to order, to pay; Club: to dance, to listen, to smoke; Museum: painting, guide, ticket, to visit; Theatre/opera: performance, to watch; Cinema: film, movie theatre; Hotel: reception, reservation, single/double room, to book; Park: bench, grass, flowers, to walk; Hospital: sick, emergency, ambulance; Pharmacy: medicine,

prescription; Bank: money, lei, currency, to exchange; Embassy: ambassador, visa, citizenship; Post office: letter, postcard, envelope, to send, to receive; Police: police car, uniform; Travel agency: ticket, vacation, to travel; Library: book, library card, to borrow.

- **Press and mass media:** newspaper, magazine, television, radio.

These lexical fields represent an essential strategy in teaching vocabulary at the A1 level. They provide a coherent learning framework, facilitate memorization, and allow for the integration of vocabulary into authentic contexts. Language games adapted to these fields stimulate motivation, reduce anxiety, and encourage active participation.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1. Educational Context and Target Group

Teaching Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) at the A1 level generally takes place within preparatory programs organized by universities or specialized language centers, but also in non-formal contexts (private courses, language schools, intercultural projects).

In our case, the target group consists of international learners of diverse ages and backgrounds, coming from varied linguistic and cultural contexts, enrolled in the *Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens* (PYRLFC) at the Faculty of Letters, University of Oradea, during the 2024–2025 academic year. Most of these learners have no prior knowledge of Romanian and present immediate communication needs in everyday contexts: interaction with teachers, peers, university administration, medical staff, or shop assistants. Therefore, at the A1 level, the major objective is the rapid acquisition of a functional vocabulary.

Learners display highly heterogeneous levels of literacy, and for many of them Romanian is the first Indo-European language they encounter. This generates additional difficulties related to phonetics, morphology, and vocabulary. In this context, the teaching methodology must focus on:

- creating a motivating and non-threatening learning environment that reduces language anxiety;
- using visual and auditory support to facilitate vocabulary recognition and memorization;
- implementing interactive and collaborative activities that encourage communication from the very first lessons;
- integrating language games and gamification as ways to transform the teaching process into an enjoyable and effective experience.

In conclusion, the educational context of teaching RFL at the A1 level requires a functional, interactive, and learner-centered approach, in which the basic lexicon is

not only taught but also activated through language games in order to meet the immediate communication needs of the target group.

#### 4.2. Teaching Objectives

Teaching Romanian as a foreign language vocabulary at the A1 level requires the formulation of clear teaching objectives, aligned both with the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR, 2003) and with the *Minimal Description of the Romanian Language* (2016). These objectives reflect not only lexical acquisition but also the ability to actively use vocabulary in real communication contexts.

##### General objectives:

- **To develop basic lexical competence** by acquiring a minimum repertoire of 500–800 frequent words and expressions, organized into fundamental semantic fields (family, housing, food, time, daily activities);
- **To stimulate oral communication** through interactive activities that encourage the active use of vocabulary in authentic life situations;
- **To create a positive and motivating learning climate** by integrating language games and gamification elements, which reduce anxiety and increase learner engagement;
- **To ensure the transition from receptive to productive vocabulary** through exercises of recognition, repetition, application, and free production.

##### Specific objectives:

- **At the lexical level:** learners should be able to recognize and use basic words to introduce themselves, ask for and provide personal information, and describe people, objects, places, and daily activities.
- **At the pragmatic level:** learners should be able to formulate simple requests (*I want water*), ask about prices (*How much does it cost?*), make basic reservations (*I would like a hotel room*), and express basic needs (*I am hungry, I am cold*).
- **At the socio-cultural level:** learners should recognize greetings and polite formulas appropriate to different contexts, respecting norms of interaction in Romanian.
- **At the affective level:** learners should develop confidence in using vocabulary and be motivated to participate actively in games and activities.

##### Formative objectives:

In addition to lexical learning, the methodology also aims to:

- develop **learning autonomy** through the introduction of games that require individual memory strategies;
- build **collaborative competences** through group activities that encourage cooperation;
- cultivate **intercultural curiosity** through games that situate vocabulary within Romanian cultural contexts (e.g., customs, traditions, gastronomy).

Thus, teaching objectives are not limited to word accumulation but aim at **integrating vocabulary into global communicative competence**, in accordance with modern principles of foreign language didactics.

### **4.3. Teaching Strategies and Didactic Tools**

The methodology of teaching Romanian as a foreign language vocabulary at the A1 level must combine the theoretical principles of lexical acquisition with interactive and playful practices.

#### **4.3.1. Teaching Strategies**

1. Contextualized learning:
  - Presenting vocabulary in meaningful contexts (dialogues, skits, real-life situations).
  - Linking words to images, real objects, and concrete experiences.
2. Teaching through lexical fields:
  - Organizing vocabulary into clear thematic domains (family, food, transport, education, etc.).
  - Activating lexical fields through associations, classifications, and group games.
3. Transition from receptive to productive vocabulary:
  - Recognition phase: bingo-type games and memory games.
  - Consolidation phase: role-plays and skits.
  - Free production phase: chain stories and guided discussions.
4. Varied and multisensory repetition:
  - Combining visual, auditory, and kinesthetic channels.
  - Alternating written exercises with oral and digital activities.
5. Gamification of the learning process:
  - Introducing game elements (points, badges, levels, leaderboards).
  - Using digital platforms to provide immediate feedback and additional motivation.

#### **4.3.2. Didactic Tools**

1. Traditional games:

- *Lexical bingo*: consolidating vocabulary through rapid recognition.
  - *Memory game*: matching words with images or synonym pairs.
  - *Charades*: practicing verbs and professions.
  - *Describe and guess*: developing descriptive and deductive skills.
  - *Board games*: progress on the board depends on recognizing and using vocabulary.
  - *Role-play*: simulating real-life situations (in a shop, at the doctor, at the hotel).
  - *Chain stories*: each learner adds a sentence using the target vocabulary.
2. Visual and associative games:
- *Lexical puzzles*: reconstructing an image associated with a word.
  - *Family tree*: consolidating family vocabulary.
  - *Interactive calendar*: days, months, hours.
  - *City map*: identifying places and public services.
3. Digital games and applications:
- *Kahoot, Quizizz, Wordwall*: vocabulary competitions with instant feedback.
  - *Plickers*: quick checking of vocabulary understanding through cards.
  - *GooseChase*: digital scavenger hunt for words and expressions.
  - *StoryJumper*: creating interactive stories with the learned vocabulary.
4. Creative activities:
- *Weather journal*: learners presenting the weather forecast.
  - *Team recipe*: inventing a menu or a recipe.
  - *Fashion show*: describing classmates' clothing.
  - *Description police*: guessing a person based on given traits.

#### 4.4. Teaching Stages

Teaching Romanian as a foreign language vocabulary at the A1 level is based on a coherent methodological structure consisting of four main stages: presentation, practice, consolidation, and assessment. Each stage incorporates language games and interactive activities as essential means for vocabulary acquisition.

##### 1. Presentation of vocabulary:

- New vocabulary is introduced on the basis of lexical fields outlined in the *Minimal Description of the Romanian Language* (2016).
- Visual materials are used (images, real objects, flashcards, digital applications).
- The teacher contextualizes the vocabulary through model dialogues and authentic situations (e.g., “At the shop,” “At school,” “In the family”).

- Examples of games in this phase: *Picture Bingo* (for recognition), *Interactive Calendar* (for days and months).
2. **Practice of vocabulary:**
- The transition is made from recognition to guided use of words in simple sentences.
  - Activities are centered on pair work and small group interaction.
  - Examples of games:
    - *Memory game* (matching word–image).
    - *Charades* (for verbs and professions).
    - *Family tree* (for family vocabulary).
3. **Consolidation of vocabulary:**
- Achieved through activities requiring the active and repeated use of words.
  - Emphasis is placed on creativity and collaboration.
  - Examples of games:
    - *Role-play* (“At the shop,” “At the doctor,” “At the hotel”).
    - *Team recipe* (for food vocabulary).
    - *Description police* (for physical and personality traits).
    - *Board game* (progress on the board requires the use of vocabulary).
4. **Assessment of vocabulary:**
- Assessment goes beyond traditional tests and is carried out through competitive and collaborative games that provide immediate feedback.
  - Examples of tools:
    - *Kahoot* or *Quizizz* for knowledge checking.
    - *GooseChase* (digital word hunt).
    - *Evaluative skit*: each group prepares a scenario using the new vocabulary.
  - Assessment includes both immediate tests and delayed evaluations in order to measure long-term retention, following the recommendations of Abdelhadi (2020) and Saleh & Althaqafi (2022).

## 5. Results and Discussion

### 5.1. Research Context

The study was conducted on a group of 10 international students enrolled in the Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens during the 2024–2025 academic year. The learners came from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe), with ages ranging from 17 to 41. Most of them had no prior exposure to the Romanian language.

## 5.2. Applied Methodology

During the first semester, vocabulary was taught in accordance with the *Minimalist Description of the Romanian Language* for level A1 (2016), following a methodology structured into four stages: presentation, practice, consolidation, and assessment. Each lexical field was associated with language games, as follows:

- **Days, months, hours:**
  - *Interactive calendar*: learners arrange flashcards with days and months.
  - *Daily schedule*: each student describes what they do on a given day.
  - *Kahoot "What time is it?"*: with questions such as "Is it quarter past ten?"
- **Weather:**
  - *Weather Bingo*: the teacher describes the weather, students mark the image.
  - *Weather journal*: in groups, learners present the forecast for a day.
  - *Memory game*: matching words with weather symbols.
- **Personal information and family:**
  - *Family tree*: groups create a fictitious family.
  - *Personal interview*: learners ask each other questions about personal details.
  - *Guess who I am*: family role labels placed on each student's forehead.
- **Personal characteristics:**
  - *Describe and guess*: one student describes, the others identify.
  - *Description police*: one group describes a "suspect," another recognizes them.
  - *Visual collage*: students receive images of people and select suitable adjectives.
- **Education and professions:**
  - *Role-play "At school"*: teacher and students in a classroom situation.
  - *Profession bingo*: with images and words.
  - *Job fair*: each learner receives a profession and must present themselves.
- **Parts of the body and health:**
  - *Simon says*: "Put your hand on your nose!"
  - *Body puzzle*: completing a silhouette with labels.
  - *Role-play "At the doctor"*: one student as patient, another as doctor.
- **Clothing and accessories:**
  - *Fashion show*: students describe classmates' clothes.
  - *Memory game*: with clothes and accessories.

- *Role-play "At the clothing store."*
- **Housing and household objects:**
  - *Object hunt:* rapid identification in the classroom.
  - *Lexical lotto:* matching picture–word pairs.
  - *Sketch "Spring cleaning."*
- **Food and drinks:**
  - *Role-play "At the shop" or "At the restaurant"*
  - *Team recipe:* learners create a recipe together.
  - *Board game:* progression requires identifying food items correctly.
- **Daily activities and leisure time:**
  - *Charades:* one student mimes the action, the others guess.
  - *Chain stories:* each student adds a sentence with a verb.
  - *Skits:* "An ordinary day of a student."
- **Sports and free time:**
  - *Digital quiz (Kahoot) about sports.*
  - *Sport charades:* "Play tennis without words."
  - *Role-play "In the park or at the gym."*
- **Vacations and transport:**
  - *Role-playing game "At the train station" or "At the hotel."*
  - *Vacation map:* groups plan a trip with destinations.
  - *Digital game "The transport race."*
- **Nature and city:**
  - *City map:* learners locate landmarks.
  - *Role-playing game "At the restaurant" or "At the pharmacy."*
  - *Urban scavenger hunt:* each team receives a list of places/objects.

### 5.3. Results Obtained

Progress was assessed through initial tests, intermediate evaluations, and a final test.

#### 5.3.1. Lexical Progress (initial – final)

Evaluation stage	Receptive vocabulary (average words)	Productive vocabulary (average words)	Observations
Initial test (November)	~80	~40	Limited, fragmented basic lexicon, mostly borrowed from international languages
Intermediate evaluation (December)	~350	~200	Rapid increase through role-play and visual activities

Final test (January)	~600	~420	CEFR A1 objective achieved; significant difference compared to the beginning
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The data presented in the table confirm the positive impact of language games on the process of lexical acquisition at the A1 level. First, lexical progress is evident: from approximately 40 active words in the initial test, students reached over 400 words used productively by the end of the semester. The receptive repertoire expanded to 600 units, which corresponds to the objectives established by the *Minimal Description of the Romanian Language* (2016) for this level.

### ***5.3.2. Lexical Retention (after 4 weeks)***

<b>Type of instruction</b>	<b>Retention rate</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Through language games	~70%	role-play, memory game, bingo, Kahoot
Through traditional exercises (lists, translations)	~55%	sentence completion, simple translations

The analysis of long-term retention shows that vocabulary taught through language games is better retained (approximately 70%) than vocabulary taught through traditional methods (55%). This finding confirms hypotheses from the international literature (Abdelhadi, 2020; Saleh & Althaqafi, 2022), while also validating them in the context of teaching Romanian as a foreign language.

### ***5.3.3. Level of Participation***

<b>Type of activity</b>	<b>Active participation (average % of group)</b>	<b>Observations</b>
Language games	85%	Students engaged, competitive and collaborative spirit
Traditional activities	60%	Lower level of involvement, reduced motivation

Active student participation was significantly higher in the case of games (85%) compared to traditional exercises (60%). The competitive yet friendly atmosphere contributed to constant engagement, even among the more reluctant learners.

### 5.3.4. Observations on Motivation and Anxiety

Indicator	At the beginning of the course	After 3 months of ludic activities
Declared motivation	Medium (6/10)	High (8.5/10)
Language anxiety	High (7/10)	Low (4/10)
Oral participation	Low (40% of group)	High (80% of group)

The average declared motivation score increased from 6/10 to 8.5/10, while language anxiety decreased from 7/10 to 4/10. Oral participation, which was only 40% of the group at the beginning, rose to 80% after three months of ludic activities.

Overall, these results confirm that the systematic integration of language games and gamification has a major effect on the learning process: it accelerates lexical acquisition, enhances retention, stimulates motivation, and reduces anxiety. In addition, it contributes to creating a positive intercultural atmosphere in which students collaborate and communicate with confidence.

### 5.4. Discussion

The results confirm the findings of the specialized literature but also add a practical perspective to the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language. For the 2024–2025 target group, the difference between vocabulary taught through games and that taught through traditional methods was significant, demonstrating the effectiveness of the ludic strategy.

The results must, however, be interpreted with certain limitations in mind. First, **the small sample size** – the study included only 10 students who were present from the first month of the preparatory year. Therefore, the conclusions reflect the progress of this restricted group and cannot be generalized to the entire cohort. This situation was due to the **administrative delays** typical of the preparatory year, as many international students arrive later to classes after completing visa procedures, receiving acceptance letters, and other bureaucratic formalities.

Another aspect relates to the **specific context of the first month**, during which the motivation and involvement of students present on time may have been higher than that of those who joined later. Furthermore, the analysis was limited to a single group, with no possibility of making **comparisons with other cohorts** from previous years or with parallel groups.

At the methodological level, there were also limitations related to the implementation of games. **Not all activities were equally effective for all learners**: introverted students preferred individual games, memory games, and puzzles, while dramatizations and role-plays were more difficult for them to manage. Moreover, **differences in digital competences** influenced participation in online games, with

some students being more reluctant to use interactive platforms. Finally, the teacher experienced the **additional preparation time** required for planning and adapting ludic activities, which may represent an obstacle in contexts with limited resources.

Overall, these limitations do not invalidate the results but highlight that the effectiveness of language games depends on multiple factors: group size and diversity, administrative and organizational context, individual learner profiles, and the resources available to the teacher.

## 6. Conclusions

Teaching vocabulary at the A1 level in Romanian as a foreign language proves to be both a challenge and an opportunity. Our study, carried out with a group of ten international students enrolled in the preparatory year 2024–2025, showed that the integration of language games is not merely a pleasant addition to the lesson but a strategy with visible effects on the process of language acquisition.

At the beginning of the course, students' lexical repertoire was very limited, restricted to a few international words and common greeting formulas. After several months of intensive work, based on organizing vocabulary into lexical fields and on ludic activities, the difference became evident. Words that had seemed difficult to memorize in the first lessons became familiar and were used spontaneously in simple conversations. The playful atmosphere – whether through bingo, role-plays, or digital games – changed the classroom dynamics: students were no longer shy and withdrawn but competitive, eager to participate and interact.

This transformation was reflected not only in the number of words retained but also in learners' attitudes toward learning. Whereas at the beginning anxiety was high and the fear of mistakes hindered communication, after several weeks of ludic activities students began to speak more freely, to collaborate, and even to seek opportunities to use new words outside the classroom. Their motivation increased considerably, and lessons became a space of active engagement and joy in learning.

The results align with what international literature has already highlighted: language games enhance retention, stimulate motivation, and reduce anxiety. However, in the specific context of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, they play an even more important role, as they address the immediate communicative needs of students living in a foreign country, who require practical vocabulary for daily integration.

The main conclusion is that language games and gamification should not be regarded as secondary activities but as a central strategy for vocabulary teaching. They transform the lesson from a mechanical exercise into a lively and memorable learning experience. Moreover, they create a positive intercultural framework where learners' differences become resources for cooperation and dialogue.

Looking forward, this experience opens new perspectives. It would be useful to extend the research to higher levels (A2, B1) to observe how games can support the development of intermediate and specialized vocabulary. Furthermore, a comparison between traditional and digital games could provide additional insights into preferences and effectiveness in multicultural groups.

Overall, the experience of the preparatory year 2024–2025 confirms that language games can become the key to a modern and effective methodology for teaching Romanian as a foreign language. They not only transmit words but also build bridges of communication, confidence, and motivation, elements essential to any authentic learning process.

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# GAMES AS A GATEWAY TO ROMANIAN: BOARD GAMES AND ONLINE ACTIVITIES FOR EXPLORING ROMANIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the use of board and digital games as tools for teaching Romanian as a foreign language in non-formal educational contexts. Drawing on both theoretical insights and practical implementation, the study involved over 500 participants from diverse age groups (4 to 78 years old), including children, teenagers, university students, and seniors. Participants engaged with six different games—ranging from physical matching cards and traditional board games to digital platforms such as Wordwall and Kahoot—designed to promote reading skills, vocabulary acquisition, intercultural awareness, and stimulate motivation for learning. The games specifically targeted key phonological and lexical features of Romanian, such as the unique letters (ă, â, ș, ț) and common digraphs (ce/ci, che/chi, ghe/ghi). Through intercomprehension strategies, learners made cross-linguistic connections between Romanian and Slovene (e.g., ceai/čaj, șuncă/šunka), recognizing shared etymologies and phonetic patterns. Over short sessions (~30 minutes), learners successfully acquired over 50 Romanian words and reported increased interest in pursuing further language study. We expected that the learners would prefer digital tools. Surprisingly, many participants—particularly children accustomed to mobile phones—chose physical games when offered. This preference may reflect school policies restricting device use or the intrinsic appeal of tactile, collaborative play. Overall, the results affirm that both board and online games foster learner engagement, reduce language anxiety, and support vocabulary retention across age groups. Moreover, the activities created inclusive, playful spaces aligned with CEFR's action-oriented approach, where spontaneous interaction and communicative practice emerged naturally. Game-based learning thus proves a valuable method for introducing lesser-taught languages like Romanian, offering learners both linguistic and cultural entry points in a motivating, low-stress environment.*

**Key words:** linguistic games, Romanian as a foreign language, Slovenia, European Researchers' Night

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the integration of educational games into foreign language teaching has gained increasing recognition as a dynamic and student-centered pedagogical strategy. Rooted in the principles of active learning and intrinsic motivation, games have proven to enhance linguistic competence while

simultaneously promoting psychological comfort, social interaction, and cognitive development (Melgani 2016). When embedded thoughtfully into the learning environment, games not only provide joy and amusement but also stimulate meaningful engagement, cooperation, and problem-solving skills essential for modern learners navigating multilingual contexts.

The use of games in language classrooms helps counterbalance the often rigid and artificial nature of formal instruction. As several scholars have observed, traditional language classrooms may frequently resemble industrialized systems—rigid, standardized, and demotivating—especially for learners with limited linguistic background or exposure (Ushioda 2011). Educational games, however, reintroduce spontaneity, interaction, and competition in ways that encourage students to take risks, participate actively, and learn both individually and collaboratively. This approach is especially valuable when teaching less commonly taught languages, such as Romanian, where emotional engagement and motivation can significantly influence learner retention and success.

The conceptual framework of game-based learning is grounded in classical and contemporary game theory. Huizinga (1949) famously defined games as voluntary activities governed by rules, existing within a specific time and space, and pursued for their intrinsic pleasure. Caillois (1994) further distinguished games through six defining features—freedom, separation, uncertainty, unproductiveness, rules, and make-believe—and proposed a taxonomy that includes *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (imitation), and *ilinx* (vertigo). Suits (1978) emphasized that games require the voluntary acceptance of constraints, which paradoxically create meaning through the pursuit of goals under self-imposed limitations. These theoretical foundations are particularly relevant in educational contexts, where designing meaningful learning experiences depends on balancing structure, creativity, and learner autonomy.

In foreign language education, vocabulary acquisition remains a central yet challenging task, especially for beginners. Research suggests that playful activities can serve as effective vocabulary-building strategies by creating emotional and cognitive associations that enhance retention (Clark et al. 2016; Schell 2020). In this respect, games offer more than entertainment—they serve as multimodal tools for scaffolding comprehension, pronunciation, and cultural understanding. Moreover, when designed to incorporate elements of intercomprehension (e.g., leveraging lexical similarities between Romanian and Slovene), games can make language learning more accessible and less intimidating, particularly for beginner learners.

Despite their pedagogical value, not all games are equally effective. As Burgun (2013) warns, games that rely too heavily on either chance or skill can alienate students, either by removing a sense of agency or by reinforcing existing disparities in proficiency. For this reason, game design must carefully balance challenge,

accessibility, and meaningful interaction to ensure that all learners—regardless of their starting point—feel empowered to participate and succeed. In language instruction, this means selecting or designing games where player decisions matter, feedback is immediate, and the learning experience is both inclusive and enjoyable.

This article explores the development and application of a suite of board and digital games designed to support the acquisition of Romanian as a foreign language, particularly among Slovene-speaking learners. Implemented as part of the European project European Researchers' Night – Humanities, That's You! (Noč raziskovalcev – Humanistika, tso si ti!), these activities sought not only to teach linguistic elements but also to foster cultural awareness and metalinguistic reflection. Through a combination of lexical intercomprehension, pronunciation practice, and playful interaction, the project demonstrates how games can serve as a gateway to learning Romanian in a way that is engaging, effective, and learner-centered.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1. Educational Games in Language Learning. Definitions and Components**

Educational games have become a central component in contemporary foreign language pedagogy due to their ability to promote interaction, reduce anxiety, and increase learner engagement (Ibrahim 2017). Games, whether physical or digital, are now recognized as valuable instructional tools capable of enhancing vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and communicative competence in a dynamic and enjoyable environment (Wong, Yunus 2021).

Research emphasizes that educators must thoughtfully select, plan, and integrate games into their language lessons, aligning them with curricular goals, textbook content, and students' developmental levels (Mubaslat 2012). Without careful integration, games run the risk of being perceived as peripheral or superficial activities rather than strategic tools for deeper linguistic engagement.

The term educational game lacks a universally agreed-upon definition, but scholars agree on key characteristics. According to Mubaslat (2012), educational games are structured activities led by a facilitator (teacher or supervisor), tailored to learners' ages, abilities, and learning objectives. Dempsey et al. (1993–94) define games as explicit instructional frameworks involving rules and competition.

An effective educational game should contain six core components (Syukroni 2020): learning goal – aligned with educational outcomes (e.g., vocabulary, grammar); rules – which guide behavior and define boundaries; competition – either against peers, oneself, or a system; challenge – appropriate cognitive difficulty beyond

current levels; imagination – to foster intrinsic motivation and engagement; enjoyment – to sustain interest and reduce learning anxiety.

## **2.2. Games and Motivation**

Numerous studies confirm that the use of game elements in non-game contexts increases both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Şifrar 2023). Intrinsic motivation arises from learners' personal satisfaction, curiosity, and interest in progress; extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is triggered by external rewards like scores or recognition.

In language education, the use of games within the language classes helps learners overcome the fear of failure, particularly in speaking tasks. The game environment shifts focus from perfection to communication, allowing students to experiment with language and recover from mistakes without judgment (Silva 2008).

## **2.3. Physical vs. Online Games in Language Education**

Board games have demonstrated effectiveness in improving vocabulary retention, fluency, grammar, and pronunciation (Wong, Yunus 2021). They provide tactile interaction, real-time social communication, and foster group dynamics in face-to-face classroom contexts. Moreover, physical games encourage spontaneous speech, collaboration, and a playful, low-anxiety atmosphere.

Digital games offer additional advantages such as adaptivity, instant feedback, and remote accessibility. Platforms like Wordwall or other gamified applications (e.g., Kahoot, Quizizz) allow learners to proceed at their own pace, receive immediate corrective input, and practice autonomously (Yousef, Abuhmaid 2023). Online games are especially useful/ helpful for grammar and vocabulary acquisition and can support asynchronous learning, offering opportunities beyond the classroom setting. They also contribute to digital literacy and independent learning strategies.

Despite their differences, blending both formats in a Romanian language curriculum can maximize learning: physical games promote group cohesion and communication, while digital games support individualized practice and motivation.

## **2.4. Pedagogical Benefits of Games in Teaching Romanian**

Although most research has focused on English, Spanish, or French as foreign languages, the pedagogical implications apply to Romanian as well. Games can: facilitate lexical and syntactic acquisition through context-rich, repetitive exposure; support cultural immersion by embedding Romanian customs, idioms, and history in gameplay; foster speaking fluency and reduce anxiety by encouraging low-pressure

oral interaction; enable formative assessment through in-game performance without formal testing stress.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR 2001, CEFR Companion Volume 2020) encourages an action-oriented approach, where learners are seen as *social agents* engaged in meaningful tasks. Games naturally align with this perspective by involving learners in authentic, goal-oriented language use.

### **3. The Use of Educational Games in the Promotion of the Romanian Language in Slovenia: A Case Study within the European Researchers' Night Project**

In recent years, artificial intelligence has sparked both high expectations and widespread enthusiasm. However, these optimistic views have increasingly been tempered by concern and even apprehension. Given the rapid pace and complexity of AI developments, researchers across disciplines are now called upon to interpret and explain these changes to the broader public—particularly to younger generations, who may be both the most vulnerable and the most responsive.

The project European Researchers' Night – Humanities, That's You! (2024–2025) focused on the highly relevant theme of *Human and AI* (Evropske noči raziskovalcev – Humanistika, to si ti! *Človek AI*). It was hosted by the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and supported by nine other faculties and academies of the University of Ljubljana, along with the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU) and the Educational Research Institute. The project explored the role of the humanities in a digitally and technologically transformed society. Bringing together researchers, theorists, and artists, the 2024–2025 edition examined the intersection of science, technology, and the arts to reflect on what defines humanity in today's information and consumer-driven age. Aimed at both academic and general audiences, the project engaged participants of all ages. To increase the visibility and accessibility of scientific work, the program offered a wide array of free public activities, such as workshops, lectures, roundtables, exhibitions, films, and interactive presentations—designed both to engage the public and to support researchers in their professional development.

The Romanian Language Lectorship at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, contributed to the European Researchers' Night broader initiative with the sub-project titled: Games for Learning Romanian: Interactive Board Games vs. Online Games (*Igre za učenje romunščine: Interaktivne družabne igre proti spletnim igram*).

This sub-project investigated the pedagogical potential of language games, with the goal of increasing student participation, reducing learning anxiety, and facilitating the acquisition of Romanian as a foreign language. Within this framework,

the Romanian Language Lectorship developed both physical and digital games, which were integrated into an introductory Romanian language and culture course/workshop. The main objectives were to familiarize participants with the Romanian alphabet, to introduce basic reading skills, and to support the intercomprehension of approximately 100 basic Romanian words.

This initiative contributed to the promotion of the Romanian language in Slovenia across multiple educational levels—from kindergarten to university—as well as among adult learners.

As part of the project, six games were created: four physical board games and two online versions, which digitally replicated the physical games. We used these games in the workshop *Igranje in učenje romunščine (Playing and Learning Romanian)*, conducted between September 2024 and October 2025 in various Slovenian institutions: Najdihojca Kindergarten – 36 participants; Podgrad Primary School, Ilirska Bistrica – 78 participants; Hinko Smrekar Primary School – 16 participants; Jože Moškrič Primary School, Ljubljana – 47 participants; ZLET 2025 Scout Camp (organized by the Scout Association of Slovenia) – 100 participants.

Additionally, the games were presented at the main public events of the European Researchers' Night – Humanities, That's You!, held in September 2024 and 2025 at the Rog Cultural Center in Ljubljana, attracting an estimated total of 500 visitors.

These activities successfully combined educational innovation, language promotion, and public outreach, highlighting the continuing relevance of the humanities and language education in today's digitally mediated world

#### **4. Methodology and Participants**

This study used a mixed-methods exploratory design, combining qualitative and quantitative tools to examine the pedagogical value of physical and digital games in teaching Romanian as a foreign language. The study examined how participants from different age groups and learning environments approached reading in Romanian, built vocabulary, stayed motivated, and connected with cultural aspects of the language.

The study involved a total of 642 individual participants, ranging in age from 4 to 78 years old, drawn from diverse educational contexts and informal learning environments. Participants engaged voluntarily in one or more game-based activities between September 2024 and October 2025, with data collected during workshops, school lessons, scout activities, and public science events.

The research involved a wide range of participants engaging with both physical and digital game formats designed for learning the Romanian language and culture. Participants interacted with all six physical and digital game formats tailored to

different learning needs and contexts. For the youngest group—36 kindergarten children aged 4 to 6— we used physical matching games to introduce basic Romanian vocabulary in a playful and developmentally appropriate way. The board game *Ludo* was played by 71 participants of different ages, offering opportunities for interaction, turn-taking, and culturally contextualized vocabulary practice.

Digital tools also played a central role. The Wordwall platform, featuring online quizzes and matching exercises, received 24 individual responses, in addition to being used in group settings during workshops—reaching approximately 82 learners in total. Kahoot, an interactive quiz platform, was used 35 times, often in collaborative group formats that encouraged discussion and spontaneous language production. Finally, Romania – Crossword Puzzle, focusing on Romanian language and cultural content, was completed 262 times, demonstrating high engagement across age groups and suggesting strong interest in problem-solving tasks embedded with linguistic and cultural challenges. The most successful game was the Card-Based Matching Game, played by almost all the participants.

In most cases, participants were given the option to choose between the physical and digital versions of the same game. In others, they engaged with both formats sequentially, allowing for a comparative perspective on engagement and effectiveness. This dual-mode approach allowed for a comparative understanding of user preferences and learning outcomes across different media.

## 5. Cross-Linguistic Comparison of Grapheme–Phoneme Correspondences in Romanian and Slovene

In order to understand why participants in the Romanian language workshops are able to learn how to read in Romanian in less than thirty minutes, it is essential to present a comparative overview of the Slovene and Romanian alphabets, together with the phonetic values of their letters. This comparison reveals that, with the exception of the sound / $\text{d}\text{z}$ /, all Romanian phonemes have equivalents in Slovene; what differs is primarily the graphic representation of these sounds.

The Slovene alphabet consists of 25 letters. Encyclopedic references—such as the *Slovenski pravopis* (2001) and the *Leksikon SOVA* (2006)—list the alphabet as follows:

**a, b, c, č, ć, d, đ, e, f, g, h, i, j, k, l, m, n, o, p, q, r, s, š, t, u, v, w, x, y, z, ž.** The alphabet includes five vowel letters (**a, e, i, o, u**) and twenty consonant letters. Although the Romanian alphabet contains six additional letters, all Romanian phonemes have equivalents in the Slovenian language.

The main graphic (orthographic) differences between Romanian and Slovenian are observed/appear in the following correspondences: **c/k** (e.g., *coș/koš*),

**ce, ci/ ȃ** (e.g., *ceai/ ȃaj*), **che, chi/ k** (e.g., *chiosc/ kiosk*), **i/ ȃ** (e.g., *jurnal/ ȃurnal*), **ȃ/ Ń** (e.g., *ȃal/ Ńal*), **ȃ/ c** (e.g., *ȃar/ car*). Although the Romanian letters **ȃ** and **ȃ** do not have direct counterparts in the Slovenian alphabet, the phonemes they represent—/ə/ and /i/, respectively—do appear in Slovenian phonology. For instance: **ȃ** corresponds to the mid-central vowel /ə/ as in *Ńel*, **ȃ** corresponds to the close central unrounded vowel /i/ as in *trg*.

Romanian			Slovenian		
LETTER	IPA	EXAMPLES	LETTER	IPA	EXAMPLES
Aa	/a/	<i>mamȃ</i>	Ȃa	/a/	<i>Mama</i>
Ȃȃ	/ə/	<i>mȃr</i>	-	-	( <i>sem</i> )
Ȃȃ	/i/	<i>tȃrg</i>	-	-	( <i>trg</i> )
Bb	/b/	<i>bluzȃ</i>	Ȃb	/b/	( <i>bluzȃ</i> )
-	-	( <i>ceai</i> )	Ȃȃ	/tʃ/	<i>ȃaj, (ȃas)</i>
Cc	/k/ /tʃ/	<i>cocoŃ, ceas, chiosc</i>	Ȃc	/ts/	<i>Car</i>
Dd	/d/	<i>director</i>	Ȃd	/d/	<i>Direktor</i>
Ee	/e/ /je/ /je/	<i>Europa</i>	Ȃe	/e/ /e/ /ə/	<i>Europa</i>
Ff	/f/	<i>frizer</i>	Ȃf	/f/	<i>Frizer</i>
Gg	/g/ /dʒ/	<i>groaznic, ghepard, girafȃ</i>	Ȃg	/g/	<i>grozno, gepard, (ȃirafȃ)</i>
Hh	/h/ ([h], [ç], [x]) (mute)	<i>hotel</i>	Ȃh	/x/	<i>Hotel</i>
Ii	/i/ /j/ /j/	<i>internet</i>	Ȃi	/i/	<i>Internet</i>
Ȃȃ	/i/	<i>Ȃn</i>	-	-	
Jj	/ʒ/	<i>jelu</i>	Ȃj	/j/	( <i>ȃele</i> )
Kk	/k/	<i>kilogram</i>	Ȃk	/k/	<i>kilogram, (kokoŃ, kiosk)</i>
Ll	/l/	<i>leu</i>	Ȃl	/l/ /w/	<i>Lev</i>
Mm	/m/	<i>muzeu</i>	Ȃm	/m/	<i>Muzej</i>
Nn	/n/	<i>nou</i>	Ȃn	/n/	<i>Nov</i>
Oo	/o/ /o/ /o/	<i>obraz</i>	Ȃo	/o/ /o/	<i>Obraz</i>
Pp	/p/	<i>prinȃ</i>	Ȃp	/p/	<i>Princ</i>
Qq	/k/	<i>Quebec</i>	-	-	( <i>Kebek</i> )
Rr	/r/	<i>raȃȃ</i>	Ȃr	/r/	<i>Raca</i>
Ss	/s/	<i>Slovenia</i>	Ȃs	/s/	<i>Slovenija</i>

Șș	/ʃ/	șah	Š, š	/ʃ/	Šah
Tt	/t/	tobogan	Ț, ț	/t/	Tobogan
Țț	/t͡s/	țar	-	-	(car)
Uu	/u/ /w/ /y/	uliță	U, u	/u/	Ulica
Vv	/v/	veveriță	V, v	/v/, /w/	Veverica
Ww	/v/ /w/ /u/	weekend	-	-	(vikend)
Xx	/ks/ /gz/	Alex	-	-	Aleks
Yy	/i/ /j/	yo-yo	-	-	(jojo)
Zz	/z/	zid	Z, z	/z/	Zid
-	-		Ž, ž	/ʒ/	Žirafa

**Table 1. Orthographic and Phonological Correspondences Between the Romanian and Slovenian Alphabets**

## 6. Didactic Games Based on Intercomprehension Between Romanian and Slovene

The foundation of the didactic games developed within the project consists of a carefully selected lexical base of 65 Romanian words that are either phonetically identical or highly similar to their Slovene equivalents. This linguistic proximity facilitates a natural introduction to Romanian for Slovene speakers through intercomprehension.

At the beginning of each workshop, participants are promised that by the end of the activity, they will be able to recognize and understand at least 50 Romanian words—a goal that motivates and empowers them. The lexical set includes terms such as: *apartament/ apartma* (apartment), *avion/ avion* (airplane), *babă/ baba* (old woman), *banană/ banana* (banana), *bancă/ banka* (bank), *bluză/ bluza* (blouse), *cadă/ kad* (bathtub), *cantină/ kantina* (canteen), *ceai/ čaj* (tea), *ceas/ ura* (clock, but *čas* in Slovene means time), *chiosc/ kiosk* (kiosk), *chelnăriță/ kelnarica* (waitress), *ciocolată/ čokolada* (chocolate), *cocoș/ kokoš* (rooster/ găină), *coș/ koš* (basket), *director/ direktor* (director), *document/ dokument* (document), *evident/ evidentno* (obvious), *film/ film* (film), *fotoliu/ fotelj* (armchair), *frizer/ frizer* (hairdresser), *garaj/ garaža* (garage), *girafă/ žirafa* (giraffe), *groaznic/ grozen* (terrible), *gunoi/ gnoj* (garbage), *haide/ aide* (let's go), *hotel/ hotel* (hotel), *inginer/ inženir* (engineer), *internet/ internet* (internet), *leu/ lev* (lion), *limonadă/ limonada* (lemonade), *lopată/ lopata* (shovel), *mamă/ mama* (mother), *muzeu/ muzej* (museum), *nou/ nov* (new), *obraz/ obraz* (face), *operă/ opera* (opera), *poliție/ policija* (police), *poștăriță/ poštarica* (postwoman), *prinț/ princ* (prince), *rață/ raca* (duck), *recepție/ recepcija* (reception),

*șah/ șah* (chess), *școală/ șola* (school), *șofer/ șofer* (driver), *șuncă/ șunka* (ham), *slujbă/ sluzba* (job), *spaghete/ șpageti* (spaghetti), *student/ študent* (student), *taxi/ taksi* (taxi), *tobogan/ tobogan* (slide), *tort/ torta* (cake), *târg/ sejem* (fair), *țar/ car* (king/ tsar), *uliță/ ulica* (alley), *uniformă/ uniforma* (uniform), *veveriță/ veverica* (squirrel), *vin/ vino* (wine), *zebră/ zebra* (zebra), *zid/ zid* (wall).

To practice reading, pronunciation, and vocabulary acquisition, six educational games were created and implemented in the workshops. These games aim not only to teach Romanian vocabulary but also to raise awareness of grapheme-phoneme correspondences and promote metalinguistic reflection (Huțanu, Jieanu 2019).

### **6.1. Card-Based Matching Game**

Objective: Identify graphic and phonetic similarities and differences between Romanian and Slovene words.

Method: Each participant or team of up to four players receives two sets of 20 cards—one set with images, the other with corresponding words. Players must correctly match the images with the corresponding Romanian words. In larger groups, teams compete, and the winner is the first to complete the task accurately. Afterward, participants read the words aloud with the teacher's assistance and discuss pronunciation patterns and reading rules they observed during the game.

### **6.2. Digital Matching Game Using Wordwall**

Objectives: Reinforce reading and comprehension through digital interaction.

Method: 40 Romanian words (including those from the previous game) are uploaded to the Wordwall platform, each associated with an image. Players join via a QR code and must match the images to the correct Romanian word. Depending on age, the number of items per set can be adjusted (4, 10, or 20). The winner is the first to finish the task with no mistakes. At the end, the game coordinator or winner reads the words aloud to reinforce vocabulary and reading fluency.

These two games efficiently introduce grapheme-phoneme correspondences, while also fostering metalinguistic awareness, plurilingual strategies, and learner confidence.

### **6.3. Ludo- Vocabulary Board Game**

Objective: Acquire Romanian vocabulary of Slavic origin.

Method: Participants play in groups of three or four (or one-on-one with the instructor). Each chooses a pawn and rolls a die to move along the board. Upon landing, they must say the Romanian word associated with the image in that space. The winner is the first to reach the end and correctly identify all words encountered.

## **6.4. Reading Game with Flashcards**

Objectives: Practice reading skills and consolidate vocabulary.

Method: Groups of four receive a sealed envelope containing all 65 Romanian lexical cards. Participants have two minutes to familiarize themselves with the words by reading them aloud in their groups. Then, a competition is organized: each group member takes turns reading one card aloud, ensuring they do not repeat any word already read by other teams. This game encourages focused attention and supports active vocabulary retrieval (Jieanu 2020: 48).

## **6.5. Cultural Knowledge Game: *Romania – Crossword Puzzle***

Objective: Learn general knowledge facts about Romania.

Method: Participants receive a worksheet with a crossword puzzle and six multiple-choice questions in Slovene. After selecting the correct answers, they locate them in the crossword grid (horizontal, vertical, or diagonal). Topics include the capital of Romania, language family, national flag colors, the most famous vampire, historical links between Slovenia and Romania (e.g., Transylvania's past under Habsburg rule), and wildlife repopulation (e.g., bears brought to Slovenia from Romania).

## **6.6. Kahoot Culture Quiz**

Objective: Reinforce cultural knowledge through digital gamification.

Method: We entered the same six questions from the crossword into the Kahoot platform. Participants join the quiz by scanning a QR code and then answer the questions in real time. The winners are those who respond both correctly and quickly.

## **7. Discussion**

The results of this study reinforce a growing body of literature that advocates for the integration of game-based learning in foreign language education. The use of physical and digital games to support Romanian language acquisition across a diverse age range proved not only pedagogically effective but also affectively engaging for learners. The data collected through direct participation and feedback demonstrate that game-based activities—whether physical board games, word puzzles, or digital quiz platforms—enhanced learner motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and cultural familiarity.

The variety of participants—ranging from preschoolers (aged 4–6) to older adults (aged 60–78)—allowed the study to explore how educational games function across age groups and learning contexts. The high level of engagement observed among children aged 9–14, who formed the core demographic (382 participants), suggests that this age group is particularly responsive to learning through games. However, adolescents, university students, and senior participants also displayed interest and engagement, especially in intergenerational workshops where collaborative learning occurred naturally.

The diversity of game formats used—such as *Ludo*, a card-based matching game, digital tools like Wordwall and Kahoot, and culturally infused crossword puzzles—enabled learners to approach the Romanian language from multiple angles: spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation, and cultural references. Notably, the rebus puzzles elicited 262 completed responses, indicating sustained interest and a strong cognitive challenge. Similarly, digital tools like Kahoot, which was played 35 times, often in group settings, allowed for immediate feedback and collaborative dynamics that reinforced learning. Although we initially assumed that participants—particularly children accustomed to frequent smartphone use—would prefer digital games over physical ones, the practical implementation of the workshops revealed the opposite. Many participants, including school-aged children, showed a marked preference for physical, card-based games. One possible explanation for this outcome is that mobile phone use is typically restricted within school environments, which may have influenced learners' enthusiasm for non-digital formats. Nevertheless, it was particularly noteworthy that even children who had access to smartphones chose to engage with the physical matching games rather than the equivalent digital version delivered via Wordwall. This unexpected preference highlights the continued pedagogical value and appeal of tactile, face-to-face interaction in educational game design.

A recurring observation across workshops was the participants' tendency to alternate between or combine both analog and digital formats. This alternation/combination highlights a key pedagogical insight: giving learners the autonomy to choose their preferred mode of interaction can foster both motivation and deeper engagement. While digital formats offered flexibility, adaptive pacing, and instant feedback, physical games supported tactile learning, face-to-face communication, and group dynamics—particularly valued in primary and intergenerational contexts.

Beyond the affective and motivational impact, the linguistic outcomes of the game-based activities were also significant. Across all six games presented in the workshops, participants first learned to identify and correctly pronounce the distinctive Romanian graphemes *ă*, *â*, *ș*, *ț*, as well as letter clusters such as *ce*, *ci*, *ge*, *gi*, *che*, *chi*, *ghe*, and *ghi*. Mastery of these features facilitated the development of early decoding skills in Romanian, even among complete beginners.

Participants were then able to match written Romanian words with images, recognizing homophonic correspondences with Slovene (e.g., *ceai/ čaj* [tea], *rață/ raca* [duck], *șuncă/ šunka* [ham]). This awareness triggered linguistic reflection and intercultural comparisons, with many learners expressing surprise that Romanian—despite being a Romance language—shares substantial lexical overlap with Slavic languages. Through intercomprehension-based play, participants acquired over 50 Romanian words in approximately 30 minutes, demonstrating both the efficiency and depth of language input that well-designed games can deliver.

This rapid vocabulary uptake, coupled with the playful and low-pressure learning context, contributed significantly to learner motivation. Participants reported increased curiosity toward Romanian and expressed a desire to continue studying the language. Moreover, they developed a more nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences among languages and language families, enhancing their metalinguistic awareness—particularly relevant for plurilingual learners in Central Europe.

The findings align with earlier research (Šifrar 2023; Wong & Yunus 2021; Ibrahim 2017), emphasizing that educational games reduce anxiety and foster an enjoyable, low-stakes environment conducive to language learning. In line with Huizinga's (1949) and Caillois' (1994) classical game theory, the element of voluntary play appears crucial in creating “authentic” learning moments—where learners engage not out of obligation, but out of genuine interest and curiosity.

However, the study also encountered certain limitations consistent with findings by Silva (2008) and Lah (2019). In some cases, technical constraints (e.g., classroom setup, internet connectivity, or group size) affected the smooth implementation of games, particularly digital ones. Moreover, some participants—especially among older students and teachers—initially expressed concern that game-based learning might trivialize academic content. These perceptions gradually shifted as participants recognized the structured, goal-oriented nature of the games used.

Finally, the comparative approach of offering both physical and digital versions of similar activities revealed that neither format was inherently superior, for the effectiveness depended on context, learner preference, and the quality of facilitation. The equality of digital and physical activities reinforces the argument that games should not be viewed as a one-size-fits-all solution, but as flexible pedagogical tools to be adapted thoughtfully within curricular and extracurricular frameworks.

## 8. Conclusions

The findings of this study underline the pedagogical potential of both physical and digital games in supporting Romanian language acquisition across a wide range

of age groups and learner profiles. Participants not only demonstrated improved decoding skills—particularly regarding distinctive Romanian phonemes and graphemes such as *ă, â, ș, ț*, and consonant clusters (*che, chi, ghe, ghi, ce, ci, ge, gi*)—but also developed intercultural awareness through interlinguistic connections with Slovene and other Slavic languages. This approach enabled the rapid acquisition of over 50 Romanian words in as little as 30 minutes of gameplay, showcasing the efficiency of game-based learning rooted in intercomprehension strategies.

An important and somewhat unexpected result was the clear preference expressed by many learners—especially children—for physical over digital games. Despite assumptions that digital formats would dominate due to young participants' familiarity with screens, hands-on, tangible game formats elicited more engagement. This preference may be attributed to contextual factors (e.g., mobile phone restrictions in schools) but also suggests a broader need for physical interaction, social play, and embodied learning in language education.

Beyond vocabulary acquisition, the games cultivated learner motivation, curiosity, and confidence. Participants reported increased willingness to study Romanian in the future and expressed a deeper awareness of both the similarities and differences between Romance and Slavic languages. Furthermore, intergenerational workshops demonstrated that game-based learning is inclusive, offering meaningful engagement for older adults and university students alongside children and teenagers.

In light of these results, we advocate for the continued integration of educational games—both physical and digital—into language learning curricula. When carefully designed and implemented, such tools not only enhance linguistic competence but also promote social interaction, intercultural dialogue, and learner autonomy. Future research could further explore how hybrid game formats (blending digital and physical elements) might optimize engagement and learning outcomes across varied educational contexts.

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# GAMES AS AN APPETISER FOR LITERARY TRANSLATION IN THE TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETING CLASSROOM

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**Abstract:** *The practice of teaching languages has evolved tremendously over the last century and continues to do so, backed by disciplines such as neuroscience and psychology and catalysed by the spread of new technologies. This is especially evident when we look at methodologies, instructional materials and attitudes in the classroom. On the one hand, teachers and students alike have shifted from an overreliance on textbooks to the occasional use of multimedia materials (at first simply as a form of enrichment in the behavioral sense of the word) and then to employing computers and even mobile devices as a common practice. On the other hand, learning activities have become more interactive, dynamic and, more importantly, student-centred. Language instructors are becoming more and more concerned with students' needs and wants, as well as their motivation. As a consequence, games and gamification have become more common in lessons for students of all ages. The current paper includes a brief case study on the use of games in the Translation and Interpreting classroom, concretely in Romanian language classes, as a means to prepare a literary translation activity in lower level groups (pre- and lower- intermediate), as well as a short inquiry on students views on the utility of such practices.*

**Key words:** translation studies, Romanian, language learning, foreign languages

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## Introduction

At the turn of the millennium, the image of a standard language classroom was quite different from that at the beginning of the twentieth century, due to exciting new developments in language learning theories and teaching, backed by disciplines such as neuroscience and psychology, and this rapid evolution has continued up to the present, catalysed by the spread of new technologies and social changes. This is

especially evident when we look at methodologies, class materials and attitudes in the classroom. Indeed, in just a few decades many classrooms have shifted from an overreliance on books and printed material (occasionally aided by some form of multi-media information, which was simply viewed as an enrichment or entertainment of sorts) to an ever-growing presence of computers and even mobile devices. Learning activities have become more interactive, dynamic and colourful, and, more importantly, student-centred and instructors nowadays are more concerned with students' needs and wants, as well as enhancing their motivation. Thus, games have become a common element in lessons for students of all ages.

The current paper constitutes a case study on the use of games in the Translation and Interpreting classroom, concretely in Romanian language classes, as a means to prepare a literary translation activity in lower level groups (between A2 and B1, according to the European Framework for Languages), accompanied by a short inquiry on students' views on the utility of such practices, carried out prior to the lesson described in this study in the same groups that the lesson was designed for. The paper aspires to contribute to the field of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, by applying principles of game-based learning and creating examples of activities for adults, as well as to the area of translation studies by contributing to the discussion on the kinds of materials and methodologies that would be appropriate for language teaching as a part of *Translation and Interpreting* (hereinafter T&I) university programmes.

A framework for our discussion is provided by means of the literature review below, which connects elements related to second language acquisition and the peculiarities of the language instruction for T&I. In addition, some contextual information regarding the T&I students programme in which the case study was carried out is provided, along with a description of the lesson to which the described game-based activities belong to. The next section describes the methodology used and provides other relevant information about the case study, along with the results and discussion.

## **1. Literature review**

Game-based learning is consistent with Krashen's influential concept of language acquisition which included the *Acquisition-Learning hypothesis* (distinguishing thus between two processes: *acquisition*, a natural and subconscious one and *learning*, a formal, conscious one) and the *Affective Filter hypothesis* which validates the influence of *affective variables* on second language acquisition, which can be applied to any other language acquisition process, such as the acquisition of third and fourth languages by translation students. Therefore, the learners' success or failure is affected by factors such as motivation, self-confidence, anxiety and certain

personality traits (extroversion and introversion).

On the other hand, occasionally working with carefully selected but unadapted literary texts even in lower level course texts allows for the development of language skills that go basic language for social interactions, in line with Jim Cumming's language skill model (2000), which distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP). This model uses a striking metaphor by describing languages as icebergs, which have a small visible tip (BICS abilities and knowledge: social vocabulary, familiar contexts, general language, social interactions) and a larger, hidden part (CALP), applicable to the T&I Romanian learners in the following ways: specialised vocabulary (e.g: literary, medical, legal, etc.), analysis, translation and interpreting tasks, use of academic language in the classroom, aiming for higher registers and concepts from other fields of knowledge (that imply multiple levels of cognitive processing).

### **1.1. Gamification and Game-Based Learning**

Games can be used at any stage of a lesson (lead-in, content development, skill practice, review, etc.) and are usually employed in order to promote interaction or student involvement, attract attention to certain language elements and tend to yield positive results because of triggering emotion and drawing students' attention. They may introduce learning goals, specific contents, practical language, or even elicit feedback from learners. The complexity of the games used (which does not have to be in any way correlated with students' language levels or ages) can range from very simple to intricate activities. The advantage of play in the classroom (and other life-like activities simulated during lessons, such as contextualised dialogues that require a problem to be solved through communication) is that they have the potential of re-activating skills and prompting behaviours that are otherwise dormant in more passive formats such as lectures: they foster problem solving, competition and many more. These elements engage students and boost motivation, which renders games quite valuable from a pedagogical standpoint.

However, it might be useful at this point to distinguish between *gamification* and *game-based learning*, which can be easily confused (Moore-Russo, D.; Wiss, A., & Grabowski, J.: 2017). The first is the enrichment of traditional incorporation of game elements such as score systems, team-names, turn-taking, badges and so forth into traditional and existing learning activities for the purposes of fostering motivation and pupil engagement. Thus, a set of common activities such as grammar exercises or reading comprehension activities can be *gamified* by means of a prize, badge system or diploma, which rewards learners after completing the task or achieving a certain score and can even bring about competition or a sense of comradery. Game-based

learning, on the other hand, requires language instructors to create class activities with game characteristics and principles, turning any exercise into a game in itself.

Authors like Vandercruysse, Vandewaetere, & Clarebout (2012) remind us that most games include at least some of the following elements: a set of rules, a clear goal, competition, problem solving, a defined type of interaction and feedback, a story and fun. To make a game pedagogical, teachers should select those elements that support their intended learning objectives for the lesson.

## **1.2.The Translation and Interpreting (T&I) classroom**

Students who are enrolled in T&I academic programmes have been examined, mostly because translation and interpreting academic programmes are, themselves, a novelty of the twentieth century, despite the documented existence of translators and interpreters throughout history (sometimes trained and knowledgeable and others forced by circumstances to assume this role).

In recent decades, discussions around the teaching and study of English as a foreign language, it has been argued that future translator and interpreter's learning needs are not the same as those of general learners, but rather closer *English for Specific Purposes* Carrasco Flores (40-47) and therefore should benefit from materials focused on the target situations, as language instructors should create materials adapted to the specific needs of students (39-44). More than a decade earlier, Cañado and Almagro, had summarised the main differences between *English for General purposes* and *English for Specific purposes* by highlighting the high motivation of the learners and the connection between the academic experience and the workplace context. Therefore, it seems only logical to extrapolate these observations to any language taught in a T&I programme, including *D languages*, despite the little attention and actual classroom time they typically receive. If we connect these observations with Krashen's guidelines, we can further infer that the so-called *comprehensible input* should be as contextualised as possible, which makes standard language textbooks or introductory language courses seem quite limited if the aim is to train potential translation professionals. Furthermore, bearing in mind the aforementioned analogy to *languages for specific purposes*, authors like Hutchinson and Waters characterise the latter not as "product", but "an approach" (quoted by Carrasco Flores 41). Cook, a researcher who focuses on language teaching methodologies, confirms this view (325-43) and nuances the difference between internal and external goals for language teaching ( the first being more related to the educational aims of the class, such as fostering thinking skills and communication goals and the latter more connected to the uses of language outside the classroom, like as providing concrete information in a specific context). In other words, it is important for teachers in more specialised courses to have both an instrumental view of language learning ( for non-linguistic goals, the achievement of 'real world' and professional objectives

by the learner by using specific linguistic competences), while in a general language course the goals are generally linguistic (e.g. the development of oral competence or a wide range of vocabulary)

## 2. Context

### 2.1. The programme and students

We move on to providing some context about the students and programme whom the survey included in this paper was applied to and for whom the lesson and game-based learning samples described were designed. The students are Spanish residents and nationals, all of whom are native or bilingual speakers of Spanish and some even in Catalan and Valencian. They are enrolled in Romanian courses as part of their Translation and Interpreting studies at the University of Alicante. The 4-year programme includes 4 languages, as anticipated in the introductory section: an *A language* (Spanish or Catalan), a *B language* (English, French or German), a *C language* (again English, French or German) and finally, a *D language* (which can be chosen from the following: Romanian, Russian, Arabic, Chinese or Italian). Romanian has been available as a *D language* since 2005. For the *D language* courses, groups are constituted exclusively on the basis of enrollment and no placement test is required. In the current decade, Romanian groups have typically had an average of 10- 20 students a year. The programme includes six consecutive subjects which are available (distributed over to six semesters), organised into 2 sets of courses: mandatory *Language Courses* (1-3) and optional *Language and Translation* courses. Although the six subjects are not formally linked to levels established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), we will reference such levels in this article for descriptive purposes. Statistically speaking, the presence of second generation migrant students from (at least partially) Romanian-speaking backgrounds is common enough but not usually representative in numbers, as 1-2 such students may enroll in each group (with the exception of the academic years between 2021 and 2023 when there has been none). Their participation will naturally contribute to the existence of different initial levels as well as different learning needs. For these Romanian-speaking students some priorities observed in the classroom and discussed in other articles are: enhancing vocabulary, creating a framework of grammar knowledge, learning to use different registers, avoiding and correcting Spanish calques/loan translations and addressing misperceptions of their own level and abilities).

Using the concepts detailed in the literature review, we can state that classroom language practice in Romanian classes should include *meaningful interaction* (Krashen's language theory) which comes closer to the realities of the T&I

profession, in any possible way (by simulating translation tasks, mediation using written texts, reading and writing tasks that are conducive to more complex competences relevant to the profession, etc.) carefully select texts, perhaps even avoiding that certain contents that are too general or are not particularly relevant or helpful with regards to translation training goals, all the while also considering measures that can minimise anxiety situations. Aware of the fact that usually learners belonging to the same group or course cannot all be at the same level of linguistic competence at specific moment in time, Krashen proposes that natural communicative input is the key to designing a language syllabus, which should provide each learner with added content or knowledge, in accordance with their current stage of linguistic competence.

Also, following the line of the complex learning needs of future translators we can discuss accompanying writing skills and reading comprehension (two of the four pillars of standard language courses nowadays) by grammar and vocabulary notions that foster quick text analysis and original translation solutions when translating, as well any other elements or practices that promote specific skills for T&I, which range from research skills to the ability of easily grasping concepts belonging to other or new areas of knowledge and being exposed to a wide variety of text types, writing styles and topics even in lower level courses. Traditional approaches to *D languages* in the programme in question usually devote the first 3 semesters (language courses 1-3) to contents and activities meant to ensure the acquisition of BICS skills (with an expectation of the B1 level as the maximum level), whereas the following 3 semesters (language and translation courses 1-3) allow for an evolution towards the acquisition of CALP (and require an *upper intermediate* level or, whenever possible, an *advanced* level, i.e. B2-C1). Ironically, given the structure of the translation studies to which the students in the groups belong, they are expected to develop CALP at the end of six semesters in which they have four hours of language training on a weekly basis (compared with five years as traditionally believed). This, of course, constitutes an additional challenge for both students and instructors and can only be tackled with additional effort and individual work from learners (which is not always something teachers can count on). In addition, we could speculate that university students possess a certain "basic" knowledge and understanding of certain specialised concepts belonging to fields such as science, law and institutions, and so on. However, even with such optimistic premises in mind, the project is still didactically challenging.

Lastly, in a previous study we have determined that our students typically perceive the following aspects as strengths or advantages when studying Romanian: Latin-based vocabulary, similar sentence structure to Spanish and Catalan/Valencian and similar morphology in general (verb tenses, two common genders and etc.)

## 2.2. The lesson design

The present case study focuses on a lesson built around a literary translation task in a lower level group of Romanian learners, which required an adapted approach due to the following reasons, which will be detailed below:

- a) low language level and heterogenous progress and language development per skills.
- b) the presence of "aparent native/bilingual students".
- c) The unusual nature and complexity of the task compared to the rest of the previous assignments.
- d) The risk of illicit practices, such as the use of automatic translation tools and artificial intelligence.

With regards to the previous list, we need to elaborate on each item, starting with the issues regarding the heterogeneous student population and their level of Romanian at the time the lesson was to be carried out. Firstly, the students belonged to groups enrolled in *Language* courses (done in the first three semesters of the programme), which corresponds to a language curriculum no higher than B1 (in reality a range between a low A2 and B1 levels), therefore, not enough for lengthy or elaborate reading comprehension exercises and translation assignments (or in other words, insufficient for texts requiring CALP language skills). Secondly, the groups contained several students of Romanian descent who had never studied Romanian in a formal setting but spoke it at home (5 in total, approximately a third of the analysed population) and can generally be characterised by a BICS-like dominion of the language. As can be expected, previous class activities had demonstrated that this segment of the student population displayed a higher language level compared to their Spanish peers in general, especially in terms of comprehension and natural communication. On the other hand, certain peculiarities must be noted, for instance: a relatively reduced academic or "intellectual" vocabulary and, consequently, difficulties in reading comprehension if the topics or concepts were more complex than typical B1 texts, flawed writing (grammar and spelling mistakes) and a tendency to loan translations and Spanish-sounding structures and expressions. In a nutshell, these students generally fall under the category of fluent BICS language users, lacking a certain proficiency and not attaining CALP levels.

At the same time, regarding the final task, it was part of a real translation order which accompanied a university project involving visual arts and literature and it was meant as a preview of sorts for future courses (namely the *Language and Translation* series) and a challenge for all students due to both the literary nature of the text and vocabulary employed (which included words and nuances that were not quite accessible in their own language). In other words, it was not a typical activity and, therefore, designed as a form of enrichment for the module. Moreover, it would be the students' first encounter with a formal *reverse translation* (also known as *back*

*translation*) assignment in Romanian classes, which is usually intimidating for students, as it involves translating from Spanish (their native/everyday language) to the target language. In addition and not to be ignored, there was a real concern that, given the obvious complexity of the task at hand, the possibility of it being carried out individually in class or at home without prior preparation and class aid could have involved a high risk of illicit practices (which have become more and more common in universities everywhere), such as the use of automatic translation or AI tools, which would automatically sabotage the whole endeavour.

Therefore, **the following decisions were made:**

- 1.the preparation of the final tasks would require clarifying the topic and meaning of the literary text
- 2.the advanced or interesting vocabulary used in the original Spanish text would be discussed and worked on previously, with the help of "licit" translation tools and resources, such as recommended monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, synonym lists or translation forums
- 3.the use of AT and AI tools will be guided (recommended only for specific short structures and after steps 1 and 2) and some ethical considerations will be made (copyright, privacy, student and translator's ethics, etc.).

As a consequence **the structure of the lesson** became clear:

**(I) Introduction to the topic** ((issues related to the LGBT community) **and context** of the original text, in this case a poem (real university project involving visual arts and literature) by means of a group discussion and preview of the text in question while scanning for key vocabulary related to the topic (carried out in Romanian with the exception of very specific clarifications).

**(II) Games based on advanced or interesting words in the source text** ( previously selected by the teacher) **meant to elicit possible translations and/or definitions** of these words in Romanian

**(III) Reading comprehension:** reading the source text and discussing the possible meaning and intentions (in Romanian), as well as anticipating main translation difficulties (most likely lexical)

**(IV) Games meant to help build a vocabulary bank in Romanian** that would be useful in the translation process

**(V) Translation, stage 1** (creating parallel variants, in groups or pairs, ideally mixed pairs in terms of language level)

**(VI) Discussion** (based on the drafts produced): identifying mistakes or confusions in each variant, disregarding inadequate terms, discuss difficulties encountered, assessing textual properties of the target texts produced and discussing whether the texts obtained are readable and can stand alone)

**(VII) Translation, stage 2** (discussing available options and decisions taken by each team/pair, comparing alternate translations of certain structures, proposing new solutions where possible and creating a final group translation to be provided as their contribution to the project.

In terms of the games used, all of them were to be played in pairs or teams and their content and goals are detailed in the table below:

<p>Games based on <b>advanced or interesting words in the source text</b> meant to elicit <b>possible translations</b> or definitions in Romanian</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Online game: <i>Wheel of fortune</i>- game created on <a href="https://spintthewheel.app/">https://spintthewheel.app/</a> using a pre-selected list of words. Students take turns in translating or defining the words assigned by the game</li> <li>➤ Game using paper-support : <i>Puzzle</i> - students must match words written on small paper cards in Spanish and Romanian (round 1: possible equivalents in the two languages and round 2: opposites in Romanian)</li> </ul>
<p>Games for <b>building a potentially useful vocabulary bank in Romanian (synonyms, derived words, etc.)</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Online game: word search in Romanian based on a pre-set lists prepared by the teacher on <a href="http://educaplay.com">educaplay.com</a></li> <li>➤ Game using paper-support : <i>Puzzle</i> - students must match words with prefixes and suffixes, creating derivations belonging to same word family</li> </ul>

Classroom observation during and after the game-based activities confirmed an increased sense of motivation and engagement of the students and also a positive change in the pace of the class as a whole.

### 3. The study carried out

As mentioned in the previous sections of the paper, the article includes a brief study on student perception regarding the use of games in the Translation and Interpreting classroom, concretely in Romanian language classes as a means to prepare a literary translation assignment in lower level groups (pre- and lower- intermediate), carried out with on the same population to which the afore-mentioned lesson was taught, prior to the actual

didactic activities. The aim of the study was to acquire insight into students' views on this kind of didactic tool in order to have a broader perspective on their viability.

### 3.1. Methodology

The present study has used the quantitative method, relying on a survey administered prior to the classroom activities mentioned in this article, administered to 13 students (belonging to two different groups, whose levels and curriculums are consecutive in the programme). As a peculiarity, 5 of the 13 participants were second generation migrants, i.e. Romanian students born and or raised in Spain, but it was considered that this was not a reason to exclude them from the study as they possess limited knowledge and are in little contact with the academic and literary world in Romania or Moldova. In fact, it is often typical for this type of students to enrol in the courses in order to (re)connect with the Romanian language and culture. The purpose of the survey was to investigate the students' opinion and with regards to the utility of games in the T&I classroom, in general, and in Romanian classes, in particular and their attitude towards such a proposal before actually putting the planned activities in practice. In addition, two of the questions aimed to detect whether pupils identified literature as a meaningful type of content or topic when it came to learning grammar and vocabulary. The surveys included statements and questions in Spanish (also displayed on the board in Romanian), which respondents had to answer using multiple choice answers (first set of two questions) or mark according to a Likert scale (second set of five), anonymously online (using a Google Forms link).

As follows, we include the survey questions and statements in the two available variants, as well as their translation to English, with the mention that the questions referring to the type of courses in which frequent games may be employed did not include the subject matters related to interpreting, which have been left out on purpose due to their already interactive and practical nature:

RO	ES	EN
<p><b>RO</b></p> <p>1.Care din următoarele subiecte ar fi practic pentru a exersa sau învăța noțiuni de gramatică prin diverse activități? (este posibil mai mult de un răspuns) <i>cultură și artă, știri, literatură, tehnologie, altul (specifică)</i></p> <p>2.Care din următoarele subiecte ar fi practic pentru a exersa sau învăța vocabularul tipic pentru</p>	<p><b>ES</b></p> <p>1.¿Cuál de los siguientes temas sería útil para practicar o aprender conceptos gramaticales a través de diversas actividades? (puedes elegir más de una respuesta) <i>cultura y arte, noticias, literatura, tecnología, otro (especifica)</i></p> <p>2.¿Cuál de los siguientes temas sería útil para practicar</p>	<p><b>EN</b></p> <p>1.Which of the following topics would be useful for practicing or learning grammar concepts through various activities? (You may choose more than one answer.) <i>Culture and art, news, literature, technology, other (please specify)</i></p> <p>2.Which of the following topics would be useful for</p>

<p>nivelul acestei grupe? <i>cultură și artă, știri, literatură, tehnologie, otro (specifică)</i></p> <p>3. Ești de acord cu următoarea afirmație? "Jucarea unui joc tematic în fiecare săptămâna ar fi utilă pentru cursurile de română ca limba D" <i>Extrem, Moderat, Deloc</i></p> <p>4. Ești de acord cu următoarea afirmație? "Jucarea unui joc tematic în fiecare săptămâna ar fi utilă pentru lecțiile de la limbile A, B sau C" <i>Extrem, Moderat, Deloc</i></p> <p>5. Ești de acord cu următoarea afirmație? "Jucarea unui joc tematic în fiecare săptămâna ar fi utilă pentru cursurile de traducere? (directă, inversă, specializată)": <i>Extrem, Moderat, Deloc</i></p> <p>6. Ești de acord cu următoarea afirmație? "Jucarea unui joc tematic în fiecare săptămâna ar fi utilă pentru cursurile mai teoretice" <i>Extrem, Moderat, Deloc</i></p> <p>7. Ești de acord cu următoarea afirmație?: "Jocurile pot fi utile ca activități de învățare la cursuri universitare, în general" <i>Extrem, Moderat, Deloc</i></p>	<p>o aprender el vocabulario típico del nivel de este grupo? <i>cultura y arte, noticias, literatura, tecnología, otro (especifica)</i></p> <p>3. ¿Estás de acuerdo con la siguiente afirmación: "Jugar a un juego temático cada semana sería útil para las clases de rumano como lengua D". <i>Totalmente de acuerdo, Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo, Totalmente en desacuerdo</i></p> <p>4. ¿Estás de acuerdo con la siguiente afirmación: "Jugar a un juego temático cada semana sería útil para las clases de lenguas A, B o C". <i>Totalmente de acuerdo, Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo, Totalmente en desacuerdo</i></p> <p>5. ¿Estás de acuerdo con la siguiente afirmación?: "Jugar a un juego temático cada semana sería útil para las clases de traducción (directa, inversa, especializada)". <i>Totalmente de acuerdo, Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo, Totalmente en desacuerdo</i></p> <p>6. ¿Estás de acuerdo con la siguiente afirmación?: "Jugar a un juego temático cada semana sería útil para los cursos más teóricos (por ejemplo)" <i>Totalmente de acuerdo, Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo, Totalmente en desacuerdo</i></p> <p>7. ¿Estás de acuerdo con la siguiente afirmación?: "Los</p>	<p>practicing or learning vocabulary typical of this group's level? <i>culture and art, news, literature, technology, other (specify)</i></p> <p>3. Do you agree with the following statement?: "Playing a themed game each week would be useful for Romanian as a D language classes". <i>Strongly agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Strongly disagree</i></p> <p>4. Do you agree with the following statement?: "Playing a themed game every week would be useful for language classes A, B, or C." <i>Strongly agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Strongly disagree</i></p> <p>5. Do you agree with the following statement?: "Playing a themed game every week would be useful for translation classes? (direct, reverse, specialized)." <i>Strongly agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Strongly disagree</i></p> <p>6. Do you agree with the following statement?: "Playing a themed game each week would be useful for the most theoretical courses (for example)." <i>Strongly agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Strongly disagree</i></p>
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	juegos pueden ser útiles como actividades de aprendizaje en los cursos universitarios, en general". <i>Totalmente de acuerdo, Ni de acuerdo ni en desacuerdo, Totalmente en desacuerdo</i>	7. Do you agree with the following statement?: "Games can be useful as learning activities in university courses in general." <i>Strongly agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Strongly disagree</i>
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### 3.2. Results and discussion

The results of the survey are detailed as follows, along with observations on the answers obtained.

The first 2 questions attempted to check whether, when presented with a variety of topics, students identify literature as useful for language practice and this was confirmed by a majority of the answers: for Q1 (related to grammar learning and practice), an overwhelming 12 students included literature in their choice while for Q2 (focused on vocabulary) 9 (out 13) did so. Therefore, this feedback highlights the value of literature as a source of language learning in the students's minds.

QUESTION 1 (USEFUL TOPICS/ GRAMMAR)	ANSWER	No.	QUESTION 2 (USEFUL TOPICS/ VOCABULARY)	ANSWER	No.
	LITERATURE (YES)	12		LITERATURE (YES)	9
	LITERATURE (NO)	1		LITERATURE (NO)	4

The following three questions (Q3-5) inquired on the students' perception of weekly games being a useful practice in their lessons. In Romanian classes this approach was strongly confirmed by a majority of 10 students, whereas for the main languages they are specialised in (for example *Spanish, English, French*) this idea was strongly supported by 9 students. The same number for strong agreement is replicated when asked about translation classes. Interestingly enough, this latter category is also characterised by almost a quarter of the participants disagreeing with the utility of frequent games during this particular type of course (usually taught in two sessions, one being a lecture devoted to theoretical concepts and translation theories and the other one consisting in a translation workshop, at the University in question).

QUESTION 3 (WEEKLY GAMES/USEFUL FOR ROMANIAN CLASSES)	ANSWER	No.	%
	Strongly agree (1)	10	77
	Neither agree nor disagree (2)	3	23
	Strongly disagree (3)	0	0

QUESTION 4 (WEEKLY GAMES/USEFUL FOR A, B o C LANGUAGES)	ANSWER	No.	%
	Strongly agree (1)	9	69
	Neither agree nor disagree (2)	4	31
	Strongly disagree (3)	0	0

QUESTION 5 (WEEKLY GAMES/USEFUL FOR TRANSLATION CLASSES)	ANSWER	No.	%
	Strongly agree (1)	9	69
	Neither agree nor disagree (2)	1	8
	Strongly disagree (3)	3	23

Although for language courses both results were favourable to games as a didactic tool of frequent use, a question arises: why is there a slight difference between their *D language* (in this case Romanian) and their *A, B* and *C* languages? This distinction may be influenced by the numbers of courses offered for each category (and implicitly, hours) as *D languages* are only granted one subject per semester (4 hours weekly) and studied later. Therefore, we may speculate that the first and more dominating languages are perceived by the students as somewhat more serious and important (compared to the *D language*) and, therefore, less compatible with a game-based approach. This seems to be reinforced by similar numbers for *translation courses* (available for combinations of those main languages). Lastly, coming back to *language courses*, if we admit that, by the time our undergraduates start studying their *D language* as *beginners*, they are already *intermediate* or *advanced* in the other foreign languages in their profile, especially if these are commonly studied in schools (like English and French), it may be that games are likely considered less effective for those higher levels.

The next set of questions were more general, referring to the applicability of games in more theoretical courses and in university teaching, in general. Frequent games still appear to be quite welcomed for theoretical contents, but this attitude is even more obvious when applied to university studies in general.

QUESTION 6 (WEEKLY GAMES/USEFUL FOR THEORETICAL CLASSES)	ANSWER	No.	%
	Strongly agree (1)	10	77
	Neither agree nor disagree (2)	3	23
	Strongly disagree (3)	0	0

QUESTION 7 (GAMES/USEFUL FOR UNIVERSITY COURSES)	ANSWER	No.	%
	Strongly agree (1)	12	92
	Neither agree nor disagree (2)	1	8
	Strongly disagree (3)	0	0

## Conclusions

The answers collected from the survey administered conveys the idea is frequent games is consistently welcome by more than two thirds of the participants in all the course types (language, translation, theoretical courses) taught in the Translation and Interpreting classroom, except for the Interpreting courses, which have been purposefully left out of the survey due to their already interactive and

practical nature. The student responses seem to reveal a positive attitude towards game-based learning and anticipate the impact of these activities on their motivation and focus on the translation task.

As the survey also included two questions related to the use of literature in Romanian classes, it can be said that this feedback demonstrated that students actually acknowledge the value of literature as a source of language learning.

Classroom observation during and after the game-based activities confirmed an increased sense of motivation and engagement of the students and also a positive change in the pace of the class as a whole, as well as the success of these activities in preparing the student for the actual reading and translation tasks, both mentally (by providing focus and practical language tools) and emotionally, as the assignment did not seem to create a sense of stress among the students.

Regarding the introduction of unadapted literary texts for reading and translation in lower level groups classroom observation seems to suggest it is a successful approach, when aided by certain adaptations and preparation activities meant to reduce pressure, enhance motivation and bridge the gap between the students' current level of language development and a complexities of literary texts. For such purposes, game-based lead-in activities appear to both be favourably received by the students (as shown by the survey answers collected) and represent an effective solution. Finally, it is our hope that literary translation tasks, aided by game-based learning may provide students with new learning opportunities and enhanced motivation so as to direct the on their path of transformation from an *outsider* to the profession (as general language learner or, in a few cases, (quasi)native speaker or (quasi)bilingual speakers who have never studied the language in a formal and structured setting), operating at a superficial level of the language (social and familiar interactions) to an *insider*, meaning an empowered professional for whom Romanian is a potential working language.

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## ANNEXES :

### INFORMATION AND MATERIALS USED IN THE GAMES:

➤ <https://es.educaplay.com/recursos-educativos/25827374-cuvinte-de-limbaj-literar.html>)

➤ WORDLISTS:

1. haber	1. gol
2. hueco	2. insondabil
3. insondable	3. constrâns
4. asomarse	4. a se uita
5. constreñir	5. configurație
6. recoveco	6. ascuns

7. disyunción	7. întortocheat
8. abocada	8. deformat
9. cobijar	9. disjunçie
10. triangulo escaleno	10. limită

- Source text (pending publishing as part of the *Escridar* project, by the University of Alicante)

### I. POEMA SOBRE EL PROYECTO BIND, DE LYDIA PLAZA

*La saeta lo traspasará, atravesará su cuerpo; la punta  
reluciente saldrá por su hiel.*

*(Job 20:25)*

*dentro del vacío hay huecos  
insondables*

*asómate  
a la arquitectura constreñida  
de mi columna*

*la configuración de un*

*cuerpo - recoveco  
una disyunción*

*abocada a los límites*

*con / tener o trans / figurar*

*pueden ser las manos un refugio?  
bésame el costado y  
cobija este triangulo escaleno  
atravesado en dos*

Play and Society:  
Cultural, Therapeutic and Political  
Dimension



# THE HISTORY OF STUDYING PLAY AND POPULAR CULTURE OF CHILDHOOD IN ROMANIAN ETHNOLOGY

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**Abstract:** *This study aims to join ongoing personal research in the field of popular culture for children, conducted over the years, by making known to readers and, equally, to specialists a category of folklore with genuine longevity and vitality within the perimeter of folkloric manifestations. The investigation of the play elements in children's folklore proves prolific through original, perpetual creation and through the varied expression found in children's games. The work synthesizes a history of these investigations in Romanian ethnology, which, of course, has long borrowed the major influences of research and reflection from various cultural milieus, from Europe and beyond. Play and childhood are notions so closely linked that we cannot think of one without correlating it with the other. Adult life is defined by professional occupations; that of a child is determined by play. Play is an activity whose motivation and fulfillment lie within itself. Unlike work, it does not aim to achieve material or spiritual goods (although it sometimes does), and unlike learning, it does not explicitly seek to acquire new knowledge—though this can also occur in many cases. Play is the defining activity for the child. With somewhat less frequency and somewhat different significance, play is also present in adulthood.*

**Key-words:** play, popular culture, childhood, Romanian Ethnology.

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When Friedrich Schiller tied the full meaning of the word “man” to the activity of play, he had in view the pure, natural manifestation of the human being in relation to the surrounding environment<sup>1</sup>. Johan Huizinga, highlighting the link between play and poetry, shows that play is an action that unfolds within limits of place, time, and meaning, within an orderly framework, according to rules accepted freely and outside the sphere of material necessity. The spirit of play is that of distraction and ecstasy, sacred or merely festive, regardless of whether play is devotion or

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schiller : *Briefe über ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen. In Werke, XX, Philosophische Schriften*, Weimer, H. Bohlens, 1982, p.54

amusement. The action is accompanied by tension and elevation and brings with it mirth and relaxation. From this sphere of play are seen to belong all activities of poetic creation: the metrical or rhythmic division of spoken or sung words, the discovery of fitting rhymes or assonances, the concealment of meaning, the artistic construction of the phrase. The correlation between poetry and play does not refer only to the external form of speech; it equally concerns the forms of imagination, its motives, and their cloaking in expression.

For the child, the success of the play it proposes is of utmost importance. Hence the child trains all its physical, intellectual, and affective possibilities within play. Consequently, play has indispensable instructive and educational contributions. It is used as a form of organizing the learning process in kindergarten and even at subsequent levels of education; thus it constitutes an essential component that generates or integrates children's folklore.

The origin and classification of games have concerned many specialists, but a universally accepted classification has not been reached due to the distinctive approaches to this fascinating activity of the child. Depending on the degree of adult intervention in organizing and enhancing the educational influence of play, one can distinguish: spontaneous games, games initiated by children, drill or functional play, symbolic or creative play, rule-based games, construction games, and didactic games.

Closely linked to children's games is the cultural component of these games, and, insofar as this component is popular, we can associate the games with children's folklore. The participants in the games are, par excellence, children. Their play is supported by the text associated with it. If we subject play to a series of transformations to move from surface to depth, we see that it involves profound meanings. We can thus comprehend the mechanism of play and its function in affirming the norms of childhood existence, norms that must be reaffirmed at each significant moment. We can thus understand the true meaning of play.

The first impression that children's folklore generates is tied to its extraordinary purity. The memory of childhood games accompanies a person throughout life. Alexandru Odobescu expressed himself, in this sense, without reservation:

O! old customs and old songs of childhood! what sweet charm you embody in your naive expressions! the mind of man, familiarized with you from infancy, seems to bathe, upon hearing you, in its primitive innocence. You are, for us, gentle memories that revive youth in the hearts! For the people you are the flower of remembrance!<sup>2</sup>

The repertory of this sector of popular culture is rich and varied, and although we record certain peculiarities connected with the status of different genres or

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<sup>2</sup> Alexandru I. Odobescu : *Prefață* la vol. G. Dem Teodorescu, *Încercări critice asupra unor credințe, datine și moravuri ale poporului român*, Tipografia Petrescu – Conduratu, București, 1874, pp. V - VI

regional variants, it integrates harmoniously into the whole of our popular culture. The unusual elements and the numerous motifs that characterize different creations in children's games best highlight the creative potential of performers within the studied space, marking, on one hand, its conservatism and archaicism, and on the other hand, demonstrating openness to innovation.

Evaluated in close relation to play and spontaneous play creation, children's folklore bears the imprint of age-specific characteristics in the structure and form of oral play creation. As a form of expression generated by the need for activity, play constitutes the principal means by which children approach the surrounding reality. Solidarity with the surrounding space is intense in the child; the sense of belonging to nature represents a certainty. The child has no prejudices, does not trouble the mind with questions, and lives a living reality of the human-nature relationship. Nature reveals itself gradually to the child, who, from the youngest age, establishes a close contact between his existence and the given natural space.

The safeguarding of childhood is not limited to researching and "photographing" the smallest details of children's manifestations in situations created by themselves, but also to promoting freedom of expression of play needs. The necessity of play is the "only modality" of distancing from everything that in current life means fixed place, dependence, regulation... aiming at the imperative of freedom of manifestation.<sup>3</sup> This reflex is common to all children; it is a constant of childhood.

Anton Maria del Chiaro, Brâncoveanu's secretary, struck by the resemblance between some pieces of the repertoire of local children and those in Italy, wrote in 1718:

Let it not seem superfluous to the reader that I describe the children's games of the Wallachs, for in them you will see another proof that they are the descendants of the ancient colonists left by Trajan after the conquest of Dacia, and who have transmitted to the generations, until today, the same games such as: the ball, the spinning top, the nuts, 'buzzing', horses, the seesaw, the blindfolded one, and others, all used in their season. The children also have other Turkish games, learned from the children of Turkish merchants settled in Wallachia.<sup>4</sup>

Also in the eighteenth century, Franz Joseph Sulzer, in his work (history contested), leaves several interesting ethnological details useful for future ethnology and folklore research, including references to children's games<sup>5</sup>. The work is regarded by Anca Goția as the most significant achievement in the field of children's

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<sup>3</sup> Johan Huizinga : *Homo ludens*, Colecția eseuri, Editura Univers, București, 1977, p.7

<sup>4</sup> Anton Maria Del Chiaro Florentino : *Revoluțiile Valahiei*, Traducere de S. Cris. Cristian, cu o introducere de Nicolae Iorga, Iași, 1928

<sup>5</sup> Franz Joseph Sulzer : *Geschite des transalpinischenn Daciens, das ist Walachei, Moldau und Bassarabiens, im Zusammenhange mit der Geschite des ubrigen Daciens*, I – III, Wiens, 1781-82, p. 142

folklore, after whose typology the Saxon folklore material from Transylvania will be classified in general<sup>6</sup>.

Moise Fulea, in 1815, in *Bucovinam de normă*, describes several games from the repertoire of Transylvanian children, noting with great care the names of the practiced games and, in a detail to be considered, preserving the local terminology still in use today: *De-a mijotca, De-a mâța oarbă, De-a pușcașu, Iepurii și pușcașii, Nucile*<sup>7</sup>.

In the same period, independently of Moise Fulea's studies, doctor Vasile Popp, in 1817, in his medical doctorate, also accounts for manifestations of children's play, offering a first classification of them. He thus distinguishes a category of "bodily" games and another of "verbal" ones. Here the classification criterion is evidently imperfect in the examples chosen; another criterion highlighted by the author concerns the functionality of the games. He also draws attention to some games that can be "vătămătoare" (harmful)<sup>8</sup>. From the examples selected by the author, we infer that he more often has in mind adult games, practiced, many of them, by children or youths.

A few decades later, in 1851, Teodor Stamati also makes references to children's games, noting a few formulas integrated into them: *Unu-i mara, De-a baba oarba*<sup>9</sup>. Regarding the actual documentation of some songs and children's games, one can speak only starting with the second half of the 19th century. The end of that century marks a real impulse in recording children's verses and in focusing collectors' attention on their songs and games. A sustained interest in children's creations is manifested by Alexandru Lambrior, G. Dem Teodorescu, Petre Ispirescu, Papahagi-Vurdună, and Al. Bogdan. All of them published valuable collections.

Alexandru Lambrior, in 1875, notes a number of games played by children, highlighting their documentary and literary value as well as their global diffusion. These are classified as rural and urban games. The most interesting aspect of Lambrior's brief collection lies in the few "boys' games," presented for the first time in Romanian specialist literature<sup>10</sup>.

At the urging of Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu and Vasile Alecsandri, Petre Ispirescu, in the last decades of the century, makes several essential contributions related to children's folklore. His most significant contribution in the field is the 88-

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<sup>6</sup> Anca Goția : *Preliminarii la o cercetare a culturii tradiționale a copiilor în Transilvania*, în *Studii și comunicări*, Sibiu, 1978, p.95

<sup>7</sup> Moise Fulea : *Bucoavnă de normă*, Sibiu, 1815, pp. VI - XIII

<sup>8</sup> Vasile Popp : *Dissertatio inauguralis historico-medica de funeribus plebeis daco-romanorum*, Viena, 1817 apud Ion Mușlea – *Viața și opera doctorului Vasile Popp*, în vol. I din *Cercetări etnografice și de folclor*, București, Editura Minerva, 1971, p.55

<sup>9</sup> Teodor Stamati : *Pepelea sau tradițiuni năciunale românești*, Iași, 1851, pp. 34- 35

<sup>10</sup> Alexandru Lambrior : *Obiceiuri și credințe populare - Jocurile copiilor*, în *Convorbiri literare*, IX, nr.1, aprilie, 1879, p.8

page brochure containing material from the creations of the young: *Jucării și jocuri de copii* (Toys and Children's Games)<sup>11</sup>. Like the first fairy tales noted from the recollections of his own childhood, the typographer-collector confesses that the “games and toys” described were practiced in his own childhood. He presents 19 children’s games, meticulously described, including testimony to the ancient game of Romanian origin, *Arșicele*. The author explains the game in detail so that it can be easily reconstructed even by the ignorant. The accompanying verses are not missing, and variants from several localities are presented. Petre Ispirescu is the first folklorist in our specialist literature to describe toys, insisting on the terminology and construction variants that vary from one region to another. Ispirescu’s work complements his earlier efforts, begun a few years earlier, when he published in *Familia lui Iosif Vulcan* descriptions of children’s games, among which the pieces in issue 14 of the magazine (the same issue in which Eminescu published *If...*): *De-a lepșa*, *De-a Baba Oarba*, and, especially, *De-a Baba Gaia* — presented in detail and in several variants found in Transylvania, in Wallachia, and beyond Milcov. Another variant of the game described by Lambrior is named by Ispirescu *Ora morilor* — *joc românesc de copii* (Windmills — Romanian children’s game) and described in the same issue of the magazine<sup>12</sup>.

In 1885 the valuable collection of Romanian Popular Poems by G. Dem Teodorescu also appears, a vast and remarkable folklo pe collection from Wallachia. After his previous work, *Cercetări asupra proverbelor române*<sup>13</sup>, the author makes some references to children’s folklore; the cited work reserves an entire chapter to “songs and games of children.” The author supports with examples from ancient literature the importance of art productions specific to this age group:

A more in-depth study would reveal surprising things... all from eras very distant, more interesting because they were not transmitted through schools or literary channels for children... but through their simple practice and the successive initiation by previous generations, since they reflect, in a very curious way, the different eras in the history of the Romanians.<sup>14</sup>

A separate chapter is devoted to the versified folklore of children, in which, in addition to songs and rhymes for children (Children’s Prayers), there are songs for animals, insects, and plants — accompanied by detailed explanations of the practice of certain formulae — songs. For example, when reproducing the verses of the Song of the Sun, the author also explains the ritual before invocation: drinking water, arranging in a line on the threshold, turning the children’s heads toward the east, etc.

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<sup>11</sup> Petre Ispirescu : *Jucării și jocuri de copii*, Sibiu, 1885, p. 102

<sup>12</sup> Petre Ispirescu : *Jocuri de copii*, în *Familia*, XIX, nr. 14, 1883, p.159

<sup>13</sup> G. Dem Teodorescu : *Cercetări asupra proverbelor române*, București, 1877, pp. 96 - 101

<sup>14</sup> Idem : *Poezii populare române*, București, 1885, p. 273

Scientifically meticulous, the author provides explanations concerning the presence of certain words in children's creations. Invoking linguistic arguments, the author demonstrates the replacement of the adjective "bourgeois" with "noble" in the expression "bourgeois horns," due to the disappearance of the wild bull as a species from our mountains. In addition to recitations for the sun, moon, snail, butterfly, hedgehog, bear, and others, the author also describes and reproduces the formulas — songs of some games, noting their respective variants. It is impressive, for example, the large number of variants for the game *De-a ascunselea* (Hide-and-Seek)

From among the other games described by Teodorescu, we mention the following: *De-a armașul*, *De-a crai slujesc*, *De-a lumânărica*, *De-a fetele*, *D-a vrăbiile* and many others<sup>15</sup>. In "Analele Academiei Române", in these last years of the 19th century, attention and typographic space begin to be accorded to this folk genre, that of children. In 1893, under the signature of Papahagi-Vurdună, a few "childish games" are published. The diligent professor from Thessaloniki brings the first contribution to the knowledge of the folklore of Aromani children. The work is valuable for the perspective it opens to broad comparative studies on this domain of ethnocultural relationships in Southeast European space. It is also worth mentioning the remarks regarding the mode of manifestation, the organic link between the poetic text and the game, with gesture, with the season, or with the place where it is played. The author always mentions the place and time when the game takes place, confessing that he left aside "some games that girls practice alone, songs for insects, and those that imitate the occupation of parents, in summer and spring."<sup>16</sup>

Gheorghe Pitiș, considered by Mușlea as "the best connoisseur of the occupations and folklore of the peasants of southeast Transylvania," refers in two lines to the creation of children or for children. It concerns two articles published in *Convorbiri literare* and *Revista nouă: Jocuri de petrecere* and *Obiceiuri populare la românii din Schei*. As the titles of the two articles show, Pitiș is especially interested in an important aspect of children's folklore, namely "celebrations/games of entertainment" practiced around the mid-19th century. The description of these games collected from "Moș Stan from Schei of old Brașov" will constitute evidence that the origin of many children's games must be sought in adult folklore. Thus, the studied games: *De-a fetele*, *De-a portița*, *De-a burcănelu* and many others belonged to adults, practiced on Sundays and holidays. Only in the second half of the century did they become a proper asset of children<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> P. N. Papahagi – Vurdună : *Jocuri copilărești culese de la românii din Macedonia*, în *Analele Academiei Române*, seria II, tom XV, București, 1893, pp. 45 - 47

<sup>16</sup> Ion Mușlea : *G.I. Pitiș, folclorist și etnograf*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968, p.234

<sup>17</sup> Dem Constantinescu : *Elementul dramatic în jocurile copiilor*, în *Revista Nouă*, anul VII, nr 7, București, 1894, p. 75

Also in *Revista Nouă*, other articles dedicated to children's folklore appear. Noteworthy is Dem Constantinescu's article in issue 7/1894, in which the author divides games into dynamic and static and follows the dramatic element in both divisions. His conclusions are decisive:

The man of nature is a dramatist; from nature he is also a good, just, optimistic imitator. Why are children in their manifestations optimistic? Because children's literature is collective. A drama must be accepted by all. In every child the bad element is individual, but in all children there is an innate tendency toward good. A song, a game submits to the control of all and thus the good comes to light.<sup>18</sup>

As much as the reflections of Ion S. Floru on the repertoire of the little ones are unknown, they are remarkable: he intuits that

children's games are the fruit of the mind most unsettled and most capricious, and... it is precisely they that can preserve what monuments in stone or written cannot... and, children's games, so important in the eyes of the philosopher, through the variety of energy they display, gain greater value for the ethnographer through the strange property they have of preserving memories of social states now disappeared or remaining the property of distant tribes. Children like to imitate animal cries, the rasping of a saw, the crack of the whip, the roar of the machine, the beating of the wind, the turning of the mill, because the child does not ask for meaning but for sound.<sup>19</sup>

Texts from children's folklore appear inserted through contemporaneous field collections. Among these, a special place is occupied by the work of Grigore Tocilescu and Cristian Țapu, recently re-edited by Iordan Datcu, who, in this new edition, restored the merits of the second author (the 1900 edition had been signed only by Tocilescu). The folklorist materials also include a few child songs collected from Oltenia, but these texts are only the product of occasional collections added to the book, where, otherwise, lullabies, shouts, and incantations predominate. In the diverse group of the Banat folklore volume, Enea Hodoș publishes in 1898 both children's games and the texts of some children's songs, but he is not at all interested in the content of the verses contained in the brochure; rather, he is interested in their linguistic aspect<sup>20</sup>.

A pioneer systematic study in the field was undertaken by Tudor Pamfile. The results of his investigations in his native locality, Țepu, were published successively in three series in the years 1906, 1907, and 1909. Aware of the importance of his endeavor, Pamfile wrote:

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<sup>18</sup> Ion S. Floru : *Supraviețuiri în locuțiuni și jocuri de copii*, în *Convorbiri literare*, nr.27, 1894, p. 39

<sup>19</sup> Grigore Tocilescu, Cristian Țapu : *Materialuri folcloristice*, Ediție critică și studiu introductiv de Iordan Datcu, București, 1980, pp.20 – 21

<sup>20</sup> Enea Hodoș : *Cântece bănățene*, apud I. C. Chițimia – *Problematika cântecelor și jocurilor de copii* în vol. *Folclorul românesc în perspectivă comparată*, București, Editura Minerva, 1971, p.286

this droplet is drawn from the variegated manifestation of rural children's life; it opens the way for others, for together they might give a true icon of the life of our nation... the collector's aim was to provide the material necessary for national ethnographic studies to those who will have the heart and the skill to undertake them or to launch them... let this be an exhortation for myself and for others, for the accumulation of our entire popular literature, collected and uncollected, which is today dispersed in the most deplorable manner."<sup>21</sup> His collection is distinguished by the minuteness of the information. For the first time in our country Pamfile attempts to offer a monographic repertoire of children's games. It seems that, lacking informants, Tudor Pamfile described from memory games practiced by himself in childhood. He first presents 70 genuine children's games, then counting-out rhymes, games of trickery, and a few other games and toys. The second part of his collection comprises songs of mockery, word games, jokes, formulas of taunting, and tongue-twisters<sup>22</sup>.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Al. Bogdan would compile a collection of "children's songs and games," a work that demonstrates not only the author's interest in this folk-literary genre but also his competence as a specialist. In the opening pages of the book, the author reviews his previous concerns in the field, after in the Preface he confesses: "my particular interest in Romanian metrics, however, led me to focus specifically on these children's songs, so rich in rhythmic forms..."<sup>23</sup> This same interest in Romanian metrics would lead him, in 1909, only four years after the previous collection, to publish in the *Analele Academiei Române* additional "contributions" on the rhythm of children's songs<sup>24</sup>. His contribution is important also because it draws attention, for the first time, to the folklore of children as comparative material for adult folklore or for various genres and folk-forms. Indeed, his works contain numerous notes addressing parallels with songs of Hungarian and Saxon (Saxon Danubian) children. Adopting an inductive method of work, he will share the view that "in order for such research to be useful to future generations or to studies in comparative metrics, they must be undertaken entirely independently of similar works from abroad."<sup>25</sup> The author also makes valuable theoretical considerations about the verses of children, from a metric perspective, distinguishing and analyzing the rhythmic sequences and groups.

Although the early 20th century is still modest in propulsion of research of this kind, the domain of interest expands to include also toys for children. Victor Păcală, in his *Monograph of the village of Rășinari*, alongside several children's songs described within the broad and complex context of the village's characteristic popular

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<sup>21</sup> Tudor Pamfile : *Jocuri de copii*, în *Analele Academiei Române*, seria II, tom XVIII, 1905, p.273

<sup>22</sup> idem : *Jocuri de copii*, seria III, București, 1909, p. 22

<sup>23</sup> A. Bogdan Hoya : *Cântece de copii și jocuri*, Brașov, 1905, p. X

<sup>24</sup> Al. Bogdan : *Ritmica jocurilor de copii*, în *Analele Academiei Române*, seria II, tom XVIII, 1905, p. 241

<sup>25</sup> idem, *ibidem*, p.8

expressions, also describes some toys used at the time<sup>26</sup>. The author presents 38 games, some of which are quite distinctive: *De-a bolda*, *De-a calul*. The *Groșinăraus* game is also notable; although the author makes no observations about the Saxon term, the game Groschen heraus is recognized, probably played by Saxon children in the area. Păcală also notes several children's verses: counting rhymes, rhymes for fortune, chants for various occasions within group play, as well as rhymes for rain, for days of the week, or for various animals.

After undertaking a succinct but well-documented historical overview of concerns surrounding the collection of children's games, Gh. I. Neagu convincingly shows that "the folklore of children, as part of the general folklore, is also a echo of the past and a mirror of the present."<sup>27</sup> In the continuation of his extensive study, Neagu does not seek to exhaust the problems posed by the texts used by children in their games. His aim is limited to highlighting the archaic character of certain folkloric elements, and to underscoring their connection to life by reflecting historical facts and figures, aspects of school life, and the rural milieu in which they appeared and live today. He states at the end of the study: "We have not dealt with the aesthetic and moral element of the texts, nor with their educational value, nor with their syncretism: the literary text, the movement, and a certain melody of the articulation of the text are inseparable in the practice of play. By their similar motives—sometimes even borrowed from the folklore of adults—they prepare the intellectual-moral development of children to understand, assimilate, and carry forward, enriching it, the mature folklore."<sup>28</sup>

Later widening his scope through contemporary collections, Neagu published in 1983 the volume *Cântece și jocuri de copii* [Songs and Games of Children]. The collection stands out not only for the large number of texts drawn from historical publications or manuscripts (B. P. Hasdeu, N. Densușianu) as well as from his own collection, but also for the manner in which the anthology is organized. The researcher took into account the geographical distribution of folkloric categories, aiming to represent the entire territory inhabited by Romanians. In the introductory study he shows interest in the historical and thematic investigation of games, their functionality, and their relations with other genres and species—especially with traditional customs. He returns to the problem of the child's relation to nature and to living beings, but also to certain linguistic and stylistic aspects, such as the issues of language wrinkle and cumulative verses. Gh. I. Neagu regards children's games as

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<sup>26</sup> Victor Păcală : *Monografia satului Rășinari*, Sibiu, 1915, pp. 24 - 37

<sup>27</sup> Gh. I. Neagu : *Câteva însemnări pe marginea textelor folosite în jocurile de copii*, în *Studii de folclor și literatură*, București, 1967, p.335

<sup>28</sup> idem, ibidem, p.386

“documents of life and history, constituting evidence of the romanity and continuity of the Romanian people on the old territory of Dacia.”<sup>29</sup>

Researcher and collector Gh. I. Neagu finds in children’s games new evidence of the unity of feeling and conduct among all Romanians, ranging from the Aromanians in European Turkey to the north of the former Dacia, at Ineu in Bihor. His collection proves to be an anthology of texts from children’s games chosen to represent the entire territory inhabited by Romanians. Some themes have variants, introduced to illustrate their vitality through geographical spread and to contribute to the idea of the spiritual unity of the people, even at the level of childhood. All are gathered and grouped under suggestive chapters: Genuine Counting-Out Rhymes, Parallel Counting-Out Rhymes, Cosmic and Meteorological Elements, Animals of Nature, Humorous, Satirical, and Prohibitive Texts in Games, Beautiful Little Creatures, Cumulative Texts, Historic-Social Segments, Fragments of Language, Games, Deaf-Mute Phrases, and Bird Speech.

Arguing that children’s folklore opens new perspectives in the study of oral creation, I. C. Chițimia senses an essential fact: “Here one can pose the problem of the link between age and the folkloric genre, or between age and the mode of folkloric creation,”<sup>30</sup> and offers, as documented as it is, compelling demonstrations within the study’s context, regarding repertoire characteristics by age groups from the youngest to those entering the youth category. The author discusses, besides issues related to the history of research and problems concerning the ages at play, the importance of cultivating this folkloric kind for the education and development of children, questions of rhythm in children’s games, the storage of remnants of old magical formulas, which facilitated the solution of enigmas.

Chițimia states that “The folklore of children has a fairly ancient origin, as does adult folklore. It is recorded by classical authors and by medieval writers.”<sup>31</sup> Demonstrating that this category of popular creation is not an exclusive prerogative of any single nation, the author shows that children’s games are found in all peoples, and even provides a selective bibliographic list of children’s folklore across different peoples: English, German, Polish, Bulgarian, Russian, Italian, etc. It is evident that, taken as a whole, children’s games and songs are received and developed at the level of play. Children absorb different folkloric elements and transpose them into rhythm and song. The “literary” aspect within the text interests him only to a limited extent, so that at times the text becomes grotesque and incomprehensible, especially at the youngest ages of children. Movement and play use the text as a catapult that hurls and scatters the group of children in all directions. In children’s folklore, I. C. Chițimia

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<sup>29</sup> idem, *ibidem*, p.291

<sup>30</sup> idem : *Cântece și jocuri de copii*, București, Editura Minerva, 1983, p. 65

<sup>31</sup> idem, *ibidem*, p.287

integrates, first of all, those oral popular productions whose authors are the children themselves, and secondly, everything that enters children's games from adult folklore or from other sources of adaptation.

The researcher does not agree with the differences in the manifestation of games between rural and urban settings; in this sense, the thematic variety of the games varies, with rural children sometimes adapting old ritual practices for play, such as *Caloianul*, *Paparudele*, etc.<sup>32</sup>

I. C. Chițimia also brings into discussion the problem of popular narratives, especially those aimed at younger children, who assimilate stories and fairy tales with great ease, retelling them themselves, listening to them, and transmitting them further. He stresses that narrative interest lies not in the content itself but in its presentation, which is mechanical, as in song, with the play itself as the primary object.

A pedagogue by vocation, Chițimia knows how to follow the progression of the game among children, with a great capacity to understand the purposes it presupposes; his commentary is continually colored by a warm and generous parental affection:

Children absorb folklore in the sense of their naive and delicate existence. They play and vibrate to the play. Their folklore is one of leaps, rhythm, and dance. They violently experience it physically, and only later do they reach the psychological and intellectual re-creation of the broader oeuvre, implicitly of popular creation, rising to a higher level of perception.<sup>33</sup>

In 1972, folklorist Ion Mușlea published a study on children's games, in which he defines children's folklore as "one of the important branches of folklore."<sup>34</sup> Discussing the significance of these games, the folklorist noted, beyond their practical and educational role, their custodianship of an ancient folk treasury. The exegete seeks the origins of children's folklore in Greco-Roman antiquity and among non-European populations, also mentioning songs once sung in the Iliad. He further reveals historical aspects preserved in children's games within Romanian material, especially that which appears in the responses to Hasdeu's Questionnaire. For example, Mușlea mentions remnants of bygone centuries in games, such as ancient weapons like the bow and arrow, the sling, the sawn-off club, and the hunk of meat. Another issue raised is the borrowing of Romanian song-formulas by children who speak minority languages.

On the basis of bibliographic suggestions, Mușlea discerned that :

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<sup>32</sup> idem, *ibidem*, p.285

<sup>33</sup> idem, *ibidem*, p.287

<sup>34</sup> Ion Mușlea: *Problema jocurilor noastre copilărești*, în vol. II de *Cercetări etnografice și de folclor*, București, Editura Minerva, 1972, p.404

the games of the little ones reflect and preserve memories and survivals of customs, rites, beliefs, songs, legends, curses, and dances of the adults, which sometimes live on only in these children's manifestations.<sup>35</sup>

An extensive survey of the history of research in the domain of children's folklore, with attention to comparative aspects, especially of Romanian–Saxon traditions, was undertaken by Anca Goția. The author justifies her choice:

We limited our inquiry to the intracarpatic space not only because we lack monographic studies of games that could identify ethnofolkloric manifestations of Sălaj or Transylvanian children, but also to discover the particularities that involve the culture of children of different nationalities within a space that is more or less common for the manifestation of play or for participation in the traditional life of a community.<sup>36</sup>

In 1970, Viorica Goian highlighted certain aspects of the old folklore of children from Caransebeș, a region less known in this field, with the exception of a few lullabies and children's songs noted by Enea Hodoș. Her article also includes the *pițărăilor* recitations collected in several variants, as well as a number of ritualistic recitations—formulations spoken by children on various occasions of life, such as the emergence of the new moon, or recitations spoken by children within certain games.

At the outset of this study, the author also mentions several earlier achievements in collecting the folklore of children from the Caransebeș area, works that have not been preserved over time. These refer to the chapter on Customs and Traditions written by the teacher Elena Biju and included in the Monograph of the city of Caransebeș in 1909, in which several ritual practices involving children during holidays or notable days of the year are described. Also noted are intermittent concerns regarding children's folklore by folklorist Gheorghe Cățană.

The author notes an internally organized traditional culture among the children of Caransebeș, linking their games and toys to the theme of shepherding (one game is even called *Oile la munte*, "The Sheep in the Mountains"). Viorica Goian's most important finding concerns the cognitive role of children's folklore:

In play, the child imitates some aspects of adults' occupations, their activities; in this sense, play is a form of adaptation to reality, to exterior models. But the children's play transforms this reality through a largely purer assimilation to the needs of the self.<sup>37</sup>

In the twentieth century, alongside the philological and ethnographic perspectives, the increasingly evident efforts of sincretists to investigate this highly

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<sup>35</sup> *idem*, *ibidem*, p.404

<sup>36</sup> Anca Goția : *op. cit.*, p.73

<sup>37</sup> Viorica Goian : *Aspecte din folclorul vechi al copiilor din Caransebeș*, în vol.III de *Folclor literar*, Universitatea din Timișoara, Facultatea de Filologie, Timișoara, 1972, p.105-120

complex domain of our popular creation become noticeable. Earlier publications or at least mentions of tunes and children's games had appeared. What is striking regarding the beginnings of these collections is that Bela Bartók, despite his aim of comprehensively knowing Romanian folklore, found almost nothing of children's folklore. The great musicologist stated, "I recall magical songs from certain regions against illness, against drought; then, as a strange negative fact, the complete absence of children's and games' songs."<sup>38</sup> It is indeed perplexing how Bartók failed to discover children's folklore in the Romanian regions he studied. Our ethnomusicologists have offered excuses for Bartók: "...they escaped him,"<sup>39</sup> although they note that "from the research conducted in the regions from which Bartók gathered material (for example Bihor), the existence of children's songs and games has been established."<sup>40</sup>

George Breazul, through his ideas about children's culture, opposes the universal spirit of Constantin Brăiloiu, showing genuine interest in discovering precisely those traits that give a national specificity to the manifestations of children's folklore in our country. He, in turn, observed how

from early childhood, barely freed from the charm of the lullaby, the Romanian child will exhibit a special attraction and a visibly keen interest in sounds, showing a preference for toys with acoustic properties.<sup>41</sup>

Following the psychological function of folk song in children, Breazul noted that almost all children's games are accompanied by rhythmic poetic formulas and enunciated not in the usual spoken form, but sung in a kind of expressive, dramatic recitative, as incantations, exorcisms, etc., are pronounced.<sup>42</sup>

Emilia Comișel has demonstrated a persistent concern with studying the repertoire of children's songs, which is notably rich. Her contributions are remarkable for the nuanced analysis of the complex purposes fulfilled by children's folklore in the social life of the young. The author gives priority, to the same extent, to the literary and musical aspects of this folkloric category; her work raises new issues, such as sound systems and rhythm, and classifies literary texts into "formulas—songs" for all play activities and the child's relation to the surrounding world (therapeutic formulae—songs for plants, insects, birds, animals, or inanimate things; weather-change formulas; independent formulas for organized play; counting formulae; hand-

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<sup>38</sup> Bela Bartok: *Muzica populară românească*, în *Însemnări asupra cântecului popular*, București, 1956, p. 87

<sup>39</sup> Emilia Comișel: *Pe urmele lui Bela Bartok în Hunedoara*, în *Muzica*, nr.9, București, 1955, p.12

<sup>40</sup> Tiberiu Alexandru: *Bela Bartok despre folclorul românesc*, București, 1958, p.41

<sup>41</sup> George Breazul, apud Gherorghe Ciobanu: *Aportul lui George Breazul la dezvoltarea folcloristicii muzicale românești*, în *Revista de etnografie și folclor*, București, 11 (1966), nr.5-6, p.519-534

<sup>42</sup> idem, ibidem, p. 522

clapping games; actual games and games with fixed rules). In her expansive work, Emilia Comișel emphasizes that “children’s folklore constitutes an admirable school of life in which psychological and physical development occurs and in which intelligence and the spirit of observation are formed ... [and she notes that] ...in children’s songs and rhymes, vestiges of an ancient popular culture are preserved—customs and beliefs abandoned by adults—archaic lexical and morphological forms, names of historical figures, etc.”<sup>43</sup> Attempting to penetrate the essence of children’s folklore, the author concludes that it confirms one of the truths emerging from studies of the past century, namely “the unwavering fidelity of memory in non-written environments.”<sup>44</sup> Culture, namely the folklore of children, gains increasing ground in the concerns of specialists, with various issues regarding the study of this domain finding a place in recent research works, such as Brigitta Buda’s study on the children’s games of Strâmtura, Maramureș.<sup>45</sup>

Within the framework of research conducted beyond the Prut, Nicolae Băieșu’s activity stands out. In 1978 he published *Folklore of Children*, a book that perhaps best illustrates Constantin Noica’s observation that in children’s games, rules are continuously renewed. Both the most recent and those pieces collected or discovered centuries ago in the repertoire of children, more than any other form of popular creation, demonstrate, as Huizinga showed, the descent of culture from play; for play signifies aesthetics, rhythm, harmony, freedom, the blending of seriousness with a spirit of competition, the tension with a temporary withdrawal from ordinary life, in a world of all possibilities, of strict rules, of roles played in a sacred spirit. Imagination endows play with a primordial sacred bearing, for the ephemeral world aimed at realizing Absolute Order, to compensate for the imperfection of the world outside it, seems to attempt to repeat the very act of the First Ordering.

Play includes the need to manifest freedom. Huizinga was the first to pose in professional literature the issue of the dignity of play in the world of culture;

even when regulated, play ends up giving us an awareness of the gratuitousness hidden in any engagement and inasmuch as it brings to light the degree of arbitrariness that residually accompanies any human undertaking, denouncing gravity only as one possible face of things—play is the tangible guarantee and constant maintenance of the reflex of freedom, not merely freedom sought, promised, proposed, or life.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> idem: *Folclorul copiilor*, București, Editura Muzicală, 1982, p. 10

<sup>44</sup> idem, *ibidem*, p.50

<sup>45</sup> Brigitta Buda : *Jocuri de copii din Strâmtura – Maramureș*, în vol. V de *Studii și articole*, Societatea de Științe Filologice din România, Filiala Baia Mare, 1989, pp. 65 -73

<sup>46</sup> idem, *ibidem*, p. 9

And this is because childish experience is... play, and play is the opposite of adaptation. In terms of form, Huizinga regards play as

a free act, conscious of not being unintended and situated outside ordinary life, an act not bound by any direct material interest and not aiming at any benefit, an act that unfolds within the bounds of a specifically determined time, an action that takes place in an order governed by certain laws and that gives rise to communal relations eager to surround themselves with a secret or to emphasize through disguising, as something other than the ordinary world.<sup>47</sup>

Although we live in an evolving world, in which the pace of development accelerates, where school no longer represents the definitive authority of instruction and education, yet the possibilities for participation in culture become increasingly complex, the idea of a reorientation in adults' behavior toward children regarding their cultural habitus is more timely than ever. In this sense, the American researcher Neil Postman<sup>48</sup> notes with concern the disappearance of traditional games from the repertoire of play, i.e., from socially natural behavior according to children's age. His worry is reinforced by the finding that these games are, at best, replaced by adult games. After a history extending over more than three thousand years, children's games are threatened with disappearance, Postman argues. The American researcher's claim is not entirely exaggerated; it can apply only to regional contexts, specifically to heavily industrialized and highly urbanized countries with a prestigious urban culture, where adults engage through a hyper-technologized educational process, through the toy industry, in the evolution and natural manifestation of children.

Despite this millennium's onset bringing general hyper-technologization, acting as a brake on the natural creativity of the child, studies from our country and abroad impress with the relatively large number of works addressing the complex universe of the child. All of these demand an immediate linking of the concept of children's culture to the term "childhood."<sup>49</sup> Researchers have expressed their views on trends toward liquidating "childhood," proposing, as a remedy, bringing this natural period of human evolution under judicial control. This implies "guaranteed childhood," secured, without adult interference in its programming. It also implies renouncing the prejudice of viewing childhood as a conglomerate of strictly pedagogical, didactic, psychological, medical problems. In this sense, an effort must be made to restore to childhood its most prominent quality in human development: freedom of expression in this "terra incognita." The study of childhood and the

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<sup>47</sup> Huizinga, op.cit., p.124

<sup>48</sup> Neil Postman : *The loss of childhood*, New York, 1983, p. 56

<sup>49</sup> Emilia Comişel : *Folclorul copiilor*, Bucureşti, Editura Muzicală, 1982, p. 23

natural, cultural, and spiritual needs of the child does not exclude collaboration; indeed, it requires cooperation among specialists from diverse fields.<sup>50</sup>

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# HOMO LUDENS AS A REVOLUTIONARY – THE ROLE OF PLAY IN THE ACTIVITIES OF THE ORANGE ALTERNATIVE

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**Abstract:** *This text presents homo ludens, described by Johann Huizinga, in a new context — as a revolutionary involved in the Orange Alternative protest and artistic movement. This description, preceded by a historical overview of the movement's activities, allows us to define the role of play in the activities of the "Oranges," with particular emphasis on happenings as an example of "political play," connections with the New Culture Movement, and the Dutch Provo movement. The text has been expanded to include the concept of homo ludens in the context of play as a revolutionary and conscious citizen. This is a kind of preliminary consideration for a portrait of the homo ludens of the Orange Alternative, which provides a basis for reflection on the significance and legacy of the most important interdisciplinary happening movement in Central and Eastern Europe.*

**Key words:** homo ludens, Orange Alternative, play, game, happening, Dutch Provo

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## 1. Instead of an introduction

The origins of the Orange Alternative protest-artistic protest movement Orange Alternative date back to 1981, when Waldemar "Major" Fydrych, then a student at the University of Wrocław, initiated a campaign to place drawings of dwarfs on white spots left after anti-government slogans had been painted over on the walls of Poland's largest cities. Over time, these individual actions turned into street happenings aimed at exposing the mechanisms of communist power through laughter, irony, and grotesque.

The movement was most active between 1986 and 1989, when spectacular performances were organized in Wrocław, Łódź, Warsaw, Lublin<sup>1</sup> and abroad,

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this text participated in street events organized by the Orange Alternative in Lublin as a student of Romance Philology at Maria Curie- Skłodowska University in Lublin (Poland).

becoming one of the symbols of peaceful opposition to oppressive rule. The “orange” strategy, based on mocking the rigid form of anniversary celebrations and official state events, proved to be an extremely effective form of criticism of the communist system<sup>2</sup>. A common feature of the Orange Alternative's activities was their peaceful nature and satirical tone, which highlighted the helplessness of the apparatus of repression<sup>3</sup>, encouraging ordinary people to overcome their fear and take to the streets. The participants' intention was not only to stage a bloodless form of protest, but also to have fun in public spaces<sup>4</sup>. The regime could react in two ways – either ignore the harmless antics or try to end them with the intervention of the militia. Street happenings attracted mainly young oppositionists who were entering adulthood in the second half of the 1980s<sup>5</sup>.

The phenomenon of the Orange Alternative shows that it was not associated with either the official anti-communist opposition or any religious circles. It can be assumed that its name referred to “alternative” in the colloquial sense, coinciding with the mathematical concept of “disjoint alternatives.” The Orange Alternative reversed the logic of power, forcing it to react to seemingly apolitical actions, such as handing out rolls of toilet paper or wearing dwarf hats<sup>6</sup>. Its actions were playful in nature, often taking the form of carnival performances, which gave them a ritual and symbolic dimension. It was also an organized form of action on the borderline between art and politics in the name of freedom and normality, in opposition to reality, exposing and deconstructing the propaganda language of the authorities.

The activities of the Orange Alternative show that fun and absurdity can be an effective form of political opposition, and that homo ludens can become a non-violent revolutionary. Its activities are in line with Johan Huizinga's concept, who argued that fun is not only a form of entertainment, but an essential element of culture and a way of expressing opposition to the existing order. Homo ludens did not have to resort to violence to challenge the authority of power. Laughter, irony, and street actions can be more effective weapons than conventional forms of resistance.

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<sup>2</sup>W. Fydrych, *Krasnoludki i gamonie*, Wydawnictwo Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, Warszawa 2006, p.34-37.

<sup>3</sup>Grindon G., *Prehistoria surrealizmu socjalistycznego od lat 60. do 80. – od Diggerów z San Francisco do Pomarańczowej Alternatywy*, „Obieg” 2013, 23.07., <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/teksty/29293> [27-09-2025].

<sup>4</sup>W. Fydrych, *Major*, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2013, p.123-126.

<sup>5</sup>W. Fydrych W., *Waldemar “Major” Fydrych. Nie ma wolności bez krasnoludków*, <http://www.majorfydrych.com/> [27-09-2025].

<sup>6</sup>Dobosz B., Fydrych W., *Hokus Pokus, czyli Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*, Inicjatywa Wydawnicza Aspekt, Wrocław 1989, p.23-35.

## 2. The Orange Alternative phenomenon

The Orange Alternative was one of the most original and unusual phenomena of anti-communist opposition in communist Poland in the 1980s. This movement, which originated in Wrocław, combined elements of Dadaism, Surrealism, happenings, counterculture, and playful political resistance, constituting an alternative form of opposition to the authoritarian communist system. It originated from a group of anti-communist activists gathered in the Wrocław New Culture Movement. The initiative group held weekly meetings at the Progres student club. The Movement was very dynamic, especially considering the relatively small number of active members. It focused largely on organizing open discussions and meetings, but was not limited to them. Its goal was to carry out spontaneous social and artistic projects, which in practice consisted primarily of attempts to expose and ridicule the absurdities of the communist system<sup>7</sup>. As an independent protest and counterculture group, it developed its activities among young people in Wrocław beginning in fall of 1980 until General Wojciech Jaruzelski declared martial law on December 13, 1981.

As early as November 1980, a happening entitled Breaking Symmetry by Major Waldemar Fydrych took place. An important event was the Easter Peace March organized by Andrzej Dziewit in the spring of 1981. A group of members of the New Culture Movement who were present at the strikes began publishing a surrealist newspaper called Pomarańczowa Alternatywa (Orange Alternative).

In addition to the influence of Major's Manifesto of Socialist Surrealism<sup>8</sup>, the work of André Breton, especially his Manifesto of Surrealism, played an important role in this publication, edited by Andrzej Dziewit, Piotr "Pablo" Adamiec, Zenon Zegarski, and Major Fydrych<sup>9</sup>. The brilliant style of the newspaper and its caricature-like content made it very popular among the striking students. This success led to a conflict with the University Strike Committee, which did not accept this type of creative expression. The conflict intensified when the Strike Committee attempted to remove the editorial staff of the Orange Alternative from the strike.

The name of the movement and the color orange were a reference to the Dutch counterculture movement of the Provos, which developed between 1965 and 1967<sup>10</sup>, inspired by the street artist Robert Jasper Grootveld, the initiator of

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<sup>7</sup> Dosse F., *Mai 68, les effets de l'histoire sur l'Histoire*, "Politix" 1989, Vol. 2, No. 6, [https://www.persee.fr/doc/polix\\_0295-2319\\_1989\\_num\\_2\\_6\\_1381](https://www.persee.fr/doc/polix_0295-2319_1989_num_2_6_1381) [26-09-2025]

<sup>8</sup> W. Fydrych *Manifest surrealizmu socjalistycznego*, <http://www.orangealternativemuseum.pl/#manifest-surrealizmu-socjalistycznego> [27-09-2025].

<sup>9</sup> W. Fydrych, *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa. Rewolucja krasnoludków*, Wydawnictwo Pomarańczowa Alternatywa, Warszawa 2007, p.14-19.

<sup>10</sup> Y. Frémion, *Provo - Amsterdam 1965-1967*, Nautilus, Toledo 2009, p.23-25.

numerous happenings and the “Provo Manifesto”<sup>11</sup>, as well as by Roel van Duijn, a painter, anarchist, and philosophy student at the University of Amsterdam, who was fascinated at the time by the ideas of Herbert Marcuse<sup>12</sup>, and above all by his work „One-Dimensional Man”, which defined the concept of freedom also in the context of the influence of so-called repressive power, while the criterion of free choice is not an absolute criterion. Provo is the name of a movement of a contestatory, anti-war, anti-imperialist and, above all, ecological nature, whose origins are described by van Duijn<sup>13</sup>. Its creators were anarchist artists who intended to shake up Dutch society by breaking with the traditional value system<sup>14</sup>, “humanizing” mutual relations, and taking action aimed at protecting the environment.

### 3. The concept of Homo ludens in the context of play

Play is often associated with dressing up, masks, imitation, hyperbole, and attempts to represent or work through specific meanings – both individual and communal. In this way, cosmic emotion is expressed and universal events are brought to life, e.g. through cult performances or musical productions. Here, play becomes a form of representing something greater than the individual – it refers to ideas, symbols, and a higher order. As Manfred Lurker wrote, “every image and creation refers to some idea, all existence is subordinate to a higher being”<sup>15</sup>. In his monograph „Homo Ludens: Play as a Source of Culture”, Johan Huizinga presents play as a fundamental element of human culture, emphasizing that play is a source of knowledge<sup>16</sup> and experience of the world for us. It is not merely entertainment, for it has the power to constitute order, inspiring people of literature and art. It can also be a symbolic act of great social and political significance.

Although it seems to be a separate set of activities, isolated in time and space, it is not detached from reality – even after it ends, play continues to influence the outside world, allowing us to feel the effects of competition. Its space is separated from the sphere of everyday life, often by designating a specific place – as in the case of

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<sup>11</sup> Provotariat, Manifest aan heet amsterdamse provotariaat, Provokatie nr 12/1.

<sup>12</sup> H. Marcuse, Człowiek jednowymiarowy, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1991.

<sup>13</sup> R. van Duijn, *Provo: de geschiedenis van de provotarische beweging 1965–1967*, Meulenhoff, Amsterdam 1985.

<sup>14</sup> *Interview met voormalig provo en kabouter Roel van Duijn* [http://www.roelvanduijn.nl/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/interview\\_roelvanduijn\\_200311.pdf](http://www.roelvanduijn.nl/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/interview_roelvanduijn_200311.pdf) [dostęp: 22.02.2025].

<sup>15</sup> M. Lurker, *Przesłanie symboli w mitach, kulturach i religiach*, Wydawnictwo Alethea, Warszawa 2023, p.23-24.

<sup>16</sup> J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens. Esej o zabawie jako elemencie kultury*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Aletheia, 2022, p.14.

rituals, cult spectacles, or artistic performances<sup>17</sup>. The mood of a ludic event is most often euphoric. Not only is it associated with competition and winning<sup>18</sup>, but also contains an element of timelessness.

Play can be treated with the utmost seriousness – by both children and adults<sup>19</sup>. This seriousness encompasses its symbolic and ritual power. It can be associated with destructive behavior through the presence of so-called “spoilsports the rules of the game, threatening the stability of a given community. Such a person may be expelled, but they may also create a new, alternative community – a community of players who continue to “play” even after the game is over. In this context, play also means deviating from norms and collectively separating oneself from a certain community. “Even after it is over, play casts its glow on the outside world”<sup>20</sup>, leaving a mark on the consciousness of participants and the structure of culture.

Huizinga emphasizes that play also involves an aspect of freedom – here it is worth referring to Bakhtin, who points to the connection between laughter and freedom<sup>21</sup>. Laughter also has a degrading function<sup>22</sup> – it can expose, unmask, and ironize reality. In the cultural sphere, laughter becomes self-deprecating, and those who make others laugh are often ridiculed themselves. We are not dealing here with the language of institutions, but with the language of culture – free, ironic, aesthetic.

According to Huizinga, play is not understood as an escapist form of activity, but as a constructive cultural practice that enables individuals and communities to symbolically work through reality. Play does not serve to escape from the world, but to reinterpret, transform, and temporarily reorganize it according to different rules – often more symbolic, ritualistic, or aesthetic. By creating a separate space<sup>23</sup>, play “rejects” prevailing social and institutional norms, creating an alternative order in which it is possible to test other models of action, relationships, and values. Such a space functions as a cultural laboratory in which reality is not negated but creatively reformulated.

As a being engaged in play and creativity, man appears in Huizinga's work as homo ludens, but also as homo aestheticus – one who experiences the world through form, image, ritual, and art. Their belonging to the world of play is illusory and temporary, but in a symbolic sense, it is timeless, which is why culture, as a collective

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.37.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.39.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.40.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.27.

<sup>21</sup> Bakhtin M., *Twórczość Franciszka Rabelais'go a kultura ludowa średniowiecza i renesansu*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków, 1975, p.164.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.153.

<sup>23</sup> Huizinga, op.cit, p.37.

field of play and creativity, remains transhistorical. From Huizinga's perspective, man is not only homo sapiens, but above all homo ludens – a being who plays, creating culture through play, ritual, art, and laughter. Play is therefore not a marginal aspect of life, but its center – it is one of the deepest ways in which humans give meaning to their existence and co-create cultural reality<sup>24</sup>.

“Culture can be both noise and a buzz of associations arising during activities and exchanges between people, but when these are clarified, it turns into opinion.”<sup>25</sup>. Play as a form of ludic experience thus combines the characteristics of creativity, reflection, and ritual. Its temporary and illusory nature does not testify to its banality, but to its initiatory and transformative function – play allows us not so much to forget reality as to look at it from a different perspective, to filter it through the language of symbols, narratives, and emotions.

#### 4. Homo ludens as a revolutionary

Play ridicules authority figures – it strips them of their seriousness, i.e., their power. Authority is based on seriousness, which legitimizes power and perpetuates the distance between the rulers and the ruled. In this arrangement, seriousness becomes a mechanism of social control, disciplining individuals and limiting their scope for arbitrary action. In this context, play and laughter perform a critical and subversive function – they enable a symbolic reversal of the order in which authority is ridiculed, deconstructed, and stripped of its sacred status. The representative of bloodless, violent change becomes a “playful revolutionary” seeking to bring about changes in the political, social, economic, or cultural system<sup>26</sup>. He does not take part in armed struggle or political upheaval, but in ideological, artistic, or social activities aimed at overthrowing the existing order. Fydrych was such a leader, and the Orange Alternative became a symbol of the bloodless anti-communist revolution in Europe.

In our times, nonviolent revolution, understood as a process of socio-political change taking place without the use of physical force, is increasingly becoming an area of activity based on imagination, humor, and the playful transformation of reality. In this context, laughter and the creative transformation of cultural symbols serve not only a communicative function, but also a transformative one. Referring to Bakhtin's concept<sup>27</sup>, laughter can be described as a form of “lower revolution” – non-violent, but effectively deconstructing existing structures of power, authority, and normativity. Carnival-like or grotesque laughter neutralizes the language of oppression,

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<sup>24</sup> Grafter Gallery, *French Graffiti - The Evolution and Cultural Impact* <https://www.grafftergallery.com/2024/05/french-graffiti-evolution-and-cultural.html> [dostęp 27.09.2025].

<sup>25</sup> F. Inglis, *Culture, Sic!* Publishing House, Warsaw 2004, p. 50

<sup>26</sup> K. Skiba, *Komisariat naszym domem*, Narodowe Centrum Kultury, Warszawa 2014.

<sup>27</sup> M. Bakhtin, op. cit, p.23-25.

introducing alternative meanings and new symbolic relationships into the social space. Examples of such actions can be seen, among others, in the artistic and performative practices of social movements such as the Orange Alternative, whose strategy of resistance was based on creatively transforming absurdity into a tool for exposing the ideological contradictions of the system. Through playful acts, street performances, and the use of irony and laughter, it became possible to reveal the inefficiency of the mechanisms of repression without the need for open conflict or aggression.

## **5. Homo ludens as a conscious citizen**

The concept of homo ludens introduced by Huizinga can be understood as a figure of a conscious citizen – an individual participating in social life not only by conforming to institutional norms, but also through creative, critical, and reflective cultural activity<sup>28</sup>. In this sense, play is not an escapist form of detachment from reality, but a space in which it becomes possible for a conscious citizen, who at the same time remains a “bloodless revolutionary”,<sup>29</sup> to test alternative social models. Play as a ludic practice enables citizens to develop a critical relationship with the surrounding world. Distance, irony, parody, and imagination become tools for dismantling the discourses of power, exposing the mechanisms of domination, and demythologizing authorities.

## **6. Homo ludens, The Orange Alternative and its “fun”**

The Orange Alternative fought against communist rule using humor, absurdity, and parody, organizing unusual street actions. Instead of traditional protests, they staged happenings: they painted gnomes on painted-over Solidarity slogans, handed out toilet paper, set up queues for vinegar, dressed up as gnomes, and organized absurd demonstrations, such as “Free the gnomes!”. Their actions ridiculed the system, showed its absurdity and repressiveness, and at the same time allowed people to release their fears. They were peaceful but very effective – the authorities did not know how to respond to them.

The most important events organized by the “orange” movement included:

Tubes, or smogging the city (April 1, 1986); Pot Festival – Centipede (April 1, 1987); Dwarves on Świdnicka Street (June 1, 1987); Anti-War Action – Peace

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<sup>28</sup> J. Huizinga, *op. cit.*, p.34-57.

<sup>29</sup> W. Fydrych, *Pomarańczowa Alternatywa*, p.67-68.

Day (September 1, 1987); Toilet Paper – the so-called first round (October 1, 1987); Militia Day (October 7, 1987); Terrorist Day, or Al Fatah (October 11, 1987); Army Day, or Melon in Mayonnaise Maneuvers (October 12, 1987); Who's Afraid of Toilet Paper? – the so-called second distribution (October 15, 1987); Eve of the October Revolution (November 6, 1987); (1,000 participants) Bar Barbara red borscht and you go to jail; Referendum on Świdnicka Street (November 27, 1987); (1,500 participants) St. Nicholas Day (December 6, 1987); (2,000 participants) RIO-botniczy Carnival (February 16, 1988); Undercover Agent Day (March 1, 1988); Women's Day (March 8, 1988); Spring Day (March 21, 1988); (10,000 participants) Major's Trial (March 29, 1988); Dwarf Revolution (June 1, 1988); Welcome on Świdnicka Street (June 19, 1988); Brotherly Aid Forever Alive (August 19, 1988) Apartment on Świdnicka Street (October 21, 1988); Eve of the Great Anniversary (December 12, 1988); Carnival, or Herring on Świdnicka Street (February 7, 1989); Stalin's Funeral, or Funeral for Oneself (March 21, 1989) FSO, or Festival of Contemporary Art (June 1, 1989), ending with a concert by the bands Kormorany, Big Cyc, and Kult; Beggars' Carnival (February 12, 1990); (5,000 participants) Funeral of the Dwarves (June 1, 1990)<sup>30</sup>.

The Orange Alternative's happenings usually ended with participants being detained by the Citizens' Militia for disturbing public order. They managed to provoke it, for example, by arresting people dressed as Santa Claus or wearing orange hats or items of clothing in that color. Political fun – because that is how the street activities of the Orange Alternative can be described, as a form of playful action – depreciated seriousness through irony, parody, masquerade, and absurdity. In this sense, ridicule became a tool for depriving power of its symbolic force. This phenomenon was particularly evident in the movement's happenings ridiculing the then communist authorities in Poland, and their reactions (e.g., arrests for distributing toilet paper) further exacerbated the effect of embarrassment.

## **7. Significance and legacy**

The Orange Alternative brought a new model of political action to Polish public life, combining art, activism, and humor. Its activities were an example of social performance art, in which the boundaries between spectator and participant, art and politics, reality and fiction were blurred. The movement provided a space for an alternative community in which resistance was based not on violence, but on irony,

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<sup>30</sup> W. Fydrych, *Major*, p.10-23.

creativity, and symbolic subversion. After 1989, the Orange Alternative lost its significance as a social movement, but its legacy is still present – both in scientific analyses in the fields of cultural studies, sociology, and art history, as well as in the practices of contemporary urban activism and engaged art. The movement thus implemented the idea of “laughter as a weapon,” fitting into Bakhtin's concept of folk laughter as a tool for overthrowing hierarchy and authority.

Ludic practices play a key role in the construction of collective identities and in processes of cultural communication. Participation in play allows for temporary identification with roles and situations which, although fictional, have a real impact on emotions, attitudes, and social relations. As Manfred Lurker notes, “every image and creation refers to some idea,” and “all existence is subordinate to a higher being”<sup>31</sup>. This means that play acts as an intermediary between everyday life and the sphere of transcendent meanings – mythological, religious, artistic.

Play can also have a critical and transgressive function – through laughter, irony, parody, or the grotesque. From an anthropological and cultural studies perspective, transgression plays an important role in the dynamics of culture. Transgressing taboos, norms, and social roles becomes a form of cultural innovation and creative tension in which the updating and transformation of value systems is possible. In this context, referring to Bakhtin's concept of folk laughter and its connection with freedom<sup>32</sup> allows us to show fun as a tool for demythologization and symbolic overthrow of authorities. However, this is not destruction in a nihilistic sense, but rather the updating of alternative ways of understanding the world.

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<sup>31</sup> M. Lurker; op. cit, p.31.

<sup>32</sup> M. Bachtin, op.cit, p.164.

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# THE HISTORY OF HUNGARIAN LITERATURE IN THE ROMANIAN-HUNGARIAN TRANSCULTURAL CONTEXT: HUNGARIAN LITERATURE IN THE BAROQUE ERA

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**Abstract:** *The study presents the history of Hungarian literature from the Baroque era from a Romanian-Hungarian transcultural perspective. The importance of the study is revealed by the fact that even today there is no history of Hungarian literature in Romanian. Attempts so far have been sporadic and primarily aimed only at Hungarian literature in Romania, or only at some Romanian-Hungarian literary confluences. Due to this fact, a group of Hungarian philologists from universities and research institutes in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Germany decided to write a history of Hungarian literature. The work under preparation will not be a literary history in the classical sense of the term, but will be a history of Hungarian literature dedicated specifically to the Romanian public. The history of Hungarian literary phenomena will be presented in a Romanian-Hungarian transcultural context. The present study is a chapter of this monograph.*

**Keywords:** History of Hungarian literature, Baroque in literature and art, rhetoric, comparative literature, transculturality, Romanian-Hungarian literary confluences

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## 1. Introduction

To this day, there is no history of Hungarian literature in Romanian. Attempts so far have been sporadic and have focused primarily on Hungarian literature in Romania<sup>1</sup>, or on Romanian-Hungarian literary confluences such as “Ady Endre or Petőfi Sándor in Hungarian literature”, etc.<sup>2</sup> The most serious presentation of Hungarian literature for the Romanian public is found in the Dictionary of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Central European Novels, except that the 14 prose writers and 21 novels presented in the volume — as the title suggests — are authors and works from the

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<sup>1</sup> Chinezu 1930; Balotă 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Todor 1983; Köllő 1993; Popa 1998; Pomogáts 2002; Trifescu, 2022; Nagy 2015.

20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>. There is almost nothing available in Romanian about Hungarian literature from the Middle Ages to the end of World War I. The only exception is the monograph by Kristóf György (professor of Hungarian literature at the University of Cluj between 1922 and 1945)<sup>4</sup>, which unfortunately was a total failure: neither at the time of publication nor later was it read by almost anyone, and today even philologists are unaware of it and do not refer to it. This is primarily due to the fact that the book was written in Romanian full of forced Hungarianisms and grammatical errors. Because of this, a group of Hungarian philologists from universities and research institutes in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, and Germany decided to write a history of Hungarian literature. The work in progress will not be a literary history in the classical sense of the term, but will be a history of Hungarian literature dedicated specifically to the Romanian public. The history of Hungarian literary phenomena will be presented in a Romanian-Hungarian transcultural context.

Thus, the history of Hungarian literature will not be considered a history that unfolds in a vacuum, separate from the evolution of Romanian literature. We emphasize those literary and cultural phenomena through which Hungarian literature is linked not only to the literatures of Western Europe, but primarily to those of Central Europe.

## **2. Baroque and Hungarian Literature – Historical and Artistic Context**

The characteristics of Hungarian literature during the Baroque period (17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> centuries) were strongly influenced by the situation in which the Hungarian state found itself at the time. The medieval Hungarian kingdom began to fall apart after the fatal battle of Mohács in 1526 and the occupation of the kingdom's capital (the city of Buda) in 1541. On August 29 1526, the Hungarian army suffered a catastrophic defeat on the plain near the town of Mohács at the hands of the Ottoman army led by Suleiman the Magnificent. Seven bishops and 30 high-ranking prelates were left dead on the battlefield. The young king of Hungary, Louis II (1506-1526) – whose secretary was Nicolaus Olahus – drowned in the Csele stream, which had overflowed due to rain. The lost battle was the main cause of the collapse of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom. Gheorghe Șincai considered the disaster at Mohács a true catastrophe also for “the poor Romanians of Transylvania, who because of this defeat now groan under the heavy yoke of the earthly lords”<sup>5</sup>. In other words, according to Șincai, the Romanian serfs of the Grand Principality of Transylvania at the end of the 18th century had a worse fate than those of the Hungarian Kingdom. The battle had a great

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<sup>3</sup> Babeți 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Kristóf 1934.

<sup>5</sup> Șincai 1969, 204.

impact on Hungarian folklore and literature. There is hardly a notable Hungarian writer who has not written something about the disaster at Mohács. This tradition gave rise to the following saying, first recorded in 1844: *Több is veszett Mohácsnál.* – Even more was lost at Mohács. That is, we should not be saddened if misfortune strikes us, because the greatest misfortune that befell the Hungarians was the Battle of Mohács, which the Hungarians managed to overcome.

After two disasters (the Battle of Mohács and the occupation of Buda, the country's capital), the central and southeastern parts of the medieval Hungarian Kingdom became a pashalic and were integrated into the Ottoman Empire. The southwestern and northeastern parts of medieval Hungary were incorporated into the Habsburg Monarchy. From the medieval voivodeship of Transylvania and some areas of Sătmar, Maramureş, and Banat (Partium), a state was formed under the name of the Principality of Transylvania, which was independent but at the same time a vassal of the Ottoman Empire until 1690. The legal status of the Principality of Transylvania was similar in many respects to that of the two Romanian principalities: like Moldavia and Wallachia, Transylvania paid tribute to the sultan. In 1686, the city of Buda was liberated from the Ottoman rule. By the end of the century, Austrian and Hungarian troops had recovered all the territories of the old Hungarian kingdom occupied by the Ottomans. After 1690, Transylvania was integrated into the Habsburg Monarchy under the name of the Grand Principality of Transylvania. Its status as an autonomous principality within the Habsburg Monarchy was maintained until the outbreak of the 1848 revolution.

The anecdote below vividly illustrates the essential feature of Baroque art and literature. If someone in Rome enters an old church and sees a beautiful reddish marble column from afar, and upon approaching the column realizes that it is indeed made of marble, then we are talking about a Renaissance column. If, in another church in Rome, we see another beautiful reddish marble column from a distance, and as we approach it we realize that it is actually a column made of wood but painted red, then that column is a Baroque column. In other words, the main method of Baroque art and literature is the creation of illusions. All Baroque literature strives to demonstrate that nothing is what it seems at first glance. Thus, for example, the authors of religious writings tried to convince their readers/ listeners (in the case of sermons) that evil is not evil. That is, the sufferings and trials that man goes through are not bad things, but are in fact signs of God's grace. Suffering even becomes the condition for salvation: "I [God] mock and torment those whom I love. From this you will know that you are not bastards, but my sons and daughters, that is, my chosen ones", wrote Count Bethlen Miklós (1642-1716), one of the most important Hungarian memoirists of the time, in his prayer book.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bethlen 1955, 230.

To accomplish this nearly impossible task, Baroque writers resorted to rhetoric. Since ancient times, rhetoric, being the art of persuasion, aimed to influence the reader /listener through teaching (*docere*), emotion (*movere*), and entertainment (*delectare*). In Baroque literature, the emphasis is on emotion and entertainment. To achieve the desired effect, writers mainly used aphorisms, metaphors, and amusing expressions. The most commonly used metaphor in Baroque poetry is the so-called *conchetto*, which meant comparing and connecting bizarre things that at first glance had no connection<sup>7</sup>. For example, in a poem (*A Vadász és Echo – The Hunter and Echo*) by Zrínyi Miklós (1620-1664), the legs of the beloved woman are compared to the Pillars of Hercules (which in ancient and Baroque literature metaphorically referred to the rocks in the Strait of Gibraltar), and the act of love is described as an analogy of the collapse of a marble palace: “Two beautiful legs/ Unmatched under the sun/ With those she walks./ Hercules’ column/ Which is non plus ultra/ Resembles them./ I wished for my beautiful marble palace/ To fall into my arms/ As Samson’s fell.”<sup>8</sup>

In the quoted stanza, certain elements are metaphorically linked — parts of the human body with geographical concepts, biblical characters (Samson) and mythological characters (Hercules) — with the beloved woman and the lyrical self, elements that, based on everyday logic, are mutually exclusive. The combination of the world of ancient mythology with the world of the Christian Bible is also a characteristic feature of Baroque literature. This literary heterodoxy results in the disappearance of perspective and unified discourse in the representation and description of reality. Discourse about reality becomes more important than reality itself, facts being replaced by interpretations, arguments by feelings, and experience by illusion. Religion is divided into denominations, and in political discourse, ethics is replaced by propaganda and manipulation. In Baroque literature, contradictions are present simultaneously: heroism is mixed with irony, and firm faith with doubt. The canonical characters of Hungarian literature from the Baroque era are representatives of these paradigms at different stages.

### 3. Pázmány Péter (1570-1637)

One of these writers is Pázmány Péter, the most prominent representative of Hungarian religious prose of that period. He was born in Oradea into a Calvinist family, but converted to Catholicism at the age of 12. He began his studies at the Jesuit gymnasium in Cluj, then continued in Krakow, Vienna, and Rome. After completing his studies, he began his academic career at the University of Graz. In 1616, he became

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<sup>7</sup> Kibédi 1964, 34-52.

<sup>8</sup> See the original: Zrínyi 1958, 379.

Archbishop of Strigonia (Esztergom), and in 1629, he was appointed cardinal by Pope Urban VIII. He made significant contributions to both the institutional reorganization of the Roman Catholic Church and the reform of Catholic education in Hungary. In 1623, he founded the Catholic college for seminarians in Hungary in Vienna, which still operates today under the name Collegium Pazmanianum. After the union of the Transylvanian Romanians with the Church of Rome in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, several prominent Greek Catholic intellectuals studied at the college: Samuil Micu, Ioan Giurgiu Patachi, Atanasie Rednic, etc. The first university to survive on the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom was also founded by Pázmány in Nagyszombat (Tranava, Slovakia) in 1635. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the university had a Romanian student: Gabriel Ivul (1619/ 1620–1678) from Caransebeș, who was also dean of the Faculty of Theology between 1669 and 1672.<sup>9</sup>

Pázmány was a prolific writer: he penned no fewer than 40 theological disputes (the most popular genre of religious literature at the time, in which authors addressed both religious and confessional issues, as well as certain political problems). All were written in Hungarian and saw the light of print. The importance of this fact can be understood when we consider that, at the time, the language of science and theology was still Latin and that the vast majority of texts were not printed. The fact that Pázmány wrote these disputations in Hungarian and that they were published contributed to a previously unknown dissemination of Pázmány's works, which also brought considerable notoriety to the author, to whom his opponents in the Protestant camp – Magyari István (1565-1605), preacher in Sárvár; Alvinczi Péter (1570-1634), court preacher to prince Ștefan Bocskai (1605-1606) and Gabriel Bethlen (1613-1629) – were forced to respond.

The main issue of the dispute was: who was to blame for the collapse of medieval Hungary? The Catholic Church had strayed from the original teachings of Christ, thus sinking into an ocean of sin. Seeing this, God sent the Turks to punish the sinful Hungarians, so the Ottoman occupation of the country was God's punishment for the sins committed by the Catholics, argued the Protestant preachers. During the reign of the Catholic kings (from St. Stephen to Matthias Corvinus), Hungary was a large and powerful state, Pázmány replied, and the country's decline began with the emergence and spread of Protestantism in Hungary. God's punishment is therefore due to the fact that Protestants rebelled against the true religion, which is, of course, Catholicism.

A selective collection of these disputes was published in 1613 in Pozsony (Bratislava, Slovakia) under the title *Isteni igazságra vezérlő kalauz* (Guide to Divine Truth). It became a very popular work: during Pázmány's lifetime alone, it was reprinted twice. This collection also contains two appendices, namely two works in

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<sup>9</sup> Radosav 2003, 123-154.

which Pázmány directs his arrows against Muslims (*A Mahomet vallásáról* – On the Religion of Mohammed) and the Orthodox (*A görögök szakadásáról* – On the Schism of the Greeks). He characterized the situation of the Eastern Church:

The Eastern Church is the noble part of Christianity, but it rebelled against the Roman Church, being rewarded for this rebellion on our part with great tenderness, and on the part of the Turks with slavery<sup>10</sup>.

The main reason for writing this short work was the fact that “not only outside Hungary, but also within it, there are some Christians of the Greek rite, such as the Russians, Serbs, and Vlachs, who are of Roman descent”<sup>11</sup>. In his work *On the Schism of the Greeks*, he deals most extensively with the issue of the procession of the Holy Spirit, trying to prove that the holy fathers also accepted the filioque thesis, according to which the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son (Jesus). The work *On the Schism of the Greeks* must be placed in the context of Catholic propaganda supported by the Habsburgs, propaganda that aimed to unite the Orthodox Christians in Hungary and Transylvania with the Church of Rome, a union that would only be achieved among the Romanians of Transylvania at the end of the 17th century.

Apart from his disputes, we must mention two other important works by Pázmány: *Imádságoskönyv* – Prayer Book, Graz, 1606; and a volume of sermons (*Prédikációk*, Pozsony, 1636). The prayer book was intended for parishioners for the practice of individual piety. With the other volume, Pázmány wanted to help ordinary priests in writing the sermons that were delivered in churches. The volume contained a total of 101 sermons and 12 meditations on a wide variety of topics (drunkenness, raising children, crime, lust, slander, the devil’s temptations, etc.) aimed at the social discipline of parishioners. In the preface to the volume, Pázmány describes the techniques of writing sermons. His theses are important not only from the point of view of religious rhetoric, but also from that of literary communication. According to Pázmány’s theses, the main purpose of the sermon is not so much to convince the listener to accept abstract truths, but rather to enable him to realize in his daily life those truths (those good deeds) about which the priest spoke in his sermon. The sermon should be short, its style adapted to the cultural level of the listeners, and the priest should be knowledgeable. The most important thing, however, is the person of the priest, who must be morally impeccable, because parishioners “are more interested in the priest’s deeds than in his words”, so “a priest who does not live according to the stated precepts will destroy moral conduct of his parishioners.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Pázmány 1898, 359.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Pázmány 1903, XXXII.

The popularity and success of Pázmány's works was so great that some sermons and prayers were even adopted by Protestant writers, without citing the source. The Protestants' plagiarism was later exposed by Pázmány himself, thus the first dispute over plagiarism in Hungarian literature arose around Pázmány's works<sup>13</sup>. Pázmány's success and popularity were due in no small part to his talent as a prose writer and the lively style of his writings. We offer a single example to illustrate this point. Both he and his Calvinist opponent Alvinczi Péter repeatedly condemned drunkenness. Here is what Alvinczi wrote on this subject:

Look around you and see how many healthy people you find among the elderly. Where are the wise men? Where are the strong men? Nowhere, because they have all perished because of wine<sup>14</sup>.

Here is Pázmány's text:

If we took the entire army of the Ottoman emperor and led it into a large valley, and then flooded the valley with the amount of wine that was drunk at the various celebrations for Hungary's freedom, we would not need a flood [allusion to the biblical flood] to destroy the Turks, because the entire Ottoman army in that valley would drown in wine<sup>15</sup>.

Melancholic questions in a morose style in Alvinczi, an ingenious metaphor cloaked in bitter irony in Pázmány.

#### **4. Zrínyi Miklós (1620-1664)**

Literary legend has it that Zrínyi was Pázmány's disciple. In reality, the cardinal was "only" the chairman of the council that coordinated the careers of the Zrínyi brothers: Miklós and Péter. This council was formed after their father died in 1626 and the two minor brothers were placed under the council's guardianship. The Zrínyi family converted to Lutheranism in the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but Miklós's father, Zrínyi György, returned to Catholicism under Pázmány's personal influence. Thus, Miklós studied at the Jesuit colleges in Nagyszombat, Graz, and Vienna. After completing his studies in 1636, he took a long trip to Italy. This study trip was also organized by Pázmány. At the intervention of Cardinal Zrínyi, he was also received in audience by Pope Urban VIII, who, under the name of Maffeo Barberini, was also an important poet of the time. The volume of poems he received from the pope (*Poemata*, 1634) had a remarkable influence on Zrínyi's literary work<sup>16</sup>. Returning from Italy in 1648, he was elected Ban of Croatia, thus becoming, after the

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<sup>13</sup> Hargittay 2001, 251; Maczák 2003, 261-276

<sup>14</sup> Alvinczi 1634, 342.

<sup>15</sup> Pázmány 1903, 291.

<sup>16</sup> Szörényi 2017, 449-460.

king and palatine, the third highest-ranking official in the Kingdom of Hungary, Croatia being part of the Kingdom of Hungary at the time.

His literary career also began during this period: in 1651, he published a volume in Vienna entitled *Adriai tengernelk Syrenaja: Groff Zrínyi Miklós* (*The Siren of the Adriatic Sea: Count Zrínyi Miklós*). This title suggests that it is an autobiographical volume. And indeed, the volume is structured in such a way that its composition reveals a lyrical biography of the Siren, that is, of the poet Zrínyi, the Siren being the allegorical name of the poet. However, this biography does not recount the life of the poet's body, but rather that of his soul, which first suffers because of love and then, in order to escape this suffering, goes to war, but even then does not escape. When his soul reaches despair because of love, like the mythological hero Orpheus, he descends into Hell, from where, like Christ, he is reborn, after which he bids farewell to both love and poetry, declaring at the end of the volume that he will continue to fight and sacrifice himself for the good of his country: "But I will not make my name with a pen alone,/ But with my sword, striking down the Ottoman race:/ As long as I live, I will fight to defeat the crescent moon –/ I will rest happily in my ancestral grave."<sup>17</sup>

The first poems in the volume are love poems, in which the lyrical self's love is rejected by a fictional woman named Viola. After this failed romantic assault, the lyrical self devotes himself to a military career, which is recounted in the epic poem *Obsidio Sighetiana* (*The Siege of Sziget*). In the epic's peroration, the author makes a direct reference to the love poems that were placed in the volume before the epic, suggesting to the reader that the composition of the volume is not random: "With my young mind before/ I played with sweet love poetry/ I struggled with Viola's cruelty/ But now with the louder voice of Mars/ I sing of battles and the soldier..."<sup>18</sup>

The epic tells a true story: in 1566, the fortress of Sziget was besieged by the Ottoman army led by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) himself. The captain of the fortress was none other than the poet's great-grandfather (also named Zrínyi Miklós). The garrison of the fortress, led by Captain Zrínyi, seeing that they could no longer hold the fortress, launched a suicidal counterattack and were slaughtered by the Turks. During the siege, Suleiman fell ill (probably with diarrhea) and died. In the invocation of the epic, the poet asks his muse, who is none other than

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<sup>17</sup> Translation by Dan George in Olariu, 1965, 264.

<sup>18</sup> The translation is mine. For the Hungarian original, see: Zrínyi 1958, 35. Several fragments from *Obsidio Sighetiana* were also translated by George Dan, who, however, strays too far from the original text. I quote this version as well:

"I, who in my youth, impetuous by nature,  
Played only with the sweet love of the nymphs,  
My chest beating with Viola, my dear, cruelly caressing me;  
From today I will shout fierce words with Mars,  
I will sing the brave..."  
(Olariu 1965, 251.)

the Holy Virgin herself, to give him the strength to write the truth and only the truth: “Muse! You, who do not wear a crown of laurels, which wither away, nor of branches that break on the crown — But from holy stars that will never set in the sky,/ And from the moon and the sun you weave your crown!/ You, who are the Virgin Mother and gave birth to the Child,/ who has been forever, and loves his son/ as the King of the world, and yours, Virgin,/ Holy Empress, send your mercy upon me.”<sup>19</sup>

After a few lines, he assures us that he will write the truth, because the one who dictates the events to him is none other than the Holy Spirit: “My hand writes the deeds of the ban [and his great-grandfather was the ban of Croatia]/ through the words of the Holy Spirit”<sup>20</sup>. However, this promise is merely a rhetorical feint, because Zrínyi, following the aforementioned Baroque paradigm (nothing is what it seems), transcribes real events. Thus, contrary to historical reality, in the epic, Sultan Suleiman is killed directly by Captain Zrínyi, and the fall of the city into the hands of the Turks is presented not as a failure of the Hungarians, but as a victory, given that the souls of the fallen Hungarian martyr soldiers are taken by angels to heaven, while the souls of the Turkish soldiers and the sultan end up in hell. So defeat is actually victory, and victory is actually defeat.

The transcription of reality served, on the one hand, family and political propaganda, and, on the other hand, imitated certain literary topoi. Zrínyi's most direct model was Torquato Tasso's epic poem *Gerusalemme liberata* (Jerusalem Delivered, published in 1581), which also tells of a victory of Christians over pagans who hold the Holy Sepulchre of the Saviour under their rule. The basic concept of Zrínyi's epic is closely related to Pázmány's polemic with Protestant preachers. Zrínyi refutes Martin Luther's thesis that the conquest of Christian countries by the Ottomans is God's punishment for the sins committed by Christians. Therefore, the Turks are God's instrument and, for this reason, they are militarily invincible. The Christians' fight against them is futile as long as they do not repent and renounce their sins. Only after a moral and religious rebirth will Christians be helped by God in their anti-Ottoman struggles, Luther asserts<sup>21</sup>. In the epic, Zrínyi presents us precisely this moral metamorphosis of the soldiers of Sziget, who, through their sacrifice in the fight against the Turks, show the way for the entire Hungarian nobility: to abandon their

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<sup>19</sup> Olariu 1965, 251.

<sup>20</sup> Zrínyi 1958, 314.

<sup>21</sup> Luther had already spoken about the Turkish threat as early as the 1520s, although he had no direct contact with Muslims. In the fall of 1529, Ottoman troops were at the gates of Vienna, which came as a shock to the whole of Western Europe at the time. The Turkish advance prompted Luther to write three works dealing with the issue of military resistance against the Turks: *Vom Kriege wider die Türken* (The War against the Turks, 1528), *Heerpredigt wider die Türken* (Army Sermon against the Turks, 1530); *Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken* (Exhortation to Prayer against the Turks, 1541). For more on the reception and adaptation of Luther's ideas in the Hungarian context, see: Dobrovits – Óze 2020.

religious quarrels and sins, because in this way they will succeed in defeating the Turks and restoring Hungary's former glory.

Another autobiographical element linked to the publication of *Syrena* is the fact that the volume was dedicated to the memory of Zrínyi's wife (Draskovich Mária Euzsébia), who died at the age of 20 in 1650. The volume was published exactly one year after the end of the mourning period. Thus, in the volume, the epic is followed by several love poems in memory of Euzsébia. With these poems, the lyrical self definitively turns away from love, and the poet Zrínyi from literature. "My profession is not to write poems, but to do greater and better things in the service of my country", he wrote in the preface to the volume<sup>22</sup>. By these great and good things, we must understand his political and military actions. After the publication of *Syrena*, Zrínyi turned away from poetry for good. The four works he would go on to write – *Vitéz hadnagy* (The Brave Captain, 1647-1652), *Mátyás király életéről való elmélkedések* (Meditations on the Life of King Matthias, 1656-1657), *A török áfium ellen való orvosság* (Remedy against Turkish Opium, 1661-1663), *Tábori kis trakta* (Small Military Treatise, 1664) – are historical, moral-philosophical, and military works. All of them remained in manuscript form, thus having little influence apart from the pamphlet *Áfium*, which was copied several times.

The main source for *Meditations on the Life of King Matthias* was Antonio Bonfini's work *Rerum Ungaricarum decades*, completed in 1497 but first published in 1568. Where Bonfini discussed the Romanian origins of King Matthias' family, stating that the magnates of western Hungary (among whom Zrínyi belonged in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) reproached Matthias for his humble origins, saying that a "Wallachian ruler" (*regulus valachus*), Zrínyi made the following comment in the margin of Bonfini's text: "*ha disznó túrná is ki az embert, csak ember legyen -- It does not matter if someone is gnawed by a pig, as long as he is human*"<sup>23</sup>. In other words, it does not matter what family someone comes from; when judging a person, what matters are their deeds and merits. In Zrínyi's view, it is irrelevant that Matia's family is of Romanian origin, as long as the members of this family are virtuous, exceptional people. A bizarre idea in the context of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, we might say, even protochronic.

In the winter of 1663-1664, Zrínyi led a glorious anti-Ottoman campaign. However, after initial successes, the Ottoman army counterattacked with great force, forcing the imperial army under the command of General Raimondo Montecuccoli to intervene. In the battle of Szentgotthárd on August 1, 1664, Christian troops managed to stop the Ottoman army. Zrínyi, wounded in his pride by not being appointed commander-in-chief of all troops, did not participate in the battle, but withdrew to his

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<sup>22</sup> Zrínyi 1958, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Bibliotheca Zriniana, 164.

estate in Csáktornya<sup>24</sup>. It is ironic that he, the brave soldier who was so eager to sacrifice himself on the battlefield fighting the Turks, was killed on November 18, 1664, in a tragicomic hunting accident by a wounded wild boar.

From a literary point of view, Zrínyi's most valuable work remains the volume *Syrena*. Its true aesthetic value would only be discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century thanks to prominent writers such as Kazinczy Ferenc, Kölcsey Ferenc, and Arany János. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Zrínyi had few readers. One of them was Gyöngyösi István.

## 5. Gyöngyösi István (1620-1704)

Gyöngyösi István was born into a Catholic noble family in Upper Hungary. He studied at the university founded by Pázmány in Nagyszombat. After completing his studies, he became a lawyer, spending his entire life in the service of aristocratic families. Between 1663 and 1670, he was secretary to Széchy Mária (1610-1679), wife of Palatine Wesselényi Ferenc (1605-1667). After Maria Gyöngyösi's death, he entered the service of the Andrassy family. All of Gyöngyösi's literary works are either about the lives of these aristocrats or dedicated to them. Gyöngyösi's first work, *Márssal társalkodó Murányi Vénus* (The Alliance of Venus of Murány with Mars), published in 1664 in Kassa (Košice, Slovakia)<sup>25</sup>, is a novel in verse that tells the story of the marriage of Wesselényi (Mars) to Széchy Mária (Venus). The marriage took place in 1644 and caused quite a stir at the time, due to the fact that it was also a political betrayal. In that year, Transylvanian Prince George Rákóczi I launched a military campaign to conquer Upper Hungary. Wesselényi, as captain of the fortress of Fülek (Filakovo, Slovakia), was a supporter of the Habsburgs. However, the Széchy family's fortress in Murány (Muránsky hrad, Slovakia) was under Rákóczi's control. The prince was deceived by Széchy Mária, who surrendered the fortress to Wesselényi without any resistance. Two to three weeks after the capture of the fortress, Mária married Wesselényi.

Gyöngyösi next work, *Porábúl megéledett Főnix* (The Phoenix Reborn from its Own Ashes, written in 1670 and published in 1693)<sup>26</sup>, recounts the marriage and heroic death of Transylvanian prince Ioan Kemény (1607–1662). Kemény married Lónyai Anna (died in 1687 or 1693) in 1659, and two years later he was elected prince of Transylvania. Gyöngyösi's verse novel depicts Kemény's battles with the Ottoman army. In the final battle at Nagyszőlős (Seleuş, Mureş County) on January 22, 1662, Kemény fell from his horse and died. In the two novels in verse, real historical events and characters are presented in a mythological context. Thus, for example, Wesselényi is characterized as follows: "His shoulders are like those of Atlas, and his

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<sup>24</sup> Căzan 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Modern edition: Gyöngyösi 1998.

<sup>26</sup> Modern edition: Gyöngyösi 1999.

heart like that of Hercules/ His mind is like that of Antenor, and his speech like that of Ulysses/ He knows how to love like Paris, his stature resembles that of Titan/ In his home he is like Pylades, and he is Achilles on the battlefield.”<sup>27</sup>

However, Captain Fülel did not carry the entire globe on his shoulders (like Atlas), he was not the son of Zeus, and he did not participate in a ten-year war like Paris, Achilles, or Ulysses. Wesselényi’s comparison with these mythical heroes adds a touch of irony to Gyöngyösi’s work. Just as the siege of Murány is a farce compared to the siege of Troy: when Wesselényi’s soldiers hear the first gunshots or encounter a bear, they get scared and run away. The irony and comedy are in stark contrast to the mythologization of the characters and events, but it is precisely because of this ambiguity that Gyöngyösi’s works were so successful in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, being reprinted several times. As the action of *The Reborn Phoenix* takes place in Transylvania, we find in the text of the novel some stereotypes about Transylvanian Romanians: they are robbers and cowards in battle, but they have good horses and beautiful, graceful dances<sup>28</sup>. Their presence in Gyöngyösi shows that, at the time, these stereotypes were quite widespread, being known even to those Hungarian nobles and intellectuals who had no direct contact with Romanians (Gyöngyösi had never been to Transylvania).

On the other hand, the success of Gyöngyösi’s works is due to the fact that they describe scenes from the everyday life of the Hungarian nobility (marriage, weddings, hunting, parties, etc.). Contemporary readers could learn the rules of good marriage from his works: how to compose a love letter, how husband and wife should behave in marriage, how children should be educated, etc. Gyöngyösi’s entire literary work is an apology for marriage. The most eloquent example of this is the poem *A csalárd Cupido* (The Cunning Cupid, written in 1695, published in 1734), in which direct eroticism is cloaked in a mythological context, the moral of the poem being that the best remedy for the torments of love is marriage. The female voice in Hungarian literature appears for the first time in Gyöngyösi’s works. In the love poems of Balassi Bálint or Zrínyi Miklós, only the man in love speaks. In Gyöngyösi, however, female characters such as Széchy Mária or Lónyai Anna fully embrace their feelings of love and speak openly about them.

Just as Italy owes to Tasso, France to Voltaire, and Germany to [Martin] Opitz, so Hungary owes to Gyöngyösi. No one has written more beautiful verses than he. His poetry is eloquent, his thoughts are full of spirit. Not to mention his beautiful descriptions, in which he presents emotions such as love, hate, pity, and other sentimental fluctuations in such a way that we can almost see them with our own

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<sup>27</sup> Gyöngyösi 1998, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Gyöngyösi 1998, 107; Gyöngyösi 1999, 23, 131.

eyes. Not even in the writings of the ancient poets do we find such beauty and color as in those of Gyöngyösi<sup>29</sup>.

This is how Batsányi János presented Gyöngyösi to the French public in 1813 in the columns of the *Mercure Étranger* magazine. Batsányi's testimony shows that, until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gyöngyösi was the most popular poet in Hungarian literature. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, his fame began to fade, his place in the romantic literary canon being taken over by the work of Zrínyi Miklós.

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<sup>29</sup> Bérnay de 1813, 32.

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# PLAY AND ROLE-PLAY AS RESISTANCE: EXPLORING SOCIAL PHENOMENA IN GABRIELA ADAMEȘTEANU'S *WASTED MORNING*

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**Abstract:** *Gabriela Adameșteanu's Wasted Morning (originally published in 2003) offers a nuanced depiction of post-communist Romanian society, capturing the everyday struggles of individuals navigating socio-political transformations. While the novel primarily delves into themes of memory, identity, and social upheaval, it subtly foregrounds the role of play—humour, irony, and triviality—as forms of resistance. This paper examines the novel as a literary manifestation of social resistance through the motif of play. By analysing the characters' engagement with play and humour amidst socio-political upheavals, the study explores how Adameșteanu employs these elements as subtle acts of resistance against oppressive societal structures. Drawing on theories of social resistance and performative agency, the paper argues that Wasted Morning reveals play as a vital form of social critique and resilience.*

**Key words:** play, role-play, memory, survival, humour, irony

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## ***Wasted Morning* by Gabriela Adameșteanu: Survival and the Performance of Memory**

In *Wasted Morning*, Adameșteanu presents a post-communist Romanian society grappling with its recent history, personal trauma, and the search for meaning. The novel's protagonist Vica Delcă navigates a landscape filled with fragmented memories and societal disillusionment, engaging in a "game" of survival that involves role-playing, memory reconstruction, and moral negotiation. She is a seventy-year old Romanian woman who lives in Bucharest (but not the centre) under the Communist regime. Based on the various dates, it seems to be 1975. She is married to a useless husband. He was dashing when she married him but now he sits in front of the television and expects his wife to wait on him. They are poor, living on a meagre pension and whatever Vica can hustle from others.

## **The Game of Historical and Personal Memory**

The novel depicts memory as a battleground where individual and collective histories intersect. Adameșteanu emphasizes that survival involves not only physical endurance but also the repeated performance of roles—be it as a victim, a survivor, or a disillusioned witness. The protagonist's internal dialogue reveals a conscious act of role-playing, where reconstructing the past is akin to playing a game of chess—every move carefully calculated to preserve a sense of self amid societal chaos.

## **The Performative Role-Playing in *Wasted Morning*: Navigating Memory and Survival**

The "game" of survival in *Wasted Morning* is also one of moral flexibility. Characters often assume roles dictated by socio-political circumstances, echoing Judith Butler's notion that identities are performative and constructed through repeated acts (Butler, 1990). The novel suggests that survival in a post-totalitarian context demands a performative resilience—adapting roles to fit the shifting landscape of memory and moral compromise.

In Gabriela Adameșteanu's *Wasted Morning*, the motif of role-playing emerges as a central mechanism through which characters negotiate their identities amidst societal upheaval and personal trauma. The novel depicts a post-communist Romania grappling with its recent history, where individuals are compelled to assume various roles—both consciously and unconsciously—to survive emotionally, morally, and socially. This performative aspect of memory and identity aligns with Judith Butler's (1990) concept of gender and social roles as enacted through repeated acts, emphasizing the fluidity and strategic nature of self-presentation.

## **Role-Playing as a Survival Strategy**

The characters in *Wasted Morning* often engage in a kind of "role-playing" that functions as a survival tactic, allowing them to navigate the complex moral and social terrains shaped by the communist legacy. For instance, Vica's internal dialogue reveals a conscious effort to adopt different roles depending on the situation—whether as a disillusioned former activist, a cautious observer, or a resigned survivor. This multiplicity of roles is not static but fluid, echoing Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, which conceptualizes social interaction as a performance where individuals assume roles to manage impressions and maintain social order.

Goffman's (1959) theory suggests that such role-playing becomes essential in environments characterized by uncertainty and moral ambiguity, as in post-totalitarian societies. Characters in Adameșteanu's novel perform roles that enable them to conceal vulnerabilities, maintain social facades, or preserve personal dignity. For example, characters may outwardly conform to societal expectations while

internally grappling with unresolved trauma, illustrating the performative nature of their identities.

Ivona for example is a sixty-ish "good family lady", where Vica used to work for her formerly wealthy family. The woman symbolizes the wisdom that comes with lived experience. Her role offers a critique of the youthful pursuit of identity, contrasting it with the acceptance of one's life choices. She represents the culmination of various roles and the reflections they leave behind, making the theme of role-playing resonate across generations.

Margot embodies the concept of identity fluidity. As a woman navigating personal and societal expectations, she often role-plays various personas — the dutiful daughter, the disenchanting partner, and the independent woman. Her internal struggle reflects the tension between her authentic self and the roles imposed by family and society.

Niki represents the male perspective on role-playing. He is trapped in traditional masculine roles, struggling between the expectations of being a provider and his desire for intimacy and authenticity. His attempts to uphold societal norms highlight the limitations and pressures of masculine identity, showcasing how he, too, engages in role-playing.

## **Role-Playing and Memory Reconstruction**

Furthermore, role-playing in *Wasted Morning* is intricately linked to the reconstruction of personal and collective memory. The act of remembering is portrayed as a strategic performance—characters selectively recall, suppress, or reinterpret past events to fit their current roles and emotional needs (López, 2004). This aligns with the concept of "narrative identity," where individuals craft coherent stories about themselves to sustain a sense of continuity and agency (McAdams, 1993).

For example, Vica's revisiting of childhood memories involves adopting different narrative roles—sometimes as a victim, other times as an observer—highlighting how memory itself is performative and malleable. Such role-playing acts as a form of psychological survival, allowing characters to negotiate their pasts without being overwhelmed by trauma. This aligns with Cathy Caruth's (1995) assertion that traumatic memories are often "disowned" or repressed, but can also be actively reconstructed through storytelling, which involves performative acts that define identity.

## **Moral Flexibility and Role Fluidity**

The novel also underscores that survival often entails moral flexibility—characters adopt roles that may conflict with their moral convictions, reflecting the performative negotiation between personal integrity and societal survival. This is

evident in characters who compromise their principles to adapt to new socio-political realities, like Maya and Olga, exemplifying Butler's (1990) idea that roles are not innate but enacted, contingent upon context.

Moreover, the act of role-playing becomes a form of resistance—an assertion of agency within oppressive structures. By consciously choosing how to perform their roles, characters challenge the deterministic narratives of history and society, asserting their capacity for moral agency even in compromised circumstances.

## **Play and Resistance in Post-Communist Context**

The post-communist transition in Romania, as depicted in Adameșteanu's *Wasted Morning*, was marked by pervasive socio-economic instability, disillusionment, and a loss of collective trust (Vasiliu, 2007). In such contexts, the act of play—humour, irony, and triviality—becomes a vital form of resistance, enabling individuals to subvert dominant narratives and cope with oppressive realities.

From this point of view, Vica plays a crucial role in framing the post-communist experience. Through observational insights, they challenge the characters' internalized roles. The reflective passages reveal a sense of disillusionment with the superficiality of post-communist life: "Freedom felt empty, like a playground with no children" (Adameșteanu, 2003: 48). This commentary underscores the struggle against the nostalgia for a stable identity and the uncertainty of newfound freedoms, highlighting resistance through critical reflection.

Lady Ioaniu offers a generational perspective on play and resistance. Her presence serves as a reminder of the past, embodying the resilience of those who lived through the regime. She engages in playful storytelling, saying, "Every tale is a thread stitching together the fabric of our lives" (Adameșteanu, 2023: 37). Through her narratives, she resists the simplification of history and calls for reflection on the complexities of their shared experiences, emphasizing the importance of memory and continuity in the face of change.

Margot's journey mirrors the struggle for self-definition in a transformed society. Her playfulness often acts as a form of resistance; she navigates personal and societal constraints through various identities. For instance, her moments of rebellion against traditional gender roles can be seen when she states, "I refuse to be just a shadow of someone else's dreams" (Adameșteanu, 2003: 156). This declaration signals her quest for autonomy in a landscape where societal expectations continue to weigh heavily on women's identities.

Ivona presents a more subdued form of resistance. Her negotiation of friendship and loyalty often reveals the constraints of post-communist realities, where individual desires are subverted by economic and social pressures. She reflects on her choices, saying, "In a world of chaos, I balance precariously on the edge of my own decisions" (Adameșteanu, 2003: 89). This acknowledgment of her struggles

highlights her subtle rebellion against a system that seeks to dictate her worth based on material success rather than personal fulfilment.

Last but not least Niki struggles with traditional masculine expectations in the post-communist landscape. His profession and relationships become a stage for performance, illustrating both participation and resistance. When he expresses frustration, saying, “I want to break free from this façade of a perfect life” (Adameşteanu, 2003: 102), it reveals his inner turmoil and desire to resist societal pressures. His play, often seen in his romantic escapades, underscores a rebellion against conventional roles that limit male vulnerability.

### **Play as Everyday Resistance**

In post-communist societies, daily routines often become sites of subtle resistance. The act of joking, gossiping, or trivial playfulness creates spaces where individuals can momentarily escape the pressures of social control (Foucault, 1978). Adameşteanu captures this through scenes where characters engage in humorous banter, which not only alleviates tension but also undermines the legitimacy of authority figures. Such acts echo the concept of “micro-resistances,” small-scale acts that collectively challenge hegemonic power structures (Scott, 1985).

Adameşteanu depicts characters engaging in trivial acts—gossiping, joking, or engaging in petty disputes—as acts of resistance. For instance, during a tense family gathering the characters indulge in humorous teasing about their neighbours’ misfortunes, which acts as a covert critique of social hypocrisy (Adameşteanu, 2003: 147). These moments of levity serve to reinforce social bonds and create spaces where resistance is enacted through shared laughter, subtly undermining the oppressive silence imposed by the societal upheaval.

### **Performative Agency and Social Commentary**

Furthermore, the performative nature of play allows characters to perform social commentary covertly. The playful exaggeration or parody of societal flaws becomes a form of “performative resistance,” effectively critiquing political and social injustices without direct confrontation (Butler, 1990). This performative resistance is particularly evident in scenes where characters mimic or parody authority figures, thus exposing their absurdity and fragility.

A notable example occurs when the protagonist mimics and parodies the superficial politeness of bureaucrats, exaggerating their mannerisms to expose their absurdity. In one scene, she imitates an official’s stiff speech, turning it into a parody that highlights the disconnection between appearance and reality (Adameşteanu, 2003: 115). This performative act acts as a covert critique, exposing the fragility and pretentiousness of authority figures, and exemplifies how humour becomes a form of performative resistance.

## **Playful Subversion of Social Norms**

In *Wasted Morning*, the use of humour and play disrupts the oppressive social norms imposed by the communist regime and its aftermath. The characters' engagement with trivial pursuits—such as gossiping or joking—becomes a form of everyday resistance. As noted by Foucault (1978), minor acts of rebellion can undermine power structures; Adameşteanu's characters exemplify this through their covert humour.

## **Play as Personal and Social Resilience**

Furthermore, the novel illustrates how play fosters resilience—allowing characters to cope with the chaos of societal change. The recurring motif of shared laughter among friends signifies collective resilience and solidarity (Klein, 2018). This aligns with Bakhtin's (1984) notion of carnival laughter as a form of social levity that challenges hierarchical authority.

## **Humour and Irony as Subversive Instruments**

Humour has historically served as a covert form of resistance against oppressive regimes (Bauman, 1990). Under authoritarian rule, overt dissent was often dangerous; thus, humour and irony provided safer avenues for critique (Miller, 2012). Adameşteanu's characters frequently employ sardonic remarks and ironic storytelling, which serve as coded language challenging authority figures and societal norms (Adameşteanu, 2003: 85). For instance, a character's dismissive joke about bureaucratic inefficiency functions as a subtle critique of the state's failings, circulating beneath the surface of everyday conversation.

In *Wasted Morning*, Adameşteanu employs humour and irony as covert tools to critique authority and societal absurdities. For example, in a scene where characters discuss bureaucratic inefficiencies, the protagonist sarcastically remarks, "The system is so efficient that it manages to waste everyone's time" (Adameşteanu, 2003: 102). This biting irony undercuts the legitimacy of state institutions, subtly resisting their authority. Similarly, the characters' playful exaggerations about their hardships—such as joking about the scarcity of basic goods—serve to normalize and mock the oppressive realities they face, turning despair into a form of communal satire.

## **Play as Psychological Buffer and Symbol of Solidarity against Societal Collapse**

Throughout the novel, shared laughter among characters signifies resilience and collective endurance. For example, characters often exchange humorous anecdotes about their economic struggles, transforming personal hardship into

shared comedy (Adameşteanu, 2003: 189). This communal humour fosters solidarity, helping characters cope with the disillusionment and social disintegration around them. Such acts of trivial play serve as psychological buffers, allowing individuals to resist the oppressive weight of societal collapse.

Finally, the literature suggests that play functions as a psychological buffer against societal collapse. As social institutions falter, humour and trivial pursuits serve as coping mechanisms, fostering resilience (Klein, 2018). In *Wasted Morning*, shared laughter among characters symbolizes solidarity and collective endurance amidst chaos, illustrating how play sustains social bonds in times of crisis.

## Conclusion

In *Wasted Morning*, Gabriela Adameşteanu demonstrates that humour, irony, and trivial play are vital forms of social resistance in post-communist Romania. Through subtle acts of parody and shared laughter, characters challenge oppressive authority, forge social bonds, and sustain resilience amidst societal upheaval. This portrayal underscores the power of play as a form of everyday resistance that persists even in times of profound social crisis.

The author also depicts role-playing as a vital performative act that underpins memory and survival. Characters navigate their fractured histories and uncertain futures by adopting multiple, fluid roles—acting as victims, witnesses, or survivors—depending on the demands of the moment. This performative process underscores the centrality of agency and strategy in the formation of identity within post-totalitarian contexts. As Goffman (1959) and Butler (1990) have articulated, roles are enacted through repeated performances; in Adameşteanu's narrative, this enactment becomes a crucial survival mechanism—one that sustains psychological resilience amid societal collapse.

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# REPRESENTATIONS OF PLAY IN QUEEN MARIE'S WRITINGS

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**Abstract:** *This article explores the diverse representations of play in the autobiographical and literary writings of Queen Marie of Romania, highlighting its symbolic, emotional, and cultural functions. Far from being trivial or nostalgic, play emerges in Marie's work as a narrative and aesthetic strategy—one that bridges memory, identity, and imagination. Drawing from Johan Huizinga's concept of Homo Ludens (1949), the study approaches play as a formative cultural act, deeply embedded in Marie's construction of self and world. Through analysis of scenes involving childhood games, creative expression, travel, and feminine rituals, the article reveals how play functions as a form of soft power and symbolic authorship. The narrative structures of Marie's writing resonate with Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity (1991), where the self is poetically configured through storytelling. Furthermore, her engagement with aesthetic and emotional expression—particularly in domestic, artistic, and natural spaces—aligns with the feminist theory of écriture féminine, as formulated by Hélène Cixous (1976). The article also integrates the lens of social representations (Jodelet, 1989) to understand how objects, gestures, and symbolic rituals within her texts carry shared meanings, rooted in both cultural tradition and individual imagination. Ultimately, play is portrayed not merely as recreation, but as a generative language of presence, resilience, and poetic resistance.*

**Keywords:** representations, play, Queen Marie, literary writings, cultural functions, narrative identity

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## 1. Introduction or play's implications

Play is not a marginal phenomenon or a secondary activity, but a fundamental component of the development of culture writes Huizinga (1938), in his classic work, *Homo Ludes*. Play, he argues, precedes culture and is present in all expressive forms – from myth, art and law, to ritual and literature. He defines play as a free, conscious action, carried out in a delimited time and space, according to freely accepted rules, which has a symbolic function and produces a reality of its own, separate from everyday life. Very interestingly he underlines that “play was older

than culture” since animals have not waited for man to teach them how to play. Huizinga (1977:5) defines play as a freely chosen activity, carried out within the limits of a determined time and space, having its own order, precise rules and a symbolic character. More than entertainment, play is, in this perspective, a force generating meaning and form, which crosses domains such as religion, law, art and literature.

In a critical and creative continuation of Huizinga's theory, Jacques Ehrmann proposes in his study *Homo Ludens Revisited* a more subtle interpretation of play, centered on modern literature as a space for constructing meaning through tension, inversion, and symbolization. Ehrmann states that play "is not the opposite of reality, but a form of it" and that literature becomes "a playful extension of existence" (Ehrmann, 1968:33). Thus, the literary text is no longer just a vehicle for a content, but a dynamic field in which the author and the reader participate in an act of co-creation, under the sign of the game of language and the mobility of meanings. For him, play becomes a way of understanding textual construction, a framework in which meaning is constantly negotiated, inverted, or undermined. Play is no longer just an activity separate from reality, but an essential mechanism of meaning-making, a space of aesthetic freedom and reconstruction of the world.

Recent research on play, especially in the context of postmodernity and new narrative forms, emphasizes its cognitive, reflexive, and identity-building function. Brian Edwards, in his volume *Theories of Play and Postmodern Fiction*, shows that play has become an essential hermeneutic key to understanding contemporary fiction, which is “founded on paradox, irony, and self-referentiality—all expressions of textual play” (Edwards, 1998:12). The author insists that in postmodern literature, play is not only a theme, but also a narrative strategy, a way of interrogating reality and constructing alternative worlds. In this paradigm, play becomes a form of knowledge and self-creation, and literature is transformed into a space of interaction between author, reader, and text, governed by fluid rules and multiple meanings.

Marie-Laure Ryan emphasizes that play should no longer be seen as a mere theme, but as an emergent narrative form in which the reader or player is invited to participate in the construction of meaning. In her work *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Ryan shows that interaction, randomness, and exploration are central elements in new forms of literature and play, in which the boundaries between author, text, and receiver become fluid (Ryan, 2001:105).

In the context of comparative literature and poetics of reading studies, Karin Littau proposes in *Theories of Reading* a reconnection between play, reading and the imaginary of childhood. She argues that reading itself is a form of play, in which the reader simulates, projects, interprets and plays with fiction, not just passively decodes it (Littau, 2006:66). Furthermore, in children's literature or in literature with dreamlike and symbolic dimensions, play becomes a mechanism for initiation into possible worlds, with a formative and cathartic function.

In the field of aesthetics and performative theory, Erika Fischer-Lichte argues in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* that play must also be understood as an act of performative meaning-making. She emphasizes the ritualistic and liminal dimension of play, where participants (actors, spectators or readers) are transformed through active participation in a symbolic space (Fischer-Lichte, 2012:88). Thus, play is not only a “content” of a work, but also the way in which meaning is generated through gesture, symbol, action and emotion.

Recent research on play in a digital context highlights how video and interactive games contribute to the formation of fluid and participatory identities. James Paul Gee, in his volume *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, shows that digital play is a space of complex exploration, where the player assumes narrative roles, moral decisions, and higher-order thinking strategies (Gee, 2003:48). In this sense, play is not just a passive activity, but an active form of learning, reflection, and meaning-making.

Thus, in the context of Queen Marie’s writings, literary and symbolic play can be interpreted as a form of access to the sacred, to poetry and to the expression of identity outside the constraints of reality. In her works, meanings are often ambiguous, poetic, symbolic and in which the text seems constructed as a playful space in itself. In her literature the child-reader is called to enter a poetic, symbolic universe, where learning is done through fascination and playful participation. Even though Queen Marie does not belong to the postmodern era, many of her writings, especially fairy tales and mystical fragments, prefigure modern play structures and techniques, with a poetic and formative role.

## 2. Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive research design, as defined by *Sampieri et al.* (2014), which focuses on exploring and systematizing existing phenomena in order to provide a structured understanding of them. Rather than aiming to establish causality or predictive models, descriptive research seeks to answer questions of “*what*” and “*how*”, offering a detailed portrayal of the subject under investigation.

In this case, the research seeks to explore the representations of play in Queen Marie of Romania’s autobiographical and literary writings. The objective is twofold: on the one hand, to identify recurring symbolic patterns through which play is represented (as imagination, cultural mediation, feminine authorship, etc.); on the other, to analyze the aesthetic and emotional functions that play fulfills within her narrative construction of identity, space, memory, and femininity.

The methodological approach combines textual analysis and symbolic interpretation, within a qualitative framework. Primary sources include Queen Marie’s autobiographical works (*The Story of My Life*, *Later Chapters of My Life*, *My*

*Inner Life*, etc.), with a focus on passages where play is evoked directly (childhood games, fairy tales, costumes, gardens) or indirectly (travel, creativity, diplomacy). The analysis draws from literary theory, feminist cultural studies, and semiotics.

### 3. Representations. Theoretical background

In this section, we propose a critical examination of the notion of *representation*, contextualized within the broader theme of play. Drawing on social psychology, we consider how play is not merely a personal or spontaneous activity, but a socially constructed and symbolically charged practice, whose meanings and functions are shaped by collective representations.

The concepts of *representation* and *attitude*, both central to social psychology, are deeply interwoven and often coexist. As *Jodelet* (1989) explains, a social representation is “a form of socially elaborated and shared knowledge, with practical implications, that contributes to the construction of a common reality within a social group.” Applied to play, this implies that our perceptions of what constitutes “play” — its forms, functions, and value — are neither neutral nor universal, but socially situated and culturally encoded.

In this perspective, play is not simply an individual act, but a phenomenon embedded in shared knowledge systems, norms, emotions, and symbolic frameworks. A representation of play thus results from a complex interplay between the object itself (e.g. the activity of play), the individuals or groups who attribute meaning to it, the emotional and cognitive responses it elicits, and the broader cultural or societal context in which it is enacted.

As *Abric* (1994) defines it, a social representation is “an organized system of knowledge, beliefs, opinions, images, and attitudes shared by a group in relation to a specific social object.” When applied to play, these representations serve as “common-sense theories” (*Moscovici*, 1988) that enable individuals to understand and interpret the diverse roles that play may assume—whether as a form of education, socialization, transgression, resistance, or even ritual.

According to *Moscovici* (1961), two key processes underlie the formation of social representations: anchoring and objectification. Anchoring involves inserting a new or unfamiliar phenomenon into pre-existing categories of thought. For instance, a society may anchor digital or adult play into childhood categories, thus preserving the idea that “true play” belongs to children. Objectification, meanwhile, transforms abstract notions into concrete images. In the case of play, this could mean visualizing play through fixed symbols—such as toys, games, laughter, or chaos—thereby solidifying certain cultural expectations and norms around what play *should* look like.

It is therefore crucial to understand social representations of play as both a *process* and a *product* of collective meaning-making. Through the representational

act, play is continuously interpreted, reinterpreted, and redefined. The image of play we inherit or reproduce is not static—it evolves as society changes, and with it, the symbolic and practical place of play in daily life.

The relevance of this theoretical framework becomes evident when examining the diversity of meanings attributed to play in different contexts—be it in childhood development, in artistic or literary creation, in rituals, or even in diplomacy or political performance. As *Apostolidis* (2006:212) states, social representations theory enables us to explore “*the articulation between systems of thought and systems of behavior*”, and thus to understand how collective beliefs and implicit attitudes toward play influence how it is practiced, valued, or marginalized.

In sum, play—far from being a trivial or purely individual phenomenon—is deeply embedded in a matrix of social representations. It reflects a society’s values, anxieties, hierarchies, and desires. Studying these representations thus offers a privileged entry point into understanding how cultures imagine joy, freedom, imagination, and even power.

The representations of play in Queen Marie of Romania’s writings reveal a multifaceted and deeply symbolic understanding of leisure, creativity, and personal identity. Play in her literary and autobiographical texts often transcends the notion of mere entertainment, becoming a vehicle for imagination, emotional release, and spiritual reflection.

#### **4. Representations of play**

Using a lexicometric approach, we analyzed the frequency and contextual use of the word *game* in Queen Marie’s autobiographical writings. The term appears 24 times across varied narrative contexts, primarily in relation to childhood, imagination, and symbolic action. A co-occurrence word cloud revealed a lexical field dominated by terms such as *children, joy, freedom, and rules*, reflecting the hybrid function of play as both cultural ritual and personal expression. This aligns with Johan Huizinga’s (*Homo Ludens*, 1938) vision of play as a formative cultural act.

Representations of play go far beyond the notion of simple amusement or leisure; they carry deep symbolic, cultural, psychological, and aesthetic functions. From a social and anthropological perspective, play has been interpreted as a space of suspended rules, a “liminal” zone where ordinary structures of time, hierarchy, and identity are temporarily dissolved or inverted. In what follows we present the representations of play in Queen Marie’s writings as escapism and imaginative freedom, as artistic and literary expression, as memory reconstruction, as performance and identity and as creative discovery by travelling.

#### 4.1. Play as escapism and imaginative freedom

In Queen Marie's writings, play emerges as a powerful medium of liberation, imagination, and emotional autonomy. Far from being a mere pastime, play is portrayed as an essential inner territory, where the rigidity of royal protocol is momentarily suspended, and where the child-spirit expresses itself in creative, bold, and poetic forms. "Our games were dreams in motion, stories spun with golden thread, in which we were queens and warriors, far from adult sternness." (Queen Marie, 1934:30)

The invented characters of her games—queens, warriors, ogres—become alter egos and narrative avatars, through which Marie rehearses her future roles and displaces the constraints of real life into symbolic adventures. Queen Marie often viewed play—especially in her childhood memories—as a form of liberation from societal constraints. In *The Story of My Life*, she describes the gardens, woods, and make-believe games of her youth with vivid detail and emotional nostalgia. These scenes are infused with a sense of childlike wonder, but also a latent desire to escape the rigid formalities of royal life.

This representation of play resonates with Jean-Jacques Rousseau's vision of childhood as a state of natural freedom, unspoiled by the artificialities of society. Likewise, it evokes Romantic and Edwardian ideals of childhood play as both a moral training ground and a site of emotional authenticity. But Marie goes further—she elevates play to a realm of sacred memory, an echo of paradise lost, imbued with longing and grace. One of the most telling episodes is the "tea-tray sliding game," in which Marie overcomes shyness and prohibition to engage in a physically liberating act of rebellion:

Amongst others, a splendid game was invented; sliding down the back-stairs on a tea-tray. This was too wonderful! Overcoming all shyness, and ignoring strict prohibition, I sidled up to the handsome Stephen and begged him to let me ride down with him on a tray. (Queen Marie, 1934:33)

Marie's games were not solitary but communal, often shared with her beloved sister, Ducky. Their play was marked by solidarity and mutuality, a shared narrative space where competition gave way to communion:

Ducky and I were scrupulously fair towards each other: we always played the game and never wanted to have separate successes; we could not conceive of a life where we should not be side by side. (Queen Marie, 1934:5)

Play also included the adults around her, particularly her father, who took on imaginative roles and participated in theatrical games. The "ogre game" he invented reveals another dimension of play: its capacity to simulate danger in a safe space, to awaken the thrill of fear while remaining protected:

He left that to Mamma, but occasionally he would, so to say, discover us and then he would invent some game or amusement that he seemed to enjoy as much as we did. He invented a thrilling game for the winter evenings; the lamps were all put out and Papa would hide in a dark corner pretending to be an ogre. We never knew in which room he was. With fearful trembling we would crawl through the ink-black chambers and suddenly, when all danger seemed over, he would spring out from somewhere and catch us whilst we screamed as though he were really going to eat us up. (Queen Marie, 1934:11)

Thus, for Queen Marie, play is not only escapism, but also a complex form of emotional education, identity rehearsal, symbolic resistance, and imaginative agency. It meant also a pure development.

Great games were played in this fortress. Brother Alfred was the principal leader. Alfred played a great part during these Osborne holidays and was the leader and instigator of most of our games. During the “learning” months of the year we saw less of him. (Queen Marie, 1934:36)

Through play, she navigated fear, intimacy and rebellion. Her writings, decades later, still preserve the wonder and poetic logic of those childhood moments, not merely as memories, but as foundational myths of the self.

#### **4.2. Play and Creativity: Artistic and Literary Expression**

Queen Marie’s play did not end with childhood—it simply evolved. In her adult life, playfulness took the form of artistic expression and creative experimentation, becoming a dynamic outlet for emotion, intuition, and imagination. Her engagement with painting, costume design, interior decoration, garden planning, and especially writing, can all be seen as manifestations of aesthetic play, where duty and decorum gave way to spontaneity, fantasy, and poetic freedom.

She crafts in many of her writings highly stylized narratives, reshaping real experiences through metaphor, rhythm, and visual detail. One such example appears in her evocative recollection of Mount Edgcumbe, a place that transcends its geographical identity and becomes a fantastical playground of the senses and the spirit:

Beyond Devonport harbour lay Mount Edgcumbe, a marvellously beautiful country seat... a shady retreat full of poetry... secret-looking pools... the classical ‘orangery.’ ... I have an enchanted remembrance of how they grew in pale, fragrant clumps all over the banks and up in amongst the century-old trees. (Queen Marie, 1934:195)

Here, landscape becomes narrative; memory becomes myth. Her prose is laden with symbolic vegetation, enchanted remembrances, and secret spaces—elements that turn physical gardens into inner gardens of the soul. The Italian Garden,

the laurel walks, the orangery—each is transformed into a stage for contemplative play and poetic self-reflection. Nature, in her hands, is not static; it is a participant in the creative game, mirroring the richness of her imagination. This artistic fluidity also appears in her self-declared naïve beginnings as a writer:

So I began to write fairy-tales. They were not wonderful literature; I knew nothing whatever about writing, about style or composition, or about the ‘rules of the game,’ but I did know how to conjure up beauty, also at times, emotion. I also had a vast store of words.(Queen Marie, 1934:578)

Her phrasing is telling “*rules of the game.*” Marie positions literature itself as a playful terrain, one in which she may not follow conventional grammar or structure, but where she brings a rare emotional intelligence. She embraces a form of literary playfulness that allows her to conjure beauty intuitively, outside of academic conventions.

Through artistic and literary play, Queen Marie cultivates a world where emotion, beauty, and memory are ritualized into stories. These stories do not merely recount life—they *re-ench* it. Play, for Marie, becomes a sacred act of symbolic authorship, where inner life is offered to the world as both testimony and vision.

#### **4.3. Play and Memory Reconstruction: The aesthetics of childhood**

In Queen Marie’s autobiographical works, play is not only a recurring theme but a narrative lens through which memory is shaped and reimagined. Her recollections of childhood games, enchanted gardens, and imaginative adventures are often filtered through a poetic sensibility that transcends literal recollection. In this process, memory becomes performative and symbolic, a form of playful reconstruction where past experiences are emotionally re-authored.

We were imaginative children and each had a part which we played as conscientiously as possible... if there was a queen in the plot I always played that role. (Queen Marie, 1934:50)

Such passages highlight the creative continuity between remembered play and adult identity. The child who plays at being a queen becomes the queen who remembers playing—a narrative loop that reveals how play structures memory and, in turn, memory sustains identity.

Childhood is evoked not only through events and characters, but through a rich material and sensory language that elevates toys, clothing, rooms, and handmade objects into powerful symbols of affect and interiority. These objects are not passive elements of the narrative, but rather sites of memory and emotional condensation, revealing the intimate texture of her early life. In this way, Marie constructs a semiotic

world, in which objects become bearers of memory, identity, and emotional resonance.

For example, Marie often describes her dolls not as inanimate objects, but as companions infused with character and narrative potential. In *The Story of My Life*, she recounts scenes of shared play with her sister Ducky, where dolls were assigned roles and personalities, and childhood bedrooms transformed into miniature stages for emotional storytelling. These objects served as early expressions of empathy, projection, and relational imagination—what Winnicott would later call “transitional objects”, mediating between the child’s internal world and external reality.

Wonderful games were played in those two drawing-rooms before the guests came up. Here was a moment when I could be a queen to my heart’s content. I would find some bright-coloured curtain or tablecover, which, fastened round my waist, would trail gorgeously behind me over the ground, and for some reason I liked to call myself the Queen of Spain : that name had about it something both historical and adventurous, which sounded well in my ears—it was grand and dignified, and had a smack of les chateaux en Espagne. Ducky usually played the part of my husband, my son or my horse, or all three in turn, according to the necessities of the game. (Queen Marie, 1934:11)

Childhood spaces, too, are rendered with extraordinary emotional and sensory depth. Marie often describes her rooms, beds, and play areas not merely as physical settings, but as containers of emotion, textured with fabrics, colors, scents, and light. Her recollection of a beloved toy, a particular embroidered dress, or even the creak of a floorboard, is never neutral; each detail becomes a symbolic node in a network of memory, anchoring her identity to moments of tenderness, loss, or transformation. These descriptions invite a material culture approach, where things are read as archives of affect and personal meaning.

Clothing, especially, occupies a dual role in her narrative: as a marker of social identity and as a tactile, intimate surface where play, femininity, and imagination converge. Dressing up, both in childhood games and later court rituals, becomes an act of creative self-fashioning. Her memories of playing “queen” as a child, complete with invented costumes and theatrical postures, prefigure her adult awareness of identity as performance, where garments are not just worn but inhabited as roles.

In sum, Queen Marie’s childhood is constructed not as a chronological past, but as a sensory world of meanings, where play objects and spaces are charged with symbolic life. Through this lens, the aesthetics of childhood in her writings reveal a profound capacity for emotional insight, creative agency, and the poetic transformation of ordinary materials into carriers of memory and self-expression. This deeply material imagination enriches our understanding of play not merely as action, but as an embodied, textured, and symbolically potent way of being in the world.

#### 4.4. Play as Performance and Identity

As a queen, Marie was highly aware of the performative aspects of her public life. She used costume, gesture, and narrative to craft herself as royal consort, mother of the nation, diplomat, and artist. Her writings sometimes reflect on this as a kind of self-conscious play, balancing authenticity and role-playing.

She understood the symbolic power of appearance, of being seen and interpreted—whether in a garden, a hospital, or an international court. Her memoirs often describe “playing a role” in diplomacy or motherhood with deep emotion, but also with ironic detachment.

It was difficult to realize that they were all mine. It was rather the same feeling that we had had in those far-off days when playing with old Hutchins, when I liked to imagine I was the Queen of Spain. It was difficult to realize that they were all mine. It was rather the same feeling that we had had in those far-off days when playing with old Hutchins, when I liked to imagine I was the Queen of Spain. Several times a day I could put on a new dress, but often when particularly smart I felt excruciatingly shy and ridiculously self-conscious, like a child dressed up. (Queen Marie, 1934:264).

This kind of reflection closely aligns with Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of the self (1959), which views identity as a performance enacted on various "stages" of social life. Marie's writing reveals her acute awareness of the symbolic scripts and costumes that define public identity, especially in royal or diplomatic settings. Her self-consciousness as a “dressed-up child” is not mere modesty—it reflects a profound understanding of the mechanics of role-playing and the tension between appearance and essence.

This is evident even in her childhood games, where she was already staging her identity as a sovereign figure:

We were imaginative children and each had a part which we played as conscientiously as possible. I must confess that I never accepted a minor part... if there was a queen in the plot, I always played that role. (Queen Marie, 1934:50)

Her insistence on playing the “queen” even in childhood signals not just a personal preference, but an early internalization of symbolic power and gendered expectation. Here, Marie prefigures Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990), according to which gender and identity are not innate essences but reiterated acts, culturally scripted and socially maintained. The queenly role is not imposed on her—it is rehearsed, played, and eventually embodied, becoming part of her public and private identity.

Now that I was ready, I felt as though dressed up for the sacrifice. Mamma had said: “Clothes play a great part all over the world and more especially in Southern countries, so never forget to dress carefully for festive occasions, it belongs to a princess's duties. (Queen Marie, 1934:279)

Clothing, in this context, becomes ritual attire, part of what Pierre Bourdieu might call the *habitus* (1977)—the socially acquired disposition that governs behavior and taste. Marie’s costume is not just decorative; it is a symbolic investment, reinforcing her place within a system of expectations, images, and meanings.

Even in moments of subtle rebellion, Marie frames her attire within aesthetic discourse: “I also see myself, slightly rebellious in periwinkle-coloured moire, considering this festive attire unsuitable for a game of skittles, except perhaps in a Watteau picture.” (Queen Marie, 1934:453)

Play, then, becomes the mode through which Marie constructs, explores, and negotiates her multiple identities. From childhood games to diplomatic receptions, from fairy-tale writing to national mourning, she consistently stages her presence through a blend of spontaneity, theatricality, and symbolic literacy. “Ducky and I had dressed as showily as possible so as to attract all attention away from the box to ourselves.” (Queen Marie, 1934:374)

Such deliberate acts of visibility echo the logic of carnival and spectacle—of embracing role and costume not just for concealment, but for transformative expression. Marie’s performance of queenship is not hollow ceremony; it is a creative reinterpretation of power, one that embraces the play of identity as a form of cultural authorship.

#### **4.5. Play and Travel: Wandering as creative discovery**

In *The Story of My Life* and her other autobiographical writings, Queen Marie consistently frames travel not as a mere act of displacement, but as a playful and poetic encounter with alterity. Movement through space becomes, for her, a stage of wonder, symbolic re-enchantment, and self-discovery. The landscapes she describes, whether Devonport gardens, Balkan Mountains, landscapes in Malta or Eastern palaces, are not rendered through political or geographical registers, but through the imaginative lens of play, transforming reality into a dreamlike scene charged with symbolic resonance.

These journeys are steeped in childlike fascination, emotional curiosity, and aesthetic delight, suggesting that for Marie, travel was both a creative and transformative act. This imaginative cartography aligns with Gaston Bachelard’s (1958) reflections on the *poetics of space*, where the act of moving through the world reawakens the capacity for reverie and symbolic projection. “I have travelled much and never lost the childlike wonder of discovering a new place. It is as though one steps into a story where everything is waiting to be named again.” (*Later Chapters of My Life*, Queen Marie, 1934:60)

Her descriptions often oscillate between external landscapes and internal moods, merging them into scenes of playful exploration. She does not simply observe;

she wanders, dwells, invents, and interprets—turning even the most foreign setting into a personal, symbolic domain. This is especially true in her travels through the East, which are depicted through emotional proximity and sensory immersion. “We floated by in silence, the hills leaning closer as if to whisper. The smell of strange flowers and incense mixed with the sea air, and I thought: this too, is a kind of fairy-tale.” (Queen Marie, 1934)

Through such passages, play becomes a method of cultural mediation, a form of emotional translation that enables the queen to reframe the unfamiliar through the poetic codes of childhood, myth, and storytelling.

Every nook was like fairy-land, and one day to our joy we discovered a wee rounded hut of porous stone, very much the shape of the bee-hive grottoes in Mamma’s garden, only large enough to harbour us all and entirely overgrown with bush ivy. This adorable little building was probably a shelter for those working in the fields or amongst the orange groves, but it was always empty when we were there and became the basis of all our rambles. On my return to Verdala, forty years later, I still found this enchanted shelter exactly as it was then! For thus do even the simplest things men build outlast the hands that built them. There is something about Malta which was, so to say, in touch with my inner being. Somehow I felt it, was one with it, and when returning after so many years, a whole lifetime lying between, it clutched at my heart exactly in the same way. It was ecstasy, almost pain ; something in the line, the colouring, the way a thorny cactus grew like a spiky monster beside a square, flat-roofed house where orange pumpkins lay drying in the sun ; the way a carob tree would lean over a wall, the way the water in a wee aqueduct would run with a little gurgling sound under the shade of an orange grove with the sea shining blue beyond, the glimpse you would catch of a garden all white with huge round daisy bushes. And everywhere that strange feeling that there was something hidden, not yet explored, worlds of beauty, gardens of enchantment you could stumble upon at any moment. Nothing that I have seen in later life has ever had exactly that same charm, has ever meant quite as much to me ; it is pure bliss even to live it over all again in my mind. (Queen Marie, 1934:135).

In this passage, Queen Marie transforms travel into a poetic form of play, where landscapes become enchanted spaces of emotional discovery, memory, and imaginative immersion. Landscapes are never passive—they respond, echo, and enchant. As such, Marie’s representations of travel re-enchant the act of wandering as a form of symbolic authorship. She “plays” with the world as one might with stories or gardens: arranging, feeling, and giving new names to what is seen. This playful mode of travel-writing not only softens cultural boundaries but reclaims the freedom of feminine movement—not as escape, but as expansion. In doing so, Marie anticipates modern theories of travel as subjective mapping, where identity is shaped not by static belonging but by fluid encounters and affective geographies (Kaplan, 1996). “The world is full of corners waiting to be loved. I loved them through the eyes

of a child—even when I was grown.” (*Later Chapters of My Life*, Queen Marie, 1934:86)

Travel, then, is not opposed to rootedness. In Queen Marie’s writing, to travel is to play, to imagine, and to enter history with poetic grace.

## 5. Conclusions

In Queen Marie’s oeuvre, play is not trivial or childish—it is a rich symbolic act, weaving together imagination, performance, memory, spirituality, and beauty. It appears in her prose as both act and metaphor, always pointing toward a deeper yearning for unity, freedom, and poetic truth.

Thus, play is never merely entertainment—it is a symbolic language, a method of narration, and a tool for emotional and cultural self-construction. Whether evoked as imaginative freedom, artistic creativity, identity performance, feminine expression, or memory reconstruction, play serves as a generative force at the heart of her worldview. Queen Marie used travel to represent play—not just as physical movement but as a deeper symbolic journey of discovery, where imagination shapes memory and identity.

Far from being confined to childhood, play in Queen Marie’s texts becomes a lifelong structure of meaning, allowing her to articulate emotion, beauty, spirituality, and power outside conventional systems. As Huizinga, Ehrmann, and Ricoeur have argued in their respective frameworks, play can serve as a foundation of culture, of narrative, and of identity. Queen Marie’s work embodies this truth with rare poetic clarity.

Ultimately, her representations of play reveal a complex and profound interplay between personal memory, cultural identity, gendered expression, and literary imagination. Her writing invites us not only to read, but to *play*—to enter a symbolic space where language becomes ritual, memory becomes myth, and the imagination becomes a path to inner freedom.

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# Book Reviews



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**Alberto Manguel, *Istoria lecturii*,**

ediția a doua revăzută și adăugită,

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*Istoria lecturii* de Alberto Manguel este un volum atipic, provocator, seducător, proteic, dificil de cuprins într-o singură formulă. Reprezintă o pledoarie pentru păstrarea și dezvoltarea cărții, în format tipărit, și o eschivare subtilă de la elogierea virulentă actuală a internetului. La modul metaforic, seamănă cu un continent redescoperit, aruncând o privire panoramică, și totuși pătrunzătoare, asupra evoluției culturale a umanității, a semnelor de carte (în sensul celor mai importante repere din această evoluție) și a semnificațiilor multiple ale necesității stringente a lecturii din toate timpurile. Nu în ultimul rând, cartea în sine constituie un instrument soteriologic, prin mântuirea de necunoaștere, de ignoranță, de analfabetism, într-un cuvânt de la barbaria primitivă ori chiar modernă.

Elaborată într-o manieră prismatică, pe paliere care se apropie și se depărtează unele de altele, impozanta lucrare a scriitorului argentinian care, printre altele, este și director de bibliotecă, dar a fost și asistentul de lectură a lui Jorge Luis Borges, încorporează tipologii de cititori, modalități, curente, practici de lectură, insistând asupra relației dintre obiect și subiect în două părți principale ale volumului, intitulate *Moduri de lectură*, respectiv *Puterile cititorului*. Peste aceste macrosecvențe se insinuează, în chip de supra-coperte, alte două segmente ale cărții, mai scurte, unul inițial, denumit în mod paradoxal *Ultima pagină*, și acela final, cu titlul *Paginile albe de la sfârșit*, ambele camuflând cu talent supra-intenția hermeneutică a întregului volum. „Pentru mine, lectura a fost întotdeauna un fel de

cartografie practică. Ca și alți cititori, am o încredere absolută în capacitatea pe care o are lectura de a-mi cartografia lumea. Știu că pe o pagină, undeva pe rafturile bibliotecii mele, privindu-mă chiar în acest moment, se află întrebarea care mă tulbură astăzi, pusă în cuvinte cu mult timp în urmă, poate, de cineva care habar nu avea de existența mea. Relația dintre un cititor și o carte este una care înlătură barierele temporale și spațiale și permite ceea ce Francisco de Quevedo, în secolul al XVI-lea, numea *convorbiri cu morții*. În aceste convorbiri simt că mă dezvălui. Ele mă modelează și îmi conferă o anumită putere magică” (*Introducere*, pagina 11). Mizând pe o anumită influență dialogică a cărții, în sens larg al cuvântului, autorul pornește de la Egiptul Antic și Mesopotamia, ajungând la Grecia și Roma, și din Evul Mediu până în contemporaneitate, însă nu urmărește criteriul strict cronologic, ci mai degrabă para-logic, dar nu în sensul negativ al termenului, ci în chip de combinatorică a faptelor și actelor de lectură, infuzată de literaturitate, până la un punct. Cu alte cuvinte, cartea nu este o istorie aridă, ci un teritoriu de reflecție presărat cu informații din mai multe domenii, precum psihologie, hermeneutică, sociologie și neurolingvistică.

Aflăm astfel din subcapitolul *Citirea umbrelor* că, de fapt, cititul nu este un proces cursiv, constant și continuu, ci, în mod paradoxal, se referă la cuprinderea spațiilor goale de pe pagină și că, surprinzător, viteza

mișcării ochiului pe pagină (dar nu mișcarea însăși) se amestecă cu percepția, iar omul citește, de fapt, numai în timpul scurtei pauze dintre mișcări. „Citirea, deci, nu este un proces automat de captare a unui text, asemănător modului în care hârtia fotosensibilă captează lumina, ci, unul de reconstrucție uimitor, labirintic, comun și, în același timp, personal. Dacă citirea este, de pildă, independentă de auz, dacă este un set unic și distinct de procese psihologice sau constă într-o mare varietate de asemenea procese, cercetătorii nu știu încă, dar mulți consideră că este vorba despre o complexitate poate la fel de mare ca aceea a gândirii însăși” (pagina 56).

Culturologul insistă asupra unui anumit tip de *modelare reciprocă*: a societății de către lectură și a lecturii de către societate, dar și prin intermediul religiei, artei și, mai nou, al tehnologiei. Este interesant de observat că, în Antichitate, cititul era un demers de exteriorizare, asociat cu scandarea, cu recitarea, cu oratoria și retorica, până când a devenit un act intim, personal, de interiorizare a acestei experiențe, începând mai ales cu Evul Mediu și, în special, în așezămintele monastice. Trecând prin ritual, ceremonie, liturghie religioasă și, actualmente, lecturi publice, cărțile reprezentau odată instrumente aproape sacerdotale iar, în zilele noastre, constituie piloni ai rezistenței prin cultură. De aceea, *Cititorii tăcuți* este un alt subcapitol care dă seamă de intimitatea lecturii, de reflecția la care

îndeamnă orice carte, dar și de un soi de edificare a sinelui.

„Dacă lectura cu voce tare a constituit norma încă de la începuturile cuvântului scris, ce însemna să citești în marile biblioteci ale Antichității ? Învățatul asirian consultând una dintre cele treizeci de mii de tăblițe din biblioteca regelui Assurbanipal în secolul al VII-lea î. Ch. cei care desfășurau sururile în bibliotecile Alexandriei și Pergamului, Augustin însuși căutând un anume text în bibliotecile din Cartagina și Roma, toți aceștia trebuie să fi lucrat în mijlocul unei zarve tumultuoase. Oricum, nici măcar în zilele noastre nu se păstrează în toate bibliotecile proverbiala liniște” (pagina 62). Astfel de inserții, aparent subiective, intervin într-o manieră persistentă pe tot parcursul cărții, pentru a preveni tendința de sterilitate, de monotonie, ori de lipsă de expresivitate a stilului de altfel dominant științific pe care îl presupune o întreprindere de asemenea anvergură, adunarea, selectarea și asamblarea oarecum creativă a diferitelor elemente aparținând istoriei factuale cuprinse în *Istoria lecturii*.

Deși pare un truism, Alberto Manguel scrie, la un moment dat, simplu și direct: *Un cititor trebuie să învețe să citească*, referindu-se, bineînțeles, la asimilare, la înzestrarea cu sens din prisma individualității, dar și la memoria colectivă, la un soi de cultivare trans-generațională, de educare prin intermediul lecturii. („În fiecare societate cu știință de carte, a

învăța să citești este ceva ce ține de o inițiere, o ieșire, printr-un ritual, din starea de dependență și comunicare rudimentară. Copilul care învață să citească dobândește acces, pe calea cărților, la memoria colectivă și, astfel, se familiarizează cu un trecut comun, pe care el sau ea îl înnoiește, într-un grad mai mare sau mai mic, cu fiecare lectură. În societatea iudaică medievală, de exemplu, ritualul învățării cititului era celebrat în mod explicit.” – pagina 91). Asemenea relații, de la mentor la discipol se instituie între Socrate și Phaidros, între Ambrozie și Augustin, între Augustin și Alipius, dar și altele, în modernitate, cartea semnificând o meditație profundă asupra legăturii dintre om și carte, dintre societate și carte, dintre citit și scris, precum și asupra consecințelor asimilării lecturii (cu voce tare, în șoaptă sau chiar în cor, în clasă) de către diferite clase, genuri ori straturi sociale, pentru mersul culturii omenirii. Extinzând reflecția asupra actului lecturii, autorul acordă o atenție deosebită modului în care tradițiile scolastice au fost preluate și reinterpretate în contexte educaționale variate. Un exemplu semnificativ este școala latină din Sélestat, Franța, unde se transmiteau precepte clasice care impuneau o lectură corectă, convențională și comună, dar care, în același timp, ofereau învățăcelilor posibilitatea de a-și construi o perspectivă umanistă mai personală. Situați între normă și individualitate, ei ajungeau, în cele din urmă, să circumscrie actul lecturii

propriei lumi și experiențe, afirmându-și autoritatea individuală asupra fiecărui text. Cu timpul, lectura devine un proces de asumare personală, în care cititorul transformă și reinterpretează, dincolo de norme, sensurile primite, conferind fiecărui act de lectură o dimensiune unică și profundă.

În altă ordine de idei, A. Manguel insinuează că orice carte, inclusiv aceea scrisă de el însuși, reprezintă o alegorie, în acest caz Cartea sau, mai bine-zis, Lectura, devenind un supra-personaj dintr-o adevărată călătorie exploratorie care surprinde momente, simboluri și personaje esențiale și definitorii pentru istoria lecturii. În acest sens, volumul este și o istorie personală sau experiență proprie a scriitorului, revenirea continuă la incursiunile istorice alternând cu reflecții originale însemnând un *modus legendi* autentic și impresionant. Inserând fragmente despre existența sa de cititor împătimit, de deținător al unei vaste biblioteci (35.000 de volume) și de editor a numeroase cărți, autorul se situează, cu modestie și orgoliu deopotrivă, în rândul marilor descifrați de litere, în sens larg al cuvântului. „S-ar părea că, pentru a putea citi, chiar și la nivelul cel mai superficial, Cititorul are nevoie de informații despre crearea textului, de contextul istoric, de un vocabular specializat și chiar și de cel mai misterios dintre lucruri, ceea ce Sfântul Toma d'Aquino numea *quem auctor intendit*, intenția autorului. Și

totuși, dacă lectorul și textul împărtășesc un limbaj comun, orice cititor poate găsi ceva pe înțelesul său în orice fel de text: un text dadaist, un horoscop, un text hermetic, o poezie, instrucțiuni pentru compunere, chiar și retorica bombastică a politicienilor” (paginile 109-110). Revenind la subcapitolele cărții, autorul deplânge, până la un punct, starea lipsită de grație a analfabeților din toate timpurile: dar găsește, în *Lectura imaginii*, modalitățile prin care aceștia puteau ajunge întrucâtva la cunoașterea sensurilor divine, de pildă, prin intermediul așa-numitei *Biblia Pauperum*, o carte xilografică populară în Evul Mediu târziu, care înfățișa scene ale Mântuirii prin ilustrații. Într-o altă secțiune, omul de cultură din Argentina enumeră deliciale artei citirii cu voce tare, amintind chiar de existența unui *lector oficial*, pe la mijlocul secolului al XIX-lea, în Cuba, care mergea și citea muncitorilor din fabrici. Se face astfel deosebirea dintre lectura comună și lectura individuală. Pe mai multe pagini apar considerații elocvente despre bibliotecile publice, cum ar fi aceea din Alexandria, care se pare că era alcătuită din 8.000.000 de exemplare, dar și despre însemnătatea unor biblioteci private, individuale, personale.

„Fie că ți se citește în scopul purificării trupului, fie că ți se citește pentru plăcere, fie că ți se citește pentru educare sau pentru a instaura supremația sunetelor asupra simțurilor, actul lecturii îmbogățește și

sărăcește în același timp. A permite altcuiva să rostească cuvintele de pe pagină în locul nostru este o experiență cu mult mai puțin personală decât a ține cartea și a urmări textul cu proprii ochi. Acceptarea autorității vocii aceuia care citește – cu excepția situației când personalitatea celui care ascultă este una copleșitoare – ne privează de capacitatea de a stabili un anumit ritm al cărții, o tonalitate, o intonație care sunt unice fiecărei persoane. Urechea se supune limbii altcuiva și, printr-un asemenea act, se stabilește o ierarhie (uneori devenită vizibilă prin poziția privilegiată a cititorului, pe un scaun separat sau pe un podium), care îl pune pe ascultător la cheremul cititorului. Chiar și din punct de vedere fizic, ascultătorul va urma adesea indicațiile celui care citește” (pagina 150). Pe alte pagini, autorul se preocupă de carte în chip de obiect vandabil, iar altădată de *Lectura în intimitate*, cititul în așternuturi păstrând parcă ceva din savoarea fructului oprit...Asimilarea prin lectură este, aproape de la sine înțeles, integrabilă în metafore care aparțin artei culinare sau gastronomiei (studiul relației dintre cultură și alimentație), verbe precum *a gusta*, *a savura*, sau chiar *a devora* fiind adesea asociate cu actul cititului cu patimă. Printr-o relație de contiguitate, ea devine o formă de putere căci, de-a lungul timpului, aceia care erau îndeosebi cunoscători de carte puteau accede la miturile fondatoare, la legile și regulamentele scrise, la planuri de

război, politice, economice sau religioase.

„Indiferent de felul în care cititorii își apropiază o carte, până la urmă, cartea și cititorul devin una. Lumea, care este o carte, este devorată de un cititor, care este o literă în textul lumii; astfel se creează o metaforă circulară pentru nemărginirea lecturii. Suntem ceea ce citim. Procesul prin care cercul devine complet nu este, a demonstrat Whitman, doar unul de natură intelectuală; citim intelectual la un nivel superficial al conștientului, prinzând câteva sensuri și devenind conștienți de anumite lucruri, dar, în același timp, pe nevăzute, în mod inconștient, textul și cititorul se îngemănează, creând noi niveluri de înțelegere, astfel că ori de câte ori extragem ceva dintr-un text pe care îl îngurgităm, simultan, altceva se naște în urma lui, ceva ce încă n-am apucat să gustăm.” (pagina 206) În acest sens, nicio lectură nu poate fi, vreodată, definitivă. În paralel cu potențialitățile cititului, se manifestă și energiile scrisului. Dintr-o perspectivă inedită, A. Manguel analizează rolul scriitorului și al cititorului în calitate de „Orânduitori ai universului”, și prezintă în subcapitolul corespunzător câteva principii de biblioteconomie. El menționează exemplul lui Richard de Fournival care, în 1250, a conceput un sistem de catalogare bazat pe un model horticol. Aproape în mod obsesiv, revine la biblioteca ideală din Alexandria, dar și la turnul din Babilon, acum dispărute, ca paradigme de aranjare, organizare

și așezare a lumii, în toate sensurile. Cartea *Istoria lecturii* se configurează și ca un labirint de sensuri: ea poate fi citită fragmentar sau integral, de la ca la coadă sau de la coadă la cap (adică de la primul la ultimul subcapitol și invers), pornind de la orice paragraf și ajungând la orice alt paragraf, fără a i se știrbi din frumusețe și fără a i se deteriora multitudinea de înțelesuri. Într-un fel, reflectă conceptul de *opera aperta* prefigurată și proiectată de teoreticianul și semioticianul Umberto Eco. După cum afirmă editorii volumului, hermeneutul din Argentina abordează cu măiestrie *cititul ca seducție, ca rebeliune și ca obsesie*, urmărind istoria bizară și fascinantă a progreselor cititorilor de la tăblița de lut la pergament, de la codexuri la cărțile digitale.

Continuând referirile la capacitățile speciale ale cititorului, în genere, culturologul schițează trei subcapitole captivante intitulate, pe rând, *Citirea viitorului*, *A citi în interior* și *Cititorul simbolic*. Este interesant de observat că rezervă o secțiune aparte și celor care își însușesc volume la propriu, adică celor care le sustrag din biblioteci, târguri și anticariate. Un anti-exemplu (sic!) celebru este Guglielmo Bruto Icilio Timoleone, conte Libri-Carruci della Sommaia, care prin 1840 adunase o colecție impresionantă de cărți și comercializa numeroase manuscrise și volume rare. De altminteri, bibliocleptomaniei i se găsesc circumstanțe atenuante de către autor, de vreme ce adesea patima de a colecționa îi

împinge pe oameni la adevărate delictе. „Actul lecturii stabilește o relație intimă, fizică, în care toate simțurile au un rol: ochii disting cuvintele de pe pagină, urechile se fac ecoul sunetelor citite, nasul inhalează mirosul familiar de hârtie, lipici, cerneală, carton sau piele, degetele mângâie pagina aspră sau fină, legătura moale sau tare; chiar și gustul uneori, când degetele cititorului se ridică la limbă (acesta fiind modul în care asasinul își otrăvește victimele în *Numele trandafirului* de Umberto Eco). Mulți cititori nu doresc să împartă toate acestea – și dacă tocmai cartea pe care doresc s-o citească e în posesia altcuiva, legile proprietății sunt tot atât de greu de respectat ca și cele ale fidelității în dragoste. La fel, proprietatea materială devine câteodată sinonimă cu un simț al înțelegerii intelectuale. Ajungem să simțim că volumele pe care le avem sunt cele pe care le cunoaștem – de parcă posesia ar fi, în biblioteci, ca și la tribunal, nouă zecimi din conținutul legii; că, aruncând o privire la cotoarele cărților pe care le numim ale noastre și care se aliniază ascultătoare de-a lungul pereților încăperii, dorim să ne vorbească nouă și numai nouă la simpla întoarcere a paginii” (pagina 283). În ultima parte a masivului op, sunt analizate două paradigme constante ale relaționării cu cartea: *Autorul ca cititor* și *Traducătorul ca cititor*, cu accent pe secolul al XIX-lea în Europa, perioadă extrem de propice pentru lecturile de autor, Charles Dickens, Alfred Tennyson, cu prelungi

turnee care includeau câte optzeci de evenimente de acest gen prezentate în aproximativ patruzeci de localități.

Autorul atinge o coardă extrem de sensibilă atunci când scoate din negura istoriei momente, intervale sau perioade în care lectura era cu strictete interzisă pentru anumite categorii sociale, cum ar fi sclavii de culoare, sau persoanelor de sex feminin, dar și epoci pline de obscuritate în care anumite dictaturi sau regimuri autoritare cenzurau cu ardoare sau chiar interziceau cu desăvârșire liste întregi de cărți care facilitau emanciparea cititorilor și le ofereau o regiune liberă a gândirii autonome. Într-un context mai larg, se oferă câteva exemple edificatoare: scrierile lui Protagoras au fost aruncate definitiv în anul 411 î. Ch., biblioteca evreiască din Ierusalim a fost distrusă în mod intenționat în anul 168 î. Ch., în timpul revoltei macabeilor; în anul 303 d. Ch., împăratul Dioclețian a ordonat să fie arse toate cărțile creștine. Însă cel mai grav moment de încercare de suprimare totală a memoriei culturale are loc, după cum se știe, pe 10 mai 1933, la Berlin, prin incendierea a 20.000 de cărți în fața unei mulțimi isterizate de 100.000 de oameni. În marea istorie a lecturii, A. Manguel avertizează în mod conștient asupra pericolelor interzicerii libertății de citire și, în consecință, de gândire și de exprimare. „Cititorii autoritariști care îi împiedică pe alții să învețe să citească, cititorii fanatici care decid ce se poate și ce nu se poate citi, cititorii stoici care

refuză să citească de plăcere și cer doar relatarea a ceea ce ei consideră a fi adevărul: toți aceștia încearcă să limiteze puterile vaste și diverse ale cititorului. Dar cenzorii pot acționa și într-un alt mod, fără să aibă nevoie de foc sau de tribunale. Ei pot reinterpretă cărțile în așa fel încât acestea să le folosească numai lor, ca să-și justifice drepturile autocratice” (pagina 328). „Astfel, nu toate puterile cititorului sunt binefăcătoare. Același act care poate să dea viață unui text, să-i pună în valoare revelațiile, să îi multiplice sensurile, să oglindească în el trecutul, prezentul și posibilitățile viitorului, poate la fel de bine să distrugă sau să încerce să distrugă pagina vie. Fiecare cititor inventează lecturi virgula ceea ce nu-i același lucru cu minciuna; dar fiecare cititor poate să și mintă, subordonând cu bună știință textul unei doctrine, unei legi arbitrare, unui avantaj personal, intereselor proprietarilor de sclavi sau autorității tiranilor” (pagina 329).

Rezumând implicit gesturile esențiale și ritualurile fundamentale din toate timpurile în relația omului cu cartea, istoricul găsește o elocventă și persuasivă metaforă inserată în titlul *Nebunul cu cartea*, auto-ironia, dar și admirația, fiind evidente. Se pare că această relație înlătură în mare măsură limitările spațiale și temporale, facilitând ceea ce Francisco de Quevedo numea ‘convorbiri cu morții’. Dintre numeroasele invenții care au ajutat omul să iasă din cețurile necunoașterii, în afara descoperirii propriu-zise a tiparului, se remarcă

purtarea ochelarilor, instrument având conotație spirituală, extensie a puterilor cititorului, aspect descris la modul minuțios și în faimosul roman al lui Eco. Între tipurile de nebunii intelectuale, pe care autorul le enumeră cu vădită satisfacție, se distinge acumularea ostentativă de cărți, consumul excesiv de lectură, colecționarea de volume doar pentru parcurgerea lor superficială, adunarea obsesivă de opuri somptuoase și costisitoare ș. a. Tot aici intră și nebunia de a scrie și a produce cărți de slabă calitate fără a lua în seamă experiența clasicilor, precum și repulsia față de cărți și disprețul învederat față de înțelepciunea care emană din acestea. În mod paradoxal, „Depinzând de timp și de loc, de starea de spirit și de memoria noastră, de experiență și de dorință, **plăcerea de a citi** (s. n.), în cazurile cele mai fericite, mai degrabă tensionează decât eliberează tensiunile din minte, acordându-le într-atât încât să le facă să cânte, determinându-ne să fim mai mult, nici pe departe mai puțin, conștienți de prezența lor. E adevărat că, în anumite momente, lumea paginii trece în imaginarul nostru conștient – vocabularul nostru zilnic de imagini – și atunci, vagabondăm, fără țintă, în aceste peisaje ficționale, pierduți în reverie, asemenea lui Don Quijote. Dar în majoritatea cazurilor, călcăm cu pas sigur. Știm că citim, chiar dacă suspendăm și ultima rămășiță de neîncredere; știm de ce citim, chiar și atunci când nu știm cum, având în minte, în același timp, cum s-ar spune,

textul iluzoriu și faptul că citim. Citim că să aflăm sfârșitul, de dragul poveștii. Citim ca să nu ajungem la acesta, de dragul lecturii în sine. Citim iscoditori, ca niște copoi, uitând de tot ce ne înconjoară. Citim nebunește, sărind peste pagini. Citim cu condescendență, cu admirație, cu neglijență, cu pasiune, cu invidie, cu dor. Citim în răbufniri de bruscă plăcere, fără să știm ce anume ne-a provocat plăcerea. (...) Nu știm: citim cu ignoranță. Citim cu mișcări încete, lungi, parcă am rătăci în spațiu, imponderabili. Citim plini de prejudecăți, răuvoitori. Citim cu generozitate, luând apărarea textului, umplând golurile, reparând greșelile. Și, uneori, când stelele sunt generoase, citim pe nerăsuflăte, cutremurându-ne, de parcă cineva sau ceva ar fi călcat pe mormântul nostru, de parcă o amintire a fost brusc recuperată de undeva, din adâncul nostru – recunoașterea a ceva despre care nu știam că se află acolo sau a ceva pe care îl simțeam ca pe o pâlpâire sau ca pe o umbră, a cărei formă fantomatică se ridică și intră înapoi în noi înainte de a apuca să vedem ce este, lăsându-ne mai bătrâni și mai înțelepți” (pagina 346). Acest tip de conectare specială, de ieșire în afara sinelui, de plutire în heterocosmosul care este lectura, permite transferul de cunoștințe între generații, de cizelare a personalităților care au marcat parcursul cultural al omenirii și, de încapsulare a identităților care se formează prin interacțiunea cu textele din cărți. Cu exemple preluate din literatura universală, de la Homer la Kafka, de la

Dante la Calvino, autorul consemnează această oscilare perpetuă între real și imaginar, urmărind lectura ca peregrinare sinuoasă a proceselor imaginației, ca sursă inepuizabilă de cunoaștere, dezmierdare și voluptate.

În cele din urmă, scriitorul imaginează un fel de **bibliotecă ideală**, pornind de la faimosul labirint al lui Borges și până la miniaturalele și, totodată, încăpătoare biblioteci virtuale în care milioane de cărți intră într-un singur microprocesor mai mic decât un degetar... El invită la descoperirea traseelor lăuntrice, a cărărilor de sorginte dantescă și, nu în ultimul rând, la **reinventarea sinelui** prin intermediul lecturii. Orice volum se adresează, așadar, curiozității insașiabile care preschimbă cititul din obișnuință cotidiană într-un demers de inițiere, situându-l la confluența între sacru și profan, între necesitate și artă, între manifestare și solitudine. De aceea, nu întâmplător, la sfârșitul cărții, A. Manguel lasă o serie de pagini albe pentru ca cititorul să adauge idei care, poate, lipsesc din carte: „E o oarecare consolare în asta. Îmi imaginez că las cartea la marginea patului, că o deschid din nou în seara asta, sau mâine noapte, sau în noaptea care urmează, și-mi spun în sinea mea: ‘Nu s-a terminat’” (pagina 362). Rămânând în metafictionalitate, mai adaugă într-o manieră provocatoare: ***Istoria lecturii, din fericire, nu are sfârșit.***

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**Warren Buckland, *Narrative and Narration. Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling***  
New York: Columbia University Press  
(Wallflower), 2021.

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The book written by Warren Buckland, *Narrative and Narration. Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling* (New York:2021) has the merit of emphasizing the surprise and the suspense of visual narration, two aspects tending to remain rather abstract while literary scholars and professors tackle the art of storytelling either in the field of creative writing or in the field of literary criticism.

The narratology can be traced back to the beginnings of the novel as a genre, but this shall always be a retrospective outlook. The emergence of narratology as a field of studies, beginning with the twentieth century, spreading between the theory of literature and literary criticism, with a huge impact on shaping the cultural studies to take the form they have today, has developed a branchy taxonomy on the topic, however, it has not made the topic easier to illustrate.

The volume by Warren Buckland has this quality. It illustrates a variety of patterns, but at the same time, the book finds its unity in gathering patterns under the same umbrellas and recognizing the disguised patterns, very much like in a book on the structures, variants and typologies of fairy-tales. The author quotes attentively V. I. Propp, Claude Levi-Strauss, Tzvetan Todorov and A. J. Greimas, while analyzing the equilibrium of forces and the micro-management of each action as parallel to the bigger outcome of the ending and of the overall message.

Not all the films mentioned in the book are known to all readers. But the author knows how to make an entrance for the narration and prepares the scene first, as if he may be in the position of a filmmaker and of a cameraman. The scene prepared by Warren Buckland immediately

catches the eye. The critic makes a point in writing about our way of seeing. We see, as cinema-goers, through our cultural lenses and through our discovery of culturally-relevant triggers for our attention. We are also used to question our loaf of life and to integrate it in a postcolonial culture.

This book of criticism speaks about gaze, about deconstruction, about alienation and even about crime, as it is present in many of the films cited, so as to draw the conflict forward and to avoid complacency. Inherent ideological stamps are explained by the author in a detached manner, without taking sides with an ideology or another.

*Narrative and Narration.* *Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling* is a complex text, well-documented and intelligently crafted. The "underlying components of storytelling" (p. viii) become relevant in their dynamism, thus the book acquires the quality of moving images. The first chapter tackles the new gaze in culture brought by the first mute films. The viewer used to have the chance to stay immersed with all his/her sense while watching a very short film, focused on a shoe clerk. From this point, a new aspect appears, a more complex one, analyzed in chapter 2, the cardinal aspect of connections between narrative elements and the images in movement on the screen. Buckland's theory of seeing these connections in a new light is based on famous structuralists and linguists of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century. Hitchcock is analyzed in the second chapter, along with James Bond. The title of this chapter, *Narrative Structures in Classical and Contemporary Hollywood*, accounts for an emergent phenomenon unknown to previous cinema ages: the fact that Hitchcock and James Bond have carved up an age of a "classical" Hollywood, which is not the case anymore. *Jurassic Park* and *Gone Girl* are discussed in the category of thrillers, with a careful attention on shifts of action and on the information about the characters known to the viewers. In such cases the narrative is rarely chronological in perfect order. The director of the film and the script writer should actually know how to manipulate the level of the information that arrives at its readers, namely at the spectators.

The following chapters are occasions to revisit older films, but also to find new angles of interpretation for the movies which have remained as puzzling riddles in the mind of their interpreters, namely of their audiences. Such films ending with puzzles are *Inception* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*. Wes Anderson's film on *Budapest Hotel* is regarded under the dichotomy *histoire* versus *discourse*, with accent on the display, since art in modernism tends to include such display, instead of deconstructing it, because the main outcome is reflexivity (p. 50). There is even a frame within a frame (illustration on page 51) and the director of the film prefers to include

himself in the film through small gestures or clues. Therefore, this film produces its own reflexivity, the realism is not taken for granted, there is room for reflection and realism is seen together with its illusions and artifices: "However, Wes Anderson does occasionally place the film's title within the storyworld. The title of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* does not appear over the image, on a discursive level, as is traditional, but appears on the cover of a book in the image. Wes Anderson employed the same structuring principles in *The Royal Tenenbaums*, which is divided into book chapters, with the film's title appearing in the film, on a library book. [...] The frame also generates a bounded space in the image: it creates a flat screen within the film that duplicates the flat screen (or surface) onto which the film is projected. [...] Marks are placed over an image to signify a character's optical point of view. If the character looks through binoculars, the following image may be masked with two overlapping circles". (Buckland, 2021: 54-56)

The selection of the films undertaken by Buckleland is very relevant for shifts in the history of Hollywood cinema. Federico Fellini is analyzed through intermediary books of theories on film, without giving the impression that Warren Buckleland resorts to a vivid outlook. The focus is not the European cinema, after all. Ingmar Bergman is gracefully mentioned in a short vignette of theory. Maybe the two famous

innovators of cinema should have had a more special place and a more direct approach, stemming from analyzing their frames.

However, it is simply amazing how the system suggested by Buckleland clarifies complex issues in the history of culture. The first wave of Hollywood industry used to have a patriarchal image of the world. The male gaze was sometimes the very angle of the filming camera. A tendency to see women as beautiful beings without a freedom of decision outside their destiny traced by society was simply inevitable. But, at the author suggest, there is a second wave of feminism inside the very Hollywood world. The critic analyzes two iconic films in the chapter on feminism. They are *Gone girl* and *Orlando*. The film *Orlando* was not made within a classical Hollywood narrative system. "Within second-wave feminism, autobiography does not conform to a Romantic notion of introspection and individual creativity, but is a reflexive practice that investigates a director's gendered self in relation to dominant patriarchal values. (...) Feminist films can employ narrational techniques to create complex, nonlinear stories that go beyond the linear, closed Oedipal narrative. Instead of a linear, fixed, closed narrative relentlessly moving forward, feminist narratives tend to be indeterminate, ambivalent, and open ended". (Buckland, 2021: 54-56)

The films discussed in the chapter on feminism are *Gone Girl* and *Orlando*. *Gone Girl* was directed by a

man, David Fincher, but written by Gillian Flynn, whilst *Orlando*, based on Virginia Woolf's novel, was directed by a woman: Sally Potter.

Another chapter is devoted to puzzles and unreliable narrators, in the sixths respectively the seventh chapter: *Alice in the Cities*, *The Inland Empire*, *The Butterfly Effect*.

The film *Inception* is in the last chapter, the chapter dedicated to videogame logic. The critic remarks the predetermined elements in *Inception* (2010, by Christopher Nolan). The film does not only contain labyrinthine structures opening under own eyes, but also embedded structures, like in the subliminal triggers of the unconscious.

The book *Narrative and Narration. Analyzing Cinematic Storytelling* retrieves (through a perfect selection of literary theories and of major popular films analyses) the forgotten enchantment of literature as an art form of combining words and cinema as the seventh art of humanity.

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*Caietele ASER – pentru o etnologie a (bunei) conviețuri(i),*  
Editura Etnologică, București, 2024

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For an Ethnology of (a Good) Coexistence could be the title of a compelling book about people who are inevitably different and about highly diverse human communities that history has long compelled to live together. For now, it was the title of a conference of ASER – the Association of Ethnological Sciences in Romania, where well-known Romanian ethnologists, as well as young master’s and doctoral students studying various aspects of cultural heritage, presented examples of this “good coexistence” that they observed. More importantly, it has become the thematic subtitle of the ASER Notebooks for 2023, published by the Etnologica Publishing House in 2024. ASER Notebooks — a publication that provokes reflection on human relations, identities, and social practices through an ethnological lens. The theme “For an Ethnology of a Good Coexistence” invites research to

go beyond mere descriptions of coexistence and to interrogate the mechanisms that make coexistence possible, enduring, and reasonable for diverse collectives.

Among the very well-organized objectives of this issue — again under the leadership of Dr. Ioana Frunteletă — one can sense the aim to illuminate the conditions, practices, and discourses that sustain peaceful coexistence or, conversely, to indicate vulnerabilities, tensions, and modalities of arbitrariness in conflict handling. The central questions, present in articles such as those by Prof. Dr. Florin Cioban, Dr. Sebastian Ștefănuță, or Andrei Roșca, might include: What does “good coexistence” mean in practice? How are cultural, religious, or ethnic differences negotiated in everyday spaces? What roles do folklore, rituals, communal cohesion, and non-formal environments play in this trajectory?

What is “good coexistence” in ethnology? A theory of peaceful cohabitation, grounded in: shared practices — rituals, festivals, and celebrations that include representatives of different groups; informal protocols — unwritten rules about public spaces, dialogue between groups, dispute-resolution channels; narrative representations — how stories and songs shape perceptions of the “other” and facilitate or hinder empathy.

A formula for the relation between coexistence and identity is also contemplated: collective identities versus individual identities in multicultural contexts, and the impact of urbanization and globalization on how coexistence is imagined and implemented. The methodologies and theoretical frameworks found in the volume include: urban ethnography, cultural anthropology, social psychology of communities, theories of coexistence and “cohabitation” in public spaces; reflexivity: how the researcher influences the image of coexistence through presence, subject selection, and data interpretation. The diverse frameworks that recur in the volume can be summarized as follows: naturalistic ethnography and participant observation to capture coexistence in action; engaging the reader with detailed ethnographic examples, including descriptions of spaces, rituals, and daily interactions, etc. Regarding intercultural and inter-ethnic contact in children’s folklore,

Dr. Florin Cioban, who opens the issue, discusses how children understand and negotiate differences between groups in play, stories, and songs. Behind the research lies five years of participatory observation in the Barcăului Valley, narrative interviews with children, and content analysis of folklore materials transmitted orally or through media for children. The article illustrates how coexistence is formed in early life through common practices, customary behaviors within groups with which they socialize, and it can identify branches of contact— hybridizations, identity juggling, or shared rituals.

Dr. Sebastian Ștefănuță’s article, “Aspects of the Informal Organization of Intra-Ethnic Coexistence in Greece,” highlights organized and semi-formal forms of coexistence (neighborhood networks, local initiative groups, festivals, community programs) within a complex ethnic inflection. This is an urban ethnography, a quantitative-qualitative case study in areas of specific ethnic diversity. The research shows how community practices negotiate identity and resources, how safe spaces are constructed, and how differences are managed through informal norms, common symbols, and collective rituals.

Andrei Roșca discusses “Framing at the Limit as a Benchmark of Coexistence” – an exploration of the idea of the limit (space, time, legal status, cultural barriers) as a benchmark in coexistence; how these

limits can be both constraining and productive for reinforcing social cohesion. The analysis of discourse, observations of how communities delimit spaces (neighborhoods, markets, gathering zones), and how these delimiters can facilitate or hinder coexistence under historically varied conditions and accelerating cultural exchanges. The article provides a perspective on the dynamics of social boundaries as markers of co-existence, highlighting inclusion/exclusion mechanisms, as well as practices of negotiating limits to maintain social order.

The final article in the series departs from the volume's main theme but draws attention with its distinctive title: "The Typology of Scatophilic Folklore" proposed by Dr. Marin Marian Bălașa. The renowned ethnologist proposes a theoretical classification of folklore materials transmitted as "scatophilic" (a term not merely hypothetical but thematic, specific) to understand how these forms of oral communication reflect and influence daily existence. Drawing on archival materials and a semiotic analysis of the presented elements, the study proves to be highly engaging, a foundational contribution to the discussion of how folklore, in its forms toward "vocality" or "vulgarity," can consolidate cohesion or underscore differences; it may offer analytical tools for future research into the daily pulse of human existence.

The issue also includes several reviews, among which we recall those

signed by Anita Capota and Dr. Alin Ștefănuț from the University of Oradea. These reviews highlight the latest publications marked by reflexivity in researchers' interpretation of data, the necessity of clarifying key terms, the extension of analytical boundaries in light of the internal diversity of the groups analyzed, and, not least, originality (exploration of relatively underobserved domains, introduction or testing of a "typology" of folklore as a tool for understanding intergroup communication, providing a conceptual framework for organizing folklore materials as indicators of cohabitation) and impact (inspiring future research, relevance for community initiatives and intercultural education, etc.).

We thus recommend a robust issue that can offer a complex perspective on the ways in which coexistence can be understood, designed, and sustained in practice. The transferability of the results to other multicultural contexts can be a key point of popularity within the journal. Research in anthropology, ethnology, and intercultural studies may use the theoretical and methodological frameworks presented as starting points for other comparative projects.

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**Iulia Tegge, *Mirajul reflectării. Spre o istorie a metaficțiunii în romanul românesc*,  
Alba Iulia, Editura OMG, 2021.**

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Iulia Tegge's "*The Mirage of Reflection. Towards a History of Metafiction in the Romanian Novel*", published in 2021 is a complex book, yielding numerous facets of the notion of metafiction that has been the preoccupation of literary theorists for the past few decades. Metafiction as such is a multi-layered, indeed palimpsestic concept, that Tegge's astute study only adds layers of insight to. In that very vein of conceptual clarification, Tegge sets out to reveal the - at times - arcane significances of terminology and subsequently applies these to several case studies that she submits. The all-encompassing terminology overview and the adroit interpretations thereof are both an insightful and useful 'tool kit' for the young researcher of literature. Not only do they shed light on the salient instruments in interpretation, but they equally open up new vistas. As Tegge argues, "defining the extent of coverage of concept has been a central

concern of European and American researchers starting with the 1970s" (Tegge 2021: 16). Therefore, the paradigmatic ups-and-downs of the last 50 years could themselves constitute food for thought for the theoretically-minded. As Tegge puts it, "*În Europa, a început să se vorbească pentru prima dată despre metaficțiune în Franța. Apariția noului roman în anii 1950-1960 a determinat dezbaterea lui Jean Ricardou (despre noul roman) și Lucien Dallenbach (despre punerea în abis). În America, Robert Scholes a atras atenția asupra "noii literaturi", dar doar de prin 1975, când Robert Alter a publicat *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre*, metaficțiunea constituie unul dintre subiectele studiilor literare. În scurt timp, literatura metaficțională devine centrul fierbinte al unei polemici generalizate, care reunește atât critici și teoreticieni literari, cât și scriitori, autori de texte metaficționale, care-și accentuează pozițiile prezentate în operele ficționale*

*prin scrieri nonliterare – eseuri, prefete lămuritoare, articole etc”* (Tegge 2021: 27)<sup>i</sup>.

Note here the ambivalent positioning of the self-reflexive protagonist, *i.e.* the author who’s omnipresent in the sense of present both in the literary work *per se* and in adjacent, non-literary productions such as essays, elucidating prefaces, articles etc. In other words, the author-as-character straddles categories in an urge to elucidate stance. Not only has metafiction been rife, but it has equally begotten new styles of fiction writing, whereby the focus on author-as-character has more often than not been the *modus operandi*.

In that vein, Tegge (2021) provides an in-depth analysis of how metafiction yields frameworks and indeed paradigms of scrutinizing the ‘*au-dela*’, of what lies beneath the surface of it all; there’s more to it than meets the eye, Tegge

e seems to imply: “*Cu toate că romanele metafictionale sunt adesea etichetate drept escapiste, Patricia Waugh le consideră, din contră, responsabile, atât dintr-un punct de vedere socio-cultural, cât și în ceea ce privește dezvoltarea romanului, fiindcă funcționează similar modulului în care glumele postulează critici într-o formă neofensatoare, așa cum explică Freud. Parodia, una dintre cele mai recurente forme de metaficțiune, are aceeași funcție eliberatoare, fără a irita. Fără a insista asupra tuturor teoriilor (aparținând lui Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, Jean Piaget, Johan Huizinga,*

*Roger Caillois) pe care Patricia Waugh le invocă în argumentarea ideii că operele metafictionale pun un accent deosebit pe componenta ludică a literaturii, reținem aici ideea că aceasta creează, în termenii lui Roger Caillois, senzația de ‘illinx’, acel vertij fascinant, întrucât nu distrug conceptul de realitate, ci doar îl problematizează. Astfel că, în ultimă instanță, întrebările referitoare la viabilitatea metaficțiunii conduc la chestionarea viabilității romanului în sine și posibila sa dezvoltare ulterioară.”* (Tegge 2021; 57)<sup>ii</sup>.

It has seldom been the case, as Tegge (2021) remarks in her Introductory Argument, that “literature does tell us something *about things, about the world* but alternatively, *tells itself TO the world*” (Tegge 2021: 27). This sort of self-reflexiveness is at the core of literary production, Tegge argues, and it should be at the center of literary exegesis as well. Equally saliently, the trace of the author that is left indelibly in a text is to be detected and subsequently anatomized. Whether the aforementioned trace is a ruse meant to entice the reader and make the book a page-turner or it does indeed get embedded into the fine structure of the text, thus becoming functionally constitutive of the text, it is nonetheless conceptually impactful and hence a must in text exegesis, Tegge (2021) submits. The conundrum of whether the author’s strategy is mock-subversive or, on the contrary, meant to buttress the

architecture of meaning that the book yields is at times the bone of contention for the intrepid literary critic.

The structure of *“The Mirage of Reflection. Towards a History of Metafiction in the Romanian Novel”* is aptly conceived alongside two lines: (i) the theoretical underpinnings of the notion of metafiction, whereby the conceptual framework is set, (ii) whilst the second section of the book looks at the recurrence of the subtle

presence of the writer-as-character in the modern Romanian novel. Throughout the book, Tegge’s acumen pervades the analyses she submits both to the astute critic and to the keen novice as well.

All in all, *“The Mirage of Reflection. Towards a History of Metafiction in the Romanian Novel”*. offers cutting-edge tool kits for literary exegesis at large. A commendable read indeed.

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<sup>i</sup> *“In Europe, the first instance of debate on metafiction occurred in France. The advent of le nouveau roman in the 50s and 60s engendered Jean Ricardou’s debates (on le nouveau roman) and Lucien Dallenbach’s (on mise-en-abime). In America, Robert Scholes pinpointed ‘new literature’, but only around the mid-70s, when Robert Alter published his ‘Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre’; metafiction thereupon constitutes one of the topics of literary study. Shortly thereafter, metafictional literature becomes the hot, as it were, core, indeed the hub of generalized polemics, that rallies both literary critics and theorists and writers alike; authors of metafictional texts, who emphasize the stances put forward in fiction through non-literary writings – essays, illuminating prefaces, articles etc.”* (Tegge 2021: 27; translation mine, Anemona Alb 2025)

<sup>ii</sup> *“Although metafictional novels are often labelled as escapist, Patricia Waugh deems them, on the contrary, as being highly responsible, both from a socio-cultural point-of-view, and as well, salient in terms of the development of the novel, as their functioning is similar to that of the way whereby jokes postulate criticisms in a non-offending manner, as Freud explains. Parody, one of the most recurring forms of metafiction, has the same freeing function, without irritating the recipient. Not necessarily insisting upon all the theories thereof (pertaining to Roland Barthes, Roman Jakobson, Jean Piaget, Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois) that Patricia Waugh invokes in her argument towards the idea that metafictional works focus specifically on the ludic component of literature; we thereby note that parody begets, in Roger Caillois’s terms, the feeling of ‘illinx’, that kind of enthralling vertigo, as it doesn’t dispel the concept of reality, it does merely problematize it. As such, at the end of the day, the queries referring to the viability of metafiction lead to the questioning of the viability of the novel per se as literary genre and of its possible subsequent development.”* (Tegge 2021: 57; translation mine, Anemona Alb 2025)