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## PETRU POPESCU'S ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WORK<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The writer Petru Popescu (born 1944) entered Romanian literature in the late 1960s and almost immediately gained the interest of critics and readers. His novels were innovative not only in terms of bold themes but also of narrative strategies. This article focuses on Petru Popescu's work written in exile in English, i.e., from the late 1970s until 2009. His texts vary significantly, as Popescu tried his hand at several literary genres, from popular novels (*Before and after Edith*, *In Hot Blood*), travelogues (*Amazon Beaming*), adventure novels (*Almost Adam*), and adolescents' literature (*Footprints in Time*) to his memoir (*The Return*) and the more stylized memoir about his parents-in-law (*The Oasis: A memoir of Love and Survival in a Concentration Camp*).

KEYWORDS: contemporary Romanian literature, exile literature, Romanian literary exile, creative non-fiction, holocaust literature, adolescents' literature

One of the authors who contributed to the revival of Romanian prose following the era of socialist realism ("proletcultism") in the 1960s was Petru Popescu (born 1944), a writer inspired by urban environments and American literature. In his novels *Prins* (Captive, 1969), *Dulce ca mierea e glonțul patriei* (Sweet as Honey is the Homeland Bullet, 1971), and *Sfârșitul bahic* (*Burial of the Vine*, 1973), he captured the general feelings of the post-World War II era of young Romanians. Despite all his achievements, he emigrated from socialist Romania to the United States in 1974, where he began to write in English. Petru Popescu decided to emigrate in the mid-1970s because of Ceaușescu's 1971 infamous July Theses reintroducing, besides other things, socialist realism in the literature – the author realized that he would increasingly have to adapt his future work to the demands of the ruling political circles.

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<sup>1</sup> The paper was created within the framework of Cooperatio, a programme for the basic institutional support of science and research at Charles University, in the field of Literature.

## SEARCHING FOR NEW TOPICS

*Before and after Edith* (1978) was Popescu's first prose novel written in English. Perhaps with the aim of attracting new readers, he chose the form of an erotic novel with detective elements, set in Austria-Hungary during World War I. The narrative interweaves the stories of two characters, a young woman, Hilke, who was raped by her French teacher as young a girl, and a police investigator, Satmary. In the early 1970s, Popescu was staying in Vienna as a Herder Prize scholar. In an interview from the time, he says he would like to situate one of his future novels in this city. In the same interview, he also mentions his fascination with long-neglected turn-of-the-century German literature, whose influence and *fin de siècle* atmosphere was then reflected in *Before and After Edith* (Nistor 1972: 12).

Following a rather lengthy introduction to the characters' family backgrounds and key life events, comes the core of the story. Satmary is investigating a series of murders, and the trail leads to a married woman and mother of three children, Hilke, who lives a double life, dressing up as a luxury prostitute by the name of Edith and murdering her customers. After Satmary gets on Hilke's (Edith's) trail, they meet several times and start an intimate relationship, through which Satmary strives to save the woman from the consequences of her crimes. The story may be appealing to some readers thanks its atmosphere of the eve of World War I, with the decadence typical of the end of the century. However, the motivation of the characters' actions is not always sufficiently credible, and the ending feels somewhat contrived.

The highly successful film *Basic Instinct* is based on a similar pattern, as Nicolae Manolescu noted in his review of the Romanian edition (*Înainte și după Edith*, 1993). He described the novel as commercial but in a good sense, stating that similar literature had been missing in Romania since the interwar period (Manolescu 1993: 6). Marian Popa, on the other hand, judged the novel from strictly literary-critical and aesthetic points of view and described it as trivial, pornographic, perversely kitsch, and hardly readable in places, although he did grant a certain appeal to some of the characters and situations (Popa 1996: 44–45). Popescu sold the film rights to a Hollywood studio; in the end, however, the film was never produced.

The novel *In Hot Blood* (1986) is a horror-genre attempt. It is more of a light, playful vampire story that does not bring anything innovative or surprising within its tradition. The novel is relatively marginal in the context of Popescu's work and has not been translated into Romanian to this day. Literary critic Alex Ștefănescu, who counts himself among the author's friends, has remarked in relation to Popescu's American work that all his novels written with regard to their future marketability slide into parody, which, claims Ștefănescu, either proves that the author did not take them too seriously or that he has too much talent to abide by the rules of such genres (Ștefănescu 2005: 665).

However, even in fact-based literature it is impossible to achieve complete objectivity. The choice and arrangement of the events described always remain at the author's subjective discretion. Similarly, the question of veracity may in some cases raise legitimate doubts. The essential criterion is credibility (Jela 2013). *Amazon Beaming* (1991) is the result of Popescu's collaboration with explorer Loren McIntyre, who discovered the sources of the Amazon during one of his expeditions to the Amazon basin.

When writing this book, the author made use of his best literary skills to make the most of the potential of the events of 1969 and 1971. These incidents were real, yet their depiction is reminiscent of fictional adventure novels. In the introduction, the author explains why he decided to alternate between first- and third-person narratives. One reason, he discloses, was that, based on the material he had gathered (notes, letters, articles, and his co-workers' accounts), he began to create a third-person narrative, but in the course of the work, several loose ends emerged. Popescu recorded additional and explanatory interviews with McIntyre on tape and then, after transcribing them, edited them into a book. However, he kept those in the first-person narrative, which makes these chapters much more authentic and impressive. This can definitely be considered a continuation of his most successful novels written in Romanian, where he often used the first person.

Apart from the often very dramatic episodes from his stay with the Indian tribe of *mayoruna* that speaks an incomprehensible language (for McIntyre) and has managed to avoid any contact with civilisation so far, the story, especially at the beginning, keeps making digressions about the conquest of Amazonia, looking for the sources of the Amazon River, and McIntyre's previous life as a sailor, soldier, and traveller. McIntyre's second expedition in search of the source of the river also presents many pitfalls and dangers, which the explorers manage to overcome, eventually finding and documenting the farthest source of the Amazon from the Atlantic.

By his title, *Amazon Beaming*, the author alludes to McIntyre's method of communication with the above-mentioned Indian tribe: telepathy. The traveller had not talked about this strange experience for a long time, until he told Popescu, which is how it finally became part of the story. McIntyre published his own album of photos along with Popescu's travelogue, and the authors promoted their books at joint appearances. A Romanian translation was published in 1993 under the title *Revelație pe Amazon*. Marian Popa, who had been very critical about Popescu's erotic novel *Before and After Edith*, gave significantly more space to the *Amazon Beaming* travelogue in the same article. In this case, he did not spare words of praise regarding the author's talent as well as the book, which, in his view, would attract scientists, writers, as well as ordinary readers (Popa 1996: 44–45).

With his next work, Popescu returned to the realm of fiction, although the contents are often bordering with scientific facts, which the author spent several years collecting. The novel *Almost Adam* (1996) is set in Africa and develops the "lost world" theme – the forgotten ancestors of today's man living aside from civilization. This subject has inspired a number of authors, from Jules Verne and Arthur Conan Doyle to Jack London, whose book *Before Adam* certainly served as inspiration to Popescu. Certain parallels can also be found with Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (Bălan 2013: 210–212). The novel, conceived as a science-fiction text, has been an international success and has been translated into twenty-five languages. It tells the story of Ken Lauder, a young American palaeontologist who discovers a prehistoric skeleton, probably several million years old, in the Kenyan savanna. On his next expedition, he meets an Australopithecus boy and soon afterwards a whole tribe of hominids. Ken becomes friends with the boy, but it soon turns out that an ambitious anthropologist is after them, eager to appropriate Ken's discovery. In addition to the epic plot, the novel is underpinned by a thorough familiarity with anthropological research.

MEMOIRS (*THE RETURN*)

After more than fifteen years of exile, a successful transition to writing in English, and a change of regime in Romania, Popescu decided to publish his memoir in a travel diary of his “return,” which was also done by several other writers during the post-revolutionary 1990s, which include, among Romanian exiles in the United States, the writer Andrei Codrescu (*The Hole in the Flag: A Romanian Exile’s Story of Return and Revolution*, 1991) and the literary critic and theorist Matei Călinescu (*Amintiri în dialog*, 1994). Popescu’s *The Return* (1997) is structured similarly to the memoir published a few years later by another famous Romanian exile of Jewish origin who settled in the United States, Norman Manea (*Întoarcerea huliganului*, 2003).

The first half of the memoir contains the author’s recollections of his youth in communist Romania. In the second, diary part, Popescu describes his visit to his homeland in 1991. Apart from visiting Bucharest, he and his wife first stopped by in Prague for a few days. In the opening chapter, “Split Feelings”, he describes how he felt in the early 1990s when he learned about the revolution and the changes taking place in Romania. He had kept his past locked away until that moment because he knew he could not return while the Communist were in power. He had not even been allowed a brief visit to his father’s funeral in the early 1980s.

In the second chapter, “Character-Forming Scenes,” he describes childhood and youth experiences that shaped him. One of the most profound was the death of his twin brother Paul, who died at the age of thirteen. The motif appears in his early stories and is the subject of the author’s Romanian debut novel, *Captive* (1969). A few months later, Popescu was interrogated by the secret police for the first time, an experience that also found its representation in the same novel. After finishing elementary school, the author began to study English at the university. Popescu believes that it was around this time that his “American dream” was born, but it was still a long way from being fulfilled. In the meantime, he had become a successful novelist in Romania. He discusses this phase of his life rather briefly. The final acknowledgements mention that the manuscript was originally seven hundred pages long, but, at the request of an American publisher, Popescu reduced it to four hundred.

An important event in the author’s life was the offer he received to accompany as a journalist the then-President, Nicolae Ceaușescu, on his visits to several South American countries. This was an opportunity to meet in person with the people who were shaping the future of Romania, and therefore also his own future. Shortly after his return to Romania, he received an invitation to spend a semester at the University of Iowa. He applied for a passport, but the application was denied several times. So he decided to use his contacts to arrange a meeting with Ceaușescu himself, where he justified his departure on the pretext of spreading Marxist ideas in the United States.

From Iowa, Popescu started his way back to Romania via London and Paris. In the French capital, he finally made the decision to stay abroad for good. He moved to Los Angeles, where he established himself as a screenwriter and novelist, and married a girl of Jewish descent whose parents, originally from Czechoslovakia, had survived the Holocaust and Nazism. The cover of the American edition of *The Return* includes a short

caption (“A Family Revisits Their Eastern European Roots”), which shows that the book has a broader scope than just the life story of an individual.

After the fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, including Romania, and following lengthy hesitation, the author and his wife finally decided to travel to Europe. Popescu recalls his visits to Prague in the 1960s – before the Prague Spring – and after the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops. His Czech acquaintances at the time included “Marie Kavkova, a scholar of Romance philology, a kind of grand dame of Czech letters who had translated my *Captive* into Czech” (Popescu 1997: 214). The author mainly describes his contemporary impressions and experiences and reflects on the life story of the Prague German writer Franz Kafka.

The couple then continued on to Romania, where Popescu was now traveling as an American journalist and was to write an article about the situation there upon his return. The author was most interested in how the revolution really happened and what role the secret services had played. In Bucharest, he was unpleasantly surprised by the changes that had taken place under Ceaușescu: the disappearance of the picturesque old parts of the city and the new dictator’s residence. A significant part of the text reflects on the recent history of Romania and the mentality of the Romanians – it mainly deals with Ceaușescu’s rule and its consequences but also with the dictator himself and the author’s long-ago encounter with him. Apart from their relatives, the Popescu couple also visited an orphanage for disabled children, most of whom were born as a result of failed illegal abortions. In certain parts, Popescu’s narrative is very emotional, which increases its authenticity and credibility. The author does not avoid controversial topics, yet he often manages to take some weight off the narrative, for example by telling jokes told from the communist era.

Similarly to the form used in *Amazon Beaming*, Popescu switches between first-person and third-person narratives; in this case, the first-person narrative predominates, especially when he talks about himself and his experiences. He uses the third person when talking about other people and their life stories. The whole book, however, begins with an exclamation in second person singular: “Listen to me. Hear me out” (Popescu 1997: 1). The author thus evokes the need to continue reading, because a testimony or a confession is about to ensue. This impression is reinforced by the missing quotation marks. It is made clear that this is an expression of the author’s inner voice, of his repressed Romanian past. Another narrative device the author often uses is dialogue. The narrative does not unfold in a linear fashion. The individual episodes are loosely linked, with numerous digressions into the history of Romania, reflections on its position in Europe, and the nature of the post-war regime. However, this type of information is only inserted into the text to the extent necessary (similarly to *Amazon Beaming*).

In addition to the author’s many relatives, friends, and acquaintances, one of the important “characters” in the story is Ceaușescu himself. A recurring topic of sorts, he comes across first as an omnipotent ruler whose influence marked the life of every Romanian citizen, later as a man of flesh and blood whose power inspired fear and utmost servility in people, and finally as a stubborn tyrant who failed to understand that the world around him had changed, and who ultimately paid the price for that. Although Popescu lived decades under his rule, he managed to break free of it, change, and adapt to life in another country, which is what enabled him to walk around Ceaușescu’s former office

with triumphant feelings in the early 1990s. This scene represents one of the highlights of the entire book.

Cognitive theorists suggest that a person is not so much the subject or the factual content of a narrative as the product of the story he or she tells about himself or herself, an entity that story ends up creating and developing (Chrz 2002: 41). This aspect of Popescu's work has already been captured by Paul Georgescu in the preface to Popescu's early Romanian book of poetry *Zeu printre blocuri* (God through Blocks), where Georgescu writes of the author as being "determined to create a work, to create himself" (Georgescu 1966: 10). What construct, then, do we find in Popescu's memoirs? The image of a successful writer and contented husband and father who managed to overcome a traumatic childhood to become a successful novelist in his homeland, from where he left at the height of his fame out of a desire for creative freedom and political liberty. He had to sacrifice, above all, his readership and popularity, and ultimately, unlike his compatriots such as Norman Manea and Mircea Eliade, he also gave up Romanian as the language of literary creation.

## OTHER ENGLISH WORKS

As mentioned earlier, Popescu devoted another novel, *The Oasis: A memoir of Love and Survival in a Concentration Camp*, to the troubled lives of his in-laws of Jewish origin. The book was published in 2011 to little acclaim, as its promotion was interrupted by the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, where the author was scheduled to meet readers and hold a book signing that evening (Bălan 2013: 246). However, the cover features praise from writers such as Elie Wiesel and William Styron, who also dealt with the Holocaust in their works. The memoirs, narrated by Blanka and Mirek, are told in the first person by Popescu and are divided into two alternating and complementary narrative lines. In the afterword, the author describes that he first recorded their testimonies and then searched for documentation in archives, consulted with historians, and visited the places mentioned in the story. He also states that his experiences in communist Romania often resonated with his in-laws' narratives, and the voices of the characters and the author sometimes merge into one. The novel was subsequently translated into Romanian (*Oaza*, 2002) and published a year after the American edition. In a *România literară* review, Tudorel Urian notes that a love story set against the backdrop of tragic events is an appealing subject not only for literature, but filmmakers often work with a similar scheme.

The author found further inspiration in fantasy literature, adventure novels, and the very world of his teenage daughter Chloe. The result was two novels for adolescents, *Weregirls: Birth of the Pack* (2007) and *Weregirls: Through the Moon Glass* (2008). Their protagonists are four girls with complicated family backgrounds who live ordinary lives filled with school, mutual friendship, passion for sports, but also hostility and intrigue. They discover that they have the supernatural abilities described by old Indian legends. The story is told in the form of a diary kept by Lily, the protagonist and leader of the whole girl gang.

Popescu meant *Footprints in Time* (2008), another piece of prose for children and adolescents, to be a follow up on his successful novel *Almost Adam*. This science-based fantasy tells the story of a 13-year-old boy's encounter with a hominid from Tanzania. The

work meets all the criteria of a well-written adventure novel. The promotional materials for the Romanian edition let the reader know that the book sold over a million copies in the United States and was on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In both the United States and Romania, the novel was published by reputable publishers.

*Girl Mary* (2009), a historical romance set in Biblical times, represents Popescu's return to adult literature and speaks to his constant search for new topics. The story focuses on the youth of Jesus's mother before the birth of her son and makes no attempt to disprove or reinterpret the usual narrative. It views the biblical figures as real personalities in the spirit of the neo-Protestant movements. Popescu thus portrayed Mary as a flesh-and-blood woman living in the specific, historical and ethnographic realities of her Jewish world.

## CONCLUSION

The choice to emigrate was all the more difficult in Popescu's case because he was leaving behind his loyal readers and his peers. It was his programmatic orientation toward his readers and their interests that brought him to the top of his popularity in his native country and then helped him establish himself during his American exile as well. He did not hide in the shell of his native language, Romanian, as Norman Manea did, but overcame the language barrier and began to write in English. His wide range of topics shows the constant need and necessity to search for new, sometime challenging topics and to address the reader in different ways. In the case of his creative non-fiction literature, he demonstrated the ability to build compelling stories out of dramatic human destinies, whether his own or someone else's. These books rank among the best he authored after he had left Romania.

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