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## **Lonely youth – Loneliness and Its Ambiguities in Romanian Literature**

The present paper investigates the different manifestations of the phenomenon of loneliness in Romanian literature – a literature that began its path towards modernization, despite the pronounced conservative tendencies, during the interwar period and has been accordingly shaped through the peculiar interplay of tradition and modern European influences. Since loneliness is a literary motif often related to the theme of growing up, the paper focuses on literary texts dealing mainly with adolescence and youth. It wants to provide an overview of the specific manifestations of the topos of loneliness in Romanian literature. It also discusses the social and cultural features that have shaped the idea of loneliness. Based on three literary texts (*Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent* by Mircea Eliade, *Travesti* by Mircea Cărtărescu and *Kinderland* by Liliana Corobca), the following questions will find an answer: What is the meaning of the notion of loneliness for the depicted object – the adolescence and/or youth of the protagonist? Another issue that is to be discussed in the present contribution is: What function does the confrontation with the theme of loneliness have for the overall image of adolescence/youth as described in the chosen literary texts?

Keywords: Loneliness, Romanian Literature, Adolescence, Youth

The emotional atmosphere of adolescence and youth sums up a lot of different and contrary feelings and states: changing moods, the fears, the tension between hope and despair, enthusiasm and hopelessness, the intense but often sterile brooding and philosophical thoughts, the urge for freedom, the deep loneliness, the rebellion against authority, the powerless anger or the active hatred against the adult world, the

erotic enthusiasm for same or different sexes, the suicide fantasies, etc. However, as Patricia Meyer Sparks remarks: “Most people reminisce readily about their teen-age years, and we hear in such accounts the unmistakable note of the mythic [...] even memories stressing youthful unhappiness evoke a nostalgic sense of aliveness.”<sup>1</sup> This is because no other stage in life equals adolescence in the intensity of feelings. Feeling lonely and unhappy is common among adolescents and young people. However, their reasons for feeling so are quite specific. Mijuskovic describes – following Professor Rubin Gotesky – four distinguishable states: aloneness, loneliness, isolation and solitude. However the positive, or “sought after”, form of aloneness is flagrantly ignored. According to Mijuskovic, the wish to be left entirely to oneself can only arise

because we have been momentarily overwhelmed by the chaotic, threatening, disintegrative activity of external reality and we want the time to reunify, to reintegrate our fragmenting selves. We need to pause in order to collect our very selves, to rediscover “who” we are. It is simply a psychological and natural impulse to preserve our cognitive sense of “personal identity”, a required respite which seeks to reaffirm the unity of the self. [...] When we seek “solitude,” it is merely a defensive device to thwart the threat of diffusion, of the self’s evaporation before the overwhelming presence of the “others” as it is assaulted by an impersonal, bureaucratic, industrialized, mechanized society or by violent and traumatic interpersonal relations. [...] Nevertheless, no one ever desires to be *absolutely* alone, to be a single consciousness in a lifeless universe, to be severed completely from familiar, human surroundings forever.<sup>2</sup>

Mijuskovic argues further that there is only “one basic form of despairing isolation.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover he insists that “the thoughts as well as the actions of all men can be interpreted as a desire to avoid the feeling of existential, human isolation.”<sup>4</sup> A quite different view on loneliness is depicted in Eliade’s autobiographical novel *Diary of a Short-*

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<sup>1</sup> Meyer Sparks, *The Adolescent Idea*, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Mijuskovic, *Loneliness in Philosophy, Psychology and Literature*, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 6.

*Sighted Adolescent*, one of the most representative Romanian novels about adolescence. Written in the far 1923/1924 years and republished posthumously in 1989, the first novel of the world-famous religious philosopher Mircea Eliade is still popular nowadays and has been read by many generations of young adults. *Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent* presents the adolescence of a precocious and literary ambitious teenager. The first-person narrator of the aforementioned novel, a student from the Spiru Haret Lycee in Bucharest, writes about himself and his school classmates, about his friends and teachers. Much attention is given to various descriptions of his attic, his diverse readings and his beloved writers.

The text of the book is being presented as the journal the author writes while he is trying to start writing his proposed novel, whose protagonist he wants to be. The original title of the book indicates that it is a novel (Romanian original title: *Romanul adolescentului miop*), the narrator however presents the text as a failed attempt to write a novel. One reads the novel with the expectation that the actual novel will begin immediately or that it is merely the intention and future plan of the narrator. The opening words of the first chapter are: “As I was all alone I decided to begin writing *The Novel of the Short-Sighted Adolescent* this very day.”<sup>5</sup> The first and the last sentence of the novel are identical, turning the text into a coherent whole. The effect is surrealistic and somewhat comic: one has just finished reading the diary of the author’s unsuccessful efforts to write a novel – and the diary turns out to be the novel. In his *Autobiography*, Eliade writes: “The value I accorded to *Romanul adolescentului miop* was, above all, documentary. I told myself that for the first time an adolescent was writing about adolescence, and his writing was based on ‘documents’”.<sup>6</sup> The author-hero’s original stated purpose for wanting to write the novel is self-vindication: he wishes to get revenge on his teachers who have misjudged and persecuted him. Also he wants to redeem himself from his humiliating failure in mathematics. In his *Autobiography*, Eliade explains that writing the novel was a great safety-value for him at

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<sup>5</sup> Eliade, *Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Eliade, *Autobiography*, 78.

that time. The need for such an outlet is evident when we read of his unwillingness as an adolescent to share his innermost feelings even with his closest friends. His journal was his only confidant and the project of the novel – his only emotional outlet. Here he allowed his conflicting and sometimes embarrassing feelings to be shown and seen. It is quite an explosion of rage and passion considering the outwardly timid and mild-mannered personality of the adolescent.

Eliade spoke of adolescence “not as a psychological or emotional phase, but as an era of intellectual discoveries.”<sup>7</sup> Although the short-sighted adolescent was aware of his own outstanding intelligence since early childhood, the usual concerns of adolescence (first love, school worries and failures, attacks of sadness and self-pity, friendship and disillusionment) are by no means alien to him. Nevertheless, they tend to stay in the background. The narrator is separated from the average adolescent by his enormous desire for knowledge. Hardly anybody has systematically modeled or perfected themselves with similar perseverance and sobriety – through attempts of sleep deprivation, self-imposed loneliness, self-punishment, suppression of impulses and temptations of all kinds. In his *Autobiography*, Eliade speaks of his exaggerated sense of singularity, his feeling of being peculiar, unique, set apart from his classmates. This sense of uniqueness, of being predestined for something special, is voiced frequently in the *Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent* as well as in the *Autobiography*:

The whole book is pervaded by a curious ambivalence: the author insists time and again that adolescence is an essential moment in life, that *this* adolescence – his and that of his friends – constitutes a new spiritual phenomenon never encountered before and, as such, deserves to be prolonged in order to be correctly analyzed and interpreted; and on the other hand he appears exasperated by the difficulties of adolescence, especially by melancholy, the regrets, and the timidity of which it seems to him to be composed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 82.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 79.

He is a shy, short-sighted adolescent who outdoes his classmates in intellectual conversations, but is socially awkward. With mocking irony he registers the blemishes of his classmates and his teachers, but at the same time longing for closeness and recognition. The kind of loneliness the adolescent goes through correlates with his attempts to seek the path to the so-called “true self” in spite of this indissoluble mixture of inconsistencies and opposites.

One of the main themes of the *Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent* is the school world. The school as an educational institution is opposed to the attic apartment, which receives a symbolic character as a place of informal and self-determined learning. The sparsely decorated room has contributed to Eliade’s development in many ways. Firstly, the attic shelters the short-sighted boy from his parental reading ban. There he is able to indulge his reading obsession under the pretext that he would only read his textbooks. Secondly, he is able to use the attic as a space for meetings with his friends and like-minded comrades.

One might say that the school and the attic are two extremes in the topography of the novel. In the attic, the boy was able to build his own intellectual universe, a parallel school where he could exercise the two roles: being his own teacher and student. The mansard as the preferred space for literary work symbolizes the useful loneliness and isolation that encourages creation. This is how Eliade describes the attic apartment in his *Autobiography*:

That attic had a decisive importance in my life. It is hard for me to imagine the person that I became later and am today without those two low-ceilinged rooms, with their whitewashed walls and tiny windows – one of them round like a porthole – and an incredible stove: its mouth in one room and its body in the other. It was the great fortune of my youth that I was able to live there for twelve years, and especially that I could live the last five or six years there alone.<sup>9</sup>

A key experience for the future literary and religious philosopher was the reading of the novel *Un uomo finito* (Eng. *A Dead Man*) by the Italian writer Giovanni Papini. The similarities between the two,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 19.

especially the early maturity, the myopia, the thirst for knowledge, are striking. Above all, they shared the same understanding of adolescence. But the joy of rediscovering oneself in another, the feeling of sharing the same fate, has its downside as well, because this surprising discovery once again challenged his own originality and authenticity. The encounter with the Italian writer Papini also had consequences on the writing process because the future author considered originality and authenticity to be key features of his novel in progress.

Eliade confesses these contrarian feelings both in his *Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent* as well as in his *Autobiography*:

[...] the joy of having found a friend, an older brother, a master who had experienced what I had experienced – but also the fury of suddenly having found myself the double of someone else. It was painful to discover that all my „originalities” belonged to another, that I was introducing nothing new in my novel, at least so far the essential problem of the main character was concerned: the feeling of uniqueness and solitariness upon which so much of my peculiar behavior depended.<sup>10</sup>

A quite similar feeling of loneliness and alienation is to be detected in the decades later written novel *Travesti* (original Romanian title) by Mircea Cărtărescu. Cărtărescu (born 1956 in Bucharest) is one of the most important authors of Romanian post-modernism. The early masterpiece *Travesti* was published in Romanian in 1994 and has been translated into at least ten other languages.<sup>11</sup> The novel not only deals with a young man’s search for his sexual identity, but also focuses on his development as an author, whereby the topics are closely linked. Highly sensitive, intensely dreaming and solitary, literary gifted and determined to “become all or nothing by the age of thirty,”<sup>12</sup> Victor embodies the widespread type of genius outsider who was once popular in German literature (for example in the works of Thomas Mann,

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>11</sup> As *Travesti* has not been translated into English yet, the quotations from the novel have been translated into English by the author of this paper.

<sup>12</sup> Cărtărescu, *Travestie*, 33. The next quotations from the novel *Travestie* by Mircea Cărtărescu are marked in the text using the sigle “CT”.

Hermann Hesse, Gottfried Benn, Georg Büchner and others). He cannot and does not want to integrate into the mainstream. While his classmates sing loudly, dance, roar and drink under the power of the hormones, Victor recites poems by Tristan Tzara, Charles Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke, *et al.* These poems function as spells against the so-felt oppressive reality, against the unbearable nature of everyday life and against his own impropriety. Years later, the young dreamer actually becomes a successful writer. Apparently he lives a happy and fulfilling life. However, the facade is deceptive. The first-person narrator is plagued by nightmares and neuroses that drive him crazy. Years of therapy, psychotropics, sex and drinking cannot free him from the burden of the past. Almost two decades apart, the first-person narrator looks back and tries to understand the cause of his trauma. He remembers the last evening in the holiday camp, the immoral sexual touch of his classmate Lulu, who was disguised as a woman, and the ghosts and monsters that haunted the adolescent and then later also the adult. He gradually becomes aware of the fact that Lulu was nothing more than “a detail, an arrow, a hint” (CT 135). The little girl who appears in his nightmares and who he thinks his sister, who died early, was actually himself. Thereby he solves the mystery of his identity and sexuality. Only on the last pages of the novel does the exaggerated drama of puberty and the maddening journey into the abyss of consciousness and the long forgotten childhood world become plausible and coherent because this is by no means an ordinary adolescence: the child was born as a hermaphrodite and had been raised his first years as a girl until it was surgically fixed on the male sex.

The image of adolescence as the most exciting and formative phase of life is composed of a multitude of elements. The reader encounters a sensitive and gifted boy who cannot develop a clear gender identity until adulthood due to a (real or supposed?) early childhood trauma. Striking is the fact that the adolescent is also caught up in even deeper contradictions: just like the main figure of the *Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent*, he feels superior to his classmates and at the same time longs for closeness and recognition. He dreams of a world of the spirit, but also of being able to feel a sense of belonging. The cause of his being different and therefore loneliness lies primarily in the conscious

rejection of eros. The uninhibited sexuality surrounding him disgusts him.

The young person suppresses his sexuality in order to devote himself to a writer's existence instead. To him, the world of book and sexuality are mutually exclusive. It is from this deliberate renunciation to sexuality that literature grows out of. The writer's life chosen by Victor can therefore be seen as another superior form of luck. The fact that the so-called world of the spirit, he aspires to, would eventually bring him loneliness is quite clear to him, because thinking is merely a "pseudonym of loneliness" (CT 12). However, it must be emphasized that Victor's fantasies of magnitude and omnipotence not only root from the inevitable adolescent naivety, but rather are to be understood as an expression of the desperation of being born as a human being – that is, incomplete. He dreamed of being "man and woman, child and old man at the same time, worm and God". In short: "I suffered from the longing to become God" (CT 99). Nevertheless, the teenager is sometimes tormented by the "desire for love and animal warmth" (CT 19). Then he wishes to be able to live through feelings intensely and to overcome loneliness like the others. Both the adolescent and the adult narrator can't seem to find their way out of this inner conflict – the enjoyment of loneliness on the one hand and the desire for closeness on the other hand. They both remain entangled in contradicting thought patterns and views.

Even though Cărtărescu's novel covers a taboo subject and transgresses boundaries, it does not stand alone. A quite similar subject is to be found in Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite*. As the title of Howe's text already reveals, its protagonist, Laurence, is an intersexual character. The novel describes a development, a quest, an awakening and the loneliness, which the sexual ambiguity brings along.<sup>13</sup> In the third chosen novel the theme of loneliness is depicted in a radically different way. It is not about loneliness as a subjectively perceived state of mind or as a chosen way of life. It concerns the loneliness of children and adolescents that grow up without their parents. The social aspect that is given little to no importance in the above-mentioned novels is

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<sup>13</sup> See Bergmann, "Hermits and Recluses in Julia Ward Howe's *The Hermaphrodite*".



the main focus of *Kinderland* (original title) by Liliana Corobca. Many thousands of children live in Eastern Europe whose parents migrate to foreign countries in the hope of finding a well-paid job. In her novel *Kinderland* (2013), the writer Liliana Corobca has dedicated herself to the fate of these abandoned children, giving them a voice. Most of these children are cared for by their grandparents, some of them though remain completely alone and exposed to the absurdity of the adult world. The author presents in short expressive episodes the fate of three children who have to grow up without parental care and love. The original title *Kinderland* sums up this situation, which is symptomatic for a society in turmoil. Kinderland is a country that has left its weaker people – the children and the elderly – in the lurch: “Every village in Moldova is a village of children, the whole country ... especially if we include the elderly who have become childlike again.”<sup>14</sup> Liliana Corobca’s novel does not only fulfill a social function by drawing attention to a phenomenon that is as crude as it is neglected by society, politics and literary world. Corobca’s novel is also convincing as a work of art through the individual voice of her little twelve-year-old heroine Cristina and her little brothers Dan and Marcel. Cristina – the main figure of the novel – is a Moldavian Pippi Longstocking. In her world, however, being alone is no fun.

The story takes place in a village in the former Soviet Republic and today’s Republic of Moldova on the extreme edge of Southeastern Europe. It begins with the description of a memorable scene: little Dan cries in the vastness of the desolate and half-empty village while his sister is looking for an adult who could remove the tick that pierces his belly. Sometimes in letters to the parents and sometimes in soliloquy, Cristina tells – clever and old-fashioned, tender and full of longing, naive and mature, funny and poetic – about the fears, worries and struggles of everyday life that she and her brothers have to endure. The mother of the children works in Italy, where she looks after foreign children, while the father works in Russia. Both communicate with the

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<sup>14</sup> Corobca, *Kinderland* (Title of the German edition: *Der erste Horizont meines Lebens*), 142. The quotation has been translated into English by the author of this paper.

children only by phone, they send money and clothes. The parents can afford to come home only once a year. The rest of the time the sibling spend alone is a long and seemingly never-ending wait for the children. Cristina has to console her younger brother by giving him many examples of bad fathers who drink and beat their children. Yet nothing seems to help overcome the longing and the acutely perceived solitude. She urges the brothers to cry according to schedule, namely only at 8:00 p.m., because there is simply too much to do – all housework must be done by the twelve-year old Cristina alone – that’s a life that contrasts strongly with the usual worries of a normal childhood and adolescence. The only twelve-year-old Cristina proves to be particularly strong in character. Resolving disputes, giving consolation, treating small wounds and much more are part of Cristina’s tasks, who has to mother her two younger siblings.

Because there is no other hold, magical thinking gets the upper hand in children’s imaginations. The realistic features that characterize the first part of the text are replaced by mystical ideas and surrealistic elements as the events develop. While the focus in the first part lies on everyday occurrences and the little dramas from everyday life of the neglected siblings and the village community, the events described in the second part embed the children’s life in a larger context. The beginning of the second part is marked by the introduction of a new minor character. A deep friendship develops between the main character Cristina and a girl from the neighborhood named Alisa. The philosophy of life, which Alisa received from her grandmother and then passed on, combines elements of both pagan and religious origins. Superstition and Christian ideas coexist and determine the life of the villagers. The magical thinking, which emerges through Alisa and her ideas, reveals the fear and disorientation that the abandoned children go through. It underlines the loss of trust in the world of adults and in the existing social (dis)order in general. A return to nature and to the irrational seems to be the ultimate solution against alienation that Corobca finds plausible. The ending of the novel is tragicomical: compassionate as she is, Cristina tries to get rid of her subconscious wish her grandmother would die so that mother and father can come home straight away. But that is exactly how the novel ends: with the death of the grandmother and with

Cristina's tears – of both grief and joy. As Mijuskovic notices, when it comes to dealing with the inevitable existential loneliness “novelists – and mankind in general – tend to fall into two distinct categories, to wit, the reflexively-oriented and the ‘escapist’ doctrinaires.”<sup>15</sup> In this respect Corobca belongs to the second group of novelists.

As one can easily observe from the discussion of the first and the second novel about adolescence, the theme of loneliness is in both cases linked to the theme of writing and development. Loneliness seems to be the precondition that has to be fulfilled in order to be able to become one's true-self. Both novels (*Diary of a Short-Sighted Adolescent* and *Travesti*) resemble the German *Bildungsroman* and its close cousin, the *Künstlerroman*. Even if Mircea Eliade's novel was written in the early 20th century while Cărtărescu's *Travesti* belongs undoubtedly to the postmodernist era, both texts share thematic aspects and ideas that root in the literary species of the *Bildungsroman* as well as the *Künstlerroman*. The young adults inhabiting these novels “seek respite from society for identity-making.” Their solitary periods are “interludes seized by the author as moments of crisis that shape and define Self and its choice of action.”<sup>16</sup> The theme of loneliness is depicted in a different way by Corobca. *Kinderland* is not about loneliness as a subjectively perceived state of mind or as a chosen way of life. Liliana Corobca's novel manages to touch upon an acute social problem that many Eastern European countries are facing nowadays underlining the unknown aspects of the everyday lives of adolescents and young adults. The theme of growing up without the emotional support of a loving family is illustrated in several novels, for example in Zoë Jenny's *Das Blütenstaubzimmer*. However, the lack of reliable familiar structures in this German novel has other motives.<sup>17</sup>

The self-imposed loneliness of an autodidact and a becoming writer, the loneliness that arises from the feeling of otherness and the impossibility of integration in the peer-group, the unwanted and painful loneliness of the ones left behind – these are only few of the

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<sup>15</sup> Mijuskovic, *Loneliness in Philosophy, Psychology and Literature*, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Engelberg, *Solitude*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> See Gösweiner, *Einsamkeit in der jungen deutschsprachigen Literatur der Gegenwart*.

aspects of the phenomenon which are present in the modern Romanian literature. The way loneliness functions thematically to shape meaning in literary works is to a certain extent undoubtedly culturally specific. Nevertheless, the reading of the chosen novels through the lens of loneliness reveals primarily that we are dealing with a universal phenomenon that is deeply embedded in our very human nature.

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