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THE FALL OF THE (ROMANIAN) WALL IN THREE ACTS AND A PROLOGUE

Andrei Codrescu

I. Romanian Walls from the Beginning of Time until Now

In the matter of walls, as in everything else, Henri Poincaré's maxim "The scale is the phenomenon" holds — up to a point. The garden wall that Winston Churchill spent his retirement building for relaxation is not the Berlin Wall. The wall Robert Frost claimed is wanted by Something in himself can be construed as a mini-Berlin Wall, if one also adds Ted Berrigan's rejoinder "*I am* that Something." The Great Wall of China, Borges tells us, built by a mad Emperor in order to stop history and to begin everything again starting with himself, is not the Maginot Line. Borges's Great Wall of China is a grand metaphor more than a wall, while the Maginot Line is more grand stupidity than wall. Some walls, like Borges's, are metaphorical, while others are merely symbolic. Others are just walls, as Freud might have said.

I grew up in an old medieval city with walled-in gardens, and I truly loved walls. In front of my window was an ancient wall whose mosses and crenelations I knew by heart. My adolescent loneliness was identical to this wall. So was my desire to escape. The school I went to was an old fortified monastery with canon balls still embedded in it, souvenirs of a sixteenth-century Turkish siege. The walls of my city were books. I could read them a little bit. Others could read them more. If my desire to escape hadn't been so strong, I could have easily settled between the pages of the book of Sibiu, Transylvania, and made these walls my life reading.

The monks who once lived in my school had immured themselves here in order to defend their minds from the world. Outside my fortified city was the larger fortified province of Transylvania, made highly defensible by sheer mountains as well as by manmade walls. And outside Transylvania was the fortresslike country of Romania with its closely guarded borders, a country that was itself inside the larger prison of the Soviet system.

The literal walls that enclosed each of these entities were but the projections of history and systems, abstract walls that held against the battering rams of the outside world. To our keepers, those outside were barbarians even though, paradoxically, they were what even the jailers commonly called "Western civilization." In order to keep all these walls in place, our keepers went to great lengths to change the meanings of words. "Freedom" is what *we* had. "Slavery" is what those outside the walls wished for us. The desperate gymnastics of distortion, as Orwell has shown, were ubiquitous but unsteady. Often, we thought that by simply reversing them we would be free. But complexity and ambiguity shadowed ideology at every turn. All one had to do was look at the old walls, the abandoned fortifications, the defeated walled cities to know that all that industry had been in vain. As far as one would look, the question of borders was there, even in myth.

There are two fundamental myths of the Romanian people, one very old, the other newer. The oldest posits the idea of border in harmony with the ecoregion and the cosmos. There are three brothers, shepherds. The youngest, who remains nameless, is told by his favorite sheep, Mioritza, who is also his confidante and lover, that he will be killed in the morning by his brothers. The young shepherd does not resist his fate. He spends the last night of his life by telling Mioritza to go to his mother after he dies and to tell her that he didn't really die, that he married the moon, and that all the stars had been to his wedding. In order to prepare Mioritza for his mother's questions, he describes each star at the wedding, its origin, and its mission. By dawn he has described the entire cosmogony of the sky, all the origin myths of the stars. He is then killed and Mioritza wanders off telling his story, not just to his mother but to everyone who will listen. Mioritza wanders and wanders and is still wander-

ing, telling his story. The path of her wanderings from the mountains to the sea is the natural border of Romania. In other words, this moving tale-telling border circumscribes the space of the Romanians. It is the path of the transmigration of sheep from mountains to sea, following the seasons.

Now, sometime in the Christian era, long after Mioritza's original journey, we hear about the Monastery of Argeș above the wild Argeș River. Three master craftsmen are building a church there on the rocky promontory overlooking the river. It is a high and highly defensible mountain fortress intended to stand forever. But the builders' labors are in vain. Every day the walls collapse. No amount of buttressing, reinforcing, or support can make them stand. An old monk, knowledgeable about such things, reveals to the builders that the walls will not stand until they build someone alive within the walls. The builders decide that the first of their wives to come with lunch the next day would be built within the monastery wall. They vow also not to tell their wives when they go home that night. But only the youngest builder, Master Manole, keeps his word. The other two tell their wives not to come. Master Manole's young and pretty wife shows up, and she is slowly built into the wall by her heartbroken husband. She cries and asks why, and, even today, long after the church was built, she continues to cry and ask why. The church still stands and the innocent victim still cries, "Why?" But she can be heard only on certain nights, and few hear her.

Between these two myths stretches a quickening and a tightening, a vertiginous loss of liberty, the advent and conquest of prehistory by history. In prehistory, the nomadic shepherds and their charges followed the cosmic rhythms of seasons and the topology of the land. But the older brothers' murder of the younger represents already a bid for history, a desire for surplus wealth beyond that allotted, an attempt to stop movement, to settle, to grow fat, to build walls. They are successful but they are also thwarted by Mioritza, by the endlessly told story that reinforces the ancient nomadic border and does not recognize the new borders of the fratricides.

These new borders will not, in fact, be established until the nomadic narrative is overthrown by another, by "history" proper, by chronicles written on the orders of kings, by chronol-

ogy. Mioritza's narrative has been subsumed by the legend of Master Builder Manole. History has firmly established its highly artificial and murderous boundaries, based on might, not geographical features. It is already clear that no great building (or city, state, or empire) will stand without the blood of the innocent. While Mioritza's shepherd still has recourse to a story that will avenge his death and retard history, the young wife of Master Manole has no such defense. She can only ask why. She has no story to leave behind, no narrative of the victim that will prevail over the injustice of her murder. The narratives of power, of murder, of surplus wealth, of mighty fortresses have become self-evident. The nomad, the woman, the young, the powerless, the victim, have been silenced. No one but the victim herself even bothers to ask why. It is obvious. The murderers' narrative has shut out the rhythms of nature.

The two victims, the young shepherd and Master Manole's wife, are both nameless. They have already been buried in history. But while the young shepherd still has a voice, the voice of an animal, to tell his story, the young wife has only the wind to carry her question, and then only on certain nights. By the time of her murder, the animals have been silenced. They have become food, they have entered the slaughterhouse of production, they exist only for the benefit of the bloated conqueror-consumer. The only carrier of the world-without-walls is an enfeebled element, the wind. The elements still command a certain respect because their fury still escapes, occasionally, the wall-building abilities of man.

Since then, voices allied to the animals and the elements—the voices of artists, dreamers, children, the powerless, the voices of nature herself—have continued to ask an increasingly enfeebled “why” under the cement bed of techno-civilization.

In some other words yet, only an ecological perspective would let us out of the walls that currently define our space and, implicitly, out of the state of permanent war in which we live. If prior to the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the illusion of two warring camps gave the militarization of the world a certain easily grasped rationale, no such excuse is available now. We are seeing, on the part of the military establishment, the desperate attempt to manufacture new threats of a smaller magnitude to keep them in business. Oil, religion, ethnic strife. Yet none of these have the grand moral authority of an adversary *system*.

II. While the Wall Was Falling

The December 28, 1989, *Romania Literara*, no. 52, year 22, is the first post-Ceaușescu issue. It is printed on the same bad-quality paper and in the same small type as the journal I used to purchase a quarter of a century ago at a corner newsstand in Sibiu, Romania. I used to scan *Romania Literara's* small type in search first of my name in the "Editorial Mail" column, then for the names of my friends. If we were in there, fine. If not, we blamed it on censorship. But *Romania Literara* no. 52, year 22, unlike the journal of my youth, is the first uncensored issue of Romania's premier literary publication.

Unlike other Romanian publications following the December 1989 coup, or "Revolution," *Romania Literara* changed neither its name nor its volume number. After the Revolution there was an orgy of name-changing, a symbolic festival that took in everything from the name of the country — which became *Romania* from *The Socialist Republic of* — to newspapers and institutes. All the newly renamed journals began blithely with Volume One, Issue Number One — sometimes qualified by the words "New Series" — as if they had sprung fully grown from the barricades. The chief Communist Party paper, *Scinteia* (The Spark), became *Adevarul* (The Truth), which was the name of a pre-World War II Romanian paper from the time when there was actually some truth in the Romanian newspapers. Numerous other provincial *Sparks* changed into *Truths* or *Libertys*. Many *Tribunes* also ceased to exist, and turned into *Forums* or *Dialogs*. In lieu of "Long Live Ceaușescu," the headlines now said "Long Live the National Salvation Front!"

These prompt name-changes telegraphed to the reading public that (a) a revolution had occurred and everything begins anew after the Revolution (Marxist History Class 101), and (b) the staff wished to inform its esteemed readers that it had been forced to collaborate with the regime until now, but now that the Revolution has come, it is free to show its true editorial colors, which are — and had been all along — revolutionary, i.e., correct.

But *Romania Literara*, by continuing to use its former volume number and typeface, and most of its columns, conveyed another message: Romanian literature, as practiced in the pages

of this literary journal, had nothing to apologize for. There is no difference between the Romanian literature that appeared in its pages before the Revolution and that which appeared after. If it had been forced to collaborate, it did so minimally, and per-versely, in such a way that collaboration became defiance.

Looking over the provisional editorial board, I found names associated, if not with out-and-out-dissidence, then with integrity and quality: Nicolae Manolescu, Octavian Paler, Alexandru Paleologu, Andrei Plesu. These were, to various degrees, dissidents of the regime's last hours. In Ceaușescu's Romania, the best writers were automatically dissidents, not because they made any overt political gestures but because they *did not*. In his last years, Ceaușescu was no longer content with the perfunctory hosannahs of his court poets: he demanded praise from everybody. He understood declared opponents but was tormented by silence.

In the upper left-hand corner of the front page of *Romania Literara*, in the space usually reserved for a quote from the Maximum Leader, is a brief telephone interview with Eugène Ionesco. "Have courage and faith in God," Ionesco tells Romanian writers. "I'm happy that you're free . . . I am convinced that only now it will be possible to express the true Romanian culture." These are the words of Eugène Ionesco, the long-time Maximum Leader of Romanian writers, the very Anti-Maximum Leader Maximum Leader.

Ionesco's first book, a volume of critical essays published in the 1930s, was called *No*. It was an attack on all Romanian literature before himself. Shortly after Ionesco's emphatic *No*, a larger and more brutal "No" instituted a permanent denial of past Romanian literature. The "No" of the Communists created a vacuum they attempted to fill with the so-called doctrine of socialist-realism, a writing prescription that nobody took seriously, and then dismissed entirely after 1965. The "No" of the Communists was a mirage, but it constituted the first parenthesis that encompasses Romanian literature from 1946 until the December 1989 Revolution. Ionesco's statement is thus the second parenthesis, the one that encloses the period, and closes the chapter.

But what is Ionesco saying? One of the first words out of his mouth is "God." Consider the fact that Ionesco's column is

replacing Ceaușescu's column. Forbidden by his ideology to utter the name of "God," the former Maximum Leader must have often felt keenly the vacuum where the Supreme Being could have been enlisted to his side, particularly since everyone in Romania could and did mention God casually, profanely, or reverentially on a great many occasions. It must have given many people a great deal of satisfaction to be able to say "God" while knowing full well that their Maximum Leader could not. He lacked the legitimacy that even the most formulaic appeal to the deity gave most non-Communists. No such problem for Ionesco, who hated Communists, and whose literary rhinoceroses, sometimes thought of as fascists, are really more like Communists, according to their author, and were thus known to most Romanians. For many years now, Ionesco's symbolic rhinos were well known in Romania by even the most ordinary citizens.

After mentioning God, Ionesco goes on to deny the very *raison d'être* of the journal's careful attempt — through numbering — to establish the unbroken continuity of Romanian culture. "Only now," he says (*italics mine*), "it will be possible to express the true Romanian culture." Once more, Ionesco is saying no to Romanian literature, the same literature *Romania Literara* is saying yes to by continuing with the volume and issue number.

"All right," you might say. "Ionesco is on the telephone! He doesn't mean 'only from now on,' he means 'now that you're free, you can say what you want,'" which is, to his mind, the only genuine practice. Literature can be practiced only in freedom. It is an important moment, a religious one: Ionesco, the exile, is given the center stage of his country for the first time since he left. A French writer of Romanian origin, he is Romania's greatest dissident because he has said no not just to the Communists but to all of Romanian culture. He has even abandoned the language. In other words, the most deliberate yes places the most deliberate no at its very center. If Ionesco the essential exile has come home, then it is time for *all* writers to come home, especially those writers who have never left, who had been in the most terrible exile of all, the inner exile of censorship. Ionesco reassures them not only because he is famous, French, and has "God" on his side, but because his very view of the human condition is one of estrangement. The exile leads the

natives home through his profound belief in the absurdity of the world.

The practice of literature in Romania was now at a paradoxical crossroads. For the editors of *Romania Literara*, the practice of literature did not have a "before" and an "after." But the writers were facing a real dilemma. Having wrested some spiritual freedom out of political unfreedom, they were not yet certain what the sudden lack of censorship might mean. The new freedom might be antithetical to people who had made a practice of refraining from direct statements. Some of the country's finest writers practiced metaphorical obliqueness among other forms of disguise, masking, and dissimulation. An awesome imagination had been required to survive within the rigid faux-utopia of Ceaușescu's national-socialism. This imagination had produced works of fantastic potency and universal resonance. One paradox, among many, of pre-Wall literature in Romania was that its very need to hide and to invent masks had given it universality. It was as if the strictures of censorship had channeled the imagination into universal paths.

Take, for instance, Ana Blandiana's story "The Floating Church." A mysterious wooden church has been sighted for years floating on the rivers of Romania. At springtide, it goes by at a furious speed. In winter, it is encased in ice, majestic and ghostly. The story is a transparent allegory about the survival of religion among Romanians oppressed by an atheist government. When it was published, it was only mildly subversive. The Ceaușescu regime encouraged nationalist religiosity. The censors took no notice. On the other hand, the beauty of the writing and the starkness of the central metaphor give the story a universal ring. The floating church echoes a truth buried by our rationalist century. God floats in the same ghostly fashion through the dreams and uncertainties of Westerners.

Ana Blandiana could not have written this story after the Revolution. The questions before many writers in December of 1989 became, What if the new freedom paralyzes us? What if we need the censor the way nonbelievers need God?

Below Ionesco on the front page of *Romania Literara* is a column entitled "Never Again!" After a few moving phrases dedicated to the martyrs of the Revolution, the anxiety of writing

freely rages. It is an ontological anxiety that questions not only the disappearance of the enemy but the nature of it.

"We must begin," writes the editorial staff, "with an examination of our conscience. We must have the strength to look within. We must assume not only collective but also individual responsibility."

The point here is that everyone collaborated in some way with the dictatorship, or it wouldn't have been possible. This isn't just an intellectual agony. A drunk man on the train from Timișoara to Bucharest on December 28 kept waving a bottle around the compartment, mumbling: "We are all guilty! We are all guilty!" A friend kept trying to shush him, not because he thought the man was wrong but because it was embarrassing—in front of foreigners.

"We would probably need," the editorial continues, "completely new typographical characters [typography] so that this editorial will cease to resemble even superficially those which for the past fifteen years have occupied this space. It was an occasional compromise that the powers knew how to make permanent. It is true that we had little choice . . . [Had we not compromised,] we would have lost all possibility of communicating to our readers a certain critical spirit, in semi-clandestine conditions, capable of maintaining the authentic values of our literature."

A little further on, we read that "writing has its own morality, which ought not to be violated . . . Just as there were those who profited from the dictatorship, there will be those who will profit from liberty."

Wishing for "completely new typographical characters" is revealing. In the nineteenth century, Transylvanian Latinists fought Slavophiles over typographical characters. When they won, they began officially writing Romanian in the Latin alphabet instead of the Church Slavonic used until then. When the Soviets occupied Romania in 1945, the battle over letters had been long won, but there was still a skirmish over the spelling of the country itself. The Soviets insisted that it be spelled with *i*—a Slavic character—i.e., Rominia, to prove that Romanian had enough Slav in it to justify occupation. Romanian nationalists kept and then changed the *i* to an *â* (România). Around this *â* revolves the Romanians' claim to Latinity and to Europe.

If a new character were possible, a new beginning would be too, a beginning without the censor, a literature in liberty. A wish for “purification” haunted the literati, and not only the literati. Religious metaphors were everywhere. What *Romania Literara* called “those who... will profit from liberty,” my friends called “*de-azi de dimineata*,” or “born this morning.” We watched on television how, one after another, officials of the old regime declared their loyalty to the Revolution. They had been born that morning, purified, completely different, free. One of my high-school chums in Sibiu told me that my books — which I’d sent him over the years without a response — had been proudly displayed in his house. “Yeah,” said his wife, “under the linen at the back of the closet.”

When I visited the Writers’ Union, which is the official publisher of *Romania Literara*, the Revolution was being loudly improvised by a number of writers going in and out of Mircea Dinescu’s office. Dinescu, under house arrest until December 22, had announced the downfall of the Ceaușescu on television. Ana Blandiana, who had herself announced the passing of the old regime on radio, was there, complaining of the large number of Ceaușescu loyalists who were walking about unmolested.

Dinescu and Blandiana’s subsequent political careers were interesting. After a brief time of glorification, they were vilified by both friends and foes during the extraordinary political and social fragmentation that followed the Revolution. Many splendid writers became political polemicists and activists during the next five years. Blandiana was courted by several interests for the presidency. The Civic Alliance Party, headed by literary critic — and *Romania Literara* editor — Nicolae Manolescu, was devastated by a split caused by Blandiana. Dinescu’s checkered career was even more controversial, but it did not diminish his pamphleteering virulence. Most of the *littérateurs*’ polemical work, as well as the political ambitions accompanying them, came to naught. The true politicians, mostly reform communists with jobs in the Ceaușescu regime, encouraged fragmentation and hysteria, using the new “freedom of speech” to create a wall of impenetrable noise behind which they continued to hold on to power.

A poem by Dinescu appears on the front page of *Romania Literara*, no. 52, year 22. Haplea, the character in Dinescu’s poem, is

a destructive folk demon who is clearly Ceasecu. Haplea breathlessly swallows church bells and lays waste to the land with his "mechanical tongue." The poem laments the fate of the Wallachian land, which since time began has been subject to destruction by anyone who passes through it. After three autumns, the poet warns, the windows will fall off your Wallachian house, and various barbarians will trample on your garden. Leading them will be our own Haplea, who is a traitor as well as a tyrant. "Haplea" is a beautiful, untranslatable poem, reminiscent of Ion Barbu's hermetic dialect poems. The list of barbarians is a litany of made-up words: "*vin cumanii si pecenegii / si gugumanii si viceregii / si-n fruntea ostii saltind buricu / Haplea al nostru cu polonicu.*"

Haplea seemed to be gone. But wasn't Haplea what happened to Romanians over and over? Lamenting an absurd history was Dinescu's, and much of Romanian poetry's, chief theme. Changing from lament to celebration would seem to have called for a whole new kind of poet. And a new language. And a new beginning. And all those new things had already been done, under coercion, by Communists.

On page 2 of *Romania Literara*, in the upper left-hand corner, there is a feature called "Digest From Journals." Quoted here are passages from various new or renamed Romanian journals. But under each passage, in bold type, there are comments by the linotypist who set the text. We are told in a footnote that "the interpolated text belongs to Linotypist Gh. Popa, and we retained it." Most of the "digests" are snippets of emotional homages to the dead martyrs of the Revolution, and most of Linotypist Popa's comments are supportive. For instance, one of the "digested" journals is quoted as claiming that "the new generation is the sacrificial flower from which the new Romania was born." Linotypist Popa notes: "A new Romania was born!"

But in one case, quotation and linotypist are at odds. "Each one of our gestures should continue the supreme gestures of those who fell for the existence with dignity of the Romanian nation, while fighting the devil Ceasecu," reads the "digest." Linotypist Popa adds a slogan from the Revolution: "*Ole, ole, ceasecu nu mai e!*" (Ole, ole, no more ceasecu!) He spells Ceasecu with a lowercase *c*, and adds, "As one printer

oppressed by the monster, I beg you, do not ever write his name again with a capital letter in your review."

This plea actually gained support in the next week or so, and several newspapers, following the suggestion of Linotypist Popa, began spelling Ceaușescu with a lowercase *c*. Once more, the nation was embroiled in a dispute over a single letter. (*Lettrisme*, the poetic movement based on the importance of single letters, was founded by Isidore Isou, a Romanian Jew. Of course, he founded it in France in French like any proper Romanian radical.) Eventually, cooler heads prevailed by pointing out that by making Ceaușescu a lowercase noun, his monstrosity would actually become smaller than it was. Hidden in Linotypist Popa's proposal, however, was another suggestion, namely that by clearly marking the devil in this startling manner everyone else would be absolved from guilt and responsibility. To this day, Romanian officials still blame only Ceaușescu for the terrible years of the dictatorship.

Under the heading "Life and Literature," *Romania Literara* no. 52, year 22 reproduces the important "Motion of the Provisional Committee of the National Salvation Front on the Editorial System." This committee, composed of many editors, calls for the abolition of the so-called Cultural Council, which had dictated editorial policy; the abolition of censorship in all forms; the depoliticization and deideologization of editorial activities; the development of new editorial plans corresponding to the true needs and necessities of Romanian culture; the reprinting of all the books rejected by censorship; and autonomy. This motion is followed by the election of various provisional committees, composed for the most part of former dissidents and writers known for their integrity.

This particular action, together with the numerous laws and decrees passed in the first week after the Revolution, was bound to alter profoundly the course of Romanian culture. But how?

The last page of *Romania Literara* contains an interview with the French philosopher André Glucksmann, who came to Bucharest on December 25, 1989. "Why are you in Romania?" asks Gabriel Liiceanu, the interviewer. "Because something I never believed possible happened here, namely the almost instantaneous collapse of a structure I have criticized in nearly a dozen books."

It's a funny answer. Glucksmann has come to witness something in his books. He is a Westerner, and an outsider, but his self-absorption is prophetic. The sudden freedom of writing without the enemy has not paralyzed Romanian writers, but, rather, has set in motion a radical doubt about "authenticity" in a future where the tests of it are as yet quite unimaginable. If anything, the sudden lack of an official enemy has opened dammed-up rivers of talk in everyone.

The problem of writing without an enemy turns out not to be one of not knowing how or what to write, but one of maintaining enough silence for what is called "authentic" to be heard. If in Ceaușescu's "golden age" critics were needed to give definition to the whispers barely heard in the general silence, in postrevolutionary Romania their job might be to lower the decibels so that something might come through.

III. Where Have All the Jokes in Eastern Europe Gone?

Moments before the end of glasnost, an old Jewish man asks the Soviet border guard for a globe to see where he should go. After he studies it for a long time, he returns it and asks, "Do you have another globe?" The strange thing about this joke is that although it tastes, feels, and looks like a Jewish joke, it's not a Jewish joke. It's a hopeful joke. While it appears to express the weary wisdom that every country is a mess just like the USSR, it also contains the optimistic reverse, which is that, finally, the USSR has become a place like every other, a modern mess identical to the mess of the West. This is the last Soviet joke. Two years later, no one given a globe to choose from, especially a Jew, would ever think twice before pointing to *any* country in the West to immigrate to.

An old Romanian Communist, a Gorbachevian reformer, and one of the masterminds of the coup that overthrew Ceaușescu, Silviu Brucan told a *New York Times* reporter in the early eighties that the first consequence of the collapse of the dictatorship would be the emptying of the country. Everybody was going to leave. At the time, this was a joke. In 1995, there is nothing funny about it. Anybody able to get the ticket money and a visa is leaving. This isn't just a brain drain, it's a pouring of the whole body out of itself, a kind of epic migration that hasn't

reached sixth-century nomadic dimensions only because the West has panicked, and because, in smaller measure, nationalists are providing a number of sentimental reasons for staying glued to one's defoliated, toxically corroded native soil.

Literature, before the Wall, was a lot more globalized than it is after the Wall. The literary imagination is now almost entirely localized, nay, *paralyzed* by local conditions. The failed utopia was both faux-global and truly global, both imaginary dimensions, to be sure, but a *shared* imagination. While the imagination of writers is compelled to locality, the imagination of plain citizens is straining to emigrate, i.e., become universal.

The history of the last forty years in Eastern Europe, from Marxism to Groucho-Marxism, can be told in jokes. It is an extremely primitive history, almost a no-history, resembling a simple organism with about three bones. It is quite amazing, given such a history's lack of complexity, that armies of Western experts spent decades sifting with lice combs through Politburo speeches and opiated economic reports. They could have saved a heap of time by knowing that Krushchev left three unopened envelopes for his successors. Inside the first was written, "Relax censorship. Declare amnesty. When this stops working, open the second envelope." In the second envelope it said, "Borrow from the capitalists. Close your eyes to the black market. When this stops working, open the third envelope." Inside the third envelope was this: "Write three messages for your successor. Seal the envelopes."

At the height of the Stalinist terror, at the political joke contest, there were three prizes: third prize—a hundred rubles; second prize—five hundred rubles; first prize—ten years of hard labor. This political joke contest was the same everywhere in the ex-Soviet dystopia with few local specifics. In that sense, the equalitarian ideal was first realized not on the economic or social level but in the amusement zone. The universality of the political joke achieved what the serious ideologues could only dream of: the universal recognition of a common *something*. That "something" turned out to be Misery. During Stalinism, a joke could have swift consequences: the release of the punch line was followed by the incarceration of the punster. Every joke during those days had, in effect, only one punch line: the Gulag. I have no firsthand knowledge of anyone incarcerated for a joke

because I wasn't old enough to go to prison until after the punsters were amnestied, but the experience must have made instant philosophers out of the victims. The Gulag must have contained thousands of Kierkegaards. The universal content of the ex-Soviet political joke did not diminish after the end of Stalinism, but the distribution improved as the punishments lessened. By the mid-sixties the secret police became a kind of center for the dissemination of jokes: they avidly collected and spread them. It became evident after Krushchev de-Stalinized the political waters that jokes had no authors. You couldn't imprison someone for having an antenna. A single source for such jokes could not be found: the political jokes were the creation of the collective mind, as spontaneous as wind-borne spores, everywhere and nowhere at once. On the surface of the still waters of state socialism, the jokes bred like mosquitoes, taking off in swarms to keep the overheated bureaucrats awake at siesta time.

By the mid-1960s, life itself became a joke in Eastern Europe, or, at least, there was no other modality to express it. The Joke became the quintessential form of truth-telling, and it had to be capitalized, as Milan Kundera finally did in the novel *The Joke*. In addition to the joke's time-honored parabolic, satirical, and pedagogical functions, there was an added existential/eschatological dimension that included everything. The Joke metamorphosed to become total. The inhabitants of the interior of the Joke reflected it in myriad ways. They laughed to death, and others laughed and died watching them. Laughter became a rictus that disfigured the faces of the citizenry as it lived, wallowed, and died in the Joke. By 1968, the state itself was the chief producer of a generalized Joke that held the place previously reserved for the sentimental platitudes of ideology. Stalinism had attempted—and failed—to oppose heroic, romantic, socialist-realist sentiments to jokes.

But it failed only with adults. While fear made grown-ups pretend to be impressed by utopian verbal and granite statuary, children were *truly* impressed. The Young Pioneers, to which I belonged, were the only ones capable of envisioning a nonjocular existence and, say what they will, we were irrevocably awed by Stalinism. It impressed itself on our souls. A Stalinist core of seriousness was planted in us at an age when we were full of

generalized faith. I remember standing bare-kneed in the dewy morning of our pioneer camp with my hand to my temple, promising, "In the name of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Gheorghiu-Dej, Forward!" — a tongue twister that left some of the verbally impaired gasping for air. In that rarefied air from which most of our fathers had vanished to labor camps, we could behold the face of Stalin, our true and only father, his kind mustache dipping downward to nestle us between its comforting parentheses. By the time Stalin died, it was too late for us to be de-Stalinized. A tiny Stalin waved his arms in a tiny amphitheater built specifically for him in our hearts.

In the years to come, our consequent disappointment was the result of an internal argument with the facts of daily life that bashed themselves against this utopian rock with waving arms. The Joke of life in the 1960s was fiercer and more grotesque for the resistance it encountered as it battered itself against our Young Pioneer hearts.

Milan Kundera's novel *The Joke* follows the Joke in one of its most familiar guises: simulation of the real. Everything in his mid-sixties Prague is a simulation. Folkloric "ensembles" imitate folklore. Communist Party members imitate Western capitalist fashions. Young Czech kids imitate what they imagine to be young American kids. Imitation extends to emotional life, where everyone is caught in a whirl of simulations of feelings. The lies have become so generalized it is impossible to remember the truth. The truth, of course, has been relativized by earlier imitations and is now without expression.

In Romania, the Joke, under Ceaușescu, didn't become total because his brand of national-socialism, while kitsch in the extreme, actually seduced both some people who knew better and the idiot masses, which, not necessarily idiotic in small numbers, become rhinocerized *en masse*. In small numbers, Romanians have a wicked, self-deprecating humor that is full of common sense, even in ethnic jokes. When Itzak and Shmuel decide to escape from Romania by covering themselves with a cow skin and pretending to be a cow peacefully grazing at the border, it is not the border guards who get them. Itzak, spying from underneath the tail, screams in terror. "The border guards?" shouts Shmuel. "No, stupid! The bull!" So — Romanians do not question anybody's desire to leave. Nor do they have

much respect for the police. But the bull, that's another story! Toro, the bull, Mithra, is the spirit of the land incarnate. You can defy temporal authority, but watch out for this bull! The Ceaușescu brand of nationalism did what it could to incite this unquestionable and aroused national bull to attack the minorities living in the country. Jews, Gypsies, Hungarians, Germans — all were under the shadow of this horny bull. When at last, after Ceaușescu's downfall, this bull escaped its Joke, there was nothing funny about it.

The kitsch of Czech folkloric assemblages was not entirely jocular for us because the Romanian nationalist bull was still real to many people of the prewar generation. Romanian fascism, while as crude as all the rest of fascisms, was more green than brown, and the smell of bull was strong and unfunny. That is, there was an added unfunniness to the basic unfunniness of fascism that is axiomatically suicidal and thus incapable of bearing the paradox of suffering with either grace or humor. The suicidal fascists of Romania were encouraged throughout the 1970s and 1980s to resurface their deadly brown myths. It is this brown, an ecological longing really, that seduced some of the younger generation in the Ceaușescu era. The mutterings of the pious cadaver of national fascism found some willing receptors in the smothered utopian cores of our Young Pioneers. We had taken our oaths in the woods, but the woods were quickly being smothered by industry. The idealized peasant life was being destroyed by rapid industrialization. It is not surprising that one of the first new political parties formed after 1989 was the Romanian Ecological Party, and it is not surprising that after a brief period of resembling its Western counterparts, the Romanian Ecological Party made an alliance with the right-wing nationalists. Their slogan, "A clean man in a clean country in a clean world," was ready-made for that merging. So much cleanliness gave me the creeps right from the start. "Ethnic cleansing" wasn't far behind. The deconstruction of jokes began under the nationalist policies of Ceaușescu. Their disappearance in post-communism is the end of that process.

For Kundera, the real and the real-sounding were complete and perfect opposites. He believed that a discerning, or merely awake, person would be capable of telling the difference, though he acknowledged that it was a difficult operation. In the

capitalist West, where imitations are done in plastic, the job of telling them apart has already become impossible. But in the East, where the technology of propaganda was still based on crude, slow, and laborious substitutions, an intelligent person could, at times, intuit the genuine. One means of expressing such intuition was to have a knack for metaphors that matter. Kundera's "laughter and forgetting," "lightness and heaviness" are of this order. Using "laughter and forgetting," Kundera was able to create a phenomenal critique of memory that held within it, amazingly, the potential for a certain sobriety, and, for the more ambitious, the possibility of mnemonic demiurgy. He pointed to the exact places in his own memory where the real was replaced by the simulacra, which was also the place where the generative, creative urge is located. This is also the place where jokes originate. The paradox of remembering and inventing, being located at the same place, is a nifty one, probably unavailable to most people, who use memory as a springboard for murderous indignation rather than an occasion for improvisation. Nonetheless, people had jokes to sustain them in paradox. Without jokes, it will not be possible for most people to live in the new postcommunist Europe, which, so far, has shown us only the grim face of its outraged memory. Without a good joke, there is little hope.

Having come to artistic maturity at about the time of the Prague Spring in 1968 and then gone into exile in the 1970s, Kundera had to remake himself in order to continue. In order to write, he had to remember, but in order to be, he had to forget. What to forget and what to remember? It is a tension peculiar to exile, but it is also a common human predicament. In the West, where we are faced with the catastrophic loss of memory brought about by *industreality*, we are daily compelled to forget even the immediate past by the collage style of the mass media. Living in a continual forgetting (an active act), we can only face forward, in a kind of parody of the communist goal that always bids the masses to step "forward." Progress is the act of forgetting. In the East, where progress was the State god, history was rewritten to fit its heroic and jocular demands, so remembering was a point of honor. How Eastern Europeans remember turns out to be the crucial means of understanding them now. But what is the point (and indeed, the strength) of that honor when

the honorable person doesn't live in the familiar communist Joke anymore, but in a postmodern Elsewhere where forgetting is such sweet narcotic?

"Is it true," a reporter asks Ceaușescu in the spring of 1989, "that your people are freezing from lack of heat?" "Yes," Ceaușescu replies, "but nobody died from that." "Is it true," insists the reporter, "that there is no food and everyone is starving?" "It is true," Ceaușescu says, "but nobody ever died from it." The astonished interviewer throws up his hands. "Have you tried cyanide?" he asks.

Next to Ceaușescu himself, his wife, Elena, was the most hated person in the country. It appears that, at long last, a citizen obtained a gun and tried to kill the dictator at a mass rally. But he missed. "How could you possibly miss?" asks the colonel in charge of torturing him. "It was the crowd," the man says, "they kept shoving me this and that way: shoot him, shoot her..."

These were possibly the last jokes told about the Ceaușescus. It was as if even the jokes had run out of anything but the crude fantasy of revenge. In the end, Ceaușescu did try cyanide on his own people—his security forces were said to have poisoned the water in Sibiu—and he would have taken the country with him if he'd been able to occupy the country's only nuclear plant. And the citizen-assassin, who in November had been only a character in a joke, became only too real in December when he and his friends pumped a great number of bullets into the tyrants' bodies.

Today, the Ceaușescus' gravesite is a place of pilgrimage. People leave flowers on it every day, and claim, without a trace of irony, that things were much better when the tyrants were in charge. These people undoubtedly told Ceaușescu jokes before their deaths. What they are lamenting is not really the Ceaușescus but the disappearance of the jokes that made their own lives bearable. They are laying flowers on the grave of the Joke.

If political jokes were once cartoons derived from reality, they have now become grimly real. But they are not jokes anymore. Life in Eastern Europe is still a joke, but, paradoxically, it is a joke without humor.

There is a Soviet film that explains how this situation came about. It is called *The Fountain*, and it was made by Yuri Mamin moments before the suicide of Communism in the Soviet Union,

probably at the exact moment that the old Jew returned the globe. It is about the fates of a Moscow apartment building and its inhabitants throughout successive changes of political philosophy.

Romanian reality was a clone of Soviet reality for four decades. We lived in the same apartment building, spoke the same artificial pseudolanguages, and were seized by the same profound sense of the absurd. We all lived in Mamin's building, a communal apartment house in Moscow big enough to accommodate all of us now grubbing in the ruins of the Grand Experiment. *The Fountain* is a metaphor about community in several of its guises: precommunity (the nomad tribe), faux-community (several of these, corresponding to different Soviet leaders' revisions of the communal ideal), and, finally, postcommunity (which resembles Marx's "primitive Communism," from which a supposedly rational Communism was going to arise—and did—into faux-community.) Of all of these, only the nomad community makes any sense because life at the end of communism is based strictly on survival, in this case Water.

There was a pure spring tended by an Orthodox monk at a hermitage in the woods in the mountains of Transylvania when I went there in July 1990. The monk looked 1,000 years old and he'd written in old-fashioned script on a yellowing piece of cardboard tacked over the spring: *God's water, Drink and Be Blessed*. The guy who took me there was an old high-school buddy of mine who was secretly paying to have the fountain restored. Secretly, because he was the regional Communist Party secretary. His secret was his way of saving his soul. In his official capacity, he would have had to order the spring shut down.

In Yuri Mamin's film, two stupid truck drivers destroy the entire ecology of a desert community by blowing up its water source. The two vandals are not ideologues, they are just in a hurry and the water fountain is in their way. By the time they show up in this desert (in the waning hours of Bolshevism), the ideological source of their impatience and callousness has been completely obscured. They have no souls, let alone a plan for saving them. Nobody orders them to do anything. They are the perfect embodiment of the "new Soviet man," a creature with-

out tribal memory, without respect, shortsighted and shallow. If they have an imperative, it is to get their truck across.

Shutting down the fountain of the peoples' beginnings is the source of all the subsequent troubles. The ecology of survival was based on the wise management of memory and necessity. Without the fountain, the old man, who must leave the desert to live with his daughter's family in Moscow, has lost his *raison d'être*. He still has his values, however, and when he inserts them into the communal apartment building of the big city where he gets control of the community's water, he acts accordingly. He shuts out the water in the basement in protest, and no one can dislodge him from there. In the end, he does re-create a tribe through his management of water, but it's a sad and ridiculous tribe of urban dwellers who know very little about tribal living. In the end also, Yuri Mamin's parable seems to sadly conclude that only a strong, authoritarian stupidity taken to its most extreme logical denouement can make a community out of people de-Communized by Communists.

The decline and fall of community have a jocular-metaphorical parallel in hair. All the old-style communists in Mamin's film have whiskers. But from Stalin's downward-pointing yet somehow oddly comforting mustache and the sideburns and mops of early Bolsheviks, to Gorbachev's smooth bald surfaces, there is a gradual loss of hair. As Communism began to wane, the heroic hair of the early founders was replaced by baldness (boldness by baldness) until we arrive in the defoliated present of glasnost—Gorbachev, the cleanest-shaven man in Russian history. He was like the earth around industrial sites where all the grass was gone, burned out by Five-Year Plan after Five-Year Plan.

The hair-shedding wasteland of Soviet society teemed with bankrupt word-slingers, from the small party fry with their shopworn slogans to poets waxing grandly under the toxic moon. (Mamin does to poets in *The Fountain* what Milan Kundera does to them in his novel *Life is Elsewhere*: holds them responsible for romanticizing terror while ridiculing them). Shouting in mutually incomprehensible tongues at each other, the people of pre-collapsed Communism have had even the most basic communal tool removed: verbal communication.

This too was a gradual process. In my childhood, I remember looking at the front page of *Scinteia* — the Romanian *Pravda* —

and falling asleep. It was pure narcolepsy. All those recurring meaningless words held us hypnotized for years. Anything was preferable, especially jokes, even if telling them meant going to prison. But in the mid-1960s we believed that the words of the poets might wake us. They didn't because the poets could not, in the end, bear the burden of a political opposition on their own, and because they spoke obliquely, metaphorically. Some of them fell also into the trap of nationalism with its easy sentimentality and heroic posturing, which resembled, more than anything else, bad Stalinist art. These poets are now highly regarded in Romania by the ex-Communists turned nationalists because they do what bad poets have always done: tug at heart-strings in the service of their patrons.

In Mamin's film, the worshippers of an ancient poet gather about the dried-flower shrine of his verses. These nostalgic and humorless keepers of the Russian Orthodox flame were very much like the nationalist poetry society in my hometown whose meetings I occasionally attended. Our poetry society worshipped Octavian Goga, a fiery and facile Transylvanian who was a minister of state under two right-wing regimes. We read his poetry in a cold-water flat, were driven to rapture reciting his verses, and ended up singing nationalist songs fueled by *tzuica*—our vodka—until everyone passed out. I enjoyed these orgies partly because they were forbidden and that thrilled me, and partly because I used to steal old books of poetry, unavailable elsewhere, from our besotted host's apartment. Today, the Romanian national sentimentalists are having a huge revival just like Pamyat is in the USSR. In Mamin's film, the epigones of the old poet worship the rotten wallpaper on which he'd scribbled while dying. It's an appropriate metaphor: nothing is left except the general rot of the apartment and society's crumbling walls, but the poetic wallpaper is sufficient to inspire the sorry inhabitants to murder in the name of sentiment.

In Mamin's world, poetry is no palliative, although words are regarded reverently by everyone. The already irrelevant Party official believes that the trouble with everything is the lack of a wall gazette and fresh slogans; he is nostalgic for the Brezhnev utopia, which was: Communism is correct slogans! (A little like Gerald Ford's WIN campaign, a button bearing the words "Whip Inflation Now," or "Say No to Drugs.") In a last-ditch

attempt to maintain the authority of the word, a World War II veteran in the movie goes to turn his family in to the police for running an illegal flower-growing business in their apartment. He arrives at the police station all decked out in World War II medals, but no one listens to him. No one is listening any longer to *anything*. The old man prays to Mecca in front of the refrigerator (because it faces East), while in the living room a theater director holds forth on how "the theater is a fascist place." The two discourses mix in a paste: all the buzzwords, "Mecca," "Fascism," etc. have lost meaning. In their stead arises a kind of buzz, an *ur*-paste of language.

One of the film's major metaphors is translation, or, rather, the impossibility of it. The daughter translates things for the old man that make no sense to him no matter how faithfully she renders the words. The elder wails away on his banjo under a portrait of Hemingway. The family is surrounded by mutually incomprehensible yet perfectly comprehensible and ultimately incomprehensible speeches and slogans. We are witnessing a spectacular failure of communication, a Babel beyond Babel. As the roof, the attic, and the basement of the apartment house collapse, the humans within are mirroring the collapse in language. The last reality is unreality. "You'll never see yourself on TV because you're such an idiot," is one of the film's grand lines, and it epitomizes and probably prophesies the future in that the last place of certainty left is television, the screen of pure illusion. Yuri Mamin pays an ironic and backhanded self-conscious homage to his own medium here. There is no salvation in this parable and fairy tale either, he tells us. *Enivrez-vous*.

There is a voting scene that shuts the last door left, the possibility that people used to mind-numbing conformism can learn how to be free. Not a chance.

The new capitalists aren't spared by Yuri Mamin either. The flower-grower trying to create a market economy all by himself is dependent on the water controlled by the insane old man. What's more, he's trying to grow *flowers*, the most pathetically tender product imaginable, dependent on vagaries of so many kinds it is a doomed enterprise no matter how much luck he has. Again, the metaphor is flawless. You can no more grow flowers in a waterless cold apartment building than you can fly off the building into sublimely bad music. All of these people are

cursed by what they have collectively made, and they cannot pull away individually from the shithouse. Either they all go down together or they go down together. There is no exit—and this movie is probably late Communism's master existentialist critique. Interestingly enough, Mamin thinks like a social determinist; he is clearly educated by Marxism. The collectivity Communism sought to create *is* a collectivity, but it is hell. Utopia turns out to be hell and it is a collective hell. In that sense, there is a kind of endearing familiarity, affection almost, for this world, which is the only one Mamin says these people will ever know. We have made our bed and now we lie in it.

The new tribalism of postglasnost society is the very opposite of materialism. All materials have disappeared. The material world has thinned out completely, resources have been squandered, any semblance of ecological balance between people and environment is gone. In the end, even the guys holding up the roof cannot be fooled into helping what's obviously doomed. They are bribed with alcohol to do so, and in terms of currency, vodka has replaced slogans. The slogans themselves, in one of the most touching motifs in the movie, have been retired and aren't even good for patching holes. In fact, every hopeful illusion—or even hopeful language—in Mamin's world is utterly false. We are in the presence of a new and intensified radical doubt.

The editor of a Romanian humor magazine, Mr. Ioan Morar, came to visit me in New Orleans around Mardi Gras. I asked him what happened to all the jokes that people used to tell before the fall of Communism. Before 1989, people used to live on jokes. There wasn't anything else. Now people scream, swear, weep over stupid nationalist songs, and beat each other up. They don't tell jokes.

Mr. Morar said that it was true, jokes had disappeared, but that Romanians had other venues for political humor now: satirical-political magazines like his own, stand-up comics, and musical comedy revues that played to sold-out crowds.

I pointed out that these things were OK, but that they were rather highbrow affairs, while jokes are for everyone. I kept thinking about this phenomenon later, while we watched a Mardi Gras parade. Mr. Morar enjoyed the carnival immensely: he jumped up and down like a kid when floats went by. But

when the Navy bands and the ROTC drill teams appeared, he drew back with a worried expression on his face. I reassured him that these military types were not out to harm us. Some of them, in fact, had beads and feathers on their rifles. I don't know if my explanation satisfied him, but I had an inkling of why there may be no more jokes in Eastern Europe. On the one hand, everybody still jumps up and down ever being rid of tyrants. On the other, the uniforms keep marching by. At least during the familiar misery of the past, the rifles were within constant view. But this odd alternation of clowns and rifles, exaltation and anxiety, this is too unsettling for jokes. Jokes need stability.

It is said that if you are Romanian, you can be born either in a city or in the country. If you are born in the city, that's fine. If you are born in the country, there are two possibilities. You can stay home and die of hunger or you can enlist in the army. If you stay home and die of hunger, that's fine. If you enlist in the army, there are two possibilities. You could get a job behind a desk or you could be sent to the front. If you get a desk job, that's fine. If you get sent to the front, there are two possibilities. You could be wounded or you could be killed. If you get wounded, that's fine. If you get killed, there are two possibilities. You could be thrown into a common grave, or you could get your own. If you get your own, that's fine. If you get thrown into a common grave, there are two possibilities. A tree will grow out of you, or nothing will. If a tree grows out of you, that's fine. If nothing grows—etc.

People told this joke waiting in line for food during the dictatorship. The idea was to see how many possibilities you could discover until you got to the front of the line. There was usually nothing when you got there—but that was distinctly one of the possibilities. Of course, death meant nothing to the realm of possibilities, and Romanians, in particular, have highly developed myths to deal with the contingency of death. The bread line had another function in my day. My mother used to wake me up at five in the morning to go stand in the line. When I got back, she didn't ask me first whether I got the bread or the milk. She asked me what I'd heard in the line. That line was our true newspaper: that's where we heard the gossip, the rumors, and the jokes. The food was secondary in importance to the telegraph that broadcast the real news of our community.

Today, the lines are still long if not longer. But the kind of news that used to feed us can be found in the newspapers. The jokes have given way to what they had been containing all along: anger at the continuing misery. Jokes used to find their culprits in the absurd gap between ideology and some kind of decency. Today's culprits are not to be found in the absurdities of the ideology but rather in the archetypal scapegoats of the pre-Communist era: Jews, Gypsies, Americans, foreign capital, speculators, etc. Salvation, once thought possible only through Western intervention, has now returned to its proper mystical ground, and found its language in the moldering wallpaper of nationalist poetry.

Jokes belong to a more benign era, one in which imagination was both universal and *shared*. Now that the wall is gone, all imagination strains to understand the extraordinarily unimagi-native, prosaic, ultrarealist, and forcibly localized moment. There is nothing funny about it.

Prologue

When the Berlin Wall finally came down, the meaning of its collapse was more than ambiguous. Of course, for a little less than ten minutes, there was no ambiguity. In the euphoria of the actual physical event, it was generally believed that freedom had come to the so-called Soviet Empire and that the people of those regions could now aspire to Western standards of prosperity, which would be brought about by the so-called free market, with attendant democracy.

This is not what happened. The Berlin Wall, like a mythical dragon, spawned a thousand little walls that are growing as we speak. First of all, the released inmates of the ex-Soviet zone were startled to find themselves unwelcome on the other side of the Wall. The cargo cult that sprang up in 1989 soon gave way to a disappointed nationalism. On the Western side of the Wall, the sudden appearance of real people from behind the veil of ideology caused a panic that also blossomed quickly into xenophobic nationalism. Nationalism is the ideology of the tribal wall—the inner side of this wall is constructed of the sentimental kitsch of a dubious history while the outer bristles with implacable hate for the neighboring nationals, busy building their own wall. The

history of the past five years is the history of the hasty erection of a variety of walls to contain the breach of the Berlin Wall.

At the beginning of 1994, Germany deported back to Eastern Europe hundreds of thousands of immigrants—mostly Gypsies—by making all kinds of cash deals with governments such as Romania where the returning deportees are sure to face persecution. No one dreamed in 1989 that the words “Germany,” “Gypsies,” and “deportation” would ever be used in the same sentence again. The “unknown Holocaust,” as it has been called, of Gypsies at the hands of Germans in World War II has been nearly forgotten. Gypsies, like the Jews, were marked for extermination by the Germans, who deported them to concentration camps in the East. Today, the German government does not use cattle wagons but deutsche marks to deport its undesirables. One further irony worthy of note: In the mid-1960s, Germany bought freedom for German speakers in Romania by paying as much as \$4,000 a person to the Communist government. Today, it is paying considerably less to throw non-Germans out of its territory. The price of freedom is, apparently, set by something other than democratic ideals.

Let us see what other freedoms were unleashed by the destruction of the Berlin Wall. The freedom to travel was once a much sought after privilege by the citizens of the red zone. The prohibitive cost of such desire in the post-totalitarian economies has made such freedom merely theoretical. One can argue, as the Germans, Europeans, and Americans do, that these peoples’ desire to travel is merely a disguise for running away from their countries. Visas have thus become more difficult to obtain and the obstacle to freedom of travel comes now, ironically, from Western countries. Before 1989, travel within the disappeared empire was fairly uncomplicated. But try to travel now between Belgrade and Sarajevo, for instance, or between Moscow and Tbilisi. Walls? Ideology? We are in the presence of new conditions.

And let’s take freedom of speech, another cherished notion of pre-1989, which rallied the intellectuals of the world. Today, in Romania, anyone is free to say anything. And Anyone does. Anyone has been speaking—torrents of speech, rivers of language. The vulgate has been unleashed in a din that makes rock ‘n’ roll sound like chamber music. Pornography, astrology, fas-

cist propaganda, scandal gossip, all the freedoms of speech that have so effectively narcotized us here in the West have flooded the hitherto silent zones. The fine writers who have been the very ones to call for freedom of speech are now lamenting the fact that no one reads them any longer. Many of them have become shockingly aware of the irony of their position: they have been the very instruments of their own obsolescence. Their power, which had been extraordinary in the days of censorship, has borne a variety of philosophical fruit, some of which has been distinctly poisonous. Take the concept of Central Europe, advanced by Konrad and Kundera among others. This mythic Central Europe that looked nostalgically back to the Austro-Hungarian Empire has now *become* the Austro-Hungarian — or perhaps the German Empire — with all the attendant nationalist tensions of that entity. Left out of Central Europe, behind an invisible wall of so-called culture were countries like Romania, Bulgaria, and Russia. But as we look at recent developments, it is not hard to see that decades of red fascism have caused the same human and cultural problems in *all* the countries under Soviet control, indifferent of their position on the map or their history. The fiction of Central Europe is hardly maintainable in these circumstances. One can find a further irony in the contradiction between a novelist's powers of observation and his philosophical posturing, if one wishes. There is no shortage of ironies.

This period bears the name Transition. Transition is a phenomenon said to last anywhere between one and three generations. During this time Eastern Europe will be absorbed into a unified Europe, and that Europe itself will be part of the United Nations of the World. The notion of Transition resembles more than anything the notion of Purgatory, introduced in the Middle Ages by the Church in order to do business in indulgences and forgiveness. Everyone gets to heaven eventually if they pay the price. The length of one's stay in Purgatory varies according to one's ability to sacrifice. Well, the nationalists are ready to sacrifice everything: they want to go to Hell or to Heaven, whichever comes first, in a burst of fire. Therapeutic *götterdämmerung*.

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