

Writing the Self in Search of Cultural Identity: Gelu Vlaşin, Marin Sorescu, and Don Quixote

By Christene D’Anca

Literature is dangerous. It has the power to simultaneously reflect, refract, deflect, and subsequently distort reality. Moreover, just as literature can be a portal to another everything, writing can be a means of creating the self. Yet, finding one’s identity within literature, whether through reading or writing, can be as challenging and tiresome a task as finding one’s life book in Borgia’s infinite library.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Don Quixote, the eternal wanderer, from his inception by Miguel de Cervantes to the myriad authors who have appropriated his character in works across genres for hundreds of years, has time and again embodied the human desire for self-creation through literary works.<sup>2</sup> His disenchantment with the world around him is resolved by his ability to draw from books the necessary imagery and characters with which to repopulate his otherwise undesirable surroundings. However, comedy shortly ensues as he behaves anachronistically and thus inappropriately in society, which earns him a certain amount of censorship, and moreover helps draw attention towards all that is wrong not just within the world he lives in, but also with the one inhabited by the reader.

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<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Francis Beaumont, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (N. O. Fox, 1635); Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Penguin Classics, 2003); Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Penguin Classics, 2006); Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. Constance Garnett (Bantam Classics, 1983); Franz Kafka, “The Truth About Sancho Panza” in *The Great Wall of China: Stories and Reflections* (Schocken Books, 1946); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (Pantheon, 1970); Salman Rushdie, *Quichotte* (Penguin Books, 2019). This list is by no means exhaustive, but clearly demonstrates the reach of Quixote’s influence.

Through Quixote's satirical, even farcical undertakings, Cervantes creates a larger underlying social commentary and critique perfectly suitable for modern adaptation, along with a titular character who acts as a palimpsest onto which future authors may construct themselves. In other words, Don Quixote and his antics speak to those trying to find, recreate, or redefine their own identities amidst their own bleak realities that do not offer a means for such expression, and additionally attempt to stifle it. Not surprisingly, Quixote has, in recent decades, become an iconographic figure for a large number of Romanian authors who have in many ways appropriated or explored his quest in their respective attempts at making sense of their own lives during and in the aftermath of communism.<sup>3</sup>

Such was the case of Gelu Vlaşin and Marin Sorescu whose creative styles and approaches dovetail even as their narratives do not. Nevertheless, these two authors represent two of the most prominent generations of current Romanian culture, those who lived through communism in different times, and either remained until the end, or physically left, but could not escape its memories. I argue that Quixote was invoked by both these authors to serve the double purpose of drawing parallels between themselves and Cervantes in their quest to underscore the ironies of their particular milieus, and further, to do so with a similar comical, almost ludic aplomb. While Don Quixote only features within a small selection of their works, the ideology inherent in his existence—and everything he represents—is threaded through their respective

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<sup>3</sup> Cristina Petrescu, *From Robin Hood to Don Quixote. Resistance and Dissent in Communist Romania* (Editura enciclopedică, 2013); Dragoş Ivana, "The Politics of Genre and Gender in Tabitha Gilman Tenney's Female Quixotism," *Open Cultural Studies* 1.690 (2017) 468-474; Octavian Paler, *Don Quijote în Est* (Editura Polirom, 1994); Lavinia Similaru, "In the Mirror of Sanity," *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity* 5.1 (2017) np; Carmen-Lenuta Sveduneac, "Primele manifestări privind interesul scriitorilor români pentru Cervantes" *Meridian Critic* 27 (2016) 131-139. This list is also by no means exhaustive, but it demonstrates a preoccupation with Don Quixote from a variety of perspectives among Romanian authors.

oeuvres, shaping their careers in ways he had not done for other authors.<sup>4</sup> As he reemerges time and again throughout the works of Vlaşin and Sorescu, sometimes as a character, other times as a fleeting concept, he demonstrates the lingering wont of an author to perpetually recreate the self and to reconstruct reality even with changing circumstances. Tellingly, this has become a methodology employed by modern authors who remain indebted to the adaptations of their forebears, such as Vlaşin and Sorescu, even as they do not necessarily reference Don Quixote explicitly in their works, making it all the more important to understand how and why such subversive tactics emerged in order to evince their existence extrapolated across literature.

The figure of the author, as stated by Roland Barthes, “is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages with English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the Reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more notably put, the ‘human person.’”<sup>5</sup> By rejecting the “Author as God” concept, he blurs the definition of creation, and the author, positioned as scriptor, becomes detached from the text, existing solely to physically produce the material that is to be consumed in a state completely ruptured from any personal affiliation or intentions the author may have had. Such is the case with Don Quixote’s reenactments and delusional roleplay in which he brings to life the characters from his medieval romances in ways their authors had perhaps never envisioned or intended. As his character becomes appropriated for use by others, they further superimpose their own agency, creating a patchwork of layers for the reader to unravel. In this sense, texts cease to exist in the presence of the past as they become read while being “eternally written here and

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<sup>4</sup> An argument can be made for Don Quixote’s importance in the work of Octavian Paler, but Paler was not predominantly a fiction writer, and even within his fiction texts, he invokes a multitude of historic figures with Don Quixote hardly at the center.

<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Art and Interpretation: An Anthology of Readings in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Eric Dayton (Broadview, 1998) 383

now.”<sup>6</sup> Yet as the dynamic changes and the reader becomes a participatory member within the process of creation, it is unclear with whom the reader participates and interacts. Michel Foucault, in “What Is an Author?”<sup>7</sup> conceives this shortcoming inherent in eliminating the author persona, and remedies the gap left by the author through identifying the function of that role. He positions writing as a collective cultural product that evades association with any one figure. In short, Don Quixote becomes a symbol of eternal wandering and a citizen of the world.

Thus, if authorship is questioned, and writing itself becomes a form of death according to Barthes, then the reader who usurps the role of author is thus positioned within a space to witness and transcend death. The hermeneutic activity of reading becomes the ethical area of relegating “the author” to “the other.” Thus, returning to Don Quixote, as he remains author/creator and reader, the distinction becomes highly problematic, but nevertheless a space worth exploring. In other words, as he transcends death through the act of self-recreation and literary interpretation, he never ceases to be relevant or to be a useful conduit for others to explore themselves and their own societies.

### **Gelu Vlaşin: Writing the Self from Abroad, from Afar**

Gelu Vlaşin, when writing *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* [*Don Quixote the Wanderer*] channeled the original Quixote’s desire to take on a society in which he felt misunderstood. Appropriately, Vlaşin’s book was written about his experience living in Spain, where he brings to light the Romanian diaspora throughout Europe. When one is born behind a veil of oppression, such as communist Romania, the other side, the West, becomes romanticized,

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<sup>6</sup> Barthes, “The Death of the Author” 385

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Cornell University Press, 1977) 124-127.

feeding into a myriad of fantasies. The only glimpses into that magical world come from rare and hard to acquire books as well as media that offer a distorted version of the world. Once Vlaşin was afforded the chance of entering that other landscape, he did so fully armed with these learned notions that quickly clashed with the reality of his situation.<sup>8</sup> As Vlaşin traces Don Quijote's trajectory, he interrogates his own, simultaneously positioning himself as a Romanian author, while forging his persona from abroad. Throughout the work, he explores different representations of the self—vacillating between being a foreigner in Spain, resembling a foreigner to his own people in Romania, and trying to shed his foreign status. Each of his personas meets with a certain amount of success, but fails to remain static, shifting with each situation.<sup>9</sup>

Recalling Don Quixote's immortalized fight against the windmills that represent everything wrong with society, Vlaşin's initial naivety drives him to question the ineffectual decision, incredulously asking “de ce morile de vânt?!” [why the windmills?!].<sup>10</sup> The futility of this question resurfaces throughout the text as he discovers that in much the same way as Don Quixote relies on the windmills to fashion himself into a knight, Vlaşin must fight his own metaphorical windmills to maintain his persona as a writer. Even as the windmills transform

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<sup>8</sup> While there were “certain mythological images of the West” that propelled people to desire migration, they were often met with an unanticipated cultural shock upon arrival. However, this was also the case in reverse, upon return. The chasm that was created within the individual was a result of inhabiting and identifying with split cultures; see Roswitha Breckner, “Processes of Re-Constructing Migration Biographies. The Experience of ‘Return’ from the West to the East of Europe after 1989,” in *Theoretical and Methodological Issues in Migration Research: Interdisciplinary, Intergenerational and International Perspectives*, ed. Biko Agozino (Aldershot, Ashgate, 2000) 91-107. Also, Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal, “The problem with identity: Biography as Solution to Some (Post-)Modernist Dilemmas,” *Comenius* 15 (1995) 250-265.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on what it means to be constantly Othered in your own land and abroad, see Breyten Breytenbach, *The Memory of Birds in Times of Revolution* (Human and Rousseau, 1996) 46-48.

<sup>10</sup> Gelu Vlaşin, *Don Quijote răătăcitorul* (Eikon, 2009) 9. All translations in this paper are my own.

from the monsters of Don Quixote's imagination to Vlaşin's bureaucratic reality, they are rendered no less absurd or ridiculous.

After the death of Romania's previous communist leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, Nicolae Ceauşescu initially won popular support by making his version of the regime appear to be far more lenient than the one before. However, the freedom was short-lived, and by 1971 his "Proposed measures for the improvement of political-ideological activity, of the Marxist-Leninist education of Party members, of all working people" speech, typically referred to as the July Theses, not only revoked previous allowances, but further restricted anything even remotely deemed artistic across all media.<sup>11</sup> The directives at first had the appearance of strong suggestions, curbed by the "imposition of themes, censoring of work, and obstacles to publication," but would quickly escalate to imprisonment if an artist or author did not adhere to the initial prescriptions.<sup>12</sup> Independent thought posed a significant threat that needed to be immediately addressed. Par for the course, in the face of other politics and their aesthetics, "communism responds by politicizing art."<sup>13</sup>

Vlaşin, born and raised in Romania during the communist regime, witnessed the consequences of freedom of speech and authors' rights in which authors either had to use their influential voices in service to the government, or not at all. These new stringent rules produced duplicity in the artistic culture that demanded the coexistence of sanctioned and forbidden art, where the former functioned as a cover for the latter. In fact, as opposed to those who earlier

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<sup>11</sup> Dennis Deletant, *Ceausescu and the Securitate, Coercion and Dissent in Romania, 1965-1989* (Hurst & Company, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Ana Maria Cătănuş, "Capitolul IV. Represiunea împotriva intelectualilor: forme și manifestări," in *Intelectuali români în Arhivele Comunismului*, ed. Dan Cătănuş (Nemira, 2006) 168.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Eds. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt. Bloomsbury Academic, 1992. 242.

chose exile, such as Eugene Ionesco, Andrei Codrescu, Mircea Eliade, Herta Müller, and Emil Cioran, those who buckled to state demands and used their skills for the creation of state-approved materials still remained a part of the larger artistic community. They used their perspectives to offer inside commentaries on the regime, often using the tools at their disposal in order to critique subtly enough to go undetected the very system that commissioned their work. Vlaşin inhabited both worlds as he remained in Romania throughout communism before migrating abroad. However, he withheld his voice, refusing to give in to the demands of the government or censor himself in any way, and only began publishing after 1989. Yet, as he began writing and speaking in what he perceived was the western way of producing literature—the right way, the uninhibited way—he was awoken to a reality in which his persona on paper continued to be restricted.

In his chapter “Obositu,’ Paulo Coelho și alte deprimisme,” [The Tired One, Paulo Coelho and Other Depressions] Vlaşin explores the ongoing forms of censorship that are carried out unremarked upon in western countries. Not unlike the Académie française—which promotes nationality through its various annual literary prizes and exclusive membership that consecrates the French language and its literature at the expense of world literature that would otherwise merit consideration for similar prizes<sup>14</sup>—Vlaşin speaks to a single case study. The film *Los lunes al sol* was awarded prizes in Spain, and throughout Europe, thus, consequently “película a fost desemnată pentru a reprezenta Spania la premiile Oscar, însă Academia de la Hollywood nu a nominalizat-o între cele cinci finaliste”<sup>15</sup> [the film was designated to represent Spain at the Oscars, yet the Hollywood Academy did not nominate it among the five finalists]. Larger

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<sup>14</sup> Oana Sabo, *The Migrant Canon in Twenty-First-Century France* (University of Nebraska Press, 2018) 128-129.

<sup>15</sup> Vlaşin, *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 20.

entities, sometimes sponsored by the government even in modern times, control the consecration of artistic work with agendas beyond the comprehension of laymen consumers. He follows this example by referencing a situation closer to his own interests, and focuses on the debate between the writer's guild of Seville and the Spanish government in regard to the laws on intellectual property in which

guvernul nu respectă Directivele Uniunii Europene în ceea ce privește împrumutul bibliotecar, că noua lege de proprietate intelectuală restrânge drepturile de autor, că societatea spaniolă este infantilizată și atrasă tot mai mult în capcana literaturii de consum.<sup>16</sup>

[the government does not respect the directives of the European Union on library lending, the new intellectual property law restricts the rights of authors, the Spanish society has been infantilized and increasingly drawn into the trap of consumer literature].

Much like Don Quixote finds the same deplorable conditions everywhere he goes, so does Vlașin discover that the strife for literary freedom is a universal battle that resurfaces in every country across time. Tellingly, he concludes the list of grievances against the government by stating “dar lucrurile astea parcă le-am auzit și pe la alte ‘case’”<sup>17</sup> [but I seem to have heard these things in other ‘houses’ as well], with the emphasized word taking on a variety of meanings.

Despite the detailed descriptions of the multiple scenic wonders of Spain, with a quirky idiosyncratic fixation on how much diverse activities cost, and what they entail, Vlașin's new house in Spain is plagued by similar restrictions on authorship as the one he left in Romania, and likewise to the houses of government's significant roles in censorship. Additionally, the

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<sup>16</sup> Vlașin, *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 20.

<sup>17</sup> Vlașin, *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 20.

publishing houses are complicit in collaborating with higher institutions at the expense of the authors they represent.<sup>18</sup>

A comparable theme emerges in the chapter titled “Madridul intercultural – jazz și premii literare” [Intercultural Madrid – Jazz and Literary Prizes], in which the literary Nobel Prize winner José Saramago

și-a lansat recent în librăriile spaniole cartea *Ensayo sobre la lucidez*, o carte în care scriitorul portughez vorbește despre conștiință și gândire asupra sistemului democratic actual. *Eseul despre luciditate* a stârnit controverse în țara de origine, majoritatea presei portugheze afirmând că propunerea scriitorului este o aberație politică. Nu același lucru se spune despre scriitorul Jorge Semprún, câștigătorul importantului premiu José Manuel Lara, cu nuvela *Douăzeci de ani și o zi*.<sup>19</sup>

[recently released in Spanish bookstores his book *Ensayo sobre la lucidez* [later translated into English as *Seeing*], a book in which the Portuguese author speaks about awareness and thought regarding the current democratic system. *The Essay on Lucidity* has stirred controversy in his country of origin, with the majority of the Portuguese press claiming that the writer’s proposal is a political aberration. The same thing is not said about the author Jorge Semprún, the winner of the important prize, José Manuel Lara, with his novel *Twenty Years and A Day*].

Both Saramago and Semprún were active members of the communist party in the 1960s,<sup>20</sup> and both wrote about their respective experiences within Portugal, Spain, and France.<sup>21</sup> The coveted

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<sup>18</sup> Vlașin touches on the role of publishing houses and their ability to make or break an author in his chapter on “Premii și drepturi de autor,” *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 94-95.

<sup>19</sup> Vlașin, *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 65-66.

<sup>20</sup> Adam Langer, “José Saramago: Prophet of Doom,” *Book Magazine Online* (Nov. 2002). Currently archived; Jorge Semprún, *L’écriture ou la vie* (Gallimard, 1994) 21.

<sup>21</sup> Semprún lived most of his life in France, see Semprún, *L’écriture ou la vie* 1.

literary prize went not to the author with the most merit, or whose work was most valued by the public, but the one who the government saw as less of a threat, who did not tread on controversial issues speaking against injustices that in the minds of those in power would have been better left alone. While Semprún's merit is hardly in question as his literary renown and exquisite oeuvre speak for themselves, and he is subsequently genuinely praised,<sup>22</sup> the competition for the literary prize was, nevertheless, rendered futile from the beginning; in a parallel vein as the previous example, the larger state apparatus prevents the authorship, or authority, of those who do not concede their insistence on independent thoughts, at least publicly.

In Vlaşin's narrative of the situation, his only commentary is delivered through the actions of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza. The former, fed-up by the *status quo*, abandons the subject altogether and “aleargă bezmetic în jurul parcului Retiro încercând să mai prindă un loc la festivalul de jazz San Juan Evangelista,”<sup>23</sup> [runs frantically around Retiro park trying to still get a seat to the San Juan Evangelista jazz festival], turning towards music as a form of escape, which earlier in the book Vlaşin identifies as one of the remaining art forms where talent and merit still count.<sup>24</sup> Sancho Panza, however, “priveşte răsăritul de lună în speranţa că o să-i vină suficientă inspiraţie pentru a scrie nuvela câştigătoare a premiului José Manuel Lara de anul viitor”<sup>25</sup> [looks at the rising moon hoping that enough inspiration will come to him to write the winning novel of next year's José Manuel Lara prize], remaining unaware, and perhaps unconcerned, of the politics involved in the prize selection, but underscoring the idea that anyone can win if they support and are supported by the right people, or at the very least know how to

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<sup>22</sup> Vlaşin, *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 70-71.

<sup>23</sup> Vlaşin, *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 66.

<sup>24</sup> Vlaşin, *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 30-31.

<sup>25</sup> Vlaşin, *Don Quijote rătăcitorul* 66.

stay out of the way. Notably, Semprún, who was clearly effective in appeasing those in control, became the spokesperson for Eastern European literature, specifically those works produced in Romania, advocating for their inclusion in the European canon due to the cultural worth they brought to the larger continent.

Tellingly, as Vlaşin's *Don Quijote* excitedly looks forward to meeting some of these well-touted Romanian authors at a conference, the attendance roster is comprised of a few writers who stayed well away from controversial topics throughout their careers, continues with a renown Spanish scholar who translated many famous Romanian authors, mostly those who lived abroad such as Cioran and Eliade, but predominantly translated into Spanish those works that were not originally written in Romanian, and the list ends with a Spanish scholar who has no known connection to Romanian literature. Considering their attendance was a result of Semprún's recommendation, Vlaşin concludes that "nici că se putea un 'ambasador' al culturii româneşti, mai bun decât Jorge Semprún"<sup>26</sup> [there could not have been a better ambassador of Romanian culture than Jorge Semprún]. Despite the numerous talented and successful Romanian authors, both within the country, and abroad,<sup>27</sup> the list demonstrates the difficulty of overstepping the boundaries set in place against authorial authority. Literature devoid of personal ideology may in the short term garner recognition for its ability to placate a larger system, but when used to create a false sense of self, as is evident through the shortage of Romanian identity represented among the authors in the aforementioned list, upon closer inspection it will eventually betray its own lack of depth.

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<sup>26</sup> Vlaşin, *Don Quijote răătăcitorul* 71.

<sup>27</sup> Subsequent chapters are dedicated to mentioning the names of those Romanian authors who merit international acclaim, even as they did not make the previous list.

Creating the self through literature remains as much a challenge across the modern world as the world of the original Don Quixote: each step of the way is met with laws and legislature that leaves each person fumbling for more creative ways of exploring their surroundings and defining themselves in manners that would remain undetected by their respective lands. It remains a constant battle to stay true to the self. However, what Vlaşin thought he knew about the freedom of authorship remained as unrealistic in his new home as chivalry had been in Don Quixote's countryside tavern. Those in power, regardless of their geography, were as refined and enlightened as Sancho Panza.

Yet, Vlaşin was presented with a predicament: as he withheld his voice to counteract potential censorship, he essentially censured himself, thwarting the emergence of his written persona. Authorship, literary authority, autonomy, are not born *ex nihilo*; the persona on paper with which one represents oneself, the identity therefore created, is a process. Each work produced is a steppingstone towards the larger structure, and what is often needed is not to eliminate the constraints under which one was living, but rather delve deeper into them to bring to the surface the circumstances that have brought an author to the here and now. To achieve the kind of authorship necessary to create *Don Quijote rătăcitorul*, Vlaşin drew from previously published works, from the recorded experiences within them, in order to continue to create himself in the literary universe.

The works I believe bear the greatest responsibility in unleashing his inner voice were his first two, *Atac de panica* [Panic Attack] and *Tratat la psihiatri* [Treated by Psychiatrists]. Throughout the first work he playfully explores the innerworkings of language, trying to discover how far he can push its limits. Then with *Tratat la psihiatrie* the first cluster of poems are each a different "depresie" [depression] and he enumerates them. However, they are not in

order, lending the work a haphazard structure and organization that reflects the narrator's own state of mind. The latter part of the book consists of poems titled after various serious illnesses. Yet the contents of the book are not as bleak as the titles suggest; there are glimpses of hope and happiness strewn throughout. Thus, Vlaşin's earlier works were entrenched in a personal journey of self-discovery and subsequent self-expression, paving the way for *Don Quijote răţăcitorul* to introduce new subjects for investigation, and mingle the personal, the public, and the political. As the original Don Quixote left the confines of his house and superimposed his imagination upon the larger town, so too, does Vlaşin's author persona, once more fully created, become integrated into society, and both curate their imaginations to make sense of the discord they find in their respective territories.

### **Marin Sorescu: Writing the Self Through the Distance of Time**

Unlike Vlaşin, Marin Sorescu did not wait until after the fall of communism to produce his works, and began writing in the mid-1960s, even as he withheld some of his publications until after 1989. He was allowed to publish in large part due to his own cautious approach that had him walking the line between dissidence and obedience. He used the universal vehicles employed by authors living in repressive regimes: satire and irony. He was subversive in the usual deniable ways, in which he relied on the chasm between denotation and connotation to lend meaning to his words. He was unquestionably good at it, as evidenced by his continued popularity in Romania and abroad. The sheer volume of his works that have been translated into English speaks to his penetration of the literary market, and his undeniable presence on the literary scene.<sup>28</sup> However, he did not escape criticism for such tactics, as he was often believed to

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<sup>28</sup> E. J. Czerwinski, "Romanian Theater and Drama: Turning Point '74," *Books Abroad* 48.1 (1974) 53; Linda Anderson, "Opening the Box: Exploring the Bloodaxe Archive" in *The Contemporary Poetry*

cater to the government even as he never allowed himself to become their puppet for propaganda as numerous other writers during the period had done.<sup>29</sup> He may not have been using his talents in praise of the regime, but his words were often construed as being entirely too compliant.<sup>30</sup> As is often the case, Sorescu was his own greatest critic. Consequently, throughout his life he vacillated between wanting to give up writing because he felt the weight of his own censorship, and his desire to finally have his voice heard despite the potential consequences. In such moments he produced some of his best works—*Iona* [Jonah], a play, and two volumes of poems in which he released the full range of his thoughts, but kept them hidden for decades until after 1989.<sup>31</sup> In between, he too, channeled Don Quixote in his 1968 *Tineretea lui Don Quijote* [The Youth of Don Quixote].

Unlike Vlaşin's Don Quijote, who is an active participant throughout the prose narrative, Sorescu's Don Quijote is more elusive, with only his essence infiltrating the text that explicitly explores self-creation through the act of writing. The various poems interrogate the authority associated with creation almost in anticipation of the aforementioned Foucauldian definition of authorship. The question is first posed in "Adam" where the role of creator is established and maintained by the god-figure who bestows life while prohibiting others from doing the same,

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*Archive: Essays and Interventions*, eds. Linda Anderson, Mark Byers, and Warner Ahren (Edinburgh University Press, 2019) 150.

<sup>29</sup> Matei Calinescu, "Romanian Literature: Dealing with the Totalitarian Legacy," *World Literature Today* 65.2 (1991) 245.

<sup>30</sup> E. J. Czerwinski, "The Oldest Dying Profession: Poetry in Eastern Europe," *World Literature Today* 59.2 (1985) 204-205.

<sup>31</sup> In 1991, he published *Poezii alese de cenzură* [Poems Selected for Censorship] and a few years later, in 1994, *Traversarea* [The Crossing]. These two often become conflated, and in 2001 John Hartley Williams and Hilde Ottschofski translated into English 87 poems from these two works to create a united collection, *Censored Poems*. Despite the numerous difficulties in conducting this translation, in many ways it has become Sorescu's modern legacy. While I will not be using this translation for a variety of reasons, here too, I am analyzing poems from both works interchangeably as they speak to each other and touch on the same subjects. For more about this translation, see Ileana Marin, "Poemele cenzurate ale lui Marin Sorescu în engleză. Despre (re)interpretarea ideologică a unei traduceri," *Revista Cultura* (Feb. 2019).

with the intonation that such power would not be wisely wielded. However, the god-like figure that weaves throughout the various poems as a reminder of his omnipresence confers another form of creative ability upon mankind that is arguably even more powerful than that which creates flesh: language.

In “Alfabetul” [the Alphabet], the poem’s main character inexplicably begins losing letters, consequently losing access to certain words. With the slow but steady loss of language, he loses concepts as they can no longer be formed, until “nu mai are cuvinte pentru viață / Formată în cea mai mare parte din literele / Pe care le-a pierdut”<sup>32</sup> [he had no more words for life / formed by the most part with the letters / that he lost]. When ideas are removed, life becomes suffocated by subsequent restrictions, a sentiment Sorescu echoes in the Afterword to *Tinerețea lui Don Quijote* where he states “noi nu putem exista fără o bucată de hârtie plină de semne de exclamare, virgule, cuvinte”<sup>33</sup> [we cannot exist without a piece of paper full of exclamation marks, commas, words]. The essence of Don Quixote’s selfhood is formed through language and text, and his sense of self cannot survive without his romances any more than anyone else could exist without first being written into existence. Notably, through this process of creation the author/reader can choose what facets of themselves and their surroundings they allow to infiltrate their world. Thus, even as Sorescu laments the overabundance of texts in existence, he simultaneously understands their necessity as harbingers of life, even as he then concedes that many are hastily written and therefore offer little to the universe of ideas.

Tellingly, it is at this early stage in his career that Sorescu begins to really grapple with the dilemma of whether he wants his voice, his words, to give rise to his ideas or rather to remain

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<sup>32</sup> Marin Sorescu, *Tinerețea lui Don Quijote* (Editura Tineretului, 1968) 103.

<sup>33</sup> Marin Sorescu, “Postfața,” *Tinerețea lui Don Quijote* (Editura Tineretului, 1968) 150.

silent and allow the life to drain out of him as he gives in to the demands of outside forces. Thus, while language can give concrete form to the physical, which Sorescu explores throughout other poems (such as “Shakespeare” where the famous poet, god-like in his ability to create entire universes, “a creat lumea în șapte zile” [created the world in seven days] through the written word), Sorescu is far more concerned with the ways in which language transcends the physical. Notably, in the same year that he produced *Tineretea lui Don Quijote*, he explored the power of language to create the self at its core, divorced from the body, and wrote his first play, *Iona*.

In *Iona*, Sorescu draws from the parable of Jonah and the mythical tale of Echo, while playing with the meaning of the titular character’s name, in much the same way Vlașin would later readapt Don Quixote for his own use. The play retains the original biblical tale, but its primary focus is on the adventure Iona has inside the body of the whale. Iona’s sole consolation is his own voice. As he questions the absurdity of his situation, he must talk himself into believing that he actually exists; it is not enough to simply feel his own physical presence. Therefore, he narrates his movements, not showing, but telling the audience that “Pot să merg, uite, pot să merg încolo [...] Și pot să merg și încoace [...] Fac ce vreau. Vorbesc.”<sup>34</sup> [I can walk, see, I can walk that way... and I can also walk this way... I can do whatever I want. I speak.]. He needs to rely on his words, on speech, to define him. However, the stage directions throughout his narrative tell a different story. As he uses language to create himself, the audience is told (or shown during performance) how Iona “merge într-o direcție, până se izbește de limită”<sup>35</sup> [walks in one direction, until he hits the limit], an action he performs again and again until he realizes he cannot do or speak whatever he wants and decides to remain silent in the middle of the stage. The physical confines of the whale’s body brought about by the omnipotent force of God

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<sup>34</sup> Marin Sorescu, *Iona* (Editura pentru Literatură, 1968) 20.

<sup>35</sup> Sorescu, *Iona* 20.

underscores the visceral facet of censorship that overwhelms, isolates, and drives one into madness.

Thus, Iona discovers the parameters of his confinement that extend beyond his physical presence, reaching as far as his voice, ultimately leaving him with only his own echo, as it, too, hits the limits of the walls and can go no further, necessarily bouncing back within the chamber of the whale's body that is now Iona's entire universe. However, an echo offers no satisfaction, only reverberations. He is left crying out his own name, "Io-na," awaiting its return from the walls of the whale, while also acting as the echo, repeating the sound back, erasing the line between himself and the disembodied sound that represents him through repeating his name. To further emphasize the connection between name and identity, much like Ovid's Echo who also suffered isolation at the hands of an angry God, or Goddess, Juno, until there was nothing left of her, Iona's echo becomes increasingly more limited until the only sound left is a volley of "io," *ad infinitum*. Ovid's Echo was reduced to dust as Iona cum Io ironically becomes stripped of any sense of self as the "io" or otherwise pronounced "eu," the Romanian "I," the center of selfhood, loses all meaning. Eventually, the self is rendered redundant.

The play brings into question the position of the self within the confines of utter suppression. Despite the human desire for self-preservation, evinced through Iona's insistence on his own name as the defining characteristic of his individual existence, he is physically and figuratively no match for the larger apparatus, in much the same way as an author loses his voice when caving in to the demands of his surroundings and a regime that calls for conformity. As others join Iona in the whale's body, they do not become active members of the community. They are, like Iona, fishermen, but unlike him, the others do not wish to exert their existence and remain silent. He commands them to talk, and when they refuse, he directly challenges them,

asking “de ce vă abțineți?”<sup>36</sup> [why do you abstain?], in much the same way Sorescu poses similar questions to fellow authors who remain silent, giving in to the oppressive environment around them. Iona continues to lament the other fishermen’s complacency, and begins berating them, only to finally acquiesce to the idea that everyone has to live, everyone has to earn a livelihood. It is within this scene that the parallels between Iona and Sorescu become undeniably evident.

Yet even as Sorescu has Iona battle with the ideologies surrounding him that reflect those in Sorescu’s real life, but which he is not in a position to contest, the futility of such actions was always already established. This is indicated by a detail in the stage directions opening the scene that read, “iar într-o parte a scenei - important! - o mică moară de vânt”<sup>37</sup> [then on one side of the stage - important! - a small windmill], which Iona is directed to avoid throughout the play. No mention of it is made again. Nevertheless, just as it remains on stage without being directly addressed, it is underscored by the note that it is “important!,” lingering in the mind of the reader. Needless to say, after the play’s incredibly successful debut in 1969, the play was never again performed during communism, and Sorescu retracted it from his oeuvre.<sup>38</sup> At no other point during communism would he again publish or present anything with such an overt commentary against censorship or those who enforced it. Instead he would internalize the role of censor and write only for himself the works that would later be brought to light shortly following the fall of the regime.

In his collection of censored poems, *Poezii alese de cenzură* [Poems Selected for Censorship], he self-censors those works that he knew the government would as well, as depicted in “Casă sub observație,” [House under surveillance], in which he laments “vin manuscrisele-mi

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<sup>36</sup> Sorescu, *Iona* 30.

<sup>37</sup> Sorescu, *Iona* 26.

<sup>38</sup> Stefania Maria Custură, *Marin Sorescu: Poezia Teatrului și Teatralitatea Poeticului* (Editura Scientia, 2009) 129-130.

să le ridice / C-o macara cât muntele de mare”<sup>39</sup> [they are coming to take my manuscripts away / With a crane as tall as a mountain]. He continues to numerate the penalties he is sure to suffer for his writing, concluding with the sentiments that even though words must be written, they do not necessarily have to be made public. However, by producing them nonetheless, he was able to continue the cathartic craft of writing, and he did so in the same vein as *Iona*. Unlike Vlaşin, whose works were constructed through recollection, always hinting at something that maybe was, or perhaps could have been, Sorescu was writing in the present, with immediacy in his voice, as indicated by his titles that are almost exclusively in the present tense. By positioning them in the present, they negate temporality, essentially remaining timeless. Regardless of when they were written, they may be read years later, when finally published, with the same urgency, and stir the same sentiments as those experienced upon their creation.<sup>40</sup>

The same is also true of his later work of censored poems, *Traversarea*, in which he does not mask his disdain of the government that was slowly destroying the nation, a government that despised the peasantry, the very stock from which Sorescu emerged. He makes this evident in “Țăranii,” [The Peasants], in which he reminds the reader of the integral role peasants play in society as workers and producers to an ungrateful regime that takes their work for granted and marginalizes them because they do not fit the image of the model citizen. Thus, through his writing, Sorescu supported the people with whom he identified and, therefore, supported himself. Through his writing, he wrote himself, and by offering up this version of the self to his readers, he never ceases to exist.

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<sup>39</sup> Marin Sorescu, *Poezii alese de cenzură* (Roza Vânturilor, 1991), 73.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion on perpetual reading and rereading, see Matei Călinescu, *A citi, a reciti. Către o poetică a (re)lecturii* (Editura Humanitas, 2017).

“Trăim” [We Live] is a commentary on the inability of people to please an omnipotent god, or in other words the Romanian population’s inability to appease the overbearing dictatorship. Sorescu begins by alluding to the immeasurable amount of publicity designed to make Romanians believe, or at the very least senselessly echo the sentiment that they had the best of everything, even as their everyday reality, the one they actually lived, served as a reminder that they had, in fact, nothing. Within these two disparate modes of existence, as the constant message from above strove to vilify the outside, Sorescu juxtaposes it with the overwhelming desire of many for escapism from their shoddily fabricated paradise. The closing lines of the poem draw attention to the daily announcements that were relayed on the radio and on the TV sets of those few fortunate enough to own them. Daily reminders to ensure no one forgot the omnipotence of their dictator and his ability to infiltrate their lives at will with messages that reinforced the delusion of the way in which they live. A daily reminder that Orwell’s *1984* had come into existence and was ceaselessly staged in homes across the country.

However, even as writing was a means of easing the mind and maintaining a sense of self, of remaining rooted in reality, it was not the solution for the larger problem because, as Sorescu remarks in his poem “În legătură cu problema” [Regarding the problem], there isn’t one. He sarcastically asserts that problems are soluble in water, much like pictures are developed under similar conditions which offer a visual representation of an unreal perfection. This means of creating a false reality with pictures, especially for purposes of government propaganda, is taken up again and described by Sorescu in “Eu sunt copilul,” [I Am the Child], in which he traces the events of one of the many government sponsored marches that occurred throughout Romania where children were brought to demonstrate their love for the dictator and their overall happiness with their living conditions. Tellingly, Sorescu focuses on the overt fabrication inherent in these

events and on the photographs created during them for future use. The child to be photographed on the shoulders of a sturdy man was an orphan, “împrumutat” [borrowed] for the day to act the part of a loyal and content citizen. The child was to be carried on this stranger’s shoulders so long as photographic evidence was to be created, and then discarded to walk back to the orphanage once his purpose was complete. The Romanian identity was forged through such depictions, and Sorescu’s identity resided in unmasking the truths that no one was allowed to utter. A picture speaks a thousand words, and Sorescu, in a single short poem, undoes all of them.

Through continuing to write, even if only for himself, Sorescu was able to remain grounded in his present circumstances, recording reality for what it was, as opposed to what he, and everyone else, was forced to believe, or at the very least pretend to believe. Gelu Vlaşin exposes the same reality through his own poems and narratives. As these two authors depict the plights of everyman, they also reveal the cultural and political milieu in which they resided that initially effaced the celebration of the Romanian self with which people wanted to identify, only to have it resurface even more strongly in the last handful of decades. The popularity Sorescu and Vlaşin enjoy speaks to the desire Romanians have to defy censorship and openly explore their past. It is also emblematic of the ways in which authors at different points in history, residing in different spaces, have thought of ways to create themselves through writing, much to the pleasure of their audiences that, in turn, used these written works to shape themselves.

Don Quixote has always been an emblem for the power of literature to transform, underscoring the ceaselessness of the task as he is reborn throughout the oeuvres of multiple writers time and again. Through his ability to be so easily adaptable to an endless array of situations, the eternal wanderer becomes appropriated in the quest for reclaiming personal and

cultural identity. Vlaşin and Sorescu uniquely choose artistic writing, such as poetry, plays, and short fictive vignettes, as the media to achieve this task from different perspectives on the same historical moment. As Don Quixote is used by these authors to write the self, he is the conduit for recreating a persona that had not previously been allowed to exist and is the catalyst for an entire corpus of works that writes the self into reality.

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