

In none of its applications to Romanian literature has the concept of Magical Realism ever successfully differentiated between itself and “established” genre systems such as Realism and Romance. Thus, it is not surprising that critics have abandoned the term altogether, in spite of its startling development in recent years. My purpose in this preface is to employ a little of the liberty provided by Romanian Magical Realism’s lack of theoretical specificity and, rather than attempt to define the concept in terms of its genre, to place it within the context of literary and cultural hybridity by taking a close look at Ștefan Agopian’s novel of 1981, *Velvet Tache*.¹

The novel takes as its focal point the tumultuous first half of the 19th century in Romania. Stylistically Agopian’s narrative is generally regarded as a stepping stone in the emancipation of Romanian fiction from the dogmatic Socialist Realism of the 1950s, and the attempts at the canonical Realism of the 1970s and 1980s of Romanian prose.² What still remains to be addressed in discussing *Velvet Tache* are the specific elements of the novel as both historical narrative, and magical realist text that also involves strange and supernatural free play and fantasy, and that refutes categorically the imperatives of Socialist Realism.

Emerging from meditative processes, *Velvet Tache* offers a new type of metanarrative marked by the manipulation of time and space relations and stretching as far as Romanian folklore and myth to create the illusion of a narrative

articulated by an individual's experience that is both timeless and historical. Associated with Magical Realism, this writing of history based on individual experience not only makes it possible for us to understand an entire community of people at a particular time in Romania's history, but it also functions as an empowering narrative solution by which the author uses the past to write about the present. Far from being disconnected from reality, the bleak picture of the moral indifference and psychological isolation, along with other social ills that have pervaded the first half of 19th century Romania chronicled in *Velvet Tache* echo Agopian's own time (the 1980s Romania as a decade marked by police terror, fear, and the aberrant communist ideology of Nicolae Ceausescu's totalitarian regime).

Effected in subtle and indirect ways, the novel's connection to the present stresses Agopian's use of magical elements to suggest not only that repetition of violent and destructive patterns in history may be cyclical and inescapable, but also to imply that our reality – in part the result of human character and in part conditioned by societal and cultural values – is more complex than we know, a comforting notion during times of political oppression.

To ascertain the extent to which Agopian abandons traditional Realism to generate a novel disguised as a historical document and uses Magical Realism as a means to radically modify and replenish traditional realism, I rely on recent scholarship that has received much attention in the last several decades and is particularly relevant to the case of *Velvet Tache*.³ One way to start when addressing the issue of Magical Realism as a literary practice operative in

Agopian's novel is to consider Robert Kroetsch's and Linda Kenyon's observation that Magical Realism seems to be closely linked with "living on the margins" from imperial centers and their totalizing systems of generic classification.⁴ Located on the geographic borderlines of European culture, at the eastern extremity of Central Europe, Romanian culture has been simultaneously "on the margins" and under the spell of the centralizing impulse of Western cultures whose literary models it has systematically incorporated.⁵ Specifically, *Velvet Tache* foregrounds a magical realist narrative that borrows from and relies on major literary structures typical of Western cultures while at the same time offering a historical narrative rooted in the indigenous Romanian culture in which it is set.⁶

In this context, of particular interest for my discussion of Agopian's text as a superimposition of literary and indigenous narrative traditions, as well as a powerfully appealing hybrid of the realist and the fantastic, are (1) Michael Valdez Moses's claim that Magical Realism is a fusion of two distinct narrative traditions that establishes the paternity of the magical realist novel to the Western European realist novel of the 18th and 19th centuries, and its maternity to a different and distinct reservoir of native-to-the-region or pre-modern materials;⁷ and (2) José Monleón's view that such archaic materials specific to a region are in turn rooted in the cultural and historical contexts, and complete with their penchant for fabulation, metafiction, the fantastic, or the marvelous.⁸

Told as a retrospective and unlikely projection from beyond the protagonist's grave, but filled with concrete,

historical details provided by a first-person narrator befitting a realistic novel, *Velvet Tache* examines the time of Tache Vlădescu's life, as well as that of his ancestors and of everyone who has ever figured in his life. In a remarkable assemblage of revelatory details about rural communities observed in various aspects of their life – hunting, sexual practices, village rituals – the novel becomes a chronicle of the historical, social, and political scene of the first half of the 19th-century province of Oltenia in southwestern Romania, beginning with Tache's birth in 1800 and ending with his death in 1848. Grafted into the historiographic metafiction are significant historical events, such as the Turks' 1812-14 frequent incursions north of the Danube into Oltenia at a time when Gavrilă Vlădescu, the landowner (or *boyar*) of the Mălura estate and Tache's own father, is murdered by the Turks who set fire to his manor and leave his grinning head stuck on a sharp pole; the 1821 uprising led by the legendary leader Tudor Vladimirescu whose army the adolescent Tache and his close friends, Boyar Lăpai and the Dwarf, plan to join; and the faint echoes of the Eteria, and 1848 Revolution circulating around the time when Tache is to be murdered by his step-brother, Mamona the Young, whose yearning to take over the Vlădescu manor and estate was triggered on the very first day when his father, Mamona the Old, married Tache's mother after defeating the other contenders for her hand. Tache's retrospective retelling, whose narrative structure closely resembles a Romanian "chronicle of a death foretold," ends with Tache's forthcoming death on the eve of his son's birth, a death that would leave not only the Vlădescu estate, but also his new

wife, Flora, at the center of the dreaded encounter with Mamona the Young.

Stretching imaginative possibilities to energize a release of Romania's troubled history, *Velvet Tache* pushes us backward, toward the past, through narrative accounts like the one recounting Tache's father's breeding of ferocious German dogs for the purpose of attacking the Turks who regularly pillaged his estate:

Father liked the idea and, as soon as he recovered, purchased three pairs of the kind they call "bear biters." To these he added several other pairs of dogs, as large as calves, called *mollosses*. Now he was busy with breeding them and looking after the puppies, and he forgot about us altogether. The dogs proved fierce, which made Father very happy. When they almost killed a beggar, Father got drunk with joy. The peasants didn't have the courage to cross the estate by themselves anymore after this incident. After giving it much thought, Father decided he didn't have enough dogs yet, so he bought ten more shepherd dogs of the Komodor breed. These were steppe dogs, and, in spite of their lovely aspect, they soon proved to be genuine beasts by nature. To make them even more savage, he would let them starve and then flog them. Then he let them loose at night, and the gang proved more dangerous than a pack of wolves. Whenever Mother got a chance to catch him in a moment of leisure, she tried to talk to him and even scold him, but it was in vain. Father only had eyes for his dogs. Because of them, our servants began to run away. Father managed to

capture one and, gathering the rest of the servants to witness it, he gave the unfortunate man to the starved dogs for a prey. He didn't let them kill the guy, but he became an epileptic from the fear he endured and died a month later. (77-8)

In his treatment of events governed by such unspeakable violence, Agopian renders the occurrences of 1980s Romania in symbolic historical narrative. While exaggerating the lack of logic and common sense of Gavrilă Vlădescu's behavior, these aberrant actions simultaneously offer an oblique commentary on the moral dissolution, disturbing moral indifference, and psychological isolation of contemporary Romania's political leaders projected indirectly through the many horrible, violent events in the country's past.

Throughout a narrative whose time is neither linear nor predictable, Tache's memory consecrates the authority of his own deeds and words over the laws of nature and the principles of logic, and even over his own death, as it unleashes the narrative events that rely heavily on the motifs of Romance listed by Northrop Frye:⁹ the mysterious births and lives of Tache's ancestors in obscure times in history, prophecies about the future contortions of the plot that pose a challenge to realist conventions of uniform space and time and verisimilitude, adventures that induce in the reader a sense of unreality, such as the marriages of both Tache and of his father to women about whom nothing is certain, not even their real names or parentage. But although Tache's story has the shape of a traditional romance, it engages the readers only as a parody of the genre. Unlike the demure

and innocent maiden of a romance, Flora Fruscio, Tache's future wife, travels in the caravan of itinerant actors and seduces the narrator one night at a country inn. In similar ways, Tache's mother, Zamfira Lupu, forces Tache's father to marry her so as to stop her screaming about what she claims is old Gavrilă Vlădescu's theft and appropriation of her dead father's body to study the cholera epidemic and its effects on its victims. Finally, unlike the hero of a romance, Tache never takes himself seriously and, beyond the extraordinary method of writing from beyond the grave, his narrative is not a grand rendition of a splendid life. It is instead an account in which the narrator turned Author, standing totally apart from his narrated life, elbows his readers from the very beginning, questioning, lecturing, and challenging them to make their own sense of his irreverent and chatty ramblings and of his unheroic life:

And now I do nothing but lie here six feet under, and slowly rot in eternity, thinking and speaking, and knowing my words and thoughts belong to somebody else (the one who, with your permission – for I have to give him a name – we shall call “Author”). I could give him another name, but as there is no special honor, or difference in a name, I will call him by this convention. (39)

Unmasking romantic conventions and ridiculing artistic strategies by revealing the mechanisms used by traditional writers in the construction of their plots and narratives, the novel's opening section and wildly inventive story line project

an eminently satirical narrative that displays reality in a fragmented and tattered state, forcing the reader to fill in the voids. By this reading, Tache's narrative is both a terrible, strange, and mystical story hiding the unreal in the shards of the broken glass of reality. It is also a typically Romanian trickster story, complete with parodic twists and seriocomic characters whom the narrator continually and hilariously mocks. Tache's friends are recognizable as both stock characters of Romanian folklore and humorous distortions of Western models. We have: the socially inept second-tier Boyar Lăpai and his brother, the ingenious and rambunctious Dwarf. As Eugen Negrici points out,¹⁰ the presence of Boyar Lăpai as a humorous Tândală – sleepy and awkward, while being simultaneously shrewd, and of the Dwarf, reduced to the size of a diminutive Achilles in proportional armor – touch on a special kind of Balkanic fabulation, complete with types specific to Romanian folklore's variety of the uncanny and the marvelous, and the comic distortion of a well known Western model. That is, the odd pairing initiates a kind of double vision into a marginal culture, a binary dimension within the novel's narrative achieved by transporting a Romanian cultural type like the beloved Tândală to a 20th-century perspective, as well as by simultaneously imposing a western heroic type in the comically altered version of a Western court-jester-Dwarf on the indigenous space of a Romanian province.

Moving between reality and legend or history and myth, *Velvet Tache* does not enforce a clear separation between the two and defines itself in as complete a manner as possible through a recourse to both. Fitting nicely into Angel Flores's expanded definition of Magical Realism, Agopian's novel is

an “amalgamation of realism and fantasy” that achieves “a transformation of the common and everyday into the awesome and the unreal” and where “time exists in a kind of timeless fluidity and the unreal happens as part of reality.” Even though readers are able to identify the specific historical time in which *Velvet Tache*’s narrative takes place, the novel’s characters exist in their own isolated microcosms that are not explicitly connected to a familiar world. Simultaneously, however, in keeping with Luis Leal’s concept of *lo realismo maravilloso*, *Velvet Tache* also deals with objective reality and attempts to discover the mystery that exists in objects, life, and human actions, without resorting to fantastic elements.¹¹

As a mythical and historical space, Oltenia is an *imago mundi*, located at the center of the world and providing for the continuity and participation of its people a symbolic transmigration that allows escape into other periods and accommodates the need to live in multiple eras at the same time. In spite of a certain narrative uncertainty and vagueness of the events, both Gavrilă Vlădescu and Tache himself are good Christians who accept their Mălura estate as uncharted territory, a place where the present history of redemption is made, either in the form of a deadly fight of Eastern Orthodoxy against the Ottoman Turks¹² or in the confrontation with the forces of evil personified by Mamona the Young. Frequently used by Romanian historians, this stylistic device known as *heterochrony*¹³ allows for the overlap of several temporal sequences and further enriches Agopian’s narrative discourse with an amplification of the scale and categories of reality. Thus, it enables Tache to avoid

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