

The Censor's Notebook

Calet de cenzor

Presented by: Cristina Spinei

Communism alters words. Words alter the mind. Liliana Corobca's novel *The Censor's Notebook* (2017) testifies to the links which bind these beliefs together, as it accounts for the role censorship has played in the oppressive histories of Eastern Europe while emphasizing the specificities of the Romanian case. A writer and established researcher on censorship, Corobca offers an elaborate vision of the state machinery by photographing the conscience of a censor situated at the very heart of this system. Organized around the observations, thoughts, doubts and longings of Filofteia Moldovean from the GDPP, i.e. Literature and Art Division at the General Directorate of Press and Publications (and it is no accident that the used voice is of a female censor), the novel is predicated upon and tries to fill the gap between two viewpoints: "Everything dressed in words can be a lie, because the truth is naked, as we know" (422) and "The truth is always hidden. Everything that's hidden is true, so you have to hide a lie in order for it to appear true" (349). It is precisely these opposing views that wane into overlaps and complementarities in the course of the text, which highlight the political agency of Corobca's narrative and its vibratory force.

The novel fulfils both requirements formulated by Czeslaw Milosz regarding Central European literature: it serves as a catalyst for producing historical and political awareness on the one hand, and on the other, the topic addressed, the strong enforcement of censorship in literature, as it was essentially the case for all liberal arts in communist Romania, is delivered with irony. Within this context, the functioning of the institution of censorship at the beginning of 1974 (a staff ranging between 270 and 350; its complex structure with divisions working on Literature and Art, Import-Export, Press, Technical and Social Sciences, etc.) illustrates the extent to which Romania has employed massive, harsh repressive practices. Hostility towards Marxism, idealistic orientations, any form of disillusionment, religious content, mystic states, praising the monarchy or Greater Romania, denigrating representations of everyday affairs by means of certain colours are just a few examples of inappropriate issues that would have a damaging impact on Romanian readers and reveal the crafty ways in which censorship interfered with the existing literary works. Politically significant is also the attention drawn to what has been named 'substitute culture' – the output proliferated by successful authors who chose to conform to the Party's dictates and therefore be corrupted in their moral and ethical principles while simultaneously enjoying a comfortable, even lavish lifestyle as opposed to the prevalent poverty. The book highlights how this phenomenon goes hand-in-hand with the often-discussed contamination of Romanian literature under communism, as signified in the narrator's wonderings who the "counterrevolutionary authors" or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn may be.

Designed along a fictitious manuscript received by the author from a former supervisor at the same institution as the fictionalized characters in the book, who allegedly snitched and kept it since she

had fled to Germany in 1974, the book converts the customary notebook kept by censors into a journal by widening its scope. As such, the author takes its bearings from sources of information and some deliberate incongruities (all these record books have been destroyed and do not exist in the archives). This frame allows Corobca to include along with excerpts from the code of conduct for censors, official guidelines or technicalities of the daily readings, also Filofteia's reminiscences of her early years, her daily impressions, comments on several colleagues and their approach to being a censor, headlines, practical tips deemed a guarantee of the novels' utility, all in order to map out a censor's universe and reintegrate it in the bigger picture of communism and censorship as political phenomenon.

At the same time, broadening the sphere of activity and, therefore, the definition of censoring (i.e. suppressing unacceptable parts), prompts readers to envisage how indoctrination pervades the lived experience and the extent to which the two aspects are interlinked. A self-defined nearly-God-like censor, Filofteia not only feels obliged to support blindly the communist guidance and judges Western literature through the eyes of Romanian policies and their expectations; as time goes by, she identifies herself entirely with the idealized Romania and its uniform, 'constructive' literature as a reference point from which to adjust the texts she receives so that they get to be 'perfect'. Indeed, it is not just the external or the state censorship that becomes evidently present in the ideological fuelling of the time – the book also exposes forms of intrusion on the conscious mind that disrupt the inner life and impact the psychic: the all-pervading political exigencies meant to shape culture and literature are rendered visible in the malign respatialization of the mind: "If I really stop and think about it, I censor myself in all the important areas of my life, love, faith, freedom." (448) From the narrator's background, "a poor orphan", a stepsister of "communist brothers who hunted partisans" (398–399), emerges a secondary political thread as an explanation of her concern not be exposed as daughter of a partisan who had to hide in the mountains, of her tortuous, but indefatigable efforts to get a respectable place in society and also of her blindfolded predicament.

Yet a turning point regarding the ordering of state censorship coupled with a certain sense of scepticism can be identified in Filofteia's apparently random church visit. In a narrower sense, this acting on its momentum expresses a burgeoning emancipation from the blinding inadequacy of 'reality'; in a broader sense, it points to plausible perspectives of subversion and resistance: "We must believe in the radiant achievements of the people, in our beloved leaders, in this we believe and we don't question, we don't doubt! But I went inside a church. [...] They definitely must have sprayed that church with something, with some super-powerful holy water or something, and that's why I had unpatriotic hallucinations." (448–449)

While the GDPP's is officially disbanded in 1977, as after being in function for 28 years, self-censure was so deeply rooted that it was estimated to be binding enough for communism to thrive, the main character reaches the opposite end of the concrete political project even before its finish line. What seemed so certain and self-evident in policy, is suddenly transformed into its reverse in practice. The censor who gradually understands that controlling the readers' minds is actually more important than revising the literary texts, shifts from being most besotted with diligence to grappling with a degree of insecurity encountered after reading world literature in the Import-Export Division: "We're the only ones whose hearts are breaking over the poison we're serving the poor nation without being able to do anything about it." (456) The "humanizing" effect of literature thus outruns the political system, pointing to an inner force of the mind that cannot remain paralyzed, nor be endlessly manipulated.

And though it may seem for a present-day reader difficult to believe, and for a Western European one even more unimaginable, that in a time in history in areas often located not very far away

everything could be perceived as censorable, and this book heralds it, those times are not that far distant. The political commitment of Liliana Corobca's novel lies not only in recapturing those times and their impact on literature, but also in its actuality. Among its remainders there is the cautioning about contemporary monitoring and surveillance of the population to a smaller extent by secret services and to a greater one by new technologies, not least about the dangerous limitations of cancel culture.

LANGUAGE: Romanian/Română

This title was not censored before publishing