

**THE POLITICS OF AMNESIA:
A MODERN "IDIOT" IN LUCIAN DAN TEODOROVICI'S
NOVEL MATEI BRUNUL**

Keywords: individual and social amnesia; puppets; Romanian Adam; forced labour; *damnatio memoriae*; Makarenko; fabricated memory

Abstract: *Never were the ideological state apparatuses more efficient in controlling and manipulating collective memory than during the two great totalitarian regimes that scarred the image of the 20th century. That policy was one of the key elements which ensured the leaders' grip on social life in Nazi Germany and in communist countries. However, it was impossible that memory be reformatted just suddenly, by some sleight of hand: the almost complete erasure of the old beliefs and historical knowledge had to be performed in the first place, and this took some time to accomplish. Thus, in Romania and the other countries of the Soviet bloc, we may speak about a culture of induced amnesia that lasted for a good many years after 1947. The novel Matei Brunul (Matthew, the Brownie), recently published by the Romanian author Lucian Dan Teodorovici, which notched up a remarkable critical success, is the story of a 1950's victim of totalitarian repression who also suffers a head trauma resulting in severe retrograde amnesia. My point in this paper is that if we look beyond the diegesis proper, and if we have in mind Halbwachs's and Ricoeur's insistence on the intertwinement of individual and collective memory, the case of Teodorovici's protagonist acquires a prototypical relevance: the way in which the communist Security leaders attempt to fabricate a new self out of a person's amnesic remainders is emblematic for the politics of memory exercised in that epoch. Besides, as a Ukrainian-born trauma specialist, Maria Tumarkin, remarks, the effects of that kind of politics can still be perceived today in the post-communist society, where an extensive "social amnesia" can be noticed in matters of history and public beliefs.*

Whether it is used in good or in bad faith, whether the actors live in a democratic society or in a dictatorship, psychological manipulation is an omnipresent reality, with various degrees of emotional impact on both individuals and social groups. We may not blow the concept out of proportion and slip into the trap of the conspiracy theory if we aver that everyone, with rare exceptions, is a puppet of sorts, whose strings are being pulled within the family or the school system, at work, or in one's social relationships: so only the puppeteers are different. The games of power do involve them and their victims by definition.

It is true, however, that in totalitarian societies the propaganda system is *the* crucial element of power keeping, individuals become just crowd components, and the

* University of Bucharest; Romania

leadership's goals are no longer concealed beneath subtle rhetoric and intricate ploys of seduction, in an attempt to persuade the public that their actions are meant to save the country from economic collapse or to increase the living standards, as in democratic societies. No, the dictator's henchmen pull the strings increasingly in full sight and those who seem to disobey the game rules run the risk of "being shot immediately", as the regulations in the North-Korean concentration camps stipulate.

It is this reality of large-scale puppeteering that the Romanian novelist Lucian Dan Teodorovici intends to lay bare in his recent novel, *Matei Brunul* (*Matthew, the Brownie*), which is set in the 1950's Stalinist Romania, for almost two decades a country ruled by a puppet-regime brought to power by the Soviet troops.

Matei Bruno, the protagonist of the novel, nicknamed *Brunul* by his surveillant (a semiliterate Security officer), is far from being a true hero or a strong opponent of the recently installed regime. Rather, he seems from the beginning to have arrived in November 1945 back in Romania from Italy as a naïf who does not even have the faintest idea about the dramatic post-war reality surrounding him: he looks like a *dépaysé*, all-trusting young fellow whose only concern is the art of puppetry, learnt in Italy during his stay there with his family. It comes as no surprise that this dangerously innocent Romanian Adam¹ will soon fall inadvertently into one of the traps laid everywhere by the communist authorities, will be brutally interrogated for months on end and sent to prison to serve a long, terribly harsh term there. When, through a diegetic sleight of hand, Bruno is set free, eleven months before the official term, he is deeply amnesic, because of an accident resulting in a serious head trauma. As of this moment, the protagonist's old condition of an ill-adapted fellow will be essentialized: his self-reliance reaches the lowest point, he is fully dependent on the others' ploys, his naiveté turns him into a modern Prince Myshkin (even the latter's seizures are evoked by Bruno's stiffness states – "*damblale*" as the same Security officer nicknames them). In front of the authorities he now behaves in a radically submissive way, innocently proclaiming his willingness to cooperate even when he is caught in the middle of the night just near the state frontier, where he has inadvertently been brought along by his friend, Eliza, who intends to flee to the West.

At this point the question arises: why has the author chosen to throw light on the manipulation techniques of a highly oppressive state, by creating such an extreme case, that of a radically ingenuous person facing a perfectly organized structure of deceit? It may be because Bruno appears as a prototypical puppet, ready to be manipulated, paradoxically hidden just within a puppeteer's skin.

His story unfolds on two parallel tiers: the odd chapters cover the post-liberation, 1958–1959 months, while the even chapters include the 1949–1958 imprisonment period, running, as it were, after the other ones, never to reach them. In the former series of events, the novel advances more strenuously, suggesting the protagonist's stagnation and helplessness in front of a manipulative society.

¹ Cf. Richard W. B. Lewis's 1955 study, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, and its first chapter, entitled "The Danger of Innocence".

A nine-year forced labour term would profoundly change anyone's personality, affecting their very identity at various levels, from the bodily to the intellectual ones. However, the puppeteer's case is even more complicated, for he is a twofold survivor: as a former political detainee and as a trauma victim.² Obviously he is suffering from a serious organic amnesia, which affects 20 years from his autobiography: he has no episodic memory of that whole period, except for a couple of moments of fulgurant reminiscences, such as a scene from the train trip to Italy together with his family, the Proustian past image of a concert and a puppet show, followed by an older puppeteer's voice in Italian, all this triggered by a symphonic concert that Bruno watches on the Romanian national television in 1959. Yet, these are awfully rare moments. His whole past seems to have fallen deep into a crevasse, as it were, and from it only fleeting glimpses and faint sounds are able to get through up to the surface, now and then. Bruno seems to have lost as well the procedural memory of those years: he clumsily carries along a marionette, nicknamed Vasilache by the Security officer, no longer knowing how to pull its strings, how to animate it by finding its *soul*, that is its weight centre (as he had once explained, in an essay on puppetry that he was writing when the Secret Police arrested him).

His medical case may be compared with the memory erasure in the "Lacuna" experiment from Michel Gondry's film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, although in Teodorovici's novel amnesia is not voluntary and it covers a whole period of time, not just some specific episodes.

After undergoing a brain operation (while still a prisoner), Bruno grows aware of his impairment little by little, with the doctor's help.³ Yet, this is no relief, on the contrary such amnesia cases are often accompanied by searing feelings of pain and fright and by a desperate search for glimpses of the past and clues to it. In his attempts to reboot his memory, Bruno's ephory efforts are dramatically inefficient, and this affects his personality all the more.⁴

The marionette that the neurological surgeon gave Bruno when the latter was transferred from hospital back to prison in June 1957 becomes for the disturbed patient a real alter ego, his only interlocutor and confidant.⁵ From now on Bruno and "Vasilache"

² In a study of post-survival changes, Derek Parfit argues that in such situations the observer should notice the possible presence of psychological continuity (regarding character, memories, psychological relations) rather than identity transformations (Parfit 20 *passim*). Within this theoretical framework we had better speak of Bruno's past and later selves, instead of referring to a "new identity" after his being set free.

³ So, his is not a case of *anosognosia*, and he still has a concept of time and of the past, as described by psychologist Christoph Hoerl.

⁴ According to Daniel Schacter and Joseph Coyle (6), *epphory* is the specialized term for retrieval processes, and *engraphy* designates encoding ones.

⁵ Actually Bruno had the marionette with him when he was arrested by the Securitate officers in 1949. Rather strangely, the same institution agrees to the doctor's request that it be returned to the prisoner in his cell, as an object that may help him get rid of amnesia.

will never be separated, even though from time to time their relationship grows tense. For this modern “idiot” (no deprecatory connotation here) the marionette acts as what the psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott calls a transitional object, which provides comfort (to children mainly), a form of mediation between the vulnerable human being and the world around him.

The doctor also gives the patient a leaf of paper, containing fragments from Bruno's old essay on puppetry. This second “memory object” unfortunately does not do its job of curing his amnesia either: it only increases his pain for not being able to understand properly the words he once used.

Is it more painful to forget altogether the nine years of painfulness caused by the terror he endured in various camps and prisons, than to keep it always in mind? Probably yes, because trying to forget is never a long-lasting cure against oppressive remembrances. For an innocent, childish young man like Bruno, his senseless detention was unfolding under the sign of some mythical figures from his youth tales – Old hag Samca and her wraiths. Their terrifying gang appear in his mind whenever extreme violence is used against him during the absurd investigation of the Security (being hung for hours on a tall peg, just like a cloth puppet, we may say, or being beaten savagely), and later on, when he is submitted to extreme cold or heat, to say nothing of the mortifying humiliation caused by the guards' and even some inmates' behaviour.

The memory of his accident has also been deleted from his brain, like everything that preceded it: his “Stakhanovite” performances at work, for which some inmates mocked him, not realizing that these feats were the product of his accommodating, submissive nature; his selection for working outside the prison walls, as a temporary reward, and finally his uncontrollable impulse to regard and to breathe in the city view for a few moments more, from a higher floor of a block under construction; the way this impulse was wrongly interpreted by the guards as an escape attempt; the resistance he put up to being carried brutally down the stairs, and, in the end, his almost deadly fall down from the third floor.

Bruno's condition after the accident would normally have passed unnoticed by the then prison-state officials. Yet, the author of the novel has chosen to imagine that the case aroused their interest, which is historically possible, though not very likely: they decided to use Bruno as a subject in a mind-reformatting experiment. Bruno's full amnesia, which covers just his “counter-revolutionary years” (in the jargon of that time), provides them with the right opportunity. What those officials do is actually to deny Bruno his elementary human right to an appropriate treatment of his mental impairment, for they forbid any exposure to some of his real past events, as normal procedures would recommend. For instance Bruno's parents, who remained in Italy after the war, are subjected to a *damnatio memoriae* treatment: never must he be allowed to speak or learn something about them. His amnesia is instrumented for political purposes, which is evocative of the Nazi medical experiments. The communist officials' goal is to study how

a person singled out for an almost *tabula rasa* intellect can be re-created as a “new man” (the official slogan of that time), who should possess a fabricated identity.⁶

Two people are directly involved in the psychological experiment whose subject is the former puppeteer: “Comrade Bojin” – the Security officer, and Eliza, a Security informant, charged to befriend and closely watch Bruno’s behaviour.

In the context of the numerous written and oral accounts of life under the communist regime, made public after 1989, Bojin appears as a significantly unsterotypical personage, conceived first as a human being and only secondly as a member of the dreaded Secret Police. This man is not a mere robot in search of the Party’s enemies, but is endowed by the narrator with feelings and doubts. To what extent such a character is credible for the most ruthless period of the communist era in Eastern Europe is another matter.

Dealing with the former political prisoner, Bojin enjoys his work for the first time, we may say. The officer realizes that he has begun the creation of a “new man” from scratch: Bruno’s lack of recent memory is a godsend for them both. He feels like a creator, who is free to design new procedures and to test their results. However, this Demiurge is torn by serious doubts about the new political realities, and senses there are two truths he must follow: one at work, and another in private. Even more unexpectedly, guilt feelings upset him more and more about having to lie to Bruno regarding the latter’s past and family. At one moment, like a Russian character, he drunkenly admits, speaking to Bruno in a whimpering tone, that he does have to tell him lies, for that is his job, and there are people in higher positions who oblige him to do it ... However, the next day he goes on with the psychological experiment of manipulation, taking advantage of Bruno’s naiveté, moral weakness and anaclitic nature.

Eliza appears to be even more duplicitous than the Security officer. The narrator is pretty vague about her real emotional involvement during her affair with Bruno, but something becomes ever more obvious: her laying bare to him the truth about Bojin’s goal and actions results only from her own vested interest in crossing the frontier illegally with Bruno and using his family for support after they are out of Romania. When her friend sees through her real motive it is too late and the story suggests that for him the whole cycle will be taken up again.

In an ironic way, George Santayana’s aphorism, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it”, is valid in the end with Bruno, too.

Bojin began his work methodically: first the assessment phase, which took place while Bruno was still in prison, when the officer made sure that the prisoner was not lying about his amnesia, and then the manipulation stage proper. At this moment what has been deleted from Bruno’s mind is to be supplanted by a complex *fabricated memory*, which should be in keeping with the prevailing ideology of the time. For Bojin, who is a technology fan, this work is similar with a technical invention: “You take up a man,

⁶ Or, rather, a fabricated *later self*, in Derek Parfit’s terms (see Note 2).

repair him, replace his damaged parts with new ones that make him functional within the new, more developed society” (298).

Thus, from a mere medical case, Bruno will turn into a political subject. “Old” documents are made up, a would-be file in the official archive is shown to Bruno so as to supply his history with “a local habitation and a name”. The Makarenko method⁷ is being applied to Bruno again, only in a non-physically violent manner, unlike at the Peninsula prison camp, of which anyhow he has no present reminiscence. For a while, the result is an artifact, a human being with a laboratory memory and deep-seated convictions about the rightfulness of the new regime or the heroism of Soviet film role-models, a man full of contrition for the indefinite crime he committed in the past, determined to make up for it through hard work and devotion. Those who are conducting the experiment seem to have achieved the effect they expected.

Yet, this is not valid for a long time. When, at a given moment Eliza betrays her commitment with the Secret Police and tells her victim-lover a few things that she has gathered about his past, Bruno is deeply disturbed. This is a moment when the coherence of his own personality begins to deteriorate again, with dramatic consequences.

If memory is a source of knowledge, distorted memory results in cognitive impairment – twisted judgments and wrong decisions. Even when Bruno realizes later on that his mentor and helper has constantly been lying, he still wants to see him again as soon as possible, in order to give his own illusions about Bojin one more chance, as in a typical case of the Stockholm syndrome.

It may seem that Teodorovici's novel is merely the story of an individual caught between the cogs of a huge wheel – that of “grand history”, in the narrator's words. As I mentioned above, peculiar to the protagonist is the fact that he has lost all his memory about the last twenty plus years, including procedural elements, but also episodic remembrances about himself and external events, as well as all knowledge about the social and political environment in which he once lived. (It may be noticed that he did not use to pay much attention to this context, but this is another matter.)

However, we should observe that, according to several theorists, individual and collective memories cannot be disentangled. Maurice Halbwachs argued that “the idea of an individual memory absolutely separate from social memory is an abstraction almost devoid of meaning” (Verovšek 8). Paul Ricoeur, too, holds that individual memories are

⁷ Anton S. Makarenko (1888–1939) was a Soviet teacher and specialist in pedagogy, author of *The Pedagogical Poem*, *Flags on Towers*, and other controversial works. He put in practice his principles in a couple of labour colonies for street children and young delinquents, which were founded by him. Makarenko emphasized the educators' obligation to make great demands on their subjects, while showing them a lot of respect; he also insisted on the social component in education and on the role of positive peer pressure. The last concept in particular was later on used, in a greatly distorted form, by the initiators of “communist reeducation” in several Romanian prisons and camps during the early 1950's.

anticipated by collective ones, which are “familiar” within our milieus. He even maintains that a person can be helped to remember by people belonging to his community⁸ (or to misremember, we may add).

I contend that, with or without the intention of the author,⁹ Bruno is a prototypical case, not only in his capacity as a political prisoner, but also as an amnesiac. For, as it was often remarked, a large part of the people in communist countries, obliged to fit in with the new reality, soon fell prey to a memory erasure process which was successfully put in practice by the ideology state apparatuses of the time – the education system, the military service, the indoctrination assemblies in working places, and, last but not least, the penitentiary system. Older memories of the previous regime were soon supplanted by fabricated “truths”, which assumed the forms of “reminiscences”. “The control of memory is a type of political power”; this is done by those persons in a position to manipulate memory, “and with it the valued symbols of a society or group”, Verovšek states (6).

If we think of Pierre Nora's distinction between personal memories and historical representations (which for him are fundamentally opposed concepts),¹⁰ we may argue that both were distorted in a way or another in those early years of communist dictatorship, and Bruno is a perfect example in point. His own *small* history of the past, as well as the *grand* history of the nation's pre-communist period, which are inculcated in his mind, assume warped, even grotesque forms owing to the procedures put in action by the controlling Power, whose lowly representative is Comrade Bojin.

A few final remarks should be made about the present-day relevance of Teodorovici's novel. Although we may read it as mainly the story of an individual caught in the traps of early communist history and the Romanian Gulag, questions about the politics of amnesia and of memory in all society types, including the democratic ones, are raised not infrequently in the reader's mind.

The first attempt at such manipulation that we may think of is a psychological phenomenon that aroused a wide-scale debate in the U.S.A., namely the so-called “False Memory Syndrome”, which appeared as a result of the “recovered memory therapy” practiced there mostly in the 1990's; because of it new victims were created among those people falsely accused of sexual abuse on their children¹¹ (Cf. Prager 77–78). In this case

⁸ Cf. Ricoeur, 124–132.

⁹ In an interview, given after the publication of this fiction, Teodorovici said: “As a novelist, I write merely about people. *Matei Brunul* is not one more novel about communism [...] – it is a literary work, just a story” (Șimonca).

¹⁰ According to Nora, “Memory remains in permanent evolution open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, *vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation*, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived” [emphasis mine] (Nora 8). On the contrary, history appears to him to be static and unable to revive the past. It is “perpetually suspicious of memory, and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it” (9).

¹¹ Prager mentions that about 15000 “victims of memories” asked for help, and “The False Memory Syndrome Foundation” was established on that basis (78).

the therapists were even more successful than the Romanian Secret Police had been with people like Bruno, as Comrade Bojin did not actually manage to make him fully internalize the fabricated notions about his past: as I mentioned above, Bruno still had doubts about them.

The appearance of that syndrome was the medical consequence of a wrong treatment (though the therapists' vested interests cannot be ruled out); it affected individuals that were more suggestible, more easily influenced by their analysts. In Teodorovici's novel the protagonist *is* such an individual, but the manipulation of people's minds was in that historical period a widely-used practice of the governing party and the Secret Police, so it occurred at the level of social psychology. Therefore if we are to speak about the continuation of such practices in the post-communist epoch, the comments made by a Ukrainian-born trauma specialist, Maria Tumarkin, are most relevant. In her recent article, "The Long Life of Stalinism: Reflections on the Aftermath of Totalitarianism and Social Memory", she talks about an extensive "social amnesia" in Russia today, which manifests itself as a kind of "deep forgetting or *systematic* mis-remembering of the Soviet past" [emphasis mine], whose hidden aim is a wide-scale rehabilitation of the communist regime (1).⁹

This is but one aspect of the memory manipulation for political purposes, but there are several others, which involve various levels of social life and various periods of the social past, always prone to be used by ruling "demiurges" for the benefit of their own designs.

Works Cited

- Hoerl, Christoph. "Memory, Amnesia and the Past", in *Mind & Language*, No. 14 (2), June 1999.
- Lewis, R.W. B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*", in *Representations*, No. 26, Spring, 1989.
- Parfit, Derek. "Personal Identity", in *Philosophical Review*, No. 80 (1971).
- Prager, Jeffrey. *Presenting the Past: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Misremembering*. Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Schacter, Daniel L., Coyle, Joseph T., and Harvard Center for the Study of Mind, Brain, and Behavior. *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Șimonca, Ovidiu. "Istoria mare îl apucă și-l țîrîie după ea pe Matei Brunul" ("Grand History Grabs Matei Brunul and Drags Him Along"). An interview with Lucian Dan Teodorovici, in *Observator Cultural*, no. 604, 9 Dec. 2011.
- Teodorovici, Lucian Dan. *Matei Brunul*. Iași: Polirom, 2011.
- Tumarkin, Maria M. "The Long Life of Stalinism: Reflections on the Aftermath of Totalitarianism and Social Memory", in *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Summer 2011.
- Verovšek, Peter. "The Politics of Memory: A Conceptual Approach to the Study of Memory in Politics", at http://www.yale.edu/macmillan/ocvprogram/conf_papers/Verovsek.pdf Accessed 1 May 2013.