

Back to the Future: A Review of Patrick McGuinness, *The Last Hundred Days*. Bridgend: Seren, 2011, 377 pp. £8.99. ISBN 978-1-85411-541-6. (translated into Romanian by Ana-Maria Lişman as *Ultimele o sută de zile*. Iaşi: Polirom, 2012, 344 pp. 29.95 RON. ISBN 978-973-46-2588-8)

Jolan Bogdan's article on "Sovereignty and the Death of Communism" in the present issue refers to the moment, captured in Harun Farocki's documentary *Videograms of a Revolution*, when on 22nd December 1989 the Romanian crowd booed Ceauşescu's words from the balcony on The Central Committee of the Communist Party. According to the critic, the fleeting moment of pointing the cameras skywards before showing the rage of people in the streets - "when the jeering began, the cameras faltered, momentarily tilted up towards the sky" - "marked the transition of the nation's turn from Ceauşescu's rule to an unknown future".

Patrick McGuinness records the same historical watershed in his first, acclaimed novel, *The Last Hundred Days*, nominated for the Man Booker Prize in 2011: "There is a shot and the camera cuts to the crowd for a moment before pulling back to the president" (358). But instead of dwelling on the visual dimension of this epoch-making scene, which would amount to following the camera's point of view, he chooses to double the scene with its aural counterpart, the sequence of events being filtered through McGuinness's protagonist, who appropriately remains nameless (i.e. de-individualised, stripped of his identity) throughout, and uses his eardrum to compensate for the moments when there is no image, "when the screen goes blank, then dark" (358). In his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, this is what Shakespeare called the "double recompense":

Dark night, that from the eye his function takes,
The ear more quick of apprehension makes;
Wherein it doth impair the seeing sense,
It pays the hearing double recompense. (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.2.177-180)

However, far from stepping into an apogee of light (the summer solstice), McGuinness's characters witness a nadir of gloom and doom, a midwinter nightmare whose occasion the former dictator had ironically chosen as a recall of the highest point in his popularity, when in 1968 he openly condemned the invasion of Czechoslovakia from the same location in front of his assembled fellow-countrymen.

The nameless protagonist can hear people screaming "Timișoara! Timișoara! Timișoara!", the "croak", the "thin rattle" of Ceauşescu's voice, the clearing of his throat, then the "unnatural" noise, "a cold snarl topped with a thin layer of cheering" (357), "the cry from the throat, the stripped hoarse larynx: the sound of fury and hate" (357) both on television and outside the balcony, experiencing both "the event and its simultaneous mediatisation" (357-358), in such a way as to make the first-person narrator feel both "there and not there" (358).

One may wonder how many of these events were really experienced by writer Patrick McGuinness. The son of a Belgian French-speaking mother and an English father of Irish descent, exposed to different cultures and languages in his early life, and currently professor of French and Comparative Literature at Oxford University, McGuinness lived in Bucharest between 1986 and the end of 1987, but unlike his

fictional creations, who are 'present' at this historical event, he experienced this nation-defining moment mediated on TV. His project thus opens a gap between historical account or testimony and fictionalization, in a world where 'mediatisation' – to be more largely understood as the process of filtering or distorting news, thus removing them from the direct immediacy of the "real" – could be said to leave no event, personal or communal, uncontaminated, and whose policy rules were based, as stated by one of the five signatories of the letter accusing Ceaușescu, on "sign this, retract that, confess to this, deny that; purge him, rehabilitate her." (266).

In his reading session at the Department of Romance Languages and the Irish Studies Program at Villanova University,¹ McGuinness acknowledged that the main fascination with communist Romania was the experiencing of the double in one of the most paranoid totalitarian regimes in Europe, where spying on citizens' private lives haunted any human relationship. His novel can be seen as "an act of catharsis, a memorial", not so much as a book on the death of communism and the rise of capitalism but as an attempt to show "how we make maps of our lives". The narrator enters this mesmerizing world of infinite reflections in an imperfect mirror. In the eighties, a Romanian was legally obliged to give a written account to the local police on the nature of his discussions with a foreigner. McGuinness understood that 'living double' was the only 'normality' for Romanians and builds his narrative on such doubling, dual and duplicitous effects of 'truth' and 'lie', "the dream of the old city" (51) and the "cement outskirts" (51) of the new capital that Ceaușescu's plans for urban systematisation were bulldozing into existence, the genuine relationship with Otilia versus the fake relationship with Cilea, who is still in love with the former occupant of the narrator's apartment, Belanger; the seemingly trustworthy person the narrator believes to be an innocent "music student at the university and a classical guitarist" (129), Petre, proves to be a major in the secret police who "was working for Belanger and others without knowing it, making them money, trafficking people when he thought he was helping them make new lives" (287), and he is killed by them before getting a chance to find out too much. As McGuinness pointed out in his reading session, his nameless narrator realizes that everything is lived through a system of doubles: "the world above has its double underneath, the official world has its double as the world of corruption", and his main character, unwittingly as much as through some perverse curiosity, drifts into an abyssal world of doubles, in spite of claiming at first that things "happened around [him], over [him], even across [him], but never to [him]." (8)

The young English student who buries his tyrannical father on the very day he flies to Romania arrives in the surreal world of communist Bucharest, employed for a post he never even applied for, and is welcomed by Leo O'Heix, who officially teaches English at the University and also dabbles in the black market during daytime, while spending his nights in luxury parties at Capsia, the Nomenklatura restaurant, where people would be served the most sophisticated dishes and vintage wines, in sharp contrast with "the street's hungers and deprivations" (17).

Leo's description of the Romanian nation, "[t]his is a country where fifty per cent of the population is watching the other fifty per cent. And then they swap over" (21), introduces the unnamed narrator and protagonist to the world of dissidents, party apparatchiks, diplomats, spies and, to a small extent, ordinary people in the streets, a

¹ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj8KN5Y9ub0>.

world in which he will experience a heady mixture of existential uncertainties, personal dangers, omnipresent dire poverty and distressing political repression.

The novel's structure and the turning points in its plot reflect the double coding that prevails in this alienated world, in which every truth can have its counterpart in a lie, every event its counter-event, and every phrase its *double entendre*. Among the most compelling figures of duplicity is Trofim, a dissident masquerading as a well-known Party statesman, who writes two manuscripts simultaneously, one ghosting the other: one an official paean to the regime, constantly expurgated in order to be published in Romania, where it will be launched with a "speech encrusted with the most tedious communist euphemisms, buzzwords and aspicated jargon" (248), and the other, *An Ideal Betrayed*, to be smuggled abroad unrevised for a concomitant debut in Paris. The fake narrative has its double also in "The Letter of the Five", co-signed by other "four top-ranking but marginal ex-ministers", in which Trofim accused Ceaușescu of "mismanaging the economy and instituting a Stalinist personality cult, of emasculating the Party and imposing third-world living conditions on the country" (256), a letter slated to appear in the *International Herald Tribune*, *Libération* and *The Washington Post*, and to be discussed by BBC World Service, France Culture, Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, and Radio Moscow. Likewise, the narrator's skin-deep affair with the daughter of a party apparatchik, the glamorous Cilea, finds its counterpart in the deeper relationship he later has with Ottilia, the unsophisticatedly honest, simple-hearted doctor who nurses him while he suffers from amoebic dysentery.

Yet the most striking instance of duality operates at the level of the city, whose double existence, virtual and real, past and present, takes centre stage in Leo's compulsive 'preservation project' based on the numerous snapshots he takes of buildings before their doomed disappearance under the communist steam-roller, just as his apartment becomes a repository for historically "salvage[d]" objects of art from demolition sites, later to be sold at secret auctions. A character named "La Princesse", Paul Valéry's last mistress, puts a human complexion on the eradication of a bygone culture and the disjointed temporalities it entails across the east-west divide, leaving those stranded in a state of ruins: unable to return to Paris after the 60s when she made the mistake to visit Romania, the former Princesse Antoinette Marthe Cantesco, debunked from nobility to citizen Antoaneta Cantescu (even though McGuinness spares her the standard communist "comrade"), exemplifies the "anachronistic" (93) re-/de-styling of an uncomprehending Parisian aristocracy who first landed by mistake in the socialist quagmire but, when eventually given the opportunity to return to their former world, could no longer readjust to the reality of exiled surroundings and ironically had to fly back to the communist prison.

There is nothing that is spared by the totalitarian regime; the 'spectre of communism' is visited upon edifices as well as people, or as Derrida writes in *Spectres of Marx*, it "weighs [*pèse*], it thinks [*pense*], it intensifies and condenses itself in the very inside of life, within the most living life, the most singular or (if one prefers, individual) life".² Even if Leo and the first-person narrator claim not to be affected by the events they experience, the all-pervasiveness of communism alters their own lives, controls and governs them, and shapes their destinies. While Leo almost loses his life

² Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx. The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and The New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, with an Introduction by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg, (Routledge: New York and London, 1994), 109.

after hurling himself at the police cordon in defence of the monastery of Saint Cyril and Methodias and the old tower which “had withstood earthquakes, fires, woodworm, the Turks, rot and neglect” (306) but could not resist against Ceaușescu’s People’s Leisure Park, the narrator sees his own file made by the *Securitate*, who threaten him that, when in need, they will accuse him of “changing money on the black market, attempting bribery of state officials, associating with criminals, using prostitutes” (253).

While rescuing Leo, the narrator meets a character named Campanu, a pathologist who helps him take his injured friend to the hospital. A namesake returns in McGuinness’s *Jilted City* (2010), a collection of poems he claims were translated from a supposedly dissident poet named Liviu Campanu, who announces that “[t]he news from Bucharest is that the regime is crumbling / the way the rocks on the shore erode – by seeming not to”, but who turned out to be a fictional alter ego of the writer’s. Reversing the process whereby dissident authors often had to be published under fictitious names, McGuinness thus created his own fictional author-double for a text written in a politically more clement climate; in a sense *Jilted City* becomes the spectral double through which *The Last Hundred Days*, set in the pre-Revolution era, lives on and pays us a new visit.

Reading this novel in post-communist Romania, some twenty years after the so-called event of the “Revolution”, one cannot help having a sense not only of classical *déjà-vu* but, more grimly, of contemporary relevance. One may marvel at how swiftly and effortlessly the president’s right-hand man flips into his most ferocious enemy in the novel until it dawns on one that contemporary “post-communist” politics offers a similarly fickle, sad spectacle of superficial alliances and friendships, with members of a political party being won over to the other camp overnight and forcing their own appointed Prime Minister to resign. In similar fashion, witnessing any piece of news on a TV channel systematically reversed into its opposite on another channel makes one legitimately wonder whether one still suffers from double hearing and brings to mind Marx’s famous, true aphorism whereby history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce. Nodding at a thinker whom large swathes of the former Eastern bloc still refuse to read more than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall on grounds that his ideology had held sway over their countries for too long is not an innocent gesture in this context. As has often been said about a trauma, and specifically by Derrida’s caveat, in *Spectres of Marx*, against the facile temptation to forget Marx without mourning the end of Marxism, the best way of coming to terms with it, in order to prevent its compulsive repetition in different, unrecognised guises, is to get to grips with its often ghostly legacy, a task and a duty which, more than any other East-European country perhaps, Romania has arguably failed to perform.

But how can there be mourning when there is not even a proper burial to start with? Such haste can be glimpsed through the fictional re-enactment of the last gasps of the regime, towards the end of *The Last Hundred Days*. Manea Constantin, Ceaușescu’s close associate till the eleventh hour, like many others showed no scruples about promptly switching allegiance instead of “giving the Comrade a hand” (362). In a scene which seems to conflate in citational shorthand several notorious historical events and actors, thus highlighting their theatrical, mediatised status, the former (then future) minister fakes being incapacitated from an accident and, like the ‘real’ General Victor Stănculescu (one of the participants in the dictators’ masquerade trial) on D-day, sports a leg in plaster when he receives the narrator in his daughter’s apartment, turned into his makeshift headquarters, giving “a wince of pain so false it might as well have been in

inverted commas.” (362) Repetition and rehearsal, or drama as sombre farce: the novel recasts a mock historical process whose unreality was at times stranger and stronger than fiction. Having thus relieved himself from action during the critical turnover, Manea makes sure the comrade in trouble will never return. His leg having healed miraculously, his voice is recognized by the narrator during the TV broadcast of the Ceaușescu’s trial on Christmas day, three days later, accusing the couple of all possible crimes and condemning them to death, while it is now the turn of the dying regime’s accusers to hide behind the camera. In the grand theatre of history’s political and military operations, Manea acts and replaces the tyrannical prop unceremoniously and, like much of the nation, without a burial: *The king is dead, long live the king!*

Both the narrator and Leo wonder how much will effectively change and, in the final pages of a book which peters out into an uncertain future, offer a rather pessimistic glimpse into post-Revolution, even contemporary Romania:

[...] I looked out as we passed the Boulevard of Socialist Victory, its gravestone, let me guess: New brothel, same old whores – isn’t it that what you told us? Leo waved it off. ‘Well, you know how it is... after all, experience is what you want in a whore...’ (377)

The still relevant prescience of this ultimate verdict is less credit to McGuinness’s protagonists’ political realism or his novelistic craft, no matter how talented he has been at re-staging the demise of the former regime, but rather a slur on the ongoing state of the specifically Romanian flavour of Realpolitik. We cannot help asking ourselves what sort of “double vision” or ambivalent feelings Patrick McGuinness would entertain, should he return to take a stroll down the former Boulevard of Socialist Victory, its sterilely homogeneous new buildings showcasing the uniformity of Romania’s political destiny and inability to turn over a radically new leaf...

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