FATHERLY SPACES IN FOUR ROMANIAN NOVELS: *EMBERS* (*JAR*) BY LIVIU REBREANU, *THE SPIDER'S WEB* (*PÂNZĂ DE PĂIANJEN*) BY CELLA SERGHI, *DEFECT* (*DEFEKT*) BY FLORIN IRIMIA AND *THE ELEVATOR* (*LIFTUL*) BY CORNEL BĂLAN

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Abstract: *This paper explores the extent to which the father as represented in four Romanian novels, two of them from the interwar period, and two of them from the period preceding and succeeding the Romanian Revolution of December 1989, complies in his parental obligations with the societal roles exacted of him. While it is significant that three of the writers under scrutiny are male, and one female, other factors will also be considered, such as the association with a specific literary movement that the writers have, as well as the peculiarities that characterize their literary style and approach. Chella Serghi and Liviu Rebreanu with their works* The Spider's Web *and* Embers*, respectively, are part of the Romanian Modernism of the 1930s. Florin Irimia and Cornel Bălan with their* Defect *(2011) and* The Elevator *(2019) retrospectively review the roles of the father during communism and contrast them with those assigned to him in our modern times. While the latter writers are (post)postmodern with a certain predilection for postmodernism, the incorporation of the autobiographical in their works connects them, over the decades, to Cella Serghi and her modernist novel. The article will discuss the consequences of this (im)perfect compliance of the father for the sons and daughters in the texts (the narrators and protagonists). In view of the aforesaid, the approach to the discussion will be new historicist with certain spatial concerns which will aim to map the fatherly spaces in the abovementioned works.*

Key words: *father; patriarchality; interwar; Romanian Modernism; Communism; spatiality.*

Ever since the printing of the Bible and its translation into numerous European languages, including Romanian (1688), for instance, Cantacuzino's *Bible* written in the Cyrillic alphabet, Romanians have been consciously and even conscientiously patriarchal. Patriarchality as a societal projection of fatherhood and way of being in the world can be in turn linked to Romanian Orthodox Christianity[1] and be associated with perusing the Biblical texts around which society was built. Thus, during the interwar period (1920 – 1940), albeit with an emerging feminist movement concomitant with the First Wave of Feminism in Western Europe, authority was largely represented by the state, the church and the father in the family who was the direct house representation and embodiment of God. Although Liviu Rebreanu and Cella Serghi, as two contemporaries from that epoch with an age difference[2], differed in more ways than age would presuppose, they were both important figures in their own generation of writers. Rebreanu was already a well-established author who had nine more years to live while Serghi was a

[1] The scriptures were translated from Greek. – a. n.
[2] When publishing *The Spider's Web,* she was only 30 years old while he was 49. – a. n.

promising unknown within the circle of the younger by comparison to Rebreanu and much more literarily visible than herself Camil Petrescu and Mihail Sebastian[3]; she was also the only one of them to live through the Communist era after WWII and die in the dawn of Romanian democracy, in 1992. *Embers* (1934) and *The Spider's Web* (1937) are separated by only 3 years as regards their year of publication, but they reflect the viewpoints of two different generations, revealed through a masculine and feminine consciousness, respectively – that of their creator. And yet, the protagonist in both novels is a young girl in her early 20s – Liana (*Embers*) and Diana (*The Spider's Web*). Although modernist in different ways, both novels present patriarchal narratives where the young woman is typically both misunderstood and deified, and where there is a clearcut case of a tumultuous relationship between the daughter and her father often under waters that only seem still on the surface. In a patriarchal narrative, as exemplified by John Goldingay in his "Patriarchs in Scripture and History" (Goldingay 1-5), this is done from the perspective of the Bible but also history where this is the story of the father and where both younger males of the family and even more so, unmarried daughters, will have to acquiesce to his will. In the case of the former, a rebellion, as also demonstrated repeatedly in Greek mythology, is to be expected, always with an unclear winner, while in the latter complete filial obedience should be the norm. In such family dynamics, the father's response to the specific societal role could be examined through the prism of fictionalized imaginary or real-life experience of place and displacement, resulting in an abstract or otherwise unrepresentable space (Tally x), which thus forms a certain fatherly space that can be mapped. As regards the presentation of the father in these two novels, in *Embers* we have an omniscient narrator who employs a rather outdated linear but otherwise dynamic narrative and places his focus on the daughter. Thus, there are situations where the father, Alexandru Rosmarin, is characterized by means of his relationships with others, including his daughter. There are also situations where we see him through the eyes of Liana where free indirect discourse is utilized by the author. Anticipating *real-politic* developments in our era of post-Truth with a term that has gained traction, Rosmarin, described by Rebreanu as "sour and grouchy (cantankerous)" (*acru și ursuz*) (12), manages to be *transactional* with everyone, excluding only his daughter and female servants for whom he preserves the imperatives. In *The Spider's Web* we have a more interesting type of narrator – the first-person unreliable narrator in the role of Diana Slavu and her *alter ego*, Ilinca Dima. It is through Diana/ Ilinca, that is from a singularly feminine perspective, that we see the father who is

[3] The three mentioned male writers were also the ones who recommended to the reading public *The Spider's Web* with a banderol attached to the book. – a. n.

partially or completely Bulgarian by origin[4]. A major question that always arises in such a discussion is, as Luigi Zoja puts it, "What do children expect from their fathers?" (Zoja 2). This article will provide an answer to how the examined literary fathers deliver on what society exacts of them, making an argument that their children's expectations are largely excluded from the picture, even with the stories (of all four novels) being told mostly by the children themselves, which could be partially accounted for by what Zoja calls a more "highly conditioned" relationship in which the father, ironically in this context, "is expected to teach them to relate to society" (2). Zoja also advises us that what we demand of a father is that he be strong and powerful (3), being the household embodiment of God. Failing to do so, showing weakness and senility as an archetype, leads to contempt and rejection as illustrated in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Zoja 3) in the elder daughters Reagan and Goneril and in the Earl of Gloucester's bastard son – Edmund, but I will also add – understanding and acceptance by Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia and the earl's legitimate son Edgar. These presumptions will be tested in both pairs of novels with the evolution of patriarchality into the new millennium where Romania shares with the West what can be referred to as unconscious patriarchality (Zoja 4) and where family archetypes have never ceased to exist.

With the stated above the Romanian society from the 1930s, as will be further demonstrated, shared many of the contradictions of the interwar epoch in Europe and America which operated on multiple levels, and which, as far as patriarchality is concerned, sometimes led to conflicts with terrifying consequences. It is fascinating to examine the discrepancy between desires and reality manifested in every aspect of life in the *belle epoch*. As Livia-Irina Alexandru synthesizes it neatly:

> Although the interwar period appears in numerous recent writings as a golden age of the Romanian society, we need to know that a considerable part of it harbored feelings of unfulfillment and suffocation. Very elegant ladies and gentlemen walked out of the famous restaurant Capșa into a street full of mud where their shoes could be ruined quite easily. Most citizens did not have electricity at their disposal at the beginning of the period. The Dâmbovița was not exactly a river with the romantic aura of the Seine for Paris; moreover, it often caused floods for the residents of Bucharest. People compared themselves in that period with the realities of the West and so felt even more deeply their own shortcomings and anxieties. The problem is that we tend to think of the Romanian society between the wars as superior to ours and tend to ignore that we are living in a world that still offers us a lot more[5] (Alexandru).

[4] For an exploration of the significance of the father's identity, see Diyana Boeva's "The Bulgarian Father in the Romanian Novel *The Spider's Web* by Cella Serghi." (orig. title in Bulgarian) *Limes Slavicus iss. 9,* 2024, pp. 197-214. – a. n.

[5] All translations from Romanian in this article are mine. – a. n.

A modern writer and literary critic such as Ioana Pârvulescu traveling back in time imagines the interwar urban quotidian thus: "the Bucharest between the wars presents a strangeness of colors, odors, sounds and rhythms, people and firms" (Pârvulescu 5), constituting a coexistence of the old and the new: "the noise of the limousines mix with the sound of the horse hooves and the rumble of the streetcars" (5). In this mirror-like image, both we, the people of today, and they, the people of the past, would be equally lost if our times could be exchanged for a moment[6] (9). Even though the past still inhabits the present, only incidentally can the past hold a feasible projection for the future. Essentially, the city and the epoch shared many of the sensibilities, preoccupations and socioeconomic conditions that could be found at that time in the West with certain differences. Just like the *flapper* phenomenon in the USA, women in Europe in general and in Romania in particular, felt more liberated after World War I due to the sweeping changes that came with the 1920s – from mass-scale inventions and improved urban infrastructure to very modern perceptions that dared not oppose promiscuity or extol chastity in the premarital relations between the two sexes. And yet, both parents and children, especially girls, evinced not only residual but essentially active Victorianism in their approach to sexual matters. At the same time, even these reactionary manifestations revealed a streak of new modernity in everything everywhere. In a striking literary concurrence attesting to the commonality of these sensibilities across the Atlantic, Roberta Alden from Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (publ. 1925) and Alexa, Mihaela's sister, in *Invitation to the Waltz* (*Invitația la vals*) (publ. 1936) by Mihail Drumeș, both ask the respective male antiheros Clyde Griffiths and Tudor Petrican to marry the heroines (Roberta and Mihaela) just before the latter give birth to an undesired child, and then divorce them on the very next day, since supposedly neither of them would relish a marriage to an unloved woman. These conflicting perceptions and modern practices universally shared by all also raised the stakes for the ever more difficult position of the father and put a severe strain on both male and female members of society in the making and managing of the family, thus underlining what Zoja calls *the paradox of the father* – being expected by his children to show double standards – as an unconditional protector for them and an implacable adversary for their opponents (Zoja 4); thus in a patriarchal world, consciously or unconsciously practiced, he is expected to be a master of the (im)possible. The two new millennium writers, whose portrayals of the father will be under scrutiny here, present their narratives from the first-person male narrator's perspective and have the additional advantage of having employed the autobiographical into their

[6] Pârvulescu further explores time traveling as a critique on the interwar Bucharest in her novels *Life Begins on Friday* (*Viața începe vineri*) (2013) and *The Future Begins on Monday* (*Viitorul începe luni*) (2012). – a. n.

writings, thus partially covering their childhood in communist Romania retrospectively[7]. It is to be noted that society was affected by the influences of the 3rd and 4th Waves of Feminism coming from the West, but since the narrators' mothers belong to older generations they are not described as being influenced by these movements. Still, they can choose what patriarchal roles to accept; respectively, the fathers opt for certain roles that they feel they can reject.

In the examined timespan we can broadly list the following perceived roles, societal expectations and social norms of the father in Romanian society: 1900-1940s: *provider, authority figure*, *work, discipline children, lead morally*, *strongly patriarchal, conservative*; 1940s-1989: *provider, socialist role model*, *work, support ideological upbringing, state controlled family ideals, more equal gender participation*; Post-1989: *co-parent, emotional supporter, still provider*; *work, be emotionally available*, *more egalitarian ideals influenced by Western Europe*, *but with cultural resistance in some areas*.

Against the roles and expectations thus listed we can begin our examination first with the novels by Rebreanu and Serghi. In *Embers* we have a presentation of a kind of belated *angelic daughter*[8], Liana, who is on the surface as patriarchal as she can be, but whose falling for the rake Dandu emancipates her from her father and once this happens, her compliance with the things he exacts of her is nothing more than keeping appearances. In *The Spider's Web*, Diana tacitly disapproves of her father's overt insistence on his daughter's being a patriarchal angel and actively uses her relationship with Michi, the chemistry teacher who is to become her husband, as an emancipation from both her controlling father and her emotionally incompatible husband who proves to be the incorrect solution to the father-daughter problem. The resulting resolution is not dissimilar to the one presented by Sylvia Plath in her poem "Daddy" and addressed partially in the American writer's novel *The Bell Jar*[9]. In both Romanian novels, apart from the daughter in a marrying age with all the enormous significance contained in what Lili Bart from Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) imparts by

[7] See Boev, Hristo's (2023) "Between the Communist Past and Early Democracy: The Power of the Autobiographical in C. G. Balan's *Crook Ltd* (*Escroc S.R.L.*) and *The Elevator* (*Liftul*)" (p. 36). – a. n.

[8] For the dialectic of the angelic daughters in the early to mid-Victorian times, see Boev, Hristo's (2021) deconstructivist "Anorexia Mirabilis Decoded: Rereading Female Corporeal Consumption in Dickens's Angelic Daughters", *Studies in Linguistics, Culture, and FLT,* vol. 9, no. 1, 2021, pp. 40-53. – a. n.

[9] See Boev, Hristo's (2022) "Sylvia Plath's Dark New York vs Cella Serghi's Cramped Bucharest with regards to Boston, Constanța and Balchik", *Annual of Konstantin Preslavsky University, Shumen. Faculty of the Humanities*, no. 2, 2022, pp. 353-364. – a. n.

referring to herself as a "*jeune fille à marier*" (Wharton 110), there is a grown-up male child, too as a counterpoint to the bringing up of the daughter.

Embers opens with the spatial positioning of the family actors in the house: most of their diurnal activities being spent in the basement parlor or what they call "living room" (Rebreanu 8), the other one also located there being permanently inhabited by the grandparents. Even though the parents and children could use the upper floor at any time, this space is reserved mainly for receiving important visitors. The basement is also the place where Liana spends most of her time, being surrounded and always monitored by the other members of the family who function as a Foucauldian panoptical eye from which she cannot really hide. By contrast, her brother Mircea can disappear from the family circle whenever he wants having purchased a studio apartment in the city. The parlor is also the place where Rosmarin likes to have a siesta, with the spacious kitchen at his wife's disposal (8). The gloomier space of the parlor is not the only reason why the father prefers to spend most of his time there – there are economic reasons, too: the upper floor furniture is thus spared from the wear and tear of use, and he saves from the light and heat (9). Liana, unlike her brother, can only recourse the upper floor under the pretext that she is studying there (9). A miser who wants to always be in control, Rosmarin has a gendered standard for his children – he may grumble about his son's studio but eventually chooses to overlook what steadily slips out of sight, concentrating his powers of observation and control on his daughter who becomes his major asset and trade commodity so he can continue working as a clerk past his retirement age despite being undereducated – by conspiring with a powerful man – a director-general, Constantin Alistar to whom he hopes to marry her off despite the latter's being much her elder. Liana's own love drama – her being seduced and abandoned by the military pilot Dandu remains largely her own private suffering save for her confidings in her granny, the only person in the family that seems to be able to understand and empathize with her despite her failing health. The death of the grandmother puts an effective end to true compassion and from then on Liana's love troubles receive only degrees of indifference, mockery and misunderstanding from all around her, friends and family. As for Rosmarin, in his society-imposed and self-assumed for his times roles, he attempts to do all, but since the main object of exercising them is Liana, he only succeeds in becoming a despicable figure not only for Liana, but also for the readers of the novel. Although he can be considered a *provider* for the family, it is mainly to keep his authority over the weaker members – his wife, daughter and little son, Bebe, based on finances – he not only cannot but also does not need to earn much since he already has inherited a house where the rest also live – this is related to his obsession with keeping his job at all cost which involves a lot of histrionics in the family (Rebreanu 99); his desire to be a *moral leader* in the

family, by severely criticizing and even threatening to evict and banish Liana for her love relationship with Dandu which does not lead to marriage only underscores a compromised myopic vision in which her marriage, if it cannot be done for love, needs to be done for his own convenience and peace of mind or he will accept nothing that undermines his roles of the patriarch in the family – a daughter perceived as *loose*. The fact that Liana plays along and accompanies her father when an intercession for keeping his job should involve her being paraded as a potentially desired woman to marry does not stop Rosmarin from being excessively cruel to her when his patriarchal integrity is endangered and so her revolt against her father's insinuations becomes an expression of unbearable indignation, labelling their home "a torture house" (160). Rosmarin's response to her declaration to leave is that "he would rather not have a daughter than be shamed in the eyes of the others" (160). His understanding of modern love is chirurgical and boils down to the utter condemnation: "Why would it not be correct of him to offer you marriage, if he loves you? Or how should I take it? – that you are not good enough to be the little mister's wife, but are good enough to be his plaything?" (163). Rosmarin's overbearing attitude towards Liana when she is fighting for what she believes is the love of her life classifies him as callous and *conservative*, *strongly patriarchal* but only as far as women are concerned. Eventually, abandoned by her lover for another woman, misunderstood by almost everyone of significance in her life, realizing that she is a prized object for Alistar above all for the fact that he may have presumed her a virgin and that her womanly value in his eyes is considerably reduced because of his misgivings that she is not, Liana takes her own life unwilling to make further compromises with the male perceptions of her womanhood in a clear manifestation of the failed single role she has expected of her father – that of her protector. The final scene with Liana lying in her coffin dressed up as a bride and even smiling is grotesque and seals off her enigma for everyone around her, remaining as misunderstood in life as in death. The comments that the mourners make only underscore their gross misunderstanding reminiscent of the biting irony at the endings of some of Oscar Wilde's fairy tales such as "The Happy Prince" and "The Birthday of the Infanta". Yet what unites Rosmarin and Liana as father and daughter is the fact that both lack proper higher education so they both remain adamantly conservative in not being able to allow for compromises which could have come with a more philosophical outlook on life.

The Spider's Web also opens with a parlor scene where a young girl Ilinca Dima whiles away idle hours, a traditional place for family gatherings seeped in memory, with an evocation of Diana Slavu, her school friend who likes to confide in her. It is when Ilinca starts reading Diana's notebooks in which she keeps a diary that we get to know Diana and her father. In this

modern novel of development with a strong autobiographical line[10] Diana's father must prove himself in times of peace and in times of war. Despite being authoritarian like Rosmarin and checking all the other boxes for the exemplary father of the 1920s and 1930s, he lacks Rosmarin's false morality. Also, he is never driven by self-interest; unlike Rosmarin, again, he will take any job that he can work honestly to support his family with, but moving incessantly from house to house and city to city, including Sofia, Bulgaria, during the war, where the Slavus have relatives, the family experiences an endless misery occasioned by appalling living conditions, including a brothel in Braila, Romania. Still, despite everything, Diana's father is never ashamed by what he can offer on the table since it has been earned with honest work; also, he never fails to be charming to unexpected visitors (Serghi 84). As a disciplinarian, he does not impose a gendered standard and is only slightly harsher with his son when he believes he needs to be physical, this equal treatment continuing into the children's adolescence. A surprising revelation for Diana is to find out that her mother probably has a lover – Cobadin (101), but having gone through so many hardships and inconveniences, Diana has learned to not judge her parents for their foibles, whatever they may be. Diana's biggest problem, as far as marriage is concerned, is that she does not have a dowry as I point out in my comparison to Sylvia Plath and her autofictional New York while discussing other represented places such as Constanța and Balchik (Boev 361). Also, it is her mother that intensifies the sensation of a true marital predicament by urging her to marry practically any man with some business who may be willing to take her (Serghi 145-7). Being patriarchal but lacking double standards, Diana's father would only respect a man with sincere good intentions for his daughter and one of the greatest transformations in the novel is Diana's reevaluation of her relationship to him. Believing she saves herself and her family – parents and little sister – from perennial penury and further courtship humiliations, Diana marries Michi for whom her being dowry-less is a problem he might be willing to forego. Yet,

[10] The factual correspondence between the autofictional and the autobiographical in this novel is established in a later book by Cella Serghi, *On the Spider's Thread of the Memory* (orig. title: *Pe firul de păianjen al memoriei*) (publ. 1977) where it can be concluded that Serghi's novel bears the mark of "too much sincerity" (Serghi 267) in the words of Camil Petrescu, one of the prototypes in the story (also discussed in Hristo Boev's *Feminine Selves in Sylvia Plath's Prose and Poetry: The Perspective of Compared Lived Experience in Fiction*, Shumen University Press, 2021, p. 241). It should be noted that the novel comes close to French and American writings from the epoch that contain a high degree of the autobiographical; also, from a modern perspective the *new sincerity* in fiction initiated by writers such as D. F. Wallace at the very beginning of the 21st century signaled a change of sensibility based on a return to early 20th century modernist developments and has given rise to its becoming an essential element in post-postmodern fictional works, which is yet another proof of the actual significance and underrated status of Serghi's novel. – a. n.

her financial situation improves only slightly since Michi's once prosperous bourgeois family has fallen into financial decline to the point that they are unable to regularly pay their electricity bills and so the newlyweds rent gloomy small apartments with Michi being the only *provider* and Diana doing her unpaid legal practice. Diana's lack of financial contributions is not a problem that pesters them, though, since she, being a woman, is not expected to contribute much if at all; it is the realization on her part that her sacrifice, and probably his, too, was unworthy: not only her family are not saved, she is also profoundly unhappy with Michi's radical pragmatism and lack of emotional connection in everything he does with her. One of the biggest strengths of this striking Romanian novel is its in-depth psychological exploration of familial relationships against the backdrop of turbulent and tumultuous times, and so Diana, becoming emancipated from her father's authoritarian house rule by marrying Michi, enters divorce proceedings and returns in a true Cordelian fashion to her already senile ailing father who, a modern version of King Lear in his last days, remains a man of moral principles as he lies dying in a Bucharest hospital. Again, unlike Rosmarin, we see the father through the eyes of the daughter who remembers fondly that in all his judgments and reproaches of her he has only spoken with love (Serghi 263).

Jumping about 80 years we will examine the roles of the father in Florin Irimia's debut novel, *Defect* and Cornel Bălan's *The Elevator*. As indicated above, these roles have undergone changes over time. Key roles in the new times after 1989 are those of the *co-parent*, *the emotional supporter*, while remaining the main, but not only *provider* in the family. The more Western *egalitarian* relationships include not only the spouse, but the children, too, and as the latter become young adults, the former becomes a friendly figure who gives well-intentioned advice where the love between the father and his children is not expected to overcome the trauma of disciplining the children which in the old times could and would, as illustrated in the examined literary texts, involve not only verbal but also physical violence. Since the second pair of novels also partially covers the childhood of the narrators spent in Communist Romania, we will discuss the role of the father as an *ideological* extension of the state in the family, remaining the main figure of authority there.

In Florin Irimia's *Defect*, the male narrator (Eduard Tăutu), in a story within a story where he is the fictional creation of an English teacher called Lorin, has a father who is presented as the perfect debonair, driving fancy cars, owning spacious villas, and even quite shamelessly, flaunting his extramarital affairs – at the beginning of the novel – with a callous gold-digger, Scarlett, a modern-day non-romantic version of the eponymous heroine from Margaret Michell's *Gone with the Wind* (publ. 1936). Eduard's father is a very successful lawyer who sees his role as a father of a young man in the Romania

of the 2000s, times of social instability and rampant corruption, as aptly illustrated in the film *Filantropica* (2002), only as the personifier and propagator of corruption itself having begrudgingly interceded for the position of his son as a PE teacher, thus denying the latter the possibility to obtain the position on his own true merits (Irimia 30). While he engages in nepotism, he does so, dismayed by his son's refusal to compete in the corruption game. The father seems to have embraced the post-revolutionary dark 1990s and insecure 2000s with open arms as times defined by their collective perception of murky waters allowing for brutal unapologetic fishing. His pecuniary domination in the family establishes him as a very different kind of father compared to his already discussed early 20th century predecessors in Romanian literature. Remaining the *main provider* in the family before the procured job for his son, *egalitarianism* is not on his agenda either to Eduard or to Eduard's mother, who, feeling constantly humiliated by her husband's neglectful behavior, has become a hysterical wreck without a vestige of self-respect, and who can only find solace in heavy drinking. As for Eduard, his father harbors for him only feelings of contempt mainly for his failure to finish his legal studies and so reap the harvest of practicing law without morality. Having chosen sport, Eduard seems to instinctively wish to steer away from corruption, since, as he poignantly remarks, "who takes private lessons in sport?" (30), but also, this is a testament to his indolence and refusal to take advantage of the situation; ultimately, it is proof of a certain lack of talent and indifference to the fishing opportunities.

It is hard not to look at this position of the father as a powerful metaphor – of the transmogrification of the communist covert favoritisms and nepotisms into the flagrant ostentatious brandishing of material gains with little regard for the closest ones or the image created in society, also exposed and ridiculed in *Filantropica*, unlike the image that Rhett Butler from Michell's novel tries to create for himself for the sake of his little daughter, so that she will not be associated with her parents' dubious rise to riches. While this effort is in vain, since the daughter dies young and innocent, in Irimia's novel Eduard manages to inherit his father's corruption, marrying his former lover, after the father dies, without much of the saving grace of his being Scarlett's more appropriate husband, but also without seeming to realize the purport of this inheritance. From then on both his life and the novel's narrative spin out of control in postmodernist convolutions of chaotic events and happenings. The powerful presence of Eduard's father is gone in an instant and this is symbolic of the collapse of the conspicuous corruption practices at the very beginning of the millennium, being transformed into a more veritable semblance of democracy, which, however, lacks a sense of purpose in the young people's lives. Getting lost in the transition to a functioning democracy, both Lorin and his alter ego, Eduard, fail to leave a legacy, failing as fathers,

unable to fit in the fast-changing Romanian society, despite some effort on their part in this respect. They are equally lost in a functioning democracy proper such as Canada, a sort of a promised land for both Romanians and Bulgarians in the first decade of the new millennium, since they lack the integration skills needed for living in such a society, impossible to obtain during their lives so far.

Another modern Romanian writer who uses the autobiographical extensively and offers a kaleidoscopic immigrant experience in his works and who also makes an ampler examination of his characters' communist past is Cornel Bălan with his debut novel *Crook Ltd* (*Escroc S. R. L.*) (2013) to be followed by *The Elevator* (*Liftul*) (2019). In both novels the narrator is a male Romanian youth who loses his father while being a child. In the first novel the autobiographical fact is rendered dramatically by a stunning reference to the fatal accident which led to the author's both parents' deaths, being smashed by a milk cistern truck (Bălan 21). Subsequently, the little boy is relegated to the care of his grandparents and grows up in a village. The father, being an impulsive young man with a penchant for boxing, is repeatedly evoked in the growing youth's memories but since the loss occurs while the boy is at a very young age, the moments that remain engraved in his mind are those of the fatal day in which neither parent is at their parental finest and uses both verbal and physical violence with the small boy; unfortunately, this will be his last memory of them. In *The Elevator* the character of the father is much better defined but also mostly as a fond memory that the young nameless narrator returns to time and time again while living in a dystopian Bucharest. As a personality, this father is the complete opposite of Irimia's portrayal of the powerful tyrant who imposes his will indiscriminately. Instead, he comes out as a modern version of Mihail Sebastian's Paul from *The Accident* (*Accidentul*) (1940) – an apathetic young man who is both fascinated by and is the object of fascination of women. Rather than being a house god, he is more of a magician who happens to have become a father unbeknownst to himself, wonderfully available to other women, and who is able to use his magical powers upon a whim, but the effect is that the small boy is immediately transported into a world of wonderful daydreaming, as the following excerpt testifies:

> When I became nine years of age, three days after my birthday, my father put some phosphorescent stickers on the ceiling of my room. He had brought them as a present, stickers in the shapes of stars. Venus, Saturn, planets, comets, constellations. It took him an entire afternoon since he made sure he arranged them into something like the Milky Way, one for the whole apartment. I don't think it had cost him much – all his presents were like this – but at night, after I turned off the lights, I literally remained without breath. I was floating in space! Dristor had remained down below, far behind, and my block of flats was racing at the speed of light towards the Final Frontier, with

> the mission to explore incredible, undiscovered worlds, where surely new forms of life and super-advanced civilizations existed. Sometimes, I surpassed even the speed of light and everything else, just by using those stickers of ten lei and fifty bani. Mum's dishes full of delicious food never quite had this success! (Bălan 48-9)[11].

The connection the child keeps with his father who is already dead is through voicemail: "I'm busy at the moment, but if you leave a message, I'll do the impossible to return your call!" No one had deactivated his mobile yet, so I started to cry" (Bălan 48). This father is also unmaterialistic to the point of being irreal, leaving the apartment and everything in it to the narrator's mother after divorce proceedings and starting all over again from scratch (Bălan 12). The narrator hints that this may have been done from the father's experiencing remorse for his infidelities. Yet, in the young man's memories, his father also appears as a person capable of giving good advice, albeit incapable of following it himself. His physical and mental strengths receive material dimensions when the narrator describes to his future employer how his father has started renting ever more miserable abodes in the city. The father can also be quite emotional and gets teary, his voice quavering, when receiving a cheap bracelet accidentally found on a bench from his son – the only present to ever receive from him (218). As the father has two more marriages after this one, the narrator suggests that his parent might be cut out of photographs from previous marriages the way the narrator's mother has cut him out of family photos.

Bălan, in his second novel, manages to construct a remarkable memorable portrait of a vulnerable father who renounces authoritarian power over an attitude of humbleness and humility. In the dystopian Bucharest that Bălan masterfully creates the father becomes elusive in a world that seems to be running on its own. Too unassertive, he gets kicked out of numerous schools despite being a brilliant mathematician and all he can do is accept his only parental role – that of a very imperfect *co-parent*, remaining a friend that is hard to reach. The overall portrayal of the father in this novel is strongly reminiscent of what James Herzog calls "father hunger" (Herzog 6) – the unavailable father due to divorce (6) where his personality fills the memories of the growing child and colors them in a light in which the father may emerge as a positive figure despite his painful physical absence[12]. What is very understated but possibly realized by the son, in this case, is that the absent

[11] Also discussed with reference to autofiction in Hristo Boev's "Between the Communist Past and Early Democracy: The Power of the Autobiographical in C. G. Balan's *Crook Ltd* (*Escroc S. R. L.*) and *The Elevator* (*Liftul*)", (p. 38). – a. n.

[12] A similar evaluation of the absent father can be observed in Tennessee William's *The Glass Menagerie* (publ. 1944) where the narrator Tom finally accepts and identifies with his father, following in his footsteps of the male member who chooses to leave his profoundly dysfunctional family. – a. n.

father might be away from the child against his will, because of the new circumstances of another marriage. His presence in the novel is manifested through the dreams of the child which add to the surreal settings. The narrator, just like Irimia's narrator, describes Bucharest in the first decade of the new millennium. Rather than become a psychothriller as we observe with Irimia, Bălan's novel portrays the times as palpably dystopian where everything and everyone is lost or borderline recognizable one way or another: the father who simply fades away from the picture; the son, who starts a job in an international corporation only to find out that his job is impossible to define, hence execute properly and he himself is targeted as a subject in a scientific experiment; the mother who heroically withstands hardships so that she will have something to put on the table; beautiful dreamy girls sitting casually on park benches seemingly lost in themselves and utterly unattainable; ultimately, Mr. Iosifescu, the director of the corporation, who seems to have lost all traces of humanity and is rather run by the company, being part of a mechanism that appears to work on its own and the goals of which must always remain unknown.

There are numerous Romanian novels – from the interwar period and nowadays, as well as in the period in between, which feature fathers (im)perfectly complying with the roles assigned to them by society. To the modern ones we could add, among others, Radu Găvan's *Neverland* (2015) which portrays a single father raising his little daughter, and Ioana Pârvulescu's *The Innocents* (*Inocenții*) (2016) where the father is a storyteller who keeps the family around the table by spinning his own yarns, seemingly implausible but essentially anti-communist, thus remaining only a formal figure that provides the framework within and against which each member of the family can find their place in the house and in the world and even in these two novels, regardless of his societal role compliance, the father dies or disappears, a metaphor of a constantly crumbling patriarchal world which is continually being both recreated and decreated. From the examined works we can conclude that there is a much higher degree of compliance with the societal roles observed in the pair of writers from the interwar period regardless of the position in society occupied by the father; other novels prominently featuring a father figure can testify to the truthfulness of this affirmation, notably *Ciuleandra* (publ. 1927) by Rebreanu. In the second pair of novels, we can see a significantly smaller engagement with what is expected of the father corresponding to a certain dissolution of the father's ego in more modern times, and again other contemporary literary works could be cited in support of this statement. From an ideological standpoint, all examined or mentioned modern novels except *Neverland*, where this is not a topic of concern, decry communist practices. Adherence to patriarchal ideology as the foundation of patriarchal society over time and in the novels under scrutiny

has undergone an erosion. Paradoxically perhaps, we have established that the more socially incompliant a father is in the interwar epoch, the more appreciative the daughters who are often the storytellers; the same could not be said about the modern post-1989 times: failure in the identified key roles leads to the filial depreciation of the male parent, possibly part of Zoja's *paradox of the father* based on the gendered perceptions of the children. Again, we can see that none of the children of the fathers in the respective novels, sons or daughters, make successful fathers or mothers. The strong presence of the father and high degree of fatherly compliance in the interwar period is certainly representative of a more patriarchal world. In a less patriarchal society, which is Romania today, the less engaged fathers, especially in Bălan's novel, may appear as weak[13], but they are nonetheless even more fascinating than their hardliner counterparts from 80 years ago since the choices they themselves must make are increasingly more difficult and dialectical in essence. Regardless of the choice a father will make, he must be, as he has always been, a master of the (im)possible.

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[13] From a modern point of view, the effects of strong patriarchality exercised by the father can be perceived, as Allen G. Johnson poignantly argues in *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, Temple University Press, 2005, as "distortions of patriarchal masculinity" (Johnson ix). According to this sociologist, this prevents a man from realizing his true self (ix). – a. n.

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