

**MINISTRY OF EDUCATION  
„1 DECEMBRIE 1918” UNIVERSITY OF ALBA IULIA  
FACULTY OF HISTORY, LETTERS AND EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES  
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF PHILOLOGY**

**DOCTORAL THESIS  
ABSTRACT**

**PhD Supervisor:**

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**PhD Candidate:**

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**ALBA IULIA**

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**CHILDHOOD TRAUMA BETWEEN REALITY AND  
CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS**

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**Key-words:** childhood trauma, interdisciplinary view, fact versus fiction, psychogenic determinations, sociological perspective, Autobiographical trilogy, psychoanalysis, the literature as an effect, Heterotopia, behavioral disturbances, Transgenerational Haunting, Therapeutic Literature, Lord–bondsman dialectic

Based on the reasoning of an interdisciplinary reception of literature, this research, **CHILDHOOD TRAUMA BETWEEN REALITY AND CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS**, consists in debating a liminally located theme. It is positioned at the border between reality and fiction. The study starts from the premise that literary discourse, clinical studies and sociological influences intermingle with each other. Furthermore, it is aimed at tracing some contours that combine the hermeneutics of the fictional with the actuality of the surrounding reality disturbances.

The **central intention** of the study aims to place the reception of the childhood trauma literature in a perspective of sociocultural conjunctures, which reflect and reveal the nerve points of modern society. We undertake this approach precisely because these topics need to be solved and, at the same time, updated. Subsequently, the purpose of the research is focused on the methods of interpretation of a strictly individual character, the bearer of childhood trauma, by relating it to the context that generated it. The analysis will follow two paths, depicting both the ideologies of the European horizon, including the Romanian one, as well as of the American space, emphasizing the sociocultural similarities that are established between the two spaces. Hence, the concern of the present study aims, in the same measure, to highlight the mutual influences that occur between contemporary life and written literature. In this way, the clinical case and childhood traumatic experiences become prototypes of literary inspiration, at the same time, the literary domain serves as a legitimizing document of the decryption of society's traumas. Narratives will be depicted, therefore, as slices of life, an *imago mundi*. For this reason, the dimension of the literary discourse required the selection of an illustrative corpus of texts, belonging to a number of three authors, whose territorial situation is in European space, Camelia Cavadia – *Măștile fricii; Purgatoriul îngerilor* (for Romania), Susanna Tamaro – *Pe o singură voce* (for Italy), and the American territory represented by the autobiographical trilogy of Dave Pelzer – *A Child Called 'It'; The Lost Boy. A Foster Child's Search for the Love of a Family* și *A Man Named Dave. A Story of Triumph and Forgiveness*.

However, the numerical exhaustiveness of the narratives was not the objective of the research (in order to consolidate the notions addressed and the hermeneutic analysis), but the priority consisted in the selection of a corpus of narratives that would complete the principles of relevance and representativeness. This approach consisted in choosing a literary corpus that covers and achieves the set of main objectives established with the choice of the theme. Furthermore, the representativeness of the literary support, along with its relevance, forms a fundamental constant for the understanding of the proposed concepts, for the selection of the mode of operation, for the chosen methodology, but also for their applicability degree. The operational nature of the selectivity of these narratives engages an apocalyptic imaginary, imbued with stereotypical images of the abused infant, which depicts a series of dysfunctional relational patterns that generate trauma and behavioral disorders. Thus, the chosen works become representative by promoting grotesque and naturalistic descriptions, which outline malignant universes and identities in a continuous disaggregation of identity, generated by the resistance and propagation of the generational circle. Suffering infantile characters are placed in relation to the forces of the victim-aggressor dyad and those of the violence and claustrophobic captivity. Family tragedies increase the alienation and mutilation of childhood identity as a result of the ritualization of suffering and torture. Besides, the chosen authors, by means of their narratives, reveal an ideology rooted in the motivation to draw inspiration from the brutal reality of the modern world. Moreover, the authors' option to record a literature of contemporaneity, centered on childhood trauma, reveals, through a careful look, their positioning within historical and sociocultural contexts responsible for societal traumas that propagate to the layers of the family unit and the unit of the individual. It is precisely this common feature of the three authors that favors the selection of a methodology that engages a mixture of clinical studies and psychosocial interpretations with that of hermeneutic analysis, favoring that universalized look that slides from the real to fiction. At the same time, the absence, on an internal level, in the Romanian critical space, of researches directed towards the texts of the three contemporary authors, strengthened the literary critical motivation of the selection and exegetical approach. It is not to be neglected, like the choice of the theme, the intrinsically affective motivation and critical interest asserted in terms of establishing a decision on each author and each work. For this reason, the subjective desire to start a research directed to the work of the three authors was born together with the sympathy and allocentrism felt during the reading.

The **selectivity of the narratives**, along with the choice of the theme, highlight the motivation and the research objectives. Involving current and delicate topics of contemporaneity and operating at a multidisciplinary level (literature, sociology, psychology/psychiatry, history), the analysis involves, on the one hand, the pitfalls of an uncertain approach, caused on the basis of a minimally exploited terrain, and on the other hand, the unpredictability of satisfaction, which justifies, in a considerable measure, the dimensions of personal motivations. As a result, the selection of the theme was based on motivations of general interest, which involve a militant attitude towards collective and individual traumas, perceived as effects of unclassifiable treatments applied to children. Hence, the research pursues, along with scientific acceptance, a societal value, manifested by triggering an alarm signal and attempting to revive, in the Romanian space, the scientific interests in the literature of childhood trauma, hoping that the study will not be limited to a simple palliative effect. The intention of directing to the literary subject of childhood traumas would facilitate, starting from the individual, fictional or partly fictional case, a decoding of the surrounding world, with all the negative aspects that take place in the heart of a family, respectively in the dark interior of a society. As well as the "demonic" history of the last century generated a magnitude of victimization, globally extrapolated, which produced the emergence of methods, strategies and terminologies of trauma, which allow this approximation and decryption of the phenomenon within the limits of literature. Through an interdisciplinary illustration and an access to the current methodological possibilities, the concept of trauma authorizes the activation of the transfers of methods, applied from the clinical field to the literary field. Besides, the transdisciplinary and pluridisciplinary views that slide from man to society, and vice versa, facilitate the opportunity for a new understanding of modern society. On the other hand, the **critical motivation**, but also **the argument** established in the foundation of our thesis, underlines, both through the prism of the subject addressed and through the choice of the authors subjected to the hermeneutic analysis, a pronounced absence from the fresco of Romanian literary criticism of a thesis that would outline and analyze the social phenomenon of infantile trauma, analysed in an interdisciplinary manner, through the lens of contemporary literature, both European and American. The clinical cases of childhood trauma, which are constantly increasing, the tendency of public, critical and literary interest towards the abuses of the power exercised over childhood, but also the selection of a corpus of contemporary writings, gives the research and its objectives **a new perspective**. At the same time, the research aimed at an

interdisciplinary integration of the critical apparatus, belonging to the approach of universal literature, from the perspective of the study of comparative literature and comparative analysis methods, with the instruments devoted to cultural studies, of psychosocial mechanisms, coming from the clinical and sociological fields (socio-psychopathological concepts , psychohistory, psychoclass, genetics, economic determinations, the historical and the sociocultural dimension). The liminal situation of the discourse, at the border of fiction and reality, joined the medical terminology of studies focused on trauma (socio-psychopathological interpretations), with the methods of a literary hermeneutics whose mechanism trains the paradigms of psychoanalytical criticism (Lacanian), the theory of the imaginary (the portal-mirror, theorized by Marius Conkan), functional linguistics (Paul Simpson), symbolic criticism and the heterotopic concept (Foucault). For this reason, the applied method establishes the research directions of the work, following the rules of inferential analyses, by placing the literary corpus in the dimension of the theoretical component, regulated in the medical and psychosocial discourse, integrating a cursiveness imposed by the structure and fictional or non-fictional nature of each approached narrative. Thus, the doctoral research is founded on the basis of a scientific perspective, provided by the extensive bibliography, which, in favor of the innovative character and the current conduct, imposed an approach to the composition of the theoretical component of the foreign bibliography, especially the English one, along with Romanian studies and Critical Theories. Involving the three types of discourse, literary, clinical and sociological, the compilation of the bibliography comes both from the field of specialized literature of clinical, psychosocial studies and sociological criticism, as well as from the sector of studies based on literary trauma, psychoanalysis and literary criticism. Its diversity consists in the mixture of contemporary and current critical references, with those of classical studies and leading critics, which include studies of criticism and literary theory, collective volumes, dictionaries, interviews, essays, doctoral theses, published articles of scientific journals and website addresses.

Therefore, **the structure and organization of the paper** justify the deductive reasoning, starting from the theoretical framework towards the hermeneutic exercises, advocating for their distribution in the size of the four chapters, along with the related subchapters, the introduction, conclusions and bibliographic references. Admitting the assumption of some terms within which the traumatic discourse manifests itself, the first part of the research outlined the core concept of trauma. The openness to this type of

understanding emerged starting from a retrospective perspective embodied in the established studies of Lucian Blaga and Henri Bergson which approximate the idea of primitive trauma under the aspect of an ontological fear of death. It was also demonstrated, through a comparative observation, the process by which the psychic configurations of prehistoric man, although positioned under the sign of magical thinking, sum up the original patterns of contemporary trauma, repositioned in a different light by psychiatrists Gottfried Fischer, Peter Riedesser and Louis Crocq. It must be stated again that the existence of anguish and traumatic experiences have been sources of literary inspiration from the distant past to the present day, being actively captured in literary discourses that involved in their construction that proportion of immediate reality. It is precisely this need to narrate the trauma that we have illustrated within our thesis, calling on the concepts of mimesis and catharsis, developed by Aristotle, the anchoring point of the notion of trauma within the psychoanalytic process, which operates through the act of remembering. The late takeover of these concepts, by Sigmund Freud, facilitated that positioning of the suffering individual in the challenging context of the traumatic event, which suppresses any possibility of articulating the human being in the primordial topos of the state of grace and positions him in the dimensions of a "cultural frustration". Yet, one of the aims of the study was precisely this justification of the refractory way in which the individual becomes a stereotype image of the society in which he lives. Hence, I have illustrated the way in which the study of traumatic events, interpreted in the light of Freudian optics, generated, among the continuators, the necessary openness to a reinterpretation of the notion of trauma, through the actions of incorporation and introjection. From a methodological perspective, the theorizations of the two concepts, included by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in the transgenerational determination, proved to be appropriate for the type of narrative proposed and were doubled by the comparative analysis applied to the texts of Camelia Cavadia and Susanna Tamaro. In their analysis, I nuanced that process that determines the activation, in the interior of the characters, of the transgenerational ghost and the crypt model that increases the ataraxia and psychedelism of the childhood trauma, transfiguring the individuality of the actors into the archetypal image of the atrocious father. The spatiality of the crypt has been identified, according to theorists, as a probing of metaphysical, spatial, logical limits. This turned out to be, paradoxically, both internal and external, characteristic of the model of human subjectivity introduced by the two psychoanalysts, while the ghost symbolized the transgenerational secret originating from the unconscious of the other. An unconscious formation transmitted from the parent's



unconscious to the child's unconscious. Focusing on the activation of the transfers of applied methods from the clinical field to the literary one, an additional effort was the integration of some concepts and a methodology that have not been assimilated and applied, in general, up to the present moment, to the literary fact. Revisiting the fictionality of Susanna Tamaro's short prose through the lens of clinical type classifications, that of the socio-psychopathological field, constituted an **element of novelty**, which consisted of an extrapolation at the analysis level. This applied approach proved its efficiency by anchoring the literary fact in the surrounding reality of behavioral deviations, favoring the relevance of the conclusions and the authenticity of the research. Furthermore, the medical approaches illustrated how the aggressive behaviors of the characters in the five short prose undergo a real redistribution in terms of signs and syndromes specific to mental disorders. On the other hand, the disintegration of the narrative identities, framed in the poetics of childhood existential traumas, in the narrative *Purgatoriul îngerilor*, was proven as an effect of some deconstructions at the level of onomastics and some denominative limits. Besides, the Freudian psychoanalytic study, regarding the failure of the psychic function to restore one's identity, highlighted the way in which, under the influence of a trauma generated by otherness, the inhabitants of the topos of begging are anamorphosed into possessors of borrowed identities. The characters of Camelia Cavadia's narratives are identified, under the inverted relationship of the antinomian onomastic hierarchization, as identities that fulfill destinies loaded with the inverted elements of the religious.

Another constructive perspective of the thesis followed the sequence of the Lacanian psychoanalytical model that revitalizes the questioning of trauma, orienting it mainly towards the symbolic chain of language. The method depicted the systematization of the human psyche by means of language, accepted as a symbol of a reality. Therefore, the psychoanalytic dimension drew a series of theoretical coordinates that aimed the notion of symptom, perceived as an indicator of alienation and traumatization, favoring the applicative approach of Pelzer's trilogy, as a verbal production of the relationships established between language and the unconscious. In addition, the chosen exegetical exercise proposes the translation of the language symbols of the mother and son, but also the translation of the symptoms, embodied in the symbols of autobiographical reality. Therefore, the analysis of Dave Pelzer's autobiographical novels were the central point of an applied approach which aimed, in the first phase, at placing the narrative universe in the Hegelian dialectic taken over by Lacan under the auspices of the master-slave relationship. With the help of this hermeneutic method,

the generic result of the installation of the three autobiographical novels was nuanced in the emblem type assertion, "Mother ordered". This type of analysis has demonstrated the capacity and influence of spoken words in metamorphosing behaviors and instilling anguish in the infantile psyche. The submissive atmosphere is transliterated into a cyclical language of fear and terror that translate the victim's position and nuance the entire narrative with dramatic tones. The existence of the infantile character is transported, therefore, to a realm of suffering, from where any desire to dream of a better world is impregnated by the symptom of constrained guilt. Consequently, using an analysis whose methods of interpretation targeted the poststructuralist works of the philosopher Michel Foucault, and by performing a symmetry in relation to the functioning of the punitive systems of carceral-type spaces and the false refuge of asylums, I demonstrated the symbolic framing of **the pain trilogy** in the experiences fixed in the identity of the alienated delinquent and inscribed in the typology of the wretched. Nietzsche's theories on the will to power, directed the force of the trilogy in two distinct directions, as an instrument of self-satisfaction – in the case of the mother, and as a will for "freedom" in the case of the son. Therefore, freedom is made possible only by the physical absence of the altering element. The infantile character breaks away from maternal influence and enters the symbolic order. This process occurs as a result of the refusal of the compulsive repetition and by the dissolution of the transgenerational trauma. Hence the fictional universe has, to the same extent, an alternative constant that is articulated through the stereotype of Heterotopias and the instruments dedicated to the Theory of the imaginary. Into the bargain, the symbolic median topos of resilience are built from the mixture of the image of reality with the utopian representations of the fantastic secondary worlds that allow access to initiates only through the composition of the mirror-portals, theorized by Marius Conkan. Confronting the alienating discourse, through the analytical method of the system of epistemic insecurity and the modes of perception theorized by the functional linguist, Paul Simpson, counted and mirrored the symptoms of insecurity, victimization and alienation of the infantile character. The cult of orphanages, the parental home and the foster systems extend that sense of alienation along with the oppression exerted on the protagonist. Thus, the analysis of the discourse of the infantile character demonstrates, through the substantial presence of modals of uncertainty and modals of perception, the manner in which the depressing and traumatizing atmosphere of the parental home and the orphanages is projected onto the conscience of the infantile character, but it also proves the consequences generated within these spaces. The effects abound in the form of inner confinements that extend the

alienation and the feeling of uncertainty. Quantitatively, the speech of the character inside the foster homes exhibits, compared to the environment of the parental home, a reduced presence of alienating speech, reinforcing the idea that the orphanage appears as a space of possible identity recovery through the absence of the mother.

Mainly, I considered it necessary to place the autobiographical trilogy, by its very nature, as an interworld element, located interstitially, between the worlds of fiction and the worlds of reality, between factuality and the literary fact. Using a theoretical component provided by the critical studies of Eugen Simion, Silvian Iosifescu, Gérard Genette, Philippe Lejeune, Adrian Marino, Kate Douglas and others, I argued the trilogy's inclusion in the district of frontier literature, as a narrative expression of the Bildungsroman. The degree of authenticity of Pelzer's narratives, vis-à-vis the truthfulness of the facts related, was built up through arguments related to the particularities of the narrative voice, the relationships established between the instances present in the text, the paratextual elements, the conditions of narrative ethics, but also through the prism of determinism social and of public reception, thus revealing arguments located both within the boundaries of the authentic and the inauthentic. Moreover, the cathartic function of Pelzer's narratives was approximated by the philosophical definition of literature, as an integral part of soul therapies, which is manifested on the psychoanalytic path of the cathartic process of generating pleasure and healing anxieties, but also by the psychoanalytic concept of "afterwardsness". The demonstration was based on the discrepancies between therapeutic writing and therapeutic literature, the trilogy falling into the latter category, due to the access of traumatic experiences to literature. The transition from the real to the fictional aimed at a ubiquitous look and a way of transdisciplinarity, which by putting man back at the center of literary analysis favored the understanding of the world through the penetration of individuality, an approximation of the human inside the literary fact, rendered through the bridge concepts of psychoanalysis. Further, the itinerary of psychoanalysis within literature was articulated around some demonstrations that illustrated Freud's lively interest in narrative productions. An approach of this type, which traces the circular movements that occur between reality and fictionality, respectively between character, person and society, required a resemanticization of narrative childhood trauma through the lens of psychosocial mechanisms. The Weltanschauung of an era is built by an act of relating the creative self to the conjunctural orders of the time it is passing through. In agreement with this judgement, the terms of the realization of an innovative approach to the reception of literature and the fulfillment of a dialogue that takes

place between the real and the fictional implemented a trajectory anchored in the sociocode dimension. Consequently, we will use a pattern that imposes on the hermeneutic practice a particularized standard of analysis of childhood traumas. It starts from the dimension of literary theories and inevitably interpenetrates the macro-social approaches that come from the area of social psychology, psychogenic determinations and sociocultural and historical influences. The investigation advanced by deepening such concepts as psychohistory, psychoclass, defensive phantasies and psychogenic layers. They illustrated the positioning of traumatic events in relation to the evolutions of the parent-child relationship and through the conditioning due to economic and technological changes - generators of major social disturbances that lead individuals towards deviant behaviors and mental disorders. Psychohistory sums up a concept that comes from psychoanalysis, but combines two different areas, history and psychology. Besides, the theoreticians of the concept, opting for a reconstruction of the problematic relational modes, have clarified the procedures by which the psychogenic layers, with each generation of children and parents, positioned under the sign of the victim-aggressor dyad, act in the macrosocial and historical planes, provoking catastrophic events which, equally, become creators of collective and individual traumas.

The nodal point of these determinations and of the narratives themselves was realized by assuming the formula of literature as an effect. Narrative forms, through the scope of the action of the sociocode, become the tools endowed with the ability to mirror the effects of a historical data that divulge the conditions of economic, technological changes, wars, or psychogenic evolutions. The sketching of the societal paintings of the American world, of the Romanian and Italian background, as native topos of the authors, illustrated the influences that these determinations produce on the writers' vision. This phenomenon positioned in the dimensions of the sociocode gave the authors a certain predilection for narrative themes and subjects. Therefore, we were allowed to assert that the conjunctural situations of the authors, put under analysis, generate an articulated literature in the proximity of the spatio-temporal index. Whether we are talking about border literature or purely fictional transpositions, their narratives totalize the effects of socioeconomic pressures, education, parenting practices, health crises, political relations, forms of abuse, or military conflicts.

The research therefore fulfills the stake of interpreting a strictly individual character, bearer of childhood trauma, through a recourse to an interdisciplinary illustration that activates the transfer of methods and that relates it to the context that generated these types of contemporary characters and narratives. Promoting current and delicate topics of the

contemporaneity, examined from several points of view, (through a lens of pluridisciplinarity that outlines phenomena of reciprocity that take place at the level of disciplines — the literary perspective, the clinical perspective, the sociological and the historical perspective) and applying the grid of unique interpretation of a relevant corpus of texts, with authors and narratives whose analytical receptions are missing from the scene of Romanian literary criticism, the current thesis is situated on the scene of analogous contributions (mentioned in the *Introduction* of the work) that outline the social phenomenon of childhood trauma. At the same time, the present research concretizes a trait of indispensability offered by the militant character it promotes. Naturally, this type of analysis, having as its central subject – ***Childhood trauma between reality and contemporary narrative representations***, understood through the convergent lens of external determinations and interdisciplinary analyses, can always be the subject of reinterpretations or hermeneutical expansions. The interdisciplinary analysis of this phenomenon of childhood trauma, which is constantly expanding, due to a self-centered society, lacking empathy and driven by transgenerational, psychohistorical, social and cultural determinations that produce continuous emotional mutilations, can never be complete, as well as the present thesis is not definitive and allows for new perspectives of research. In the sense of this opportunity for improvement, but also for deepening an activity with societal goals, the present research remains open to new horizons of interpretation and improvement.

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