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PRODUCTS OF COUNTERFACTUAL IMAGINATION: THE HEALING LIFE OF LITERATURE

Abstract: My article investigates two of the latter volumes by Romanian author Monica Pillat, *Invitație la vis* (*An Invitation to Dream*, 2014), and *Croitorul de cărți* (*The Book Tailor*, 2019), in which the literary experience elevates and transcends life itself, as a form of rewriting/healing the past and, maybe, of projecting one's dreams into the future. It relies on criticism of two stories from the respective volumes, which investigates the sites of memory, such as the family mansion, which is the central piece around which the fantasy world woven by the author gravitates. Since Monica Pillat descends from a whole line of literary masters, her gift for writing is in fact a form of recuperating and also compensating for the family past, in which especially her father (Dinu Pillat) was very much afflicted by political persecution during Communist times. I will dwell upon the less factual connection between life and literature – that of a mutual mirroring and influencing – in the attempt to prove that the experience of writing can make up for the losses encountered in reality. In this sense, being a literary author may offer one the chance of re-inventing one's self (or imaginatively amending the life of your loved ones) and – for Monica Pillat – it certainly offers the greatest reward of all: a continual dwelling inside the family lineage, in the company of the kindred spirits that have guided and protected her since she was born.

Keywords: *memory; nostalgia; family history; re-writing; imagination.*

"Obviously, perfection lies at the crossroad between the times."

For the purpose of the present article, I will try to connect the scope of two stories by Monica Pillat, "The Tale of Retraced Footsteps"⁹ from *An Invitation to*

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⁹ "Povestea pașilor întorși" in the original

Dream (2014) and “As If”¹⁰ from *The Book Tailor* (2019), which – in my opinion – reflect upon each other since they both refer to the imaginative retrieval, or re-writing, of a common space of memory, most dear to the author: the family mansion and its surroundings. I will try to connect these stories to the existential drama of the author’s own family and emphasize the lessons that her fiction has to teach us. According to Pierre Nora, the mere existence of a site of memory is an “illumination of discontinuity” (Nora 17), by which the past becomes a palpable presence, wherein we might seek “the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer” (Nora 18). Every site of memory works as a “mise-en-abîme” of the significance of the past, due to the continual swaying between its original intention and “a return in the cycles of memory” (Nora 20). Similarly, in Monica Pillat’s stories, we encounter a “will to remember” of the characters which also distinguishes Nora’s concept. Nevertheless, these agents do not entertain an absurd notion that the past could ever be restored to its former brilliance. Still, as long as our feelings trigger our memories, such lingering traces constitute an alluring path that invites us to walk along, before it be too late: “Fear of a rapid and final disappearance combines with anxiety about the meaning of the present and uncertainty about the future, to give even the most humble testimony, the most modest vestige, the potential dignity of the memorable” (Nora 13). Thus, the quest for one’s memories becomes in Monica Pillat’s stories an individual search for identity, while the act of striving to regain a long-abandoned familiar residence bespeaks the need for reconnecting with a space where personal identity was crystallized and flourished in the past, so that the depleted source of one’s vitality may once again be re-fuelled.

The Tale of Retraced Footsteps – *An Invitation to Dream* (2014)

The story that opens the first volume under discussion is in special connection, I believe, with the life and memories of Monica Pillat herself. It is written as a moralizing tale about an old emperor that asks his sons to fulfill a seemingly absurd task, by retrieving for him things from the past which are now long gone and in connection to which he feels a lot of remorse for having let them go: his old dog which drowned in a pond while attempting to bring back to his master a shot duck, an old beggar whom the emperor as a young prince had failed to give alms to, and – most important of all – the emperor’s old home, a

¹⁰ “Ca și cum” in the original

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mansion whose description may very well be an evocation of the author's own family countryside retreat, the Miorcani mansion, which belonged to her father (Dinu Pillat) and grandfather (Ion Pillat), both of them renowned Romanian writers. Nowadays, this place has been donated by the surviving family (Monica and her mother Cornelia) to the public domain, its material heritage surpassing their ability of administration. Unfortunately, even today, the mansion at Miorcani¹¹ is in an advanced state of decay, the authorities responsible having proven yet unable to properly renovate what was intended to become a community center and which still houses a decaying museum dedicated to the history of the Pillat family. The vivid memories of a blissful era, coupled with regret at the impossibility of recuperating what was lost (a big part of which was destroyed during the Communist era, when these spaces were requisitioned by the government, and later on vandalized), find a way of being fictionalized (and therefore redeemed) through this bewitching storyline. It contains a perfect illustration of the "sites of memory" concept, understood as "a purely material site invested by imagination with a symbolic aura that becomes the object of a ritual" (Nora 19) that involves our willingness to remember, worship and even regain the past realm. According to an interview given by Monica Pillat in 2016, Miorcani had helped her grandfather, poet Ion Pillat, to make his peace with eternity, by giving him a feeling of enduring stability:

His impression was strengthened by the beauty of the stately trees that guarded the park, by the serene tranquility of the place which had given his family and before that, his grandparents' spirits solace. My father had been familiar in his childhood and adolescence with the charm of the Miorcani residence, a location seemingly torn away from the flux of time (...) He had to live through the drama of the loss and destruction of the place that had seemed eternal to Ion Pillat." (my translation)

Moreover, the wife of Ion Pillat, painter Maria Pillat Brateş, contributed to the preservation of the memory of this place, immortalizing its façade and interior in some of her paintings. From this point of view, the premises for restoring this "site of memory" to its rightful place in the history of Romania

¹¹ Ion Pillat's heirs – his son and grand-daughter (Dinu and Monica Pillat) – returned to the family mansion in 1983, and together with the locals, they began organizing a series of literary sessions entitled The "Ion Pillat" Days, which were held there until the nineties.

culture are already laid and it merely depends upon the good will of the authorities for this "lieu de memoire" to regain its contemporary relevance.

Fig.1 and 2. Pillat family exhibits inside the ruined Miorcani Mansion¹² vs. Interior at the Miorcani Mansion (painting by Maria Pillat Brateş)¹³

In the story under discussion, it is significant that only the oldest son recalls the existence of a family place and takes on the mission of retracing his footsteps

¹² <https://adevarul.ro/cultura/patrimoniu/cum-isi-bate-statul-joc-mostenirea-culturala-primita-cadou-ruina-degradarea-uitarea-s-au-lasat-conacul-miorcani-familiei-pillat-1_5e0233155163ec4271574e91/index.html>.

¹³ Monica Pillat, nepoata poetului Ion Pillat: "Pentru mine, Miorcanii sunt o rană vie!", Știri Botoșani, Cultură - Știri.Botosani.Ro

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to it. Symbolically, his name is Alean, which means 'Sickness from Longing' or nostalgia. His voice may very well be the writer's own voice, while the desire to return to the childhood house and be once again surrounded by the dearly beloved who are now dead is equally that of Monica Pillat. This division of the authorial ego, between a young and an old self, between having a longing and seeking to satisfy it (the passive and the active aspects of memory) will be healed in the end by the emperor's wise decision to postpone regaining total access to the past, through death, in order to continue enjoying life with his sons a little longer. The quote below illustrates the melancholy feeling which the emperor struggles to contain, a struggle shared by his compassionate son:

Alean, the older son, got closer to the bed and, after a second of silence, spoke with great trouble:

"I choose the grandparents' house, to which I arrive in my sleep, frequently at night. Other times, being awake, I fancy being able to catch fleeting glimpses of old faces, forgotten glances that have softened my childhood, and yet I do not remember where it was, nor how the mansion looked..."

"It was like no place on earth, the emperor uttered nostalgically. It was surrounded by a park set alongside the waters, and behind it there resounded the forest. Its ceilings were high, with clanking chandeliers, and when you entered it, the floor sang under your footsteps... But, after my folks went away, in turn, and shortly after your mother followed, the beloved mansion fell silent and since then I had no desire of returning to confront its emptiness." (4-5, my translation)

Alean's intellectual dilemma refers to finding a real life correspondent to a space that only lives within him (7). In order to achieve this feat, the hero receives advice and encouragement from his elders:

„Alean, your mind resembles your grandfather's, your eyes are like your mother's and your smile like your grandmother's, so *they* will help you get back home safe." (8)¹⁴

„Can you fish for something that does no longer exist?"

¹⁴ Indeed, in his dream, the hero will be guided by the three dead family members which he resembles the most, as his father tells him.

„Only if that something remains lodged in your memory!”, his grandfather helped him by hanging a question mark for bait in the silver hook. (8)

But he is also warned several times against interfering with the past visions or with the imaginary recreation of the past, because: “Your time is not the same with that of those who were before” (9) and “Your present would make those you return to disappear” (11). So, the only safe possibility for a real-life personage to regain the past is in the realm of dreams or in a vision. In his attempt to regain the lost mansion, Alean spends the night in a ruined house by the sea, in which he has three dreams on three successive nights. In each of the dreams, one of the dead family members – his grandfather, his mother and his grandmother – give him an object that ensures a means of reaching into the past but each of them is accompanied by an interdiction. The *compass fish* transports him to the former residence where he sees his parents as a newly married couple in the company of his middle-aged grandparents, while the *fountain pen-bird* re-writes family history by making his father return in the company of his three young sons to the former residence (after the deaths of his wife and parents) – but each of these times, Alean’s restlessness interferes with the visions and they disappear from his sight. On the third night, going through the mansion’s attic (a place the author tells us Alean had never really seen, so this time he is having a vision or imagining things he cannot remember), he meets his grandmother who gives him a pair of old boots for the emperor to wear. They are meant to carry him back to the family home and to his former life, while helping him regain his youth and be with his dearly beloved who had departed, but all this at the cost of being separated from the present in which his sons exist. The wisdom of the emperor’s final choice consists in that he chooses not to wear these boots for the moment but decides to remain with his living family: “It’s fine”, the emperor shivered, looking longingly at his surroundings, “it’s fine that I still have a little time...” (14). Thus, nostalgia for the present replaces past melancholy and enjoying the moment becomes the quintessential spiritual activity.

Fig. 3 and 4. The ruined façade of the Miorcani mansion VS. The original façade of the Miorcani mansion (painting by Maria Pillat Brateş)¹⁵

In the blurb on the back cover of the first volume, Ioana Pârvulescu – a renowned specialist in 19th century Romanian society, sums up the focus of Monica Pillat's fiction: "every one of us can become a character, life can turn unexpectedly into fiction, and the full recovery of what was before is no longer possible" (3). However, the wisdom imparted by the characters of the present story goes beyond the apparent inescapable regret for the golden era of the past – as Alean feels when he returns from his quest: "Nothing can be stopped from going away and yet... *what seems lost to me, is going along with me.*" (13, emphasis mine)

Even if both the prince and the emperor initially suffer from melancholia, in the end the former suddenly realizes that what was long gone has been in fact

¹⁵ Monica Pillat, nepoata poetului Ion Pillat: "Pentru mine, Miorcanii sunt o rană vie!", Știri Botoșani, Cultură - Stiri.Botosani.Ro

a part of him all the time, while the latter postpones the regaining of the past realm in order to enjoy the equally valuable present. Suddenly, their regressive mood is alleviated or transgressed and so is the reader's, who learns a most valuable lesson by example. A similar recuperative turn is displayed in the second story I want to discuss below.

As if – *The Book Tailor* (2019)

A historical witness to the enduring charm of one particular memory site connected to the happy days of the Pillat family, Sabina Cantacuzino notes: "Florica¹⁶ was not only the framework that resonated with the whole sweetness of childhood, the whole happiness of youth, but at times it seemed to be living, it seemed to have a soul woven out of all our souls, both dead and alive." (my translation) According to Pierre Nora, while stepping inside a museum, "we become acutely aware of the paradoxical divergence and convergence of memory and history, of the double nature of the exhibits - at once material traces of historical presence and imaginary objects of memory whose restrictive play is freely allowed in the realm individual sensibility." (qtd. in Bulz, 242)

Also, "we can never know where the imaginary reconstruction of history as remembered may lead us" or how we might lose ourselves in the vastness of a past which the respective site seeks to reconstruct. Yet, "as we become aware of the full significance of the original event which we are contemplating from our distant future, we should consider this risk worth taking." (qtd. in Bulz, 242) – just as in Monica Pillat's fiction, in which the main characters always brave the unknown, meticulously working towards piecing together what has long been lost and joyfully integrating it into the present moment.

¹⁶"Situated in the town of Ștefănești, Argeș county, the Brătianu family mansion is named Florica, like the village in which it is located, in memory of the first daughter of Ion C. Brătianu. It is one of the most beautiful boyard possessions from Romania, extremely well preserved until the present (with the exception of objects, furniture and inside library, which were mindlessly scattered during Communist times) - <https://www.cjarges.ro/conacul-bratianu-de-la-florica>

Fig. 5. The Brătianu domain at Florica (Argeş County)

The third part of the second volume proposes a fascinating descent into the past, coupled with the acquisition of a new identity: Mara Tanini, a bored housewife whose husband is absent all day long, starts reading a novella in the hope of eloping into fiction. On page 30, she is guided towards a secret door that turns her into Marina Sur, a dedicated architect whose passion is to restore old mansions to a new life. This short fiction holds the key, I believe, to the entire construct of imagination relying on a re-writing of the past and, within it, the writer has dropped a few hints as to her conception of incorporating the old into the new and thereby regaining what was lost, in a slightly different guise. In my opinion, this technique is akin to dream object displacement, in which the real life items turn into different entities but meanwhile preserve their emotional weight for the dreamer. In a dream, things change according to the concerns of the dreamer, just as - in the task of redecorating an old house - Marina recaptures the entire beauty of the inner and outer furnishings of the mansion she is working at, while making slight alterations that prevent a total juxtaposition between the present and the past aspect of the house. Thus, the newly designed hotel is a fictional alter-ego of the castle still haunted by its former owners and these ghostly inhabitants (Bogdan the Lonely and his sister Liza) can finally find their peace by reclaiming their home in complete separation from the visiting tourists.

To begin with, I must mention that the key which Mara/Marina uses to lock up her trailer is the same key that unlocks the gate of the castle, the place of the heroine's initial transformation or the point of departure for her fictional journey being the portal through which she embarks upon her adventure. The symbolism

of changing clothes is an obvious suggestion for this occurrence (bathrobe and slippers for boots and overalls). The few quotes below constitute the proof of this miraculous mutation which preserves the old alongside the new – in terms of character but also regarding the location:

Sunken in its sleep, the castle was still dreaming, and the juxtaposed voices that she had caught in her hearing earlier were coming from the sleeping mind of the building. *Only after she passed through it caressing the walls of the rooms above and of the thick walls from the tall tower, did she feel the ensemble stir under her footsteps* (emphasis mine). Then, she descended the staircase lightly, like a cat, took her drawing book, the pencil and the crayons, returning to the hall where she sat with her legs crossed on the floor and laid within reach what she had gathered. (99)

Let us immerse ourselves in the long-gone atmosphere of the mansion, allow the objects around us to unchain their energy and bring back to life a vanished world. *I will draw back the emptiness like a curtain*", he added raising his arm, and, at a sign, the empty hall was animated by brilliance. (100, emphasis mine)

"Oh, such wonderment!" she whispered dazed and searched for support in the angel with the folded wings, but the statue, like the gentleman in black, was immaterial.

"And you have only seen the beginning..."

"If I were to change one nuance only, the whole ensemble would topple..."

"This is what I said to myself also," the gentleman in black nodded his head, „and that is why I am still a prisoner of this interior. But what is going on?" he troubled himself, seeing Marina turn paler and paler in the cheek.

"Now your castle is taking hold of me too..."

"We'd better leave this place", he urged worriedly. (100)

A horizon of winged promises was shimmering inside her, it always happened to her whenever she entered an old building that she revived. Yet, what she had glimpsed at, a night before, under the guidance of Bogdan the Lonely, promised unparalleled discoveries. She would not unveil anything to Filip, for fear that his reaction might drive always the fragile sightings. *The*

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development had to take place in the dark and only then could the result be brought to light and be fully embraced by reality (emphasis mine). (102)

As soon as she finished colouring the very last detail, the designer noticed with amazement how the drawing slid away from the paper. The castle drew it to itself and was minutely processing the ensemble, giving consistency and volume to the contours that were gradually filing its void. In less than four hours, the hall had gained its elegance, even if the former purple was now a shade of dark red, and on the copper plate, instead of plums and violet grapes, there sat lavishly apples and pomegranates, close to the same vase, which was now filled with dark red roses. (103)

Needless to say, Marina the architect does a wonderful job redesigning the castle interior and its gardens, allowing herself to be guided by the spirits of the former owners of the place, thereby fully gratifying the desire of Mara the housewife for adventure and wonderment. Yet, the open ending introduces a nuance of danger for the reader who may have identified too much with the character. Looking to retrace her footsteps back through the trailer/portal space, Mara feels that she has been fictionalized up to the point where there is a risk that she might not return to her former life even if she desires it: having to choose between two doors, she goes through the one to her left, wholeheartedly hoping that her husband is waiting for her on the other side, but we never find this out. Thus, part-taking of fiction is done at the risk of re-writing one's self, which will never be the same afterwards.

Fig. 6. Images from the inside of the Brătianu mansion, as restored nowadays

The description of the resurrected park fits very well the evocation of the natural surroundings of the Florica mansion, a space which is equally connected to the author's family history: this domain belonged to the Brătianu side of the family line being where Monica's grandfather (Ion Pillat) spent a big part of his childhood. It was in this place that one of her great aunts¹⁷ had designed a grand landscape garden, famous for its beauties and dubbed "The Garden of Semiramis" by the visitors of those times. And perhaps the gentleman in black that so paternally guides Marina in her quest for the castle's secrets is an embodiment of the author's father, while the fair-haired and blue-eyed maiden at his side could be an alter-ego of Monica Pillat's youthful self. Witness the evocation of this special place of the imagination, restored or better said redeemed through fiction, so that future generations might still enjoy its charms and be uplifted in their spirits by its beauty and serenity:

She went ahead sauntering, pursued by Marina who tuned in to the girl's rhythm. Under their footsteps, the garden woke up to life, *remembering its beauty*. The empty lake turned white with swans and herons, amidst the trees on the banks the peacocks boasted their empyreal tails, while the reeds were undulating in a dance above the waters. There lied ahead of them a golden pathway that led upwards, to the pavilion barely visible through the birch trees. On the road's margins there were waving in the autumn wind pale yellow chrysanthemums and orange roses." (104, my translation/ emphasis mine)

What strikes one in this description are the particulars. It is as if the writer is depicting a place that once existed for real. And if some of the details may be different from what it used to be, the overall effect of the evocation is still that of

¹⁷ The character Liza may be an unconscious evocation of the real-life personage that gave life to the enchanted gardens around the Florica mansion – Eliza Brătianu, the wife of politician Ionel Brătianu (also the architect and designer of the mansion).

remembering, with the sense of putting together pieces of a memory puzzle, with the implicit purpose of consoling the spirit. There is a restoring effect to Liza's words, who may be thus imparting to us one of the author's keenest hopes:

"Those of us who sometimes return from the unseen, are able to choose the age of our spent life, even the hours that delighted us the most.", said Liza unexpectedly, stopping by the bench underneath the willow tree. (104).

The indirect invitation to sit on the bench under the weeping willow and witness the landscape depicted by the heavenly maiden, holds in it one of the most dangerous traps in this type of fiction – as Ioana Pârvulescu wisely warns us: the irrepressible melancholia that can make you a perpetual prisoner of the past. Eventually, however, the storyline has a balancing effect upon the reader's spirits, due to the collaboration of the main character with her ghostly guide, himself a prisoner of a continually remembered golden age. The moral of the story is encapsulated in the motto to the present paper: "Obviously, perfection lies at the crossroads between the times", as Marina concludes while doing her work of reviving the old in a new guise. And, just as in the first story discussed here, the ghostly company explains to Marina why she will somehow not be missed, even if her work with them is nearing its end and she feels sad to leave: "Even if you go now far away, some part of you will stay with us in the park and in the castle", the gentleman in black consoled her. (110)

Fig. 7. View of the landscape park at Florica

Conclusion

As Pierre Nora explains, memory provides the link between history and literature so that the “lieux de memoire” will definitely remain “moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.” (Nora 12) One can only hope, together with the author of these wonderful stories, that a part of what was thus (re)written will linger on in the memory of the readers - a vision of beauty lost and regained: “If Pierre Nora compared the traces of memory to shells on the sea-shore of history, there is still another interesting comparison that could be made: these traces may also ‘work’ like pebbles thrown into the water, whose ever-widening circles are waves of hope connected to the possibility of future prospects.” (Bulz 256)

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