Reviews

Alexandru Mamina, *Cenaclul Flacăra. Istorie, cultură, politică,* Târgoviște, Cetatea de Scaun, 2020, ISBN 9786065374874, 456pp

In November 2010, Romania's main television stations gave live coverage of the funeral, with full military honours, of poet and politician Adrian Păunescu (1943-2010). It was an occasion to assess the merits of one of the most complex and charismatic figures of the communist and post-communist periods. Păunescu was the 'Court Poet' or 'King's Fool', who had contributed spectacularly to Nicolae Ceaușescu's cult of the personality, and, for his pains, nearly been lynched during the Revolution of December 1989: ironically, he had found refuge in the US embassy compound. But he was also one of the most talented poets to emerge in the 1960s and, as leader of *Cenaclul Flacăra* (The Flame Circle), attracted the 'blue-jean generation' to shows that combined a heady mix of poetry, folk and rock music, dance, national-communist – especially nationalist – politics and bohemian excess.

Păunescu and Cenaclul Flacăra are now the subject of an excellent book by Alexandru Mamina, which adopts a nuanced and informed approach to this cultural phenomenon, combining close reading and categorisation of their poetry and song, as well as brief interviews with some of its members. At a time when Romanian historiography is under the considerable influence of organisations such as the Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism, Mamina bravely chooses not to put Păunescu and his acolytes on posthumous trial and investigates dispassionately a movement which had attracted him, like so many young Romanians, in the final years of the regime.

Cenaclul Flacăra was launched in September 1973, at an uncertain time for culture in communist Romania. During the first years after Ceaușescu became party leader in 1965, there had been considerable internal liberalisation and, on the foreign policy front, a distancing from

Moscow, shown spectacularly by Ceaușescu's hugely popular condemnation of the Warsaw Pact intervention in August 1968 to crush the Prague Spring. However, a tour of China and North Korea in 1971 had inspired Ceaușescu to launch his own cultural revolution, calling Romanian intellectuals to heel and resisting foreign, especially western, cultural influences. Păunescu's circle of poets, visual artists and musicians therefore had to navigate an increasingly challenging cultural and political context until 1985, when it was shut down in dramatic circumstances: a thunderstorm during a show in the city of Ploiești caused a mass stampede which killed five people and injured a hundred others. During these twelve years, more than 1600 artists had performed for Cenaclul in front of nearly six million spectators.

Ever since its beginning, this mass phenomenon has provoked conflicting opinions: for some, it was an instrument of communist and nationalist propaganda directed at Romanian youth. Its admirers, on the other hand, have spoken of the quality of its creations, its importation of western culture, and the sensation of freedom that existed at its shows. Mamina eschews what he calls the 'moral-judicial' discourse found in condemnations of Păunescu and his kind, which reflect, he believes, a simplistic and comfortable view that retrospectively distinguishes between 'collaborators' and 'resisters'. Instead, he examines how Romanian creative artists (like Romanian citizens more generally) operated in a grey zone of semi-autonomy, complicity and compromise. He is interested in '*strategies of adaptation* or *attempts at instrumentalization of the system with the aim of obtaining some concessions*, an objective that could not be achieved through direct confrontation' (p51, author's emphasis).

Mamina certainly does not avoid discussion of Păunescu's role in the Ceaușescu cult of the personality, which had reached Ubu-esque proportions by December 1989: his poetry and shows were peppered with obligatory praise of the *Conducător* (Leader). As a member of the Romanian Communist Party (PCR), Paunescu praised the vanguard of the working class, as in 'Light, struggle, liberty!'. He also contributed to the national-communist turn of the Ceaușescu regime, in historical-patriotic poems like 'Horea's Spear', a homage to the Transylvanian leader of a peasants' revolt in 1784, which was presented by the 'protochronists' of the time as proof that Romania did not need to follow the example of the French Revolution. It is not surprising that Păunescu, who was born in Bessarabia, a province lost to the Soviet Union after the Second World War, was attracted to Ceaușescu's brand of communism. He told me in 1999: 'Ceaușescu was shot for the good things he did – building the Nation – not the bad. He was a complex person. A bit like Nixon'.

At the same time, Păunescu's national-communism did not lead to the nativist proto-fascism expressed by his rival court poet, Corneliu Vadim Tudor. During his time as a creative writing fellow at the University of Iowa in 1970, Păunescu had been profoundly affected by a Bob Dylan concert. He told me: 'I realised that I too could become a star in one night'. Dylan's success also showed the importance of combining poetry with music in order to expand its appeal to the masses. Thus, back in Romania, Cenaclul Flacăra's shows could combine poetry with the music of Black Sabbath or the Beatles and traditional songs from the mountainside. This created a cultural hybrid that opened Romania to western influences while at the same time channelling them in a manner ostensibly compatible with the regime.

Such a heady and ambiguous mixture attracted an overwhelmingly young audience, the 'blue jean generation', in the words of one of Păunescu's most famous poems. Păunescu, who had emerged from the bohemian avant-garde in the mid-1960s, and was only thirty when Cenaclul was founded, now presented himself as the spokesman for a generation. Mamina shows a social and generational register in his verse which expresses tensions between young and old, the 'Illiterate' he denounced in a poem of 1980 that attracted the ire of the authorities. However, in order to relativise the political nature of Cenaclul's output, Mamina identifies other registers in the poetry of Păunescu and his circle: 'affective-meditative', 'folkloric' and 'ludic'. The long list of those who passed through this cultural phenomenon is an eclectic one, including the legendary rock band Phoenix and future 'dissident' poets Ana Blandiana, Nina Cassian and Mircea Dinescu (who was a prominent member of the National Salvation Front in December 1989). In the appendix to Mamina's book, interviews show that, for many, the Flame Circle provided a space for their art to develop, and was usually a passing phase.

Through archival documents, Mamina shows the ambivalent nature of the 'King's Fool'. For example the Securitate secret police express concern about the content and atmosphere of Cenaclul's shows, where the young audience seem to shout Păunescu's name as often, or more, than Ceaușescu's. Păunescu also encouraged militancy among his young audience, inciting them to demand a better life. In 1983, the Securitate reported that he would make the crowd shout, for minutes on end, 'we want, we want, we want!' (p309). In a sign of the secret police's nervousness, some young spectators were admonished or even detained for brandishing peace placards written in foreign languages.

The most fascinating document in this book is a letter from Păunescu to Ceaușescu in 1982, when communist Romania was entering its dark last decade of increasing shortages and surveillance. It begins with nauseating sycophancy: 'You have done for Romania and the world as much as all the Brezhnevs, Carters and Reagans put together. You are a blessed man, you have genius, you have by your side an exceptional woman and under your parentage is growing up a young patriot, in whom I feel I have made a friend, your son Nicu' (p295). But after this grovelling preamble, Păunescu pleads with the leader to intervene in favour of various intellectuals whom he believes have been unjustly treated. He ends by asking favours for Cenaclul Flacăra, but, as Mamina points out, Păunescu, despite his bloated vanity, first wrote '*for others*' (p300, author's emphasis).

Păunescu's very own spiralling cult of the personality may help explain his fall from grace in 1985. To responsibility for the deadly stampede in Ploiești were added accusations of corruption. This humiliation by the regime may explain why the erstwhile court poet refused Ceaușescu's desperate pleadings, during the December 1989 Revolution, for him to intervene on his behalf. The fall of the regime left Păunescu bloodied. With typical humour, he told gloating revolutionaries: 'I am your pig for the slaughter. Your pig for a free Christmas!'. But Păunescu was not completely on the losing side. Indeed, in his conclusion, Mamina argues that, although Păunescu had sought improvements within the unquestioned framework of the communist regime, the rebellious side of Cenaclul may have indirectly inspired the 'blue jean generation' who took to the streets, and the author personally remembers that some poetry and songs from that period were references during the events. Mamina suggests convincingly that Cenaclul's celebration of Romanian National Day, 1 December, rather than the regime's official anniversary of 23 August, as well as its ritual singing of *Deșteaptă-te, române* (Waken Thee, Romanian!), which would become the post-communist national anthem, contributed to the failure of communist hegemony and anticipated the events of 1989. According to anecdote, the doomed Elena Ceaușescu, as she looked down on the rioting revolutionaries in December 1989, exclaimed: 'Those are Păunescu's madmen!'.

Păunescu recreated himself in post-communist Romania, and, as poet and politician, became a spokesman for the losers of the transition to the market economy and EU membership. Unlike some other intellectuals, he did not deny his association with the fallen regime, while also reminding critics, not without foundation, of the role he had played in helping and protecting fellow artists. In 1996, at the funeral of his close friend (and frequent protector) Nicu Ceaușescu, he read, to an audience of thousands, 'Death of the Prince', which contains the line: 'Go tell your parents what has been done to their country!'. While continuing to churn out verse, he became a popular television presenter, as well as senator for the Socialist Workers Party (PSM), an unofficial successor to the PCR. For a brief period he allied in opposition with Vadim Tudor, at that time leader of the far-right Greater Romania Party. The two ex-Court Poets thus engineered a 'red-brown' rapprochement based on denunciation of the 'selling' of Romania's economy and soul. However, most of the PSM, including Păunescu, would eventually merge with the Social Democrats of Ion Iliescu, post-communist Romania's first president and, ironically, the man who had ordered the execution of the Ceaușescus. Could Păunescu's enthusiasm for Iliescu during the last decade of his life be seen as another manifestation of his desire to be a poet close to power?

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Useful jellyfish

The Collected Poems of Montagu Slater, ed. Ben Harker, Smokestack Books, Ripon, 2023; _The Selected Poems of Clive Branson_, ed. Richard Knott, Smokestack Books, Ripon, 2023

Despite its small size even at its zenith in the politically compelling 1930s, the Communist Party of Great Britain, founded in 1920, attracted a significant number of gifted writers, artists and intellectuals to its ranks in the two interwar decades christened the 'Long Weekend' by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge's gossipy social history of the period. Distrusted, even despised, by more traditional members as the 'vast jellyfish of the petty middleclass', these 'petit-bourgeois intellectuals' nevertheless added a considerable cachet to the party's standing. As Montagu Slater (1902-1956) reminded readers in a 1935 article in *Left Review*, the new cultural journal he co-edited on the party's behalf for fifteen months, 'the jellyfish has a place in our kettle'.

Mostly remembered now for his libretto to Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, Slater, 'the quietly prolific communist man of letters' in Ben Harker's description, probably joined the party in 1927, between the General Strike and the 1929 Wall Street Crash. Growing up in a run-down Cumbrian mining port amidst 'collapsing trade, strikes, returning soldiers' and 'begging in the streets', as his friend and literary custodian Arnold Rattenbury reported, the young Slater won a rare scholarship to Oxford, where he graduated as a non-collegiate student in PPE in 1920. He went on to work as a newspaper reporter in Liverpool, where he became active in the city's labour movement, and then on Fleet Street. His journalistic talents were put into political service when, with fellow intellectuals Tom Wintringham and Amabel Williams-Ellis, he became founding joint-editor of *Left Review* in 1934. Ben Harker has collated and annotated here most of Montagu's poetic output from his published collections, as many uncollected poems as could be traced in periodicals, newspapers and memoirs, and drafts from the personal papers archived in Nottingham University.

Slater's shorter poems most frequently yoke echoes of Georgian lyricism with a more up-to-date but largely second-hand modernist fustian, with verbal and rhetorical debts to the usual contemporary influencers.

When he steps out from the formal pose of poet and seer into the world of human interactions his writing perks up, as in the dialogism, alert to the registers of class and gender, of such puppet plays as 'Old Spain' and the masque-like *Seven Ages of Man*, or the choruses from the Agitprop drama *Easter 1916* (1936), and the documentary *Stay Down Miner* (1937). Foremost among the poems, however, for its colloquial vigour is 'In the Beginning: A Broken Narrative'. Here a succession of working-class voices, individually identified by name and occupation, separately aspire to connect with the 'broken narrative' hinted at by each man's occasional terse exclamation: 'General strike '26', 'Red Front', 'May Day'. All these aspirations, the poem's closing lines indicate, are posited on the repressed conditional 'If-', opening up the perpetual possibility of 'a word like a rivet /Red hot, to be dropped in', which would complete the 'broken narrative'. Montagu is at his best in these dramatic narratives and libretti, and it's a nice joke that in *Peter Grimes* the poet George Crabbe, who supplied Britten's original story, walks through the robust polyphonies of each scene without ever speaking himself, though everywhere greeted, as if in mute acknowledgement that a poet speaks best when he speaks through and for others – particularly a socialist working-class poet.

Born in India to the family of a British Army major, educated at Bedford School and the Slade School of Art, the talented upper-class painter Clive Branson (1907-1944) was certainly extremely useful to the party which he joined in 1932, to the extent that Harry Pollitt, its General Secretary, vetoed his original request to be sent to fight in Spain with the 'suggestion' that he 'Put it off for now'. When he did get to Spain in early 1938 he was, after five weeks of rudimentary military training, almost immediately captured by Franco's forces, thereafter spending several months in prison camp till he was released and returned to Britain in the autumn of that year, probably partly out of deference to his upper-class background. (Working-class International Brigade prisoners fared far less well.) During this time he wrote several poems expressing his almost religious devotion to the Soviet Union and international Communism. Perhaps the most effective of these is the quiet admiration in 'To the German Anti-Fascists in San Pedro' for the nostalgic singing of some of his fellow prisoners, with its closing profound sense of solidarity and respect: 'This German sang to us of home / Our heritage in one another / Comrade, Brother – no foreigner'.

Branson's unquestioning fidelity to the Soviet cause remained undimmed until his death on the Indian front in 1944. But the gleeful histrionics of a poem like 'May First', written in May 1940, which seeks to identify English popular struggles (Peasants' Revolt, Chartists, General Strike) and the global 'assault / against the world's tyrants' with 'the splendour of the USSR' which 'march[es] on where we hold back through doubt', can only be understood if the 'Communist' victories it celebrates are those won in the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, which carved up Eastern Europe in an ungodly alliance between the two dictatorships, only shattered when Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941. In the last days of the 'Phoney War', when Britain stood largely alone, the poem's confident faith that 'Communism is English! Freedom is ours!' must have seemed desperately improbable. (Even Harry Pollitt, who resigned as party secretary in response to the Pact, seems to have thought it a 'cunning plan' too far.) Branson, that is, could at times write like a starry-eyed teenager melting before Stalin's flirtatious smile. Given what was known even in the 1930s about that region's Stalin-induced famine, for example, Branson's celebration in 'A Handkerchief Waved from a Passing Train' of Ukrainian peasants gathering the harvest of 'the golden corn' seems peculiarly egregious. One turns with relief to the brisk anti-war humanity of 'The General Didn't Know', with its reiteration of that pronoun to which many of Branson's poems aspire: 'We are the soldiers. We are the bombed. We are the routed, the wounded, the dead /… British or Russian, French or Nazis'. Branson's various poems celebrating the 'crumbling city' of London share a similar, collectivising impulse, and a similar ambivalence. The clamour and turbulence of the city are vividly evoked, but London remains a liminal place most alive at dawn and dusk, when the multitudes flock to and from work down 'lonely streets / (though packed with people and the traffic's stir)'. Its 'difficult pavements' can be brightly lit yet full of dark spaces and blind windows, where 'Now / Streetlights are turned down', neons broken, and 'Everywhere shadow'. This is not James Thomson's *City of Dreadful Night*: it's far too excited an urban panorama for that; but it does, oddly, recall at times the Laforguian lassitudes of Arthur Symons's *fin de siècle* collection *London Nights* (1895). One can only wonder what this promising young poet and dedicated revolutionary would have made of the Cold War disenchantments to come.

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