

## Memory, ethics and (post)critique. A triangular reading of Simona Sora's novel *Complaisance*

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### Introduction

Literature has a significant role in aesthetically addressing collective experiences and sensible subjects that require ethical engagement and moral conscience and reasoning. Fictional configurations and reconfigurations of reality allow extensive explorations of the traumatic or abusive relationships or events and of their effects on the personal and social structure. This article offers a multi-perspectivist reading of a Romanian contemporary novel, namely Simona Sora's 2020 *Complezență. Înălțarea la ortopedie/Musafir pe viață* (*Complaisance. Ascension in the orthopaedics ward/A guest for life*). It is a two-parts novel, one localised in Romania in the late 1980s, and the other in Switzerland, a few years after the falling of the Berlin Wall, and both parts focus on Maia, a young woman born, as Sora herself, in 1967, who works as a nurse (again, like the author itself) in a Romanian public hospital and in a Swiss private elder care, respectively. The basic plot parallels two moments when Maia faces an interrogatory: when she locks herself in the hospital's bathroom with an embryo who was subject to an investigation for illegal abortion conducted by Romanian political police and when she resuscitates an eighty-year-old patient of the Swiss house of care, against the institution's regulations. Because of the way in which the book is printed, each of the two parts may function as either the "first" or the "second"; hence the double-headed title.

We decided to theoretically engage with this fictional text by following the social-cultural context of this fictional narrative and by proposing a triangular reading of the novel, using theories and methods from memory studies, ethics and literary studies. The three readings were grounded in the epistemological pluralism, not in order to gain general approval or claim epistemological truth or to introduce a sort of relativism in addressing the fictional text, but as a theoretical framework recognising "several valuable ways of knowing" that can lead "to more successful integrated study" (Miller et al., 2008, p. 46) of fictional texts. Drawing on our own scientific experience, we decided to use our specific fields of research to investigate Sora's novel. Each individual reading followed in a separate way, without any knowledge of the others' research data, the same two phases: a. the analysis of the novel in the designed theoretical framework, and b. a structured, non-hierarchical presentation of the knowledge generated by the reading. The post-reading and post-analyse phase was the moment when we tried to unify our individual results. The fact that we decided to embrace the epistemological pluralism in analysing this novel offered much more than the common theoretical space to surpass our specific expertise. It made us acknowledge the fact that by legitimising and deploying other ways of

knowledge the epistemological pluralism can increase the openness, transparency and participation (Healy, 2003) in studying different cultural productions and their relations with the past.

### **1 Memory-work method: fictional remediation of the past**

*Complaisance* is inspired by the Romanian women's experience of late communism and of the transition years that followed its collapse. The author acknowledges in her interviews a resemblance between her life and that of the main character in the novel, Maia, as both worked as nurses in Romania and Switzerland. However, as no other details are provided in this direction, I am reading this novel in the framework of fictional literature addressing past experience. Using memory as a "resource for research" (Keightley, 2010), I develop further the connections between the main character's experience and the Romanian women's lives under the communist regime and during the transition years. The narrative analysis is combined with "alternative sources of data," in a triangulation approach to ensure that "the epistemological challenges memory poses are met" (Keightley, 2010, p. 63). Therefore, I discuss women's lives and connect my research with data from other cultural analyses regarding Romanian women's experience of the communist regime and of the transition years. In this "memory-work method" (Keightley, 2010, p. 64), several "recurring commonalities" in the form of experience are identified, as well as major differences in terms of the author's engagement with the collective past. Despite re-visiting the common topical experiences of Romanian women's lives under the communist regime, Sora's fictional engagement with the past indicates unexplored areas of emotional memory and uncharted dimensions of women's experience.

The novel is structured around Maia's work experience in a public hospital in Romania in the last two years of the communist regime and in a private elder care institution in Switzerland. The narrative analysis has revealed three main thematic dimensions: 1. abortion and unwanted children; 2. control and abuse; 3. physical and emotional displacement. They are reunited under the recurring idea of complaisance, indicating here the pressure to behave according to written and unwritten rules and to accept the complaisance state of mind, including the impossibility of self-development and difficulty to follow personal goals. The complaisance idea is iterated in several parts of the novel. It indicates the main character's inadaptability to her social and contextual surroundings, her difficulty to accept the social norms and directives that are sensed as restrictive. Maia seems to resonate more with the unborn child and with the old man she is responsible for than with the cohort of adults stuck in the complex fabric of complaisance behaviour, which tacitly and undoubtedly introduces an existential rupture in their lives.

#### **1.1 Abortion and unwanted children**

The demographic policy provided the communist regime with the right to interfere in peoples' private life: childbirth, principles of education, sexuality, marriage, reproduction, and death. In 1966, Ceaușescu started a fertility campaign that remained in force throughout his regime; abortion became illegal from the same year until the 1989 change of regime (Andrei – Branda, 2015) and by the end of the 1980s Romania had the highest recorded maternal mortality of all European countries (Hord et al., 1991, p. 231). Control over women's bodies exceeded any previously known limits. The party-state introduced the mandatory gynaecological checks in schools and in the workplace. Any pregnancy detected during these mandatory checks would later be closely monitored, and any women attempting to have an abortion faced prison.

Various recollections discuss abortion and state control over women's bodies. The recollections draw attention to the mandatory gynaecological checks and the lack of contraceptives, and to the deaths caused by botched abortions (Gheo – Lungu, 2008). Although illegal, the practice of abortion was discussed in detail and in secrecy, with memories, experiences and solutions shared between friends and relatives. At visual level, the high impact documentary *Das Experiment 770 – Gebären auf Behelf* (2005), directed by Razvan Georgescu and Florin Iepan, used oral testimonies and various documents to depict the painful social experiment and the long-term effects of Decree 770 of 1966. Focusing on two best friends living in a world governed by Decree 770, the feature film *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007) (432), directed by Cristian Mungiu, re-opened the discussions about abortion and friendship in the final years of the communist regime (Petrescu, 2020).

Sora's novel uses several narrative images from 432 and from women's historical accounts of the experience related to unwanted pregnancies. However, she departs from the general discussion and visual approach of abortion by shifting focus from the mother figure (questioned by the police, followed by cameras, main subject in testifying about her ordeal in finding methods to terminate unwanted pregnancies, etc.), to the unwanted child. This pause in focus facilitates a complex exploration of a large palette of emotional memories connected to child loss and grief feelings.

The mad rush and the panic of getting rid of the foetus body quickly – explored in 432 movie and also included in Sora's novel as the aborted foetus is abandoned in the same manner in both works, on the floor of a bathroom, like a *corpus delicti* – is forcibly transformed into a quiet moment when the grief for the lost life, with all its possibilities gone forever, became possible. The hospital personnel, seen here as state intruders, are forced to break the bathroom door where Maia, through her almost magical ritual of cleaning the body, while thinking of the child's life, re-humanises the baby girl. Maia has no blood connections with this child, although she is finding complex affiliative connections with the baby girl. The thirty-second shot of the aborted embryo abandoned on floor in Mungiu's movie, and the image of Otilia, the main character's friend in 432, wandering the streets to find a place to get rid of the foetus, are both replaced by Maia's ritual of cherishing the baby girl as a human being, a child and a sister, acknowledging the existential presence of the un-noticed victim of the communist regime (Mitroiu, 2020) and re-opening the discussions on victimhood, responsibility, trauma and grief.

## 1.2 Control and abuse

The communist regime's surveillance directly affected private relationships and invaded the private space of family homes. A survey of Romanian life writings dealing with daily life in communism depicts the deep influence of the communist regime over everyday life experiences, and the mechanisms used by individuals to evade regime control (Massino, 2012). Women's lives were directly subjected to the regime's control, and despite the propaganda around equal rights and workforce inclusion, women were in fact deprived of their right to choose their path in life, as their private lives became quantifiable in the number of children they gave birth to.

In Sora's novel intimacy is moved from the private space of the family into the hospital space where the sexual encounters are consumed. Gender relations are reduced to sexual behaviour and in the relations of power the authority is heavily masculine. The world depicted by Sora in her novel is dominated by male surgeons with predatory behaviour, and female nurses, with a lower social status, salary, authority and even lacking control over their own lives. The lower social status is narratively indicated through their undeveloped portraits. For example,

although a short paragraph indicates that the department is coordinated by a woman, no other details are given and no portrait of a woman equal in social status or authority with the male surgeons is included. Despite the author's reluctance in accepting this interpretation,<sup>1</sup> *Complaisance* depicts a world guided by patriarchal norms, where sexuality is explored in order to obtain social advantages. The male surgeons' comments and jokes demonstrate the women's transformation into sexual objects. The women's agency is mainly stated when one of them is using her sexuality to change her social or institutional place, to move from one department to another or to climb the medical personnel hierarchy. Seldom, short narrative episodes depict the female nurses' professional abilities and skills in assisting male surgeons, but only as silent assistants, supporting the male figures and increasing their aura of deciders over life and death. Several male portraits are sketched, with a clear attention given to Maia's relationship with doctor Negru. Despite his predatory behaviour, suspected and later proven by his actions, his figure is extensively wrapped in charismatic male features in a way that borders on caricature. A reminder of the male portrait created by the Romanian communist cinema productions (Manta, 2016), doctor Negru's charisma is built on the general subordinate status of women (loyal wives and good mothers raising children of more than often absent husbands, helpful and efficient women assistants, sexual objects, etc.).

The second male representation explored in this novel continues the patriarchal authority series: the police officers who conduct interrogatories and deal with the women who tried avoiding the state's control over their bodies. Whenever illicit abortion occurred, women's lives were first under these officer's control, as medical help could be abusively denied in the absence of confession incriminating all those involved in the abortion. Maia is also subjected to police interrogations after the bathroom door was broken and her connection with the dead child's mother (the novel does not reveal the cause of the child's death – miscarriage or abortion) is repeatedly questioned. Doctor Negru, former lover and possible father of the dead baby girl, is not subjected to the same interrogations. According to the communist legislation, a woman who had an abortion could easily be given a prison sentence, while her partner bore no legal responsibility whatsoever. The novel extends the responsibility to the women who in one form or another had any connection with the subject of investigation. The existential gap between male investigators and Maia is also reflected in the second part of the novel, when Maia is again facing interrogation, now for her breach of contract when practicing CPR manoeuvres in a Swiss institution that had a DNR protocol. She is now facing another type of control over human life: a procedural one, clearly included in the instructions received and contractually determined. It does not allow interpretations and derogations and Maia is again proving her lack of adaptability in facing the normative control of life and death.

The third male representation, lacking patriarchal behaviour, Adi, who suggests they cross the border illegally, running to Yugoslavia and hoping to be helped by German relatives, and Grégoire, her boyfriend, is narratively underdeveloped, indicating Maia's lack of knowledge over this type of male figure. In 432, Adi, the boyfriend, has also little substance; he is responsible for the unwanted pregnancy, but he is not involved in the events. Nevertheless, his lack of involvement facilitated the rape to which his girlfriend is subjected by the same man who agreed to perform the abortion.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see the third part and the information given there.

### 1.3 Physical and existential displacement

A long-time abusive regime of power also means recurrent attempts of the Romanian elite and ordinary people to escape its control, not only through evasion actions or adaptation strategies, but also through planned attempts to illegally cross its borders. The last communist decade was even harder, as, besides the regime's control, the poverty and lack of basic products dominated the economic and social life. The construction of an imagined parallel world where freedom of thought was still possible, practiced also by Maia through her literary readings, was not enough. To cross, swimming or otherwise, the Danube river was a choice made by some Romanian people in their attempts to breach the border with Yugoslavia. For example, *Silent River* (2011), directed by Anca Miruna Lăzărescu, tells the story of the struggle of two young people to escape from Romania by crossing the Danube. Whatever the means to cross the border, escape played a significant role in Romanians' life plans during and after the communist regime, when the economic reasons determined a large part of population to migrate to Western countries (Kemp-Welch, 2020).

Besides Adi's suggestion to cross the border into Yugoslavia, the novel indicates in both its parts Maia's displacement feelings that dominate her life. Deva, her hometown, is described as suffocating, Romania is a country from which she wants to run away, Switzerland is another country that she aims to leave when her life there will no longer respond to her inner needs and existential expectations. The displacement is in fact embedded in existential strata. It is the result of the general complaisance governing social life and human relations, and of the existential gap sensed between the individual self and the external world.

The inclusion of the portraits of the female nurses working in the same institution in Switzerland complete the picture of existential displacement, extending and completing the initial sorority formed by Maia's childhood friends. When bathing and caring for the dead baby girl Maia is performing a sorority initiation ritual, thinking of and transmitting through her ritual her own gender knowledge and experience. Through the symbolic gesture of placing a coin from 1966 in the baby girl's hand, Maia and the author pay their respects to the communist regime victims by acknowledging the lost lives caused by the 1966 Decree outlawing abortion. Describing other women's lives, Sora adds an international panoptic view over the women's affective displacement. A physical and existential displacement was forced upon the little baby girl, reflecting Maia's displacement. The abusive regime of power and the patriarchal society forced upon her life path and determined a life direction in which Maia is feeling displaced. And she is not alone.

## 2 Women's agency, complacency and moral action

From a philosophical perspective, *Complaisance* would privilege a possible explanation of the manner in which a consciousness habituated with a double perspective on things assimilates, learns, through the tragic encounter with the death of the other, of the stranger, not only the hard lesson of how death occurs, but also the lesson of becoming an individual consciousness. The consciousness of being a woman, of finding alternatives to take control of one's own body, of calibrating the body's position between what the private area would represent and what should be, in an order of life, the public position of one's own body which comes into contact with sick, dying bodies.

Through an ethical reading of the novel, I have tried to capitalise on the life experience of the novel's heroine, as a female experience that could contribute to a better understanding of

morality, of the way in which a woman matures from a moral point of view,<sup>2</sup> of the way she reasons morally, the way she decides to act and, subsequently, to justify her actions. As ethical appreciation, judgment, or evaluation must be methodologically based on a theory, the reading of the novel has favoured feminist ethics<sup>3</sup> and the utilitarian perspective. The same feminist perspective has been maintained regarding the manner in which the main character of the novel, Maia, deliberates and justifies her actions. In order to interpret the facts and have a more accurate moral understanding of the consequences of Maia's actions, it has been necessary to apply the interpretation required by the professional and social context in which the action takes place, a reading from the perspective of the ethics of care versus contractarian theories.<sup>4</sup>

At the level of reading epistemology, the ethical interpretation of fictional facts would help to understand a complex phenomenon, that of the formation of an authentic moral consciousness of a woman who adapts to various political and social conditions. From this point of view, it should be noted that lately literature is perceived by ethics theorists as a true "moral laboratory" (Hakermulder, 2000), a secure and imaginary space where one can question beliefs and practice, and simulate various scenarios or formulate principles (Mandelson – Maoz, 2007).

## **2.1 Moral reasoning: the encounter with the death of human beings**

Referring to the situations described in the novel, two moments become essential for an ethical reading. Both are built narratively around the encounter with death: the encounter with the stillborn foetus and the death of Mr. Stoltz. In the greater picture of the novel, the author suggests that these two events be considered equal: "Why is it the same thing if you die a few weeks old, in a warm bed of red velvet throbbing with life around you and without thinking for a moment that this life doesn't want you, or at 88, in the bed you can no longer warm up?" (Sora, 2020a, p. 151).<sup>5</sup>

Death, in terms of metaphysics, is a phenomenon of life, a fact of life that becomes public through the encounter with the death of the stranger. Death is learned, the consciousness of one's own finitude is acquired only through the encounter with the death of the other. This metaphysical problem has no solution. Ethics takes it over and solves it by establishing general rules of conduct, codes and protocols. But beyond the provisions of the rules that require respectful attitudes and the preservation of the human dignity of inanimate bodies, can anyone establish the degree of guilt of someone who, as an individual in the position of caring for people with health problems, encounters the death of a stranger, of an uninitiated existence such as that of the foetus thrown on the bathroom floor, or that of a person who is consciously and patiently waiting for the arrival of death?

How to act, at the level of moral conscience, towards the other at a time when for the other good or evil – as the two concepts are perceived – are suspended? How can one save one's moral conscience from the feeling of guilt when any action taken in favour of the other would not change the situation for the one who has already died?

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<sup>2</sup> In ethical theories, the manner in which women reason and decide to act was considered, up until the 1980s, when Carol Gilligan (1982) published the results of her research regarding women's way of thought, inferior to men's way of thought. In the ethical tradition, the idea was born that "the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled" (Aristotle, 1885 section 1254b).

<sup>3</sup> For an elaborated discussion on feminist ethics please see Shafer-Landau, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> The principles of the ethics of care clash with those of contractualists, this opposition has been taken into consideration, since as a rule contractualists believe that obedience to the rules is a moral duty; in this case, the moral development of the woman is constructed in opposition to the obedience to the rules.

<sup>5</sup> The first part of the novel was indicated as 2020a, the second part as 2020b.

Naturally, in these situations everyone acts according to their own conscience, their own model of moral reasoning or based on the code of professional deontology. Due to various ethical traditions, social contexts in which individuals have been educated, gender differences, behaviours or professional codes of conduct are not universal and the way individuals react is different. In relation to the theories of feminist ethics, the dominant way of reasoning, imposed by tradition, appeals to principles, to universal norms. This type of rationality involves a “male” model of thinking (Koehn, 1998) which, in the case of moral dilemmas, resorts to universal principles/norms, creates hierarchies in which some rights take precedence over others. Following this logic and in the contractualist spirit, in the care centre for medicalized pensioners, Maia is being disciplined for violating the order established by her contract. Moral reasoning that is based on universal principles and morally evaluates actions according to them is criticised by some feminist philosophers (Bernstein, 1986) because it evokes the image of domination, oppression, repression, patriarchy, violence, totalitarianism and even terror, and these structures of reasoning shape the behaviours of individuals in this direction. On the other hand, there are feminist philosophers (Gilligan, 1982) who have noticed, following the model of family/friendship dynamics, that women tend to adopt, in solving moral problems, a much more fluid reasoning structure, based on trust and imagination, at the same time engaging in deliberative openness. Criticisms of rationalist ethics (Heikes, 2010) focus on the idea that, because of the dualism established between mind and body, reason becomes isolated, both from the world and from the senses and emotions of the thinker. At the level of consciousness this dualism can be, in certain situations, harmful. It can dictate deeply antisocial behaviour: a judgment of situations without compassion or empathy.

In the novel, the author describes a moral conscience that is not in the process of shaping, but of reconfiguration with the intention of surviving morally and thus liberating itself from the communist paradigm that established women’s role and educated women’s consciousness in the area of forced motherhood. The woman’s body became an asset of the communist state, one that the regime could control by law and regiment in its favour by aggressively supervising pregnant women, forcing them to give birth to unwanted children: “what is the circuit: the fair regulation, the inclusion of each type of girl or woman in the articles of the decree” (Sora, 2020a, p. 34).

Maia’s gesture of bathing and caring for the body of the stillborn girl, found on the bathroom floor, among the dirty laundry, is the gesture of a whole conscience, of a moral conscience that cannot and must not be detached from her womanly body that can or cannot keep in the womb the life of a new being. It is the redemptive gesture in relation to an innocent existence that had never intended to arrive into this world. By simply bathing and wrapping the little girl who “was an agglomeration of cells, more water and void than anything else” (Sora, 2020a, p. 72) includes her among the beings that came into contact with a world ruled by a communist regime. The passage through this world left traces even on the faces of those who did not live long enough to have a story of their lives, who were not aware of living in the world. The only story that is slipped unnoticed into the hand of the girl without a life story, but who had “an expression of fear, horror and amazement” imprinted on her face (Sora, 2020a, p. 72) is the story stamped on the 25 bani/coin with the year of issue 1966, the year in which the decree on the prohibition of abortions was enacted in Romania. The harsh reality was that during the communist regime, thousands of girls, without a life story, passed through the world carrying such a coin hidden in their hands. Thousands more were born wearing the communist effigy.

More women have died as a result of illegal abortions, paying Charon,<sup>6</sup> the ferryman for the underworld, the same 25 bani coin issued in 1966. In an ethical reading, it is not the transition and the preparation of the girl for the other world that is important, but the coin. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (section 1133b) says that the *nomisma* – the coin – brings things to a common denominator. The coin signifies equality between those who were born dead and those who entered life (although life was denied to them as well as to those whose existence was from the beginning enclosed in death) as a result of the consequences of the 1966 decree.

## 2.2 Complaisance and free conscience

In certain situations, a servile attitude can be considered a moral virtue and can bring a number of benefits to those who act in this manner. Traditionally, in the Romanian ethos, a humble attitude was and still is seen as an opportunity to avoid punishment for a wrongdoing, and sometimes, completely arbitrarily, a humble behaviour is associated with modesty. From a rational point of view, generalising the utilitarian cost-benefit calculation, an obedient attitude brings to the one who adopts it a benefit that is less than the cost he/she pays through obedience, because the humble attitude has the most harmful negative effects. One of the most serious effects is that “a submissive attitude encourages exploitation” (Hill, 2002, pp. 255–256), and the direct consequence is the loss of moral rights that may in fact be fundamental human rights.

Read from an ethical perspective, Sora’s novel retraces the steps taken by a woman to free herself from a conscience educated in the spirit of complaisance. An obedient conscience accustomed to seeing reality only through a slit, which accepts silence as a virtue, one that the essence of complaisance has turned it into public conduct: “think only what you can see with your own eyes; only speak of what you have seen” (Sora, 2020a, p. 104). The only refuge that those who lived during communism found was their own conscience. But this closure in one’s own mind also came with its price.

The specific attitude of Eastern Europeans affected by communism is understood by theorists (e.g. Tyszka, 2009) as a dysmorphic manifestation of a consciousness infected by the same destructive virus that manifests itself as a kind of schizophrenia, and people who experienced life in communism accessed a double thinking: diametrically opposed values, some for the public space and others for the private one. That is why for the heroine of the novel complaisance is torture: “for her complaisance was hell: to simulate goodwill, openness, approval, when you feel something completely different, to grin and bear it, when grinning and bearing rip out your internal organs one by one: to endure and put yourself on hold, through a “complaisance switch” you develop on your own, as an exercised autonomous muscle, just to avoid confrontation.” (Sora, 2020b, p. 87).

In contrast to Eastern Europeans, Westerners were aware of their freedom of opinion and action. Freedom of action, according to utilitarianism, can only be limited by the interests of others. Hence the striking difference between Maia and Mr. Stoltz in terms of metabolising complaisance: “... when you do what the others expect of you – either obey their rules, which you need to know, or their unexpressed desires, which you are supposed to be able to guess – you expect the others to do exactly what you think they should do. It’s an exchange, but without this exchange you don’t even get to know the others” (Sora, 2020b, p. 86).

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<sup>6</sup> Charon, in Greek mythology, is the son of Erebus and the goddess of the night. He is the one who makes the connection with the underworld of Hades. Charon would ferry the souls of the dead across the Acheron to the other world, if they paid him at least one coin. Sora alludes to the mythological character, whose name she imagines she sees inscribed on a silver pen. (2020b, p. 37).



In the liberal spirit, we could understand why this discrepancy arises between people who have lived in different socio-political backgrounds and how it could be mitigated. Mill (2014) proposes the idea that the diversity of lifestyles derives from people's imperfection. The value of different lifestyles can and must be proved practically by directly accessing, adopting the lifestyles considered desirable by individuals who have previously been guided by other patterns. In this scheme, in which the majority imposes the rule of opinion, the individual spontaneity, as unrestricted freedom, is recognised by the majority with difficulty. The tendency of not recognising spontaneous novelty elements in life and thought patterns is due to the fact that most people are satisfied with the patterns they use and cannot understand why they cannot be equally good for everyone, and as such accepted and used – and forms of spontaneity are not part of the ideal of the majority (Ciubotarașu-Pricop, 2017).

Maia's spontaneous, caring gesture towards the guest who enters cardio-respiratory arrest had to be punished according to the utilitarian logic. Mr. Stoltz had negotiated with *Derniere Chance* the conditions under which he would die. He had invested all genuine freedom in the gesture of death.

### 3 Between the “hermeneutics of suspicion” and intimate reading

This last part of the article proposes an interpretation of Sora's novel inspired by American critic Rita Felski's plea for “a post-critical reading” of literature. In her 2015 book *The Limits of Critique*, Felski draws attention to the naturalisation of the “hermeneutics of suspicion”<sup>7</sup> in the American academia, to the point that *critique* has become synonymous with literary criticism, and proposes a deconstruction of this way of reading, interpreting and arguing in literary studies. Extremely simply put, critique employs suspicious and even paranoid (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 125) reading, always mistrusting the text; this technique of reading is authoritative and intransigent; ultimately, it is “a style of interpretation driven by a spirit of disenchantment” (Felski, 2015, p. 2). Felski and other critics also propose alternatives to this way of reading and interpreting, including Eve Kosofski Sedgwick's “reparative reading” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 146) or Yves Citton's affective hermeneutics (quoted in Felski, 2015, p. 178). In what follows, I analyse, firstly, how the pattern of suspicious reading is activated in Sora's novel, in opposition to what I call, based on the author's own suggestions, *intimate reading*. Sora's vision on writing (about) literature and on the act of reading is akin to the claims of the post-critique wave. Secondly, I argue that the tension between the two reading patterns transcends the realm of critical debate and literary theory, having an important cultural relevance in post-communist societies: how do we read fictional and non-fictional narratives about communism today?

#### 3.1 Cultural difference and suspicion

*Complaisance* is an extremely intriguing material object: a “diptych novel”, in Sora's own words (Purcaru, 2020), in which the two semi-autonomous narratives that compose it are placed not in succession, but back-to-back, so that the book contains two overturned stories, each with its own cover and cover page. A novel with two beginnings and no clear ending, therefore, that does not impose a teleological reading path neither at the level of narrative logic, which is non-linear, rich in textual meanders, nor in terms of the direction of the act of reading. The reader is free to start with each of the two sequences, and in tune with the post-critical approach to

<sup>7</sup> The “hermeneutics of suspicion”, as points out Eve Kosofski Sedgwick (Sedgwick, 2003), Felski and other critics, has its roots in Paul Ricoeur's coinage of the notion, and it has been used, abused and misunderstood (Scott – Baumann, 2009).

literature, I must confess that I myself took advantage of this freedom and began reading with the part that, strictly chronologically, could be considered “the second”. Of course, my choice was not a coincidence, and it most likely reflects the more or less conscious choice not to dive directly into a “new novel about communism”.

Settled in the city of Fribourg, where Maia arrives almost by chance as a refugee after the 1990 violent street clashes in Bucharest, the Swiss chapter takes place in the narrative frames of a disciplinary inquest disguised as a dialogue that does not exceed the limits of professional politeness. Let us take a look at the excerpt below. It is not an excerpt from the first chapter of the novel (the first according to the reading path I opted for), but it might very well have been, because the phrase “while being judged thoroughly and clearly” returns again and again as a call to order both for the reader and to the character who views herself from the outside:

While being judged meticulously and clearly, with evidence with which she cannot disagree, Maia admires Mr. Legrand’s technique [...]. There’s the same light in the room that falls equally over the objects in the familiar office. Mr. Legrand is just as polite, methodical and calm. He seems to illustrate the facts – and therein lies the trap that carries Maia up and down, in a short-stroke elevator – in an anamnesis that is the practical result of the time spent at Chance. If Monsieur Legrand could enter her mind for a few minutes, he would no doubt be pleased. It’s just that she still can not – it’s an organic impossibility – go rigorously, backwards, through the events she is supposed to describe. She does not see the effects and cannot explain the causes (Sora, 2020b, p. 48).

To the questions of Mr. Legrand, the director of the Swiss asylum *Chance*, Maia answers through long and wandering forays into the past, which go beyond the present of the communication situation. These digressions probably also have the role of protecting the Romanian nurse from a diffuse threat, perceived unconsciously, and which is partly due to the cultural difference. But above all they highlight, in contrast to the clarity and precision of the questions, two opposite ways of relating to reality, which can be seen as allegories of two distinct reading patterns.

Thorough and clear judgment, technique, method, anamnesis, rigorous description, entering her mind, cause and effect – it is easy to recognise, in these notions, the conceptual vocabulary of what is called *critique*. Legrand fulfils all the characteristics that Felski associates with the persona constructed through this pattern of thought: “suspicious, knowing, self-conscious, hard headed, tirelessly vigilant” (Felski, 2015, p. 6). He, we are told in the novel, “has not only all the willingness, but also all the details” of the case he is investigating, just like the famous detective Sherlock Holmes, a prototype character, as it was argued, for the paradigm of *critique* (Iovănel, 2020). This is not only a professional interrogation, but also an example of a particular way of reading, which Maia suspects it is characteristic of the whole new culture in which she operates. Monsieur Legrand actually comments on Maia’s daily notes in her “green notebook”, a working document used by Swiss nurses, which Maia loads with personal notes that gradually take a turn towards pure fiction, sometimes with surreal accents. Comparing it with her colleagues’ notebooks, Legrand is looking for clues to explain a paradoxical case of malpractice, which could involve medical protocols and cultural practices from Maia’s country of origin.

In her book, Felski reviews several types of manifestations of suspicion in literary criticism. But the American critic does not talk about the suspicion mixed with complaisance of the Westerners, culturally superior – as they perceive themselves and are perceived by Maia – to Eastern Europeans, in the Swiss chapter of the novel, or the widespread suspicion during communism, when every individual could be an informant of the Romanian political police. This

is why the way in which the “hermeneutics of suspicion” enacted in Sora’s novel has a wider relevance, emphasising as it does the East-West cultural divide. Still, Sora itself goes beyond this model, as she avoids an antagonist perspective, favouring instead a pluralistic one.

### 3.2 Intimacy and intimate reading

Back in Romania, the centre of gravity of the narrative is the city hospital in Deva, with its atmosphere full of eroticism and sex, palliatives that are used as an antidote to the permanent presence of death in the not very well-equipped wards of the hospital, where male doctors have the status of life-saving gods. Whereas in the Swiss asylum the atmosphere is dominated by a complaisant politeness and an aseptic distance, in the Romanian hospital intimacy appears to be a collective feeling among the personnel. Human solidarity between doctors and nurses, strengthened by romantic dalliances, blurs any clear differences in professional status and gender ascendance, typical of the medical system during communism: the male doctors operate and dictate surgery protocols, while women-nurses supply the instruments in the operating room, gossip or, as in the case of Maia, read and retell books. These representations are not politically neutral, but, as Sora states in an interview (Purcaru, 2020), their function in the novel goes beyond the denunciation of unequal gender relations.

This is a much more sensory narrative, richer in lexical nuances and registers, haunted by contrasting emotions and affections. Whilst the Swiss part of the novel is saturated with rhetorical figures from the sphere of *critique*, as it is described by Felski, and the narrative protocol takes the form of a detectivist interrogatory, the Romanian chapter stands under the sign of *affectivity*. The surgical operations themselves are passionately lived by doctors and nurses, who fully invest themselves, as in a personal piece of work, in these acts of fighting against death. But, more importantly, the hospital in Deva is also a space of reading, and there are many places in the novel where the purpose and usefulness of fiction are debated. Maia herself is not only an instrumentalist in the orthopaedics department, but also a voracious reader, who in this way tries to make up for the lack of life experience. Maia reads “compulsively” and tells story in the same manner. To be sure, Maia, although a trained reader, is not interested in a theorising of literature. She reads in an affective manner, cutting out significant details about the characters and creating her own order of the narrative, which no longer takes into account temporal causality or the characters’ internal motivations. For her, reading is a ritual, but especially a way of life, it is an affective intervention on reality and a creative appropriation of the same.

Thorough judgment, suspicious reading, distance *versus* reading rituals, affective investment, intimacy with the text – two different reading possibilities are formulated here. Following Citton, Felski argues in favour of “the emergence of a new type of interpretation: one that is willing to recognise the potential of literature and art to create new imaginaries rather than to denounce mystifying illusions”. A model in which “the language of attachment, passion and inspiration is no longer taboo” (Felski, 2015, p. 187). In my opinion, there are several points of convergence between Felski’s view of non-suspicious interpretation and Sora’s own view of ideal reading, set forth in Sora’s non-fictional works, especially in her 2008 monograph *Redescoperirea intimității (Rediscovering Intimacy)*. Here, Sora repeatedly advocates for the recognition of “pleasure and communion” as an important dimension of the communication relationship between reader and author (Sora, 2008, p. 279). Inspired from the author’s engagement with the topic of intimacy, I call this ideal model *intimate reading*. It is an ideal model in the sense that, as Sora notes, it does not exist as such, as a generalised practice; but it is also an ideal model in the proper sense of the term, because it is positively valued by the

Romanian critic, in a manner very similar to the critical paradigm advocated by Felski and other American and French critics. In *Complaisance*, an intimate, fictionalised relationship of the main character to reality is designated in three ways. First of all, intimacy is related to cultural geolocation, in which the re-enchantment of the world is made possible by the recovery of the lost mythical aura of Deva, “The Maiden’s City”, and through the reparative rituals Maia performs for a minuscule girl, aborted in the Romanian hospital. Then, blurring the outline of reality through imagination and dreaming is also part of a strategy through which Maia, as a reader and future writer – if we give credit to the author’s identification with the character – strives to understand and appropriate it. Throughout the novel, Maia repeatedly favours an affective relation with reality, mediated by the process of “compulsive” writing and reading, strongly marked by affect. Thirdly, the novel itself is based on a biographical experience, which pulsates in the middle of superimposed layers of transformation, literalisation, and re-enchantment of personal experiences. The feminine element, without necessarily being feminist, acquires importance in this model of intimate reading – and not coincidentally in the critical bibliography it is connected mainly to women-readers and to women reading experiences<sup>8</sup>.

In the end, post-critical reading is not only a solution for breaking the vicious circle of the hermeneutics of suspicion in literary studies, but can also be a useful model for the way we “read” (and, implicitly, write about) the post-traumatic past, a model both in the line of reparative hermeneutics (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 147), but also of the agonistic mode of memory, increasingly active today in Europe and elsewhere<sup>9</sup>. But it should not be understood that Sora definitely opts for the pattern of intimate reading, abandoning the “suspicious” one. The circular construction of the novel shows that the two models do not exclude each other, but instead coexist. By proposing alternative ways of reading, the author finally captures a tension between the traumatic paradigm, with its suspicious reading of the past, and the affective, reparative and future oriented one. This is why this novel is illustrative not only for the post-critical turn in Western literary studies, but also for the East-European post-communist condition. Ultimately, as an agonistic novel of memory (Mironescu – Mironescu, 2020, p. 112), *Complaisance* enacts and problematises two modes of reading, interpreting, and appropriating our shared, increasingly distant past.

## Conclusion

The triangular reading of Sora’s novel reveals common elements, significant differences and several variations in terms of approaching and understanding fictional texts using the epistemological pluralism framework. Complex correlations between fictional texts and the context-dependent experience are indicated. Through corroboration of arguments, representations and descriptions, a story creates a complex image of a particular knowledge related to a specific context. A context-dependent understanding of a particular event/situation/relationship/person might limit the knowledge in a dimensional understanding, although it adds profoundness and explores different layers of meaning. An elaborated understanding of the mechanisms that colluded in shaping the main character’s moral maturity is revealed through a reading connected to the social-political context of the authoritarian regime of power. Surpassing the moral limitations forced upon her by living under an abusive regime and in a patriarchal society, the

<sup>8</sup> Janet Mason Ellerby (2001) and Jessica Bar (2020) explore the connection between memoir writing and medieval sacral literature, respectively, and women’s biographical and reading experiences.

<sup>9</sup> Agonistic memory is a dialogic model which “recognizes conflict as an ontological and fundamental characteristic of human society” (Bull – Hansen, 2020), and therefore aims at acknowledging, deconstructing and accommodating conflictual interpretations of the past.

main character is able to conduct her own conscience and reasoning reading of the external reality. She is empowered as a moral agent, gaining her own voice, telling her own story and her truth as she had perceived it. From a memory studies perspective, this particular experience in its fictional form was approached through its similarities with other existing cultural analyses regarding Romanian women's experience of the communist regime and of the transitional years. Several recurring common elements were indicated in the form of experience, as well as major variations in terms of processing the collective memories of the past. Sora's fictional engagement with the past was indicated as revealing uncharted dimensions of women's experience in relationships of power. Finally, the third reading of the novel employs a post-critique perspective, partially opposed to the cultural studies' emphasis on the context. Without disregarding the importance of the political and social frame in which a fictional piece is written, circulates, is read and appropriated, the post-critical model of interpretation favours an emphatically, close reading of the text, and admits to and thematises the affective investment of the interpreter. Fictional texts often encrypt, in a more or less (in)direct manner, reading protocols, as is the case in Sora's novel. By deciphering and discussing two opposed, although co-existent, reading patterns, an authoritative and "suspicious" one and an affective, "intimate" one, the final part of the paper acknowledges once again the perspective of epistemological pluralism and opens the interpretation of the novel to the challenging dimension of the politics of reading. This is how the novel accounts for and, most importantly, accommodates the differences between the two modes of thinking presented in conflict, male and female, and for the cultural differences between Western and Eastern Europe.

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## Summary

### Memory, ethics and (post)critique. A triangular reading of Simona Sora's novel *Complaisance*

This article offers a triangular reading of a contemporary Romanian novel, namely Simona Sora's *Complaisance. Ascension in the orthopaedics ward/A guest for life* (2020), in the frame of epistemological pluralism. To this end, each of the three co-authors opted for different epistemological perspectives, spanning memory studies, ethics, and literary aesthetics. In the first section, Simona Mitroiu uses a "memory-work method" and applying narrative analysis she reads Sora's novel in relation to several cultural productions dealing with Romanian women's experience in relationships of power. In the same context-dependent framework, Laura Pricop embraces, in the second section, an ethical perspective and retraces the steps taken by a woman to free herself from a conscience educated in the spirit of complaisance and obedience under the communist regime. Finally, Andreea Mironescu deciphers in Sora's novel the allegorisation of two antagonistic, although co-existent, ways of reading and interpreting, arguing that such antagonism between a suspicious and affective reading has a wide cultural relevance, especially on how we read the past. The three analyses make a stronger case for how epistemological pluralism works in practice.