

# Veronica Porumbacu's 'Return from Cynthera' (1966): A Conceptual Manifesto of Socialist Feminism

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## ABSTRACT:

Veronica Porumbacu (1921-1977) was a Romanian poet and translator who has been unjustly forgotten today due to her proletcultist poems of the 1950s. Yet her work was widely published and well-known during the socialist regime, and is especially relevant for the two decades of growth and ideological innovation of the 1960s and 1970s. In my article I analyze a remarkable volume of hers published in 1966, situating it in the context of her work and in the wider frame of the political context of Romania. I argue that *Return from Cynthera* can be considered a conceptual manifesto of socialist feminism, relying on reflexive eroticism, embodied thought, and historical consciousness to challenge the surrounding patriarchal order and to claim the necessity of developing a different cultural genealogy, centered on the standpoint and experiences of women.

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Postcommunist România has tried hard to abandon its own recent past, although as visual artist Ciprian Mureșan has reminded us, strictly speaking “Communism never happened.”<sup>1</sup> In the past three decades of “post-socialist” or “post-communist” West-oriented transition, a specific type of forgetting has been perfected in academia, the public sphere, as well as the larger culture industry. Romanian “communist poet,” writer and translator Veronica Porumbacu has been a collateral casualty of such systemic forgetting, which seemingly only allowed remembering in the troublesome form of virulent anti-semitic, anti-communist and misogynist callbacks.<sup>2</sup> In this article I would like to counter this forgetting by engaging in a close philosophical reading of her book *Return from Cythera*, situated in the wider political context of socialist Romania. I argue that the concepts created here by this accomplished poet, in an opening moment of the history of actually existing socialism, can still serve as inspiration and provide useful references for feminist thought and social theory working with the cultural archive of Eastern Europe.

## A Brief Intellectual Biography of Veronica Porumbacu

Far from being the marginal figure she may seem today, Veronica Porumbacu was a prominent intellectual figure of post-war Romania, when her militant proletcultist poems were featured on the frontpage of official journals – like the poem “Baladă pentru 1 Mai” [Ballad for May Day] in *Scînteia* (23 April 1949) or “Către centrul de votare” [Towards the Voting Centre], *Scînteia* (30 November 1952). Her volumes of poetry were rewarded from early on with state prizes (such as the volume *Mărturii* [Testimonials] from 1952), and one of her poems “Tatăl meu” [My Father] featured for decades in Romanian primers, to the point of becoming—as I witnessed—

an “authorless” poem recited in kindergartens. Her poem “Blestem” [Curse], an actual curse published in the epoch of the Eichmann trial, was circulated in spite of the official denial of the Holocaust in Romania.<sup>3</sup> She was part of the intellectual groups of influential Romanian literary journals of the 1950s and 1960s from both Bucharest and Cluj (*Viața Românească* and *Steaua*) and was an outspoken internationalist, travelling for instance to the World Festival of Youth and Students in Budapest in 1949, to the World Peace Congress in Warsaw in 1950, and to Berlin in 1951, where she won the international prize for a poem protesting against the continuation of war. She also traveled to North Korea in 1957. On such occasions she met figures like Pablo Neruda, Nicolas Guillen, Rafael Alberti, María Teresa León, Nazim Hikmet, Paul Eluard, Paul Aragon, Elsa Triolet, An Son-Hi and Nevena Stefanova, with whom she developed a vast correspondence and some long-lasting friendships.<sup>4</sup> Yet the interest in her work suddenly seemed to all but vanish after her tragic disappearance together with her husband, highly respected literary critic Mihail Petroveanu, in the catastrophic Bucharest earthquake from 1977. Thus, the first veil of forgetting Veronica Porumbacu did not set in the context of some sort of internal critique the Stalinist-era proletcultists, as one would perhaps expect, but rather during the radical turn within the ideological history of Romanian socialism which occurred in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, towards a masculinist ethno-nationalism under the authoritative figure of Nicolae Ceaușescu as the First Man of the land.<sup>5</sup> Her own self-critical position toward the proletcultist work from the Stalinist era was typically steadfast: “I am among the ones who took on the responsibility of writing (...) Maybe I did not reach the truth, but I also never lied”<sup>6</sup>; or: “I know a lot of things / but I do not know the regret of keeping back. / The poet prefers the feelings of

remorse / to an empty soul, forever clear. / Everything I felt could be read on my face.”<sup>7</sup> Finally, after 1989, the memory of Veronica Porumbacu was covered by a second veil, the anti-communist forgetting,<sup>8</sup> never too far away from anti-semitic and/or misogynist allusions or implications.

Against this double forgetting, it is worth recalling briefly the multi-faceted character of Veronica Porumbacu’s intellectual work, before introducing her conceptual poetry. Born Veronica Schwefelberg in 1921 in Bucharest, she became a communist activist in high school during the years of Romanian fascism. She spent the war years in segregated Bucharest as a member of the illegal communist organisation in a poor worker’s district, and confronted on February 24, 1945, the last anti-communist repression, which used machine guns against the population at the orders of then prime-minister Rădescu. She studied philosophy and during the course of her life worked as a stenographer, primary school teacher, radio reporter, journal editor, and translator, and was elected deputy in the local council of her city district three times. She typed on her typewriter the requests of her neighbors and tried to solve their problems. After the war she was employed as reporter at the Romanian Radio state company by a veteran member of the illegal communist movement in interwar Romania, a woman who had spent 14 years in prison. In the years to follow Veronica Porumbacu traveled extensively throughout the country, in meager conditions, interviewing scores of common people. “I feel better in the crowd than at home... I see so many thousands of people, I hear so many regional turns of phrase and argotic expressions that every journey becomes a mobile school.”<sup>9</sup>

On a personal level, she made her official literary debut, *Visele Babei Dochia* [*The Dreams of Old Dochia*] (1947), just as she divorced her first husband, rejecting the perspective of becoming a

wife waiting for attention,<sup>10</sup> and engaged in a love affair with her future partner. Her voice overpowers the accusations of “intimism” hurled at the time by the literary priests of “objective” socialist realism. “I was born at the same time with the first man. / Actually not, at the same time with the first star, / If there ever was a first day. (...) I ring the bell of the mountain / I bathe in all the streams / and I like to catch the wind while walking. / I shout in the street with the people. (...) / The barefoot children love me. / They are the many sons of the Earth.”<sup>11</sup> Here, as elsewhere, she simply identified with the revolution, and the barefoot children of the Earth are the proletariat as seen from her life experience, the Wretched of the Earth in the larger sense.

In 1946 she also self-published *La capătul lui 38* [*At the End of No. 38*], remembering life in the poor slums of interwar Bucharest and the struggles during the war. This was complemented in 1968 by the prose volume of memoirs *Porțile* [*The Gates*], in which she evokes the life-worlds of Jewish Romanian neighborhoods and the antisemitism of interwar Romania. Her travels as a radio reporter are recalled in *Drumuri și zile* [*Roads and Days*] (1969). Then *Voce și val* [*Voice and Wave*], published in 1976, one year before her disappearance, is a complex testimony to both her personal life and the intellectual history of post-war Romania. With her international connections she worked as a one-woman-agency for the global promotion of Romanian literature, translating into French several major modern Romanian poets, such as George Bacovia and Tudor Arghezi. Throughout her life she also translated into Romanian works by Stepan Scipaciov, Rafael Alberti, Alain Bosquet, József Attila, and by Emily Dickinson, Mariana Alcoforado, curating in 1968 a massive two-volume anthology of modern Nordic poetry (from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden).

Furthermore, knowing well that children's literature had a special status in actually existing socialism, reaching a different audience and allowing a particular freedom of expression, she also published popular volumes of poetry for children, with illustrations made by her sister, painter Maria Constantin,<sup>12</sup> such as *Din lumea noastră* [*From Our World*] (1960) or *Cercul și Anamaria* [*The Circle and Anamaria*] (1974). The latter's second edition was published posthumously in 1979 with a print run of 30,000 copies. In 1954, after suffering a miscarriage, she wrote as self-therapy—according to her own confessions<sup>13</sup>—a fantasy theatre play for children, *Fata apelor* [*The Daughter of Waters*], engaging with mythological and cosmological materials. The play was premiered in the Transylvanian village of Luna de Jos, where the Fates were dressed in local popular garb, while the Fairies were in urban tailored suits, then performed at the National Theatre in Cluj, as well as on the Romanian Radio in 1961. The play was also published as a book with illustrations by her sister.

In the 1960s Veronica Porumbacu reached the zenith of her career as a poet, with the volumes *Diminețile simple* [*Simple Mornings*] (1961), *Memoria cuvintelor* [*The Memory of Words*] (1963), and the anthology *Poezii* [*Poems*] (1962), which was chosen to be published in the select book series “The Most Beautiful Poems” of the popular Bucharest publishing house Editura Tineretului, whose previous 22 volumes had featured authors such as Pushkin, Rimbaud, Eminescu, Petöfi and Goethe. The volume also featured a portrait of the poet made by her sister. Then, in January 1966, at the dawn of what is perhaps the most prolific and influential decade of Romanian modern culture,<sup>14</sup> she published the conceptual volume *Întoarcerea din Cythera* [*Return from Cythera*],<sup>15</sup> which could be considered a conceptual manifesto of actually-existing socialist feminism.

## Return from Cythera: Reflexive Eroticism and New Beginnings

The unassuming volume, small enough to fit in a breast pocket, was in fact a major gesture from an established figure, written at a time of profound change. Romanian communist leader Gheorghe-Gheorghiu Dej had fallen ill during a visit to Moscow and died in March, 1965, after almost two decades of rule. Yet during the ongoing decade of decolonization, Dej had actually initiated the distancing of Romania from the Soviet Union and the rapprochement with the Non-Aligned Movement (a direction which was continued and intensified by Ceaușescu in the first decade of his own rule). As a result, Dej had visited Nehru's India and Sukarno's Indonesia in 1962, and established Romania's major industrial collaboration with Tito's Yugoslavia in 1963 (the project *Portiile de Fier*). Dej's sudden death in March 1965 prompted the organisation of the 9<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Romanian Communist Party in July, in very special circumstances, in the wider context of the US invasion wars in Vietnam, Laos and the Dominican Republic. Present at the Congress were many international delegates who had come directly from the World Congress for Peace, which had been held just a few days earlier in Helsinki. The 9<sup>th</sup> Congress marked a radical turn in the internal history of Romanian real socialism,<sup>16</sup> affirming the commitment to "new beginnings," active international solidarity with the movements of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist liberation, and the re-affirmation of "Marxism as a living science" (i.e. subject to transformations) and the abandonment of "ossified dogmas." Celebrated Romanian writer Marin Preda later famously theorized this paradigmatic change as a transfer of generations marked by the distinction between the "agressive primary spirit" of the first two decades of state socialism, and the "obsessive decade" of the late 1960s and the first half of the 1970s. The latter was an unprecedentedly prolific age

of radical experiments and commitment to the cultural and material re-foundation of socialism, to re-imagining the “future of communism,” in the hope of building a better world.

At the same time, Veronica Porumbacu had also reached her “middle age” and had just moved out, together with her husband, from the old Jewish family house at the heart of the communal neighborhood, leaving it in the charge of her sister, to a socialist apartment, engaging with enthusiasm in the material and communal organisation of their new life.<sup>17</sup> During this time she became an outspoken poet of everyday life in the socialist apartment, talking much like Preda about entering the “new house” while leaving “primordial chaos.”

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“In the new house, / we are now watching from the sixth floor / the head of the street / like people who already know / where the passers-by will lay their tired bodies after work / where they will bathe their children / where they will lay down carpets. / The houses without past / have their future poetry” (“Colocviu” [Colloquy]).

“The street landscape changes within the frame of my window” (“Numai păpușa” [Only the Doll]).

“You, small things, rich nothings, / tame these walls. (...) / Everything, we moved everything in between these white walls / except the secret connection between people and things. (...) / You, small things, flower vases, / bird trinkets from burnt clay, / I will first put you here to get closer to the walls, / before the curtains I saw in a shop window, / before the carpet which we’ll buy next month. / You, small things, rich nothings, / Ask yourselves, when the doors will have set in their hinges



/ when the shutter shadows will mix on the floor with  
the rays of the moon / what looks will be able to find  
each other on the white map of the wall“ (“Sfiala”  
[Bashfulness]).

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The new apartment of the Porumbacu-Petroveanu family quickly became a real point of attraction in Bucharest, visited by many literary figures—one of the “confidential communities”<sup>18</sup> that characterized the social and cultural life of actually existing socialism. Here, Veronica Porumbacu celebrated her 41<sup>st</sup> birthday with poems talking of power and wisdom: “I’ve drunk so much light / from the people, from the trees, from the stars / from the half-tones of hope / from the full music of love / that even as I enter the shadow light / I will light it up myself” (“Al 41-lea” [The 41st]); “At my age one adds to my years / the age of the Earth, flowing / as if through a delta, into the future times” (“Ca o deltă” [Like a Delta]).<sup>19</sup> The writer consciously and constantly identifies the two decades of state socialism with her own life and experience, and likewise with the reflections on the perspectives of entering a new epoch.<sup>20</sup> The identification of the social with the personal does not collapse here into individualism or solipsism, instead heightening the historical consciousness.

*Return from Cythera*, the title of the 1966 volume, immediately signalled that it was nothing less than a conceptual manifesto, a re-emergence of the famed artist on her own ground—yet in a coded letter. Cythera is the mythic birthplace of Venus. Together with many other references used by the poet – waves, shells, bells, gulfs – Cythera is the name that claims the place of an autonomous femininity. Famously, Boticelli painted *The Birth of Venus* in 1486, daringly representing Venus as an adult nude woman about to reach, from a shell pushed by the Zephyr, the shores of an island. The name

of the island is Cythera. For his part, conservative art critic Ernst Gombrich tried to push the Western reception of Boticelli's painting in the direction of a hand-wringing neoplatonic interpretation, arguing that nudity symbolizes divinity, and therefore that Boticelli's painting was actually showing divine love, namely the type of superior love that elevates the human (male) intellect by contemplating pure ideas. One could also argue that Lorenzo de Medici's court painter directly emphasized the eroticism of the adult woman who "reached new shores" – perhaps by way of love, a wedding, sexual intercourse or something else. The later painting of Watteau, *The Embarkation for Cythera* (1714), which probably inspired the title of Porumbacu's book, focuses on free love, representing the different stages of a love affair. However, contrary to his own title, Watteau's painting seems to represent a gradual process of leaving the island, from the enjoyment of free love (consumed on the luxurious landscape of the island) to the end of it. Consequently, other conservative and masculinist interpretations speculated that the painting represented teleologically the moment of *leaving* Cythera and thus the ephemeral nature of bodily pleasures. Venus's own place was weakened, as it were, by such a masculinist appeal to the virtues of disembodied and asexual reason. Here, progress was understood as a battle won by the elevated forces of the faculties of infinite internal accumulation (self-control, the infinite depth of consciousness, and the absolute freedom of reason), set against the waste of vital energies falling prey to the base instincts of the body.<sup>21</sup> This argument paralleled the contemporary capitalist-colonial accumulation of wealth of the "higher civilisations," legitimated by comparisons to the "waste" of wealth in the "inferior" indigenous civilisations that were not exerting dominion over nature. Yet contrary to Watteau, Porumbacu titles her book *The Return from Cythera*, emphasizing the standpoint of starting from Venus's own place. Furthermore, one of the first poems is named "Toward Cythera," emphasizing that

the endpoint is the very same place, in a coded act of double affirmation equivalent to a rejection of teleological determinism. And not only is there no leaving Cythera, there is also a lot of overnight staying and magic. Here, Porumbacu calls herself from the outset “an arariél bush” (“Către Cythera” [Toward Cythera]), using the name of Arariél, who appears in Rabbinic literature as the guardian angel of the waters of the Earth, and at the same time, as a cure against the rigidity of thought. Porumbacu also invokes Isolde in the poem opening the volume. In Wagner’s opera *Tristan and Isolde*, the latter is a witch capable of pronouncing a curse that raises the waters of the sea and drowns her kidnappers. Yet for her part, Porumbacu explicitly rejects Wagner’s fatalist vision that man is pushed towards misery and is consumed by his impossible desires: “Autumn, / please take away the poisoned chalice from my lips. / There are still so many rich hours and stars on the canopy” (“Rozariul Isoldei” [Isolde’s Rosarium]).

The volume attempts to enact an epistemic break and a revolutionary refoundation of one’s own relation to reality. The narrative voice belongs to an adult woman that breaks from the disembodied and asexual reason of the modern masculine self and embraces self-mythologization and reflexive eroticism. “Look at me, my friend, I’m near the sea, (...) / With my own hand / I snatch my own stem from the dry rocks (...) / And then I stay overnight, and everything is new on Earth. (...) Unchained from the mast we will go, / we will run towards temptations, / journeying to the land of legendary love. / I have no filter with me (...) On a shore worn out by words / I pour out in the sand / a fistful of see-through shells, / in new carnal dialects” (“Spre Cythera” [Toward Cythera]).

Thus, from the outset, Porumbacu rejects an inherited tradition, taking a different path. More precisely, she takes on the *Odyssey* and re-writes it from a woman’s standpoint. Veronica Porumbacu

becomes herself the protagonist, replacing the canonical figure of the male hero (Odysseus) and expressing her intention to break with the associated cultural tradition. She claims thus, in the context of the major political events occurring in Romania in 1965, the need for fundamental new beginnings and a different cultural genealogy, centered on women's experience. Such a gesture may have inspired other creators from socialist Romania like Nell Cobar, the visual artist who created afterward a series of cartoons re-telling canonical fairy tales with interventions featuring the girl character Mihaela.<sup>22</sup> The path taken by Porumbacu is an anti-odyssey, committing to the experience of listening to the song of the sirens. She opposes Watteau's leaving Cythera as well as the Homeric *nostos*: this is not the story of a return (*nostos*) to the native continental land and to its one truth, to the patriarchal domain and its house with a wife. Instead, Porumbacu plunges into the liminal zone of a sandy "island," whose truth and reality are differently perceived and sensed, voiced and inscribed. It is worth noting that she had already attuned her sensibility to "islands" and the perception of the historically oppressed from the Caribbean in solidarity poems such as "Song of the Caribbean Sea": "What do you have around your slender neck? A ruby necklace? / And what are the red butterflies on your white shirt? / The liquid shell of the sea keeps your land in her hand, / the fluid shell of the sky envelops you blue, / and you are sparkling between them, you pearl of pain, / my bitter-sweet girl, with the whip mark on your face, / oh, you rebel!"<sup>23</sup> Along the way, she revisits well-known tropes of Romanian mythology and official culture, re-writing for instance the folk-epic *Ballad of Master Manole* from the perspective of the buried woman ("Fie!" [Let it be!]), and a poem in the style of national poet Eminescu, but from the perspective of the "sisters" ("Asemenea vouă" [Just like you]).<sup>24</sup> The poet also makes sure that her unique voice is felt materially by the reader

by using a series of untranslatable phonetic alliterations: “sînt vară spălată de valuri” (“Statui istrene” [Instrian Statues]); “Eu, mai curînd urcînd” (“Arhaică” [Archaically]); “Nu densele umbre în volburi de fund” (“Ochii verzi ai luminiî” [The Green Eyes of the Light]); “Prundul iradia ritualul nocturn” (“Peștii în jur” [The Fish Around]).

The decision to “stay overnight” opens up not only a different kind of space, described by the to-and-fro of the shell approaching the shore, but also a new temporality, a different perception of historical time. Yet the “new” is not an absolute invention: it is, after all, a “return.” Porumbacu’s projection of her personal life in the possible (and ideal) communist future is memorably named “the hour of trust,” which is an embodied “new” temporality: “The time / is born in me / now.” (“Bună-Vestire” [Good-Tidings]). Other verses also emphasize liminal spaces, lived time and themes of precedence and continuation: “I live / like a seed in the apple” (“Sîmburul” [The Seed]); “I’m a cloud. / Look at me for a long time” (“Capriciile vîntului” [The Wind’s Whim]). “The higher we build this world / the deeper we find the other one. / Like the soul that keeps in us / untouched by time and rains / unknown by me, by none, / treasures from the old times (...) / that we pass to the others through time / which only the children will find, one day” (“Sipetul de lut” [The Clay Coffin]). This is not anymore the purist projection of a technological future of modernity that one could encounter in the traditional communist imaginary of the inevitable march to freedom of the working classes. “She, the Revolution, can only be a woman / wild passions bringing a great tomorrow”<sup>25</sup> – she declares elsewhere.

Thus, the quest for freedom itself changes. The contestatory standpoint of the woman becomes central, and many verses start with expressions of will and desire, like “I want” or “I would like”: “I would like in the summer night / to raise my hands / to have a star

on top of each finger. / I would like to live all these wonders, / and stay humble” (“Ceasul încrederii” [The Hour of Trust]); “I would like total memory / like the canopy that keeps the count of all the stars” (“Memoria totală” [Total memory]). Here, total memory is what keeps into consideration not only the bright lights, but also the dim lights, the resistances that have been killed and annihilated, the fallen stars and the dark spots. “Watch the sky twice, girl, / the stars that rise, the stars that fall / I know a young man who was shot long ago / and he’s never going to see them.”<sup>26</sup>

In the land of legendary love, the erotic experience of the woman becomes central to reflection and expression (“În sfîrșit,” “Sîngele,” “Naiul,” “Bacante,” “Polenizare,” “Niciodată, în zori,” etc.). “Lying on my back on the shore, / one with the rock / I’m summer washed by waves, / once, / a hundred times, / a thousand years, / like the old Istrian statues. / And the waters of the old gulf caress my body, / once, / a hundred times, / a thousand years, / and the sun kisses my closed eyelids, / and the wave washes away lightly, in sonorous circles / the dreams of the gulf” (“Statui istrene” [Istrian Statues]). One poem describes an orgasm on the sea shore (“Oră arămie” [Amber Hour]). In such poems, the erotic experience is an event that intensifies reality, multiplying its possibilities. One is able to perceive the plural essence of reality (as in the ingenious formula: “all / the multiple beauty of the world” – “Nu mi-e de-ajuns” [It is not enough]), and breaks with the status quo of the passing of time: a self-affirmed and deeply felt change (signified by markers like: “today,” “the dawn,” “the day,” “the bell of summer night”) is set against the general background of an epoch (“total memory,” “eternity,” “a thousand years,” “the autumn”). “I have an eternity and – / The day / was born under the vines” (“Sub bolta de viță” [Under the Vines]). Yet, in spite of the interruption, one does not exclude the other, and Porumbacu’s embodied reflection tells of a porous body in a living relation with the world, one that goes through both the experience

of humbly tuning to eternity as well as preparing for revolutionary changes: “The sun goes through me like through a leaf / All the nerves can be seen, vines of shadow” (“Cupă de aer” [Air Cup]); “The colors of my hair grew tired, / without sadness, they stepped down onto things around, / passing into people, closer / to them, to their own understanding” (“Ceasul încrederii” [The Hour of Trust]); “I felt my breathing widening / as big as the universe, beyond it, / and my heart, passing from my chest / pulsated eternity on Earth” (“Reminiscentă” [Reminiscence]).

For the poet, such an embodied reflection produces historical consciousness rather than sentimentalism: “I’m not a leaf lost in the wind, / I feel my roots in the earth, / and I feel the responsibility of leaves” (“Ceasul încrederii” [The Hour of Trust]); “Suddenly, eternity counts its hours” (“Unde e azi?” [Where is Today?]). The perception of eternity itself is changed through the revolutionary event (“the raising of waters”), inaugurating a “new season” which is felt through a distinct type of affect, named by Veronica Porumbacu “calm love.” “September. The season of calm loves. (...) / Even the old turtle / looks at me from the grass / with the respect of the younger” (“Mezina” [The Younger]); “The hour of trust has come / like another season of being (...) / From all there is, I only take a seed. / Around me life flows, dense river, / and the joys are flowing, too / radiating color, sound and sense” (“Ceasul încrederii” [The Hour of Trust]).

Far from being a vain consumption of the subject in the intensity of the moment, the affirmed eroticism of the “summer bell” is for Veronica Porumbacu a power that potentiates historical memory and makes possible the perception of the multiplicity of reality with the generosity of “calm love.” Against the accumulation and dissipation of sexuality in capitalism, Porumbacu’s eroticism increases one’s rootedness in a shared geo-genealogy and grounds the desire

for a radical transformation of reality. The “future of communism” – the name given to the ideal liberating potential that could be foreseen in the non-dogmatic opening of actually existing socialism in the decades of the 1960s-1970s – would depend here on the powers of perceiving together and cultivating a new “season of being.” And the latter is not entirely “new,” for it becomes manifest in the reception with calm love of the radical events that bring the change but do not obliterate one’s relationship to a different historical time. In other words, the poet is tentatively moving away from the cosmology of purist modernity, in which it was assumed that the tractor and the oil rig will completely eliminate traditional peasantry, and gets closer to a cosmology of co-presence of historical times. Yet this transition is enormously difficult. Porumbacu pleads for cultivating the attachment to foundational events and a shared past that gives birth to historical consciousness, even if the birth was painful, and for developing an hour of trust, a positive relationship between different generations or opposite ideas. “You are so young! Like the grass in the field / under which our ancestors are geologically sleeping. (...) / Somewhere under the earth / the water of our fountains runs together. / Somewhere in the sky / the same clouds are giving us shadow” (“Ceasul încrăderii” [The Hour of Trust]).

As the reflection is anchored on and revolves around her personal history and feelings, one can notice the withdrawal of the explicitly political take, and a creeping tension between hope and an unnamed negative affect that looms between melancholia and existential dread. Here, the increased reliance on cosmology and mythology contributes to the fortification of the never-abandoned hope and the foundation of deep solidarities. Also, Porumbacu makes it clear in the final poem, which is addressed like a new testament to man (Adam) from the standpoint of the she-revolution, that the victories and achievements of real socialism are to be considered a cosmological event that cannot be abandoned or denied:



“In pain I gave birth to the children of the Earth (...) / and I am more proud of my ordeal / than of God’s indifference, playfully kneading you from clay (...) / death is only the other side of the Moon / and the name of Eve / is life” (“Amurgul Evei” [The Twilight of Eve]). As a person who witnessed the rise, rule and defeat of fascism, the post-war reconstruction of the country, the beauty of international solidarity and the bitterness of new wars, as well as the dramatic changing of the guard within state socialism—all while having to deal with major personal upheavals, a cultural sector dominated by men and the emergence of a promising new generation, Veronica Porumbacu always managed to give a big voice, from her legendarily small physical stature, to the ethical effects of companionship and comradeship. She expressed outright resistance against the accusations of “intimism” of the (mainly male) overseers of socialist realism from the 1950s-1960s, and in her manifesto she conceived a form of reflexive eroticism against the masculinist asexual reason that would dominate the later stages of real socialism. All throughout, she remained intensely committed to the intimate life worlds of daily life in socialism, as well as to conveying ways of feeling the historical events affecting society and the vulnerable world at large.

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## CONCLUSION

Concepts such as “carnal dialects,” “total memory,” “calm love,” and the “hour of trust” were radically opposed not only to the official monoculture of asexual “patriotism” and ethno-nationalism (“the dry rocks”), but also to the temporality of the empty present<sup>27</sup> and the superficial hedonism of capitalist modernity (“the poisoned chalice”). Most remarkably, they are not concepts developing a criticism of domination, or a criticism of the limits or failures of state socialism. Instead, they are liberating notions elaborated on a positive epistemic field developed autonomously within the cultural ar-

chive of actually existing socialism. To my ears they remain relevant and translatable, since they resonate close to concepts such as vernacular values, counter-memory, dignified rage, or just reconciliation, elaborated in the 1990s-2000s in various areas of decolonial thought and social movements.<sup>28</sup> Unfortunately, this orientation of thought and the forms of social life that could recognize themselves in such notions have not been continued, neither under the hegemony of the idea of communism before 1989, nor in the post-communist transition to capitalism. Veronica Porumbacu may have inspired other literary and artistic figures, or other women, but the oblique politics of quotation practiced under the state-socialist regime and the self-constructed barriers of confidential communities make it very difficult to ascertain any degree of influence. At the same time, the importance of her conceptual gesture was clearly noted. The volume was saluted at the time in Romania as the achievement of a major poet,<sup>29</sup> and two of Veronica Porumbacu's poems were translated in Joanna Bankier's 1976 anthology *The Other Voice: Twentieth-Century Women's Poetry in Translation*.

While Veronica Porumbacu does not challenge heteronormativity discursively, she finds in embodied thought, historical consciousness and reflexive eroticism the freedom to challenge the surrounding patriarchal order, and to shed the proletcultist overtones from her own past, without denying or abandoning her foundational work. Perhaps more importantly for our age of fragmentation and burnouts, her voice unmistakably gravitates towards the deeper grounds of solidarity and companionship. It is here that her work (like that of others, more or less forgotten) can provide the tools and references for an itinerary of feminist thought and social theory grounded in the cultural archive of real socialism. What carnal dialects can we bring to discussion, challenging from Eastern Europe the current monologics of coloniality and capitalist modernity? What invisibilities are produced, and how can we speak from our

produced ignorances and poverties, but also from the foundational events and achievements of actually existing socialism, invoking the canopy of total memory against instrumental forgettings? What movements of collective transformation, chipping away at our own comforts, can we embrace with calm love? How far are we from an hour of trust in our political institutions, in past and future generations, and even in our own desires? Veronica Porumbacu's letters from Cythera remain available, like a hermetic medicine for a rising counter-culture of healing and hope, which may be able one day to draw on the most different resistances and historical experiences of socialism and capitalism.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Installation by Ciprian Mureșan, 2006. See for instance: <http://www.monumenttotransformation.org/en/activities/projects/ciprian-muresan>.
- <sup>2</sup> Thus the website [www.orthodoxinfo.ro](http://www.orthodoxinfo.ro) published, on 24 March 2018, a defaming piece titled “The Jew Veronica Porumbacu,” widely disseminated on other Romanian websites and blogs.
- <sup>3</sup> In 2004 the Romanian government recognized for the first time the deliberate participation in the Holocaust by the regime led by Ion Antonescu during World War II, and the Romanian Parliament declared October 9 to be National Holocaust Commemoration Day, also observed for the first time in 2004, after the publication of the report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, led by Elie Wiesel and Jean Ancel.

- <sup>4</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, *Voce și val*, Bucharest: Editura Cartea Românească, 1976, pp.118ff, 300-303.
- <sup>5</sup> Archival Dossier III, *The Veil of Peace. The iconography and Conceptual History of Peace in the Socialist Experience of Romania 1945-1989*, exhibition curated by Igor Mocanu, Ovidiu Țichindeleanu, Raluca Voinea, tranzit.ro/Bucharest, 6.11-7.7.2017.
- <sup>6</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, *Voce și val* [Voice and Wave], pp.289-291. All the translations into English provided here are by the author.
- <sup>7</sup> "Atît aș vrea", from the volume *Generația mea* [My Generation] (1955), in Veronica Porumbacu, *Poezii*, Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, p.56.
- <sup>8</sup> I refer here to *anticommunism* in the sense of one of the dominant ideologies manifested in the cultural history of the post-socialist transition, a phenomenon that had little to do with an analysis of communism, with social justice and democratic reconstruction, and much more with the selection of new intellectual elites, the creation of a new normative understanding of history, the rejection of the relevance of local history, the relegitimation of local right-wing figures and ideologies, and the import of right-wing as well as liberal Eurocentric and Occidentalst thought after 1989. See for instance "Towards A Critical Theory Of Postcommunism?", *Radical Philosophy*, #159/2010.
- <sup>9</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, *Voce și val*, p.62.
- <sup>10</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, *Voce și val*, p.54.
- <sup>11</sup> "Fără titlu" [*Untitled*], *Visele Babei Dochia*, Bucharest, 1947.
- <sup>12</sup> Maria Constantin (born Maria Schwefelberg, 1926-2012) was a painter who studied in Bucharest with Medi Wechsler Dinu, Camil Ressu, and M.H. Maxy. She participated to numerous Romanian and international group exhibitions: 1949 – Moscow, Budapest, Prague; 1959 – Leipzig; 1962 – Tokyo, Viena, Helsinki; 1966 – Sofia; 1970 – Rome, Palermo; 1973 – Berlin; 1980-Sofia; she also had international personal exhibitions in Athens (1981) and the Federal Republic of Germany (1986, 1988). See mariaconstantin.com.
- <sup>13</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, *Voce și val*, pp.250-255.
- <sup>14</sup> 1965-1966 are the debut and affirmation years of the "new generation" of Romanian poets like Nichita Stănescu, Marin Sorescu, and Ion Alexandru, of novelists like Ștefan Bănuțescu and Nicolae Breban, of literary

critics like Nicolae Manolescu, and of a plethora of many others (Ana Blandiana, Gabriela Melinescu, A.E. Baconsky, D.R. Popescu, Petru Popescu, Paul Georgescu, Matei Călinescu etc.) who **continue to be** prominent representatives of the canon of Romanian literature and intellectual history.

- <sup>15</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, *Întoarcerea din Cythera*, Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1966.
- <sup>16</sup> I use “real socialism” here to refer to the self-description of Romania’s political and economic system of the time, as distinct from “socialism” in general. The distinction is meant to address the difference between “real” and “ideal”, not that between “real” and fake”.
- <sup>17</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, *Voce și val*, p. 261.
- <sup>18</sup> In the 1993-1994 project *Visual Anthropology Workshop*, conceived together with philosopher Valery Podoroga, Victor Misiano, famed Russian curator and editor of the journal *Moscow Art Magazine*, coined the concept “confidential communities” in order to describe the specific informal institutions and mode of social organization and exhibition of the Soviet artists in totalitarian circumstances, as opposed to the concept of the “open society.” I think the concept applies to Eastern Europe too, not only to the former Soviet Union.
- <sup>19</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, *Memoria cuvintelor*, Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură, 1963.
- <sup>20</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, “Nel Mezzo del Camin...”, *Poezii*, București, Editura Tineretului, 1962.
- <sup>21</sup> Silvia Federici argues that a new concept of the person emerged in Western Europe at the end of the Peasant Wars and the Thirty Years War, based on the permanent conflict between the elevated faculties of mind and the base, corporeal instincts and drives. See *Caliban and the Witch. Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, New York: Autonomedia, 2004.
- <sup>22</sup> Nell Cobar, *Mihaela and Snow White, Mihaela and Pinocchio, Mihaela and Red Riding Hood*, Animafilm Bucharest, 1968-1971.
- <sup>23</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, “Cîntecul Mării Caraibilor”, *Memoria cuvintelor*, Bucharest: Editura pentru literatură, 1962, pp.53-54.
- <sup>24</sup> “The Ballad of Master Manole” is an orally-transmitted popular ballad, first

collected and published in 1852, telling the mythological story of the construction of the Greek-Orthodox monastery at Curtea de Argeș, at the cost of sacrificing the wife of master builder Manole, who is buried alive in the construction walls, and then of Manole's life himself. Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889) is the most influential Romanian poet, often writing from the perspective of a contemplating male "I".

- <sup>25</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, "Ea, Revoluția" [She, the Revolution], *Poezii*, Bucharest: Editura Tineretului, 1962, p.96.
- <sup>26</sup> Veronica Porumbacu, "Alți ochi" [Other eyes], *Poezii*, București: Editura Tineretului, 1962, p.174.
- <sup>27</sup> Rolando Vazquez argues that the empty present is the specific mode of temporality of the age of modernity. See for instance "Modernity, the Greatest Show on Earth," *borderlands*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2010.
- <sup>28</sup> On vernacular values see for instance the works of Indian architect R.L. Kumar, departing from Ivan Illich's works *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) and *Shadow Work* (1981), on [www.vernarch.com](http://www.vernarch.com); on counter-memory: Anaheed al-Hardan, *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of Shattered Communities*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, and Mark Watson's work on decolonial counter-memory in indigenous artist Alan Michelson's work *Third Bank of the River* (2009): "Unsettled borders and memories: a 'local' indigenous perspective on contemporary globalization," *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture*, vol. 7, 2015; on just reconciliation as opposed to shallow reconciliation see Cherie Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves*, Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2017; on dignified rage, see the First Global Festival of Dignified Rage organized by the EZLN in Mexico City on December 26-29, 2008, for instance on *Envío. Información sobre Nicaragua y Centroamerica*, no.330, January 2009, <http://www.envio.org.ni>.
- <sup>29</sup> See the issue of the influent literary journal *Gazeta literară*, December 1, 1966.