

MEMORY AND HISTORY: ANNIE BENTOIU

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Abstract A young student in the 1940s, Annie Bentoiu, reconstructs retrospectively, fifty years later, the establishment of the communist regime in Romania, using a discourse that oscillates between the subjective experiences of her own history and the major events that took place in her country during the 20th century. This paper discusses how *Timpul ce ni s-a dat* [The time we were given], as a consequence, becomes a feminine writing with a hybrid character, revisiting the past according to internal and external events, thus being located at the intersection of personal memory and collective history. Moreover, the study highlights the sociological accents, the philosophical meditations, the political reflections and the historical realities that these memoirs encompass, openings favoured by the author's triple intellectual formation – in the fields of law, history and literature. Through this hermeneutic exercise, I try to show how a woman's testimony about an epoch is superimposed over the testimony of her own life, resulting a process in which subjective sources (memories, letters and diaries) are supplemented by a major documentary effort (historical studies and journals of the time). Two different types of history meet inside this sample of feminine literature, bringing together intimate stories and significant national transformations, as an example of the strong and irreversible way in which these histories affect each other.

Keywords Memoirs, history, individuality, complexity, communism, 20th century.

Memory, History and the Complexity Beyond Them

According to literary critics, major events in human history arouse many memorial writings.¹ It seems that historical turning points significantly influence the decision to retrospectively retell the events people experienced by filtering them through one's own particular history. In its evolution, the genre has come very close to autobiography² and, especially in the 20th century,

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¹ Eugen Simion, *Genurile biograficului I* (Bucharest: Tracus Arte, 2018), 52.

² Hendrik Van Gorp et al., *Dictionnaire des termes littéraires* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001), 298.

a time marked by several unprecedented historical events, the practice of writing memoirs became more and more democratised. Much is still written about this disturbing century and the consistent books of memoirs published by various personalities (artists, intellectuals, political leaders) are completed by the so-called *témoignages* [testimonies], writings by which the authors, simple people who witnessed a painful history, recount events that disturbed their existence and talk about their consequences.³ These writings are among the ego-documents specific to the modern era because through them, while presenting a collective history, the author speaks (also) about himself, although in a more veiled way.⁴ In a broader sense, they are part of a vast subjective literature, whose genres refuse rigid classifications and often transgress their boundaries towards hybrid textual structures.⁵ Georges Gusdorf insists that researchers should not be concerned with a formal framing of works belonging to the literature about oneself (memoirs, diaries, autobiographies and letters), but with their content, aiming to highlight the coherence and unity they propose at a discursive, thematic and even existential level.⁶

Among these writings, born against the background of historical realities, being in close relationship with them, but bearing the personal imprint of their authors, are also the *Memoirs* written by Annie Bentoiu in the late 1990s, intertextually entitled *Timpul ce ni s-a dat* [The time we were given].⁷ They are memoirs *par excellence*, telling not only the author's own story, but also the story of a generation, a society and an epoch, revisiting a key moment in the recent history of Romania. Annie Bentoiu's approach to these events involves a very broad perspective and a deep analyse of the establishment of communism in Romania, reaching every relevant level of collective and individual human existence: historical, political, social,

³ Jean-Louis Jeannelle, "Les mémorialistes sont-ils de bons témoins de leur temps?" Collège de France (2009), https://www.fabula.org/atelier.php?Temoins_du_temps (accessed on 22 January 2021).

According to Jeannelle, the authors of memoirs are already famous personalities, who revisit the course of history while proving the unity and coherence of their own lives. Instead, the authors of testimonies are mere witnesses to a negative history (from wars to the Holocaust and communist camps, genocides etc.), who write in response to a major historical trauma.

⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Récits autobiographiques et ego-documents à l'époque modern," Collège de France (2019),

<https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/sanjay-subrahmanyam/course-2018-2019.htm> (accessed on 22 January 2021).

⁵ Eugen Simion talks about the so-called 'impurity' of the genre and insists that memorial works are all the more hybrid the richer and more complex the formula of discourse. See *Genurile biograficului I*, 18. Also Silvian Iosifescu states that the boundaries between the genres of subjective literature are fluid and that even their titles may hesitate (there are diaries or autobiographies entitled memoirs, for example). See *Literatura de frontieră*, ediția a II-a revăzută (București: Editura enciclopedică română, 1971), 70.

⁶ Georges Gusdorf, *Les écritures du moi. Lignes de vie 1* (Paris: Les Éditions Odile Jacob, 1991), Digital edition (Québec: Chicoutimi, 2018), 308,

http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/gusdorf_georges/ecritures_du_moi_lignes_de_vie_t1/ecritures_du_moi_lignes_de_vie_t1.pdf (accessed on 22 January 2021).

⁷ The title quotes a slightly modified verse from Mihai Eminescu's poetry, *Stelele-n cer* [Stars in the sky].

psychological, legal, administrative, cultural, economic, domestic, intimate. Consequently, my hypothesis is that her memoirs are a multilayered writing, in which we can identify not only the autobiographical pact and the pact with history,⁸ but also other thematic levels. The book transcends the boundaries of a 'classical' ego-document and includes small sociological studies, political explanations, psychological forays, philosophical reflections and a cultural chronicle of the time – all these meant to help the understanding of a phenomenon, that is the emergence of communism in Romania, in the middle of the last century. These memoirs are defined by a hybrid form and a complex content, giving account of a deep vision of life and of the society, aiming at understanding personal and collective events in their causalities and consequences.

The complexity of the discourse is due to the fact that Annie Benteoiu does not aim at a summary or a simple retrospective; instead, she focuses on an analysis, an interrogation and an explanation. For the author herself, continuing a literary tradition that flourished after the French Revolution, memoirs are 'mărturii despre o realitate mult mai complexă decât cea prezentată în discursul oficial' [testimonies of a much more complex reality than that presented in the official discourse].⁹ Therefore, Annie Benteoiu will recount both the history of her country and some private narratives of individual evolutions (her own youth, Pascal Benteoiu's career, the destinies of friends or family members), insisting on the major events that marked them in a decisive way. In this text written '*în deplină maturitate*' [in full maturity],¹⁰ we can clearly distinguish the vision of an esthete, an author with a rich intellectual background, formed in the old Interwar Romanian school which was so firm in terms of fundamental human values. Starting from these premises and focusing on this particular example, in the present article I propose some reflections on the complexity of memoirs and I try to prove that, beyond memory and history, for Annie Benteoiu the retrospective narrative means unfolding both collective and personal existence in all their essential dimensions.

Memoirs as a Genre of Subjective Literature

I open this theoretical section regarding memoirs as a genre of subjective literature with some considerations on the readers' response to such subjective texts, dwelling on Goethe's statement, suggesting a double reading: the first and most immediate, focusing on the reported events; the second, revealing a higher truth and made visible to readers who seek deeper meanings. The first type of reading would concern objective and direct truth of the facts, while the second one would insist on hermeneutics, rising to the level of a higher ontological reality.¹¹ For Goethe, the history of the world cannot unfold without telling the

⁸ Simion, *Genurile biograficului I*, 19.

⁹ Annie Benteoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat: memorii: 1944-1959* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2019), 737.

Note: All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹¹ Gusdorf, *Les écritures du moi*, 340.

history of man. And vice versa, the story of a man cannot unfold without subsequently questioning the history of his environment and his place into the world.¹² These two levels of reading correspond, in fact, to the two major discursive levels specific to memoirs: external, collective history and personal, intimate history.

Philippe Lejeune considers that memoirs, akin to other genres of subjective literature, respect the autobiographical pact (the identity between author, narrator and character), but they differ from autobiography due to their content, because at the heart of memoirs is history, in its major events, and not man, with the depths of his intimacy.¹³ While autobiographies narrate a history of the self, memoirs do more than that, recounting the history of an epoch, although filtered through the prism of a certain self. Various formal distinctions between memoirs and autobiographies have been debated over time, but some literary critics believe they are rather disadvantageous. Although the memorialist aims at the history of a world, observed in a determined time and space, trying to describe the society in which he lived, any reflection on the world implies a particular voice taking responsibility for the act of remembrance. And although the autobiographer focuses especially on the intimacy of his own life, any human life is situated in the world and has to be described in relation to it.¹⁴ Autobiography, rather egocentric, will however refer to an external reality; memoirs, rather sociocentric, will however filter the events through the individuality of their author.¹⁵ Consequently, memoirs and autobiographies are neither contradictory nor opposite, but rather concentric. Memoirs show, using a broader vision, how the author relates to history; autobiographies focus, more narrowly, on the author's individual existential trajectory.¹⁶

As for the memorialist, he is a witness to history and his testimony can only account for those events in which he participated. Absolute objectivity is not imposed on him, he can write down his own opinions, reflections or feelings on the edge of the episodes he remembers.¹⁷ Memoirs are the subjective montage of an experienced reality; their structure does not necessarily respect a historical chronology, but is related to an overall rhythm, to a coherence and unity of the text. Moreover, the truth of memoirs is not a truth of the facts narrated, but a truth of the author's self-consciousness.¹⁸ Memory is always relative, introducing a unique perspective on an event, because reality is always wider and richer than

¹² Ibid., 341.

¹³ Philippe Lejeune, *Pactul autobiografic*, transl. from French by Irina Margareta Nistor (Bucharest: Univers, 2000), 13.

¹⁴ Gusdorf, *Les écritures du moi*, 338.

¹⁵ Ibid., 335.

¹⁶ Ibid., 345.

¹⁷ Ibid., 317.

¹⁸ Georges Gusdorf, *Mémoire et personne, Tome second, Dialectique de la mémoire* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1951), Digital edition (Québec: Chicoutimi, 2020), 151, http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/gusdorf_georges/memoire_et_personne_t2/memoire_et_personne_t2.pdf (accessed on 22 January 2021).

what we can remember or record about it.¹⁹ Consequently, also the rhythm and nature of the discourse have their own specificity.²⁰ Compared to diarists, memorialists do not obey the law of the calendar, seen as a key element of the intimate diary,²¹ they do not respect either the poetics of spontaneity, proposed by Roland Barthes as the only poetics of diaristic writing,²² but subscribe to a retrospective narrative whose main feature is anteriority, which is considered, from Aristotle onwards, to be the specific mark of memory.²³ However, memoirs are subject to the sincerity clause, although this principle can be questioned for two main reasons: firstly, the memorialist is subjective, hence his sincerity is partial, limited; secondly, the distance between narration time and narrated time can distort reality.²⁴ But time can also give the text authenticity, because it allows a recoil and a detachment from powerful emotional charge which can distort the memory to an equal extent.²⁵

In fact, remembrance is an act of inner will, in which man invests effort and responsibility. Henri Bergson talks about the intellectual effort²⁶ that this type of reflection requires, while Edmund Husserl distinguishes between immediate memory and secondary memory, which is a recollection, that is, a laborious, sometimes even difficult evocation.²⁷ And because the object of memory is the past,²⁸ time becomes an essential element, as it allows ordering and structuring one's memories. There is also a close relationship between memory and values, because the essence of remembrance lies in the emotional, inner events (even if they are echoes of or retorts to the outer, historical events) that we endow with value.²⁹ Memory unfolds as a revelation of fundamental life values, because it retains only what lasts over time,³⁰ helping man to acknowledge and understand his own experiences and thus becoming a possible response to his perpetual need for order, purpose and meaning. Writing allows an even clearer ordering of the past and the fundamental principle of confessional discourse is the author's freedom to speak about his own life through the literary form that best corresponds to his inner experiences.³¹ Ego-documents are weighed not so much

¹⁹ Ibid., 150.

²⁰ Simion, *Genurile biograficului I*, 19.

²¹ Maurice Blanchot, 'Jurnalul intim și povestirea', transl. from French by Emil Paraschivoiu, *Caiete critice*, no. 3-4 (1986): 49.

²² Eugen Simion, *Ficțiunea jurnalului intim – vol. I: Există o poetică a jurnalului?* (Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 2001), 19.

²³ Paul Ricoeur, *Memoria, istoria uitarea*, transl. from French by Ilie Gyurcsik and Margareta Gyurcsik (Timișoara: Amarcord, 2001), 27.

²⁴ Simion, *Genurile biograficului I*, 19.

²⁵ Gusdorf, *Mémoire et personne*, 158.

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Memoria, istoria, uitarea*, 45-46.

²⁷ Ibid., 52-53.

²⁸ Ibid., 32.

²⁹ Gusdorf, *Mémoire et personne*, 156.

³⁰ Ibid., 155.

³¹ Gusorf, *Les écritures du moi*, 304.

according to their textual stylistics, which in this case is secondary, but especially according to their content, because their intrinsic value lies in the degree to which the text proves the depth of the author's personality.³² Therefore, in subjective writings, the discourse of intimacy has a major importance. Confessional writing can also be a way of searching for the meaning of one's own life and it can express man's need to 'make it all cohere'.³³

Memoirs are defined by explaining historical events using both external sources, which become a valuable support in the process of remembrance,³⁴ and the recollection of private events, which become precious episodes throughout the text. However, if history is at the center of memoirs, having priority over the individual and his intimacy, Eugen Simion points out that at the center of this history is, in fact, the individual himself.³⁵ The result is a kind of concentric game, which turns our gaze, as in the case of any confessional genre, back to the individual and to the great events and interrogations of his existence.³⁶ Inside memoirs, the relationship between the individual and history is, therefore, relative.³⁷ Despite their approach to history, memoirs are imbued with the marks of subjectivity, because the discourse has its own rules, its own structure, its own inner rhythm, aspects that are fundamentally different according to each author. And because every life is unique, every narrative about oneself will be unique as well. It turns out that, in the case of memoirs, although history predominates thematically, the experience of the self, the author's way of relating to history are equally precious elements. Even more, no matter how great the intellectual effort, the memorialist cannot remember everything; thus, his discourse will inevitably be a selection. From the richness of his own memories, the author writes down what he wants, as he wants; the montage will therefore be relative, fragmentary, imperfect and subjective.³⁸ Beyond the principles and clauses of confessional writing, beyond the justifications of the act of writing and beyond what still remains unspeakable in such writings – the problematic distinction between deliberate and inevitable forgetting³⁹ –, memoirs preserve some variables that the researcher cannot explain exactly. Still, it is fundamental that inside a subjective discourse we

³² Ibid., 312-313.

³³ I paraphrase here Ezra Pound's lyrics, which, both in his translation of a text by Sophocles and in his own poem *Cantos*, refers to coherence in terms of meaning, something that binds and gives unity: 'Splendour, it all coheres' or, on the contrary, 'I cannot make it cohere'. See Horia-Roman Patapievic, *Două eseuri despre paradis și o încheiere* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2019), 59-60.

³⁴ Ricoeur, *Memoria, istoria, uitarea*, 56.

³⁵ Simion, *Genurile biograficului*, 24.

³⁶ Georges Gusdorf explains that we do not actually remember the events themselves, but we remember ourselves in relation to or in response to those events. We remember, therefore, a personal journey, albeit against the background of history. See *Mémoire et personne*, 157.

³⁷ Simion, *Genurile biograficului I*, 24.

³⁸ Ibid., 26.

³⁹ Ibid., 30.

can identify, in order to assign to it a certain value, a coherent scenario, a plausible history, a unity of being and of living.⁴⁰

According to Paul Ricoeur, remembering involves an intellectual labor, an effort to remember.⁴¹ Memoirs can unravel how this effort is ordered and revealed to others through writing. A close-up reading exercise can unveil the specifics of such texts: what they confess, what they withhold, what stylistic and thematic particularities define them, what their unity and value consist of. Consequently, using this method, I dwell on the thematic and discursive complexity of Annie Bentoiu's memoirs because they have a special richness and erudition, as the following critical reflections try to prove.

Reading a woman's past: Annie Bentoiu

If the simplified formula of memoirs brings together the autobiography plus the external history, while studying Annie Bentoiu's account of the past, a third element becomes obvious. This particular element is made up of multiple thematic layers and illustrates how complex the description of history can become and how many research directions it can offer. I will firstly highlight the two interdependent dimensions that constitute the invariants of all memoirs – memory and history; afterwards, I will discuss how various thematic levels are added to these two, in this particular text. Annie Bentoiu's memoirs depict Romanian society around the 1950s, but the image of this world is restored through her eyes and her personal history. The author acts in two steps, focusing on relevant scenes of personal history, but also arising to see, in a much wider context, the historical background of the time. Consequently, her narrative has the particularity of constantly juggling between two existential levels: collective life and personal life. This explains why the most serious or profound fragments about human destiny, the most relevant philosophical or theoretical reflections or the most accurate historical details about the evolution of a generation are intertwined with the scenes of the personal daily life of a woman, in its own major changes: a young Law student in the 1940s, a wife, a mother etc. It is a thematic mixture that testifies to a complexity of human existence itself.

Evolving from subjective experiences to objective events, starting from fragments related to her own life and reaching generally valid reflections, Annie Bentoiu unfolds the inner changes of her youth against the external changes of Romanian society. Using a lucid and detached rather than nostalgic perspective, the text reveals a personal history that understands itself through the events of collective history, but also vice versa, a collective history for which personal history becomes a convincing example. History is reconstructed here on several levels: national history allows the understanding of an individual and a generation's history, while universal history is a key to understanding national history. A close-reading of this text reveals two major narrative plans. The first one details how ordinary people live, in their individual histories, making their plans for the future, consolidating their own

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30.

⁴¹ Ricoeur, *Memoria, istoria, uitarea*, 18.

values, enjoying their youth, but also facing their own trials; the second explains what transformations occur in society and how they affect (even prevent or overturn, in the end) any small personal history. The author herself declares that the first volume of her memoirs covers '*evenimente hotărâtoare pentru viața publică și a mea personală*' [decisive events for public and my personal life].⁴² Through a wide panorama of the epoch, she decides to revisit '*societatea, țara și vremea pe care mi-a fost îngăduit să le cunosc*' [the society, country and time I was allowed to know].⁴³ The interest in the history of her own country is a moral duty and a response to the threat of forgetfulness.⁴⁴

The plan of collective history presents, at the simplest discursive level, the complex reality of a world on the threshold. Accurate images capture places, people, buildings, families and friends, activities and life habits and how they are perturbed during the difficult moments specific to great historical transformations. At a deeper level, the author observes the effects of political decisions, explaining both the seemingly trivial phenomena and the crucial causes that led to decisive historical turns. The narration focuses both on macrocosm and microcosm and even for the reader the transition from a domestic universe to serious changes imposed by the totalitarian regime represents no difficulty. In fact, the discourse creates a horizon of expectation and the reader becomes aware that individual and collective history flow together. The personal springs of confessional writing (childhood, student years and youth, one's own intellectual formation) join the wider background of a time of transition and turmoil. Explaining the implications of political changes on one's own life includes everyday domestic scenes: lack of money, sale of household items, food rations, the cold, the abolition of university courses and later, evictions, investigations and arrests. Finding a job becomes a central topic for a woman who, having *origini nesănătoase* [unhealthy origins], does not fit into the structure of the new society, despite her obvious intellectual abilities. Intimate details are always counterbalanced by historical details; consequently, the text abounds in transitions from everyday topics to ample historical descriptions, which explain how, meanwhile, communism evolved in Romania and Eastern Europe. The plan of personal life also includes deep reflections on one's own condition: social status, vocational and existential crises, the profound encounter with divinity.

Time is also a central element of Annie Bentoiu's memoirs. Thus, 'the time given to us' is serious or even solemn, marked by unprecedented events in the country's history, but also common, because it also includes many jokes, anecdotes from the communist years or details related to everyday life. Time has an intrinsic duality, according to the different levels of existence and depending, in its turn, on personal and collective experiences. Connections between events are made visible grace to a relationship between the present of writing and the recalled past. History is disposed in the chronological order of years; once the discourse about a precise time interval begins, the author focuses on the events that took place during

⁴² Bentoiu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, 294.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 258.

⁴⁴ For Paul Ricoeur, memory has the duty to fight oblivion. See *Ibid.*, 47.

that period: the personal ones, the family ones, the national ones and sometimes even the international ones. Along the way, the retrospective narrative shows how these events intertwine, detailing what these years bring on a personal and historical level. Moreover, the memoirs also include considerations and events belonging to the time of writing (the 1990s), which give Annie Benteoiu the opportunity to enrich and complete the narrative with new details, to introduce new portraits and to shed light on issues unresolved until then. Time itself guarantees, in this case, both the author's detachment and her possibility to better capture an overall image of the recalled epoch.

In addition to the strictly memorialist side of the discourse (which includes, as previously explained, the autobiographical pact and the pact with history), in addition to time, which is a central element of remembrance, in these memoirs there are a number of other thematic levels that enrich the text with erudition, credibility, complexity and specificity. These are incursions into other areas of interest of the author and become obvious in fragments referring to culture, society, politics, philosophy, psychology, justice etc., fields through which history can be explained and understood.⁴⁵ Therefore, there are places where the text unfolds as a chronicle of cultural life, focusing especially on music, theater or literature and revealing the impact of the new regime on art. The fine observation of political changes leads to relevant conclusions regarding the docility to which the population is brought and the means by which it is indoctrinated. The brutality of the regime, its victims, but also its possible results are also analysed. An extraordinary sense of justice leads Annie Benteoiu to question the laws and decrees promulgated by the regime, to carefully read the reforms and political decisions, to seek truth in the trials of political prisoners, to reveal how thinking has been distorted when ideologized. Among the many questions and considerations, the discourse is taken to a psychological level, in order to expose 'rațiunile profunde ale întâmplărilor generației mele' [the deep reasons for the events of my generation]⁴⁶ and to see the implications of historical events on individuals and collectivity. From a sociological point of view, the author targets the central pillars of Romanian society (health, education, culture) but she also insists on how the administration, the life of the townspeople and of the peasants, urban architecture or interpersonal relations are transformed. The regime is undergoing here a deep interrogation, which shakes it to its foundations. The clarity of the exposition testifies to a keen eye, a wide vision and a firm intellectual training. Trying to be as equidistant as possible, the positive results of the regime are also analysed (literacy, cheaper supplies, installation of radio stations) and understood in the key of their real intentions and of the price that had to be paid for them.⁴⁷ The demonstration exposes a mechanism by which, although veiled, although seemingly beneficent, the regime was always above human dignity and freedom, everything being thought in its favor. The most important stakes of communist ideology are revisited in

⁴⁵ Annie Benteoiu ascertains that she only addresses in her memoirs those fields that are familiar to her, leaving aside subjects that she does not master (see *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, 257).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

order to discover their deep meanings. For example, the analysis of a key concept, egalitarianism, compares the ideal of equalization with the uniqueness of human beings, demonstrating that the promised equality was not established at the social level and that the system attacks human dignity by trying to make uniform what is unique.

Nevertheless, when writing about people, one of the most important features of the author is her humanity, as she is ready to understand and even to justify human attitudes. Her humanity is the result of an extraordinary gentleness, kindness, depth and psychological finesse, without losing the advantage of lucidity when facing history. For her, people remain precious in their humanity, easy to know and even to understand. Sometimes, we can almost read her pity between the lines – for example, when explaining how docile the population had become by means of fear.⁴⁸ While revealing some common-sense truths (comparing the promises and the failures of the system, talking about the annihilation of human dignity and mass manipulation), the memoirs focus on different categories of citizens and frame portraits of various personalities from the stage of individual or collective history.

A last relevant thematic aspect is the perpetual need for a refuge in one's own intimacy. Facing the wickedness of history, man finds his own *oases of intimacy*: places, people and activities helping him to survive morally and spiritually. These oases are always related to the personal or domestic universe and to the fact that there is something deeply human in every life context, giving him the possibility of a refuge.⁴⁹ Therefore, this book is also an account of the ways of spiritual survival Annie Bentoïu chose. Nature, music, theater and literature, family and friends become the leitmotifs of her inner history, which thus becomes richer, even if undergoing times of difficulty.

I finally focus on the author's own beliefs about writing. At the level of metadiscourse, Annie Bentoïu shows us the workshop of her own memoirs: how she writes, why she writes, for whom she writes. An enormous work of recollection, documentation and systematization becomes visible, to which a detachment effort is added, in order to respect the claim of lucidity and truth. One's own memory is confronted with collective memory, stored in newspaper pages. The author quotes the testimonies of others or various specialized studies (historical, cultural etc.), she also spends time in libraries and archives. Moreover, she gives us access to her own cultural trajectory: we know what she reads, what she watches, what fascinates her, what works of art she is interested in – she reconstructs her own intellectual and spiritual destiny. Her own diaries, but also private correspondence, as well as notebooks written over the years become sources of memoirs. Finally, the fundamental motivation behind this huge effort is to penetrate and understand history, once again proving man's ultimate need for meaning.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., 264.

⁴⁹ I have noticed, in my readings, that these are constants of the volumes of memoirs and it is probable that they are also anthropological constants, that is, fundamental features of human existence itself.

⁵⁰ The author herself confesses this deep human need (see Bentoïu, *Timpul ce ni s-a dat*, 737), while another witness to the history of his time, Viktor E. Frankl, explains that man is not driven essentially by the will of power nor by the will of pleasure, but by a will of meaning and that those who survive negative

Conclusions

By evolving on two narrative and existential levels, Annie Bentoiu's *Memoirs* capture major events significant both from a personal and a collective point of view. Consequently, the discourse also registers different thematic levels, depending on the stories unfold: a story of her country, of her generation, of her friends and family, of herself. And because the author has a rich intellectual background, the narrative evolves towards other directions of research: justice – through a constant need to clarify the facts and seek truth; history – implying a laborious documentation, searching for sources and reconstructing events; sociology – by recording changes that occurred at all social levels, from the peasantry to the bourgeoisie, merchants etc.; even literature – because it shows a strong interest for the humanity found in every life experience. All these thematic plans come together to reconstruct an epoch, to catch, both in its general lines and in certain essential details, a particular spirit of the time. Finally, the author's merit consists in her ability to look at the bigger picture of European history from the last century and to explain, through in-depth study and relevant connections, its evolution, focusing especially on the history of her country.

If the purpose of studying the past is to understand human actions, looking for their meanings,⁵¹ Annie Bentoiu completes this hermeneutic exercise both on the scale of individual history and on the scale of collective history, bringing together three essential features: the intentions that motivate the actions and events she witnessed; the actions and events themselves; their consequences, reflected in the social and cultural contexts.⁵² The result is a thematic complexity that transforms her memoirs into a palimpsest – through the reflection about the world and about oneself, through the multiple fields they approach, so that different layers overlap and merge, to render an image as complete and as faithful as possible, in an effort that combines recollection and documentation, the subjective and the objective. We find, in this text, a continuous mix between a troubled collective history and the evolution of a personal history which strives to be good, beautiful and true. Among the lights, shadows and double edges of external events, we can apprehend a way in which the individual defines him/herself in relation to history.

All this complexity, together with the author's intimate universe, also proves that, although the regime wanted to steal human dignity and freedom, fundamental human experiences are always inner and impossible to remove: encounter with divinity, love,

histories succeed only by finding meaning in their sufferings. See *Man's Search for Meaning. The classic tribute to hope from the Holocaust* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2008).

⁵¹ Hayden White, "The question of narrative in contemporary historical theory," *History and Theory*, 23/1 (1984): 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 27.

contemplation, self-giving, fruitfulness, fulfillment of one's own vocation. Seeking to give meaning to the events she lived, Annie Bentoiu testifies to the human need for coherence (of one's own destiny and the destiny of humanity), one of the anthropological constants that allow reconciliation – with oneself, with others, with history itself.