

REALISM WITHOUT FILLERS: LIFE WRITING AND LITERARY FORM IN RADU COSAȘU'S *SUPRAVIEȚUIRI*

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ABSTRACT. *Realism without Fillers: Life Writing and Literary Form in Radu Cosașu's Supraviețuiri.* Radu Cosașu entered Romanian literary history as a somewhat minor writer who published an incredible series of short stories titled *Supraviețuiri* [*Survivals*] (1973-1989), which combined were read as a big novel on the theme of living in the communist regime. Moreover, his volumes of short stories are still considered to this day (maybe) the most representative piece of literature on the topic of the 'haunting decade'. My aim is to look at the way realism is constructed in these texts, and, at the same time, to read Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri* applying the concept of 'life writing' and adding to this the theoretical methods promoted by literary sociology. Given the fact that literary and non-literary texts both could serve as documents for the social and political context, also having the quality of literariness embedded, the analysis of these texts could be much more fertile, all relating to what Margaret Cohen called "literature as social practice". This approach not only offers a novel perspective on the construction of realism in *Supraviețuiri* through the means of composing and assembling but also contributes to a deeper understanding of collective memory formation regarding communism in Romanian literature.

Keywords: *Radu Cosașu, short story, realism, Life Writing, literature, sociology of literature, novel.*

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REZUMAT. *Realism fără fillere: life writing și formă literară în Supraviețuirile lui Radu Cosașu.* Radu Cosașu a rămas în istoria literară românească drept un scriitor oarecum minor care a publicat o serie incredibilă de nuvele intitulate *Supraviețuiri* (1973-1989), care puse laolaltă ar putea fi citite ca un mare roman pe tema trăirii în timpul regimului comunist. Mai mult, volumele sale de povestiri scurte sunt considerate până în ziua de astăzi unele dintre cele mai reprezentative piese ale literaturii pe tema „obsedantului deceniu”. Scopul lucrării de față este analizarea modului în care este construit realismul în aceste texte și, în același timp, realizarea unei lecturi a *Supraviețuirilor* lui Radu Cosașu în grila teoretică a „life writing”-ului, adăugând la aceasta metode teoretice specifice sociologiei literare. Având în vedere că atât scrierile literare, cât și cele nonliterare, ar putea servi drept documente pentru contextul social sau politic al unei perioade, analiza acestor texte s-ar putea dovedi mult mai fertilă dacă am privi-o din perspectiva lui Margaret Cohen, care vedea „literatura ca practică socială”. Această abordare ar putea să ofere atât o perspectivă nouă cu privire la modurile de construcție a realismului *Supraviețuirilor* (prin metode de compunere și asamblare formală), cât și o înțelegere mai profundă a modului în care se formează memoria colectivă în literatura română din timpul comunismului.

Cuvinte-cheie: Radu Cosașu, povestire scurtă, realism, life writing, literatură, sociologia literaturii, roman.

Radu Cosașu was a prolific Romanian writer who entered Romanian literary history as a somewhat ‘minor’ writer who published a series of short stories *Supraviețuiri*² [*Survivals*] which were considered by many critics his best work and one of the best texts on the theme of living in the communist regime in the ‘haunting decade’ (Crohmălniceanu, 1989, 145). I used the term ‘minor’ writer in quotation marks because the attribute is not entirely valid, but neither can we speak of him as a canonical writer in the academic sense. Although he has benefited from a good number of republished works – especially after the 1990s – Radu Cosașu has not managed to gain recognition in the broader Romanian cultural mainstream exclusively for his literary work, but also through his journalism – the term is used in a broad sense and includes his work in the field of film criticism, sports commentary, and essays. Furthermore, Radu

² Originally published: Cosașu, Radu. 1973-1989. *Supraviețuiri* [*Survivals*], 6 volumes, Bucharest: Cartea Românească. Reordered and republished: Cosașu, Radu. 2011. *Opere* [*Works*], vol. 4: *Supraviețuirile* [*Survivals*]: 1. *Rămășițele mic-burgheze* [*The Remains of the Petit Bourgeoisie*], 2. *Armata mea de cavalerie* [*My Cavalry Army*]. Prefaced by Paul Cernat. Iași: Polirom. Cosașu, Radu. 2013. *Opere* [*Works*], vol. 5: *Supraviețuirile* [*Survivals*]: 3. *Logica* [*The Logic*]. Iași: Polirom. Cosașu, Radu. 2014. *Opere* [*Works*], vol. 6: *Supraviețuirile* [*Survivals*]: 4. *Pe vremea când nu mă gîndeam la moarte* [*Back When I Didn't Think About Dying*], 5. *Gărgăunii* [*The European Hornets*]. Iași: Polirom.

Cosașu's position on the periphery of the canon can also be observed in Romanian literary histories and dictionaries³. Most often, the writer is presented as a complex character with a commendable body of work, but most literary critics do not discuss volumes other than the cycle of stories entitled *Supraviețuiri* [*Survivals*] in any depth, and the most common model of interpretation is aesthetic and thematic – these being the most widespread and representative interpretative models of the moment, which led the literary critic Alex Goldiș to call this attitude the 'fetish' of aesthetic autonomy (Goldiș 2015, 590). Born into a petit bourgeoisie Jewish family in 1930, Radu Cosașu debuted in 1952 with a volume of reportage entitled *Servim Republica Populară Română* [*Serving the Romanian People's Republic*] – a text 'on the line', modelled after the ideology of socialist realism. His biographical trajectory is interesting to say the least, given that the writer renounces his social status and petit bourgeoisie upbringing in order to become a communist party activist, and shortly after his active involvement in the 'revolution' that was taking place he was penalized by the very institution he was staking his life on for a lecture that was misperceived and negatively received as a theory of 'integral truth' in literature (Cordoș 2012, 58-61). These topics – and many others – are presented and analysed in the short story cycle *Supraviețuiri*, which is also the central element of analysis of this paper. I intend to address two issues. On the one hand, I want to borrow some conceptual elements from the sphere of life writing and apply them to Radu Cosașu's short story cycle. On the other hand, I intend to analyse the difference or the novelty that Radu Cosașu's text brings to the Romanian literature of that time, using theories related to both formalism and realism.

***Supraviețuiri* as (almost) life writing**

The first discussion point of the present approach is the motivation for the choice of the phrase 'life writing'. First, the option for this concept is explained by Marlene Kadar's introductory statement from *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*: "Life writing has always been a more inclusive term,

³ See Manolescu, Nicolae. 2008. *Istoria critică a literaturii române. 5 secole de literatură* [A Critical History of Romanian Literature. Five Centuries of Literature]. Pitești: Paralela 45: 1114-1119. Ștefănescu, Alexandru. 2005. *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1941-2000* [History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1941-2000]. Bucharest: Mașina de scris: 354-356. Simion, Eugen (ed.). 2004. *Dicționarul general al literaturii române* [General Dictionary of Romanian Literature], volume 2: C-D. Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic: 393-395. Simion, Eugen (ed.). 2016. *Dicționarul general al literaturii române* [General Dictionary of Romanian Literature], volume 2: C. Coordinated and revisioned by Gabriela Dantîș, Gabriela Drăgoi, Laurențiu Hanganu, ..., second edition. Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române: 650-654. Zăciu, Mircea, Papahagi, Marian, Sasu, Aurel (eds.). 1994. *Dicționarul scriitorilor români* [Dictionary of Romanian Writers], volume I: A-C. Bucharest: Editura Fundației Culturale Române: 666-670.

and as such may be considered to have certain critical advantages over 'biography' and 'autobiography'." (Kadar 1992, 4) But how does the concept manage to be more inclusive? The definition of the concept offered by the same Marlene Kadar gives a more general meaning to writing about the self than the classical theory of autobiography does:

Life writing comprises texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else, and who also does not pretend to be absent from the [black, brown, or white] text himself/herself. Life writing is a way of seeing, to use John Berger's famous phrase; it anticipates the reader's determination on the text, the reader's colour, class, and gender, and pleasure in an imperfect and always evolving hermeneutic – classical, traditional, or postmodern. (Kadar 1992, 10)

At the same time, the description of the concept broadens the range of textual categories/types that can be categorized as 'life writing', but it also indicates the relationship with the reader and anticipates the critical perspective:

Life writing as a critical practice, then, encourages (a) the reader to develop and foster his/her own self-consciousness in order to (b) humanize and make less abstract (which is not to say less mysterious) the self-in-the-writing. Thus, there are many forms, or genres, in which a reader may glean this written self, but we usually think immediately of autobiography, letters, diaries, and anthropological life narratives, genres in which the conventional expectation is that the author does not want to pretend he/she is absent from the text. (12)

Up to this point, I am interested in borrowing the concept because it allows for a different typological framing of *Supraviețuiri* – it is no longer a short story with a biographical core but becomes a life writing about life in the communist regime. Moreover, as David McCooey points out in *The Limits of Life Writing*, life writing brings in the following additional elements in terms of critical discourse: minority discourse, the critique of the human subject, and the reconfiguration of the subject (McCooey 2017, 277). This fact becomes relevant in the case of Radu Cosașu's writings, because in *Supraviețuiri* we have a situation of a somewhat double marginalized individual. Although it is the story of a white, heterosexual man, brought up in a family with a stable economic condition, the text of *Supraviețuiri* presents the life of an individual marginalized through identity. On the one hand, it is the marginalization 'by default' that young Oscar Rohrllich experiences because he is born into a Jewish family and bears a Jewish name:

Naturally, this 'Rohrlich Oscar' became in a single day: Rolling, Roli, Rolih, Rori, Roric, Rolic, Rolrih, especially Rolrih, and this for years, from the first grade of primary school, at Școala Tancului, when in the catalog, after him, followed, like an oasis of peace and serenity, the laureate Ruptureanu Teodor; since this Rohrlich Oscar had recorded the secret and substantial difference with which the teacher, reading the catalog, pronounced the two consecutive names, I realized that something would not be in order in the life of this little boy, otherwise normally developed, well cared for in his petit-bourgeois home, with his accountant father and housewife mother [...].⁴ (Cosașu 2011, 23)

At the same time, having the socio-economic status of the petit bourgeoisie, the protagonist lives in constant tension with the activist community of the communist era, a community of which the protagonist wanted to be part of:

He left me in the doorway, rummaged under a bed, put something in his coat pocket – I had the impression it was a revolver – and, on the way back to town, finally told me that 'your petit-bourgeois fear stinks worse than my room... I can't breathe when I see you shit yourselves... ideas can shit, too, from fear. At least learn to breathe some ideas in and breathe them out'.⁵ (45)

On the other hand, once involved in party activities, the young man – who, in the meantime, will assume the identity of Radu Cosașu – becomes marginalized from his family environment because of his choice to become a party activist and to deny his socio-economic origins:

From tomorrow you will leave our house, my house. I will admit anything in the name of revolution, because I am aware of its limiting character, but I will not admit the breaking of the laws of common sense. If this is the beginning of your revolution, do it without my assent. Rely on my contempt

⁴ "Firește, acest «Rohrlich Oscar» devenea într-o singură zi: Rolling, Roli, Rolih, Rori, Roric, Rolic, Rolrih, mai ales Rolrih, și asta de ani de zile, din prima clasă primară, la Școala Tancului, când la catalog, după el, urma, ca o oază de liniște și senin, premiul Ruptureanu Teodor; de când acest Rohrlich Oscar înregistrase secretele și substanțiala diferență cu care profesorul, citind catalogul, rostea cele două nume consecutive, îmi dădusem seama că ceva nu va fi în ordine în viața acestui băiețel, altfel normal dezvoltat, bine îngrijit în casa sa mic-burgheză, cu tată contabil și mamă casnică [...]" Cosașu 2011, 23.

Note: All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁵ "M-a lăsat în prag, a cotrobăit parcă sub un pat, și-a pus ceva în buzunarul hainei – am avut impresia că era un revolver – și, pe drumul de întoarcere în oraș, mi-a spus, în sfârșit, că «frica voastră mic-burgheză putea mai rău decât camera mea... Eu nu pot să respir când vă văd cum vă căcați pe voi... ideile se pot căca, și ele, de frică. Învăță-te măcar să tragi unele idei în piept și altele să le respiri pe gură»" (Cosașu 2011, 45).

and protest. That which proceeds in defiance of common sense is doomed to perdition, do you understand me, comrade Benjamin and esteemed comrade? You understand?⁶ (Cosașu 2013, 106)

We can see, therefore, that applying the concept of life writing to Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri* would not necessarily be entirely appropriate – which is why I want to 'borrow' elements from life-writing theory and not to adopt them entirely –, but we can also see that there are common elements that could serve to eventually extend the theoretical perspective on this type of texts.

Another topic debated in the theory of life writing that has had and may still have echoes in the analysis of Radu Cosașu's texts is the idea of fictionalization. What is the difference between novels and life writing? As Evelyn J. Hinz points out, one of the fundamental differences is the articulation of mimesis:

More important than the fact that auto/biography and prose fiction have narrative in common, therefore, is the fact that they differ radically in the area of mimesis. And the importance of a dramatic analogy is that it enables one to recognize the historical/referential component of auto/biography while still arguing for its artistry, whereas the use of a novelistic model leads to the nihilistic cul-de-sac of denying the reality and the humanity of the individual and of arguing that existence itself is 'ultimately fiction' (as Petrie titles his study of biography). (Hinz in Kadar 1992, 199)

On the same topic, but with a different approach, Max Saunders addresses the dynamics between the autobiographical mode and the fictionalization of the self in his work *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiography, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010), drawing on post-structuralist theories. Based on Linda Anderson's statement that "the autobiographical self is a fictional construct within the text, which can neither have its origins anterior to the text, nor indeed coalesce with its creator" (Anderson 1986, 59), Saunders comes to the following conclusion:

To say an autobiographical text is a fictional construct is one thing. To say an autobiographical self is a fictional construct is almost something else. At least, Anderson's phrasing might imply that an 'autobiographical self' – a self written in an autobiography – is a fictional construct, as opposed to the self doing the writing or the self doing the reading. But taken together

⁶ „de mâine vei părăsi casa noastră, casa mea. Admit orice în numele revoluției, pentru că sînt conștient de caracterul ei limitativ, dar nu admit călcarea legilor bunului-simț. Dacă astfel începe revoluția dumneavoastră, atunci fă-o fără asentimentul meu. Bizuie-te pe disprețul și protestul meu. Ceea ce se desfășoară în pofida bunului-simț e sortit pieirii, mă înțelegeți, tovarășe Beniamin și stimată tovarășă? Mă înțelegeți?” (Cosașu 2013, 106).

with the philosophical position that the self can only be understood narratively, it appears to imply something much more sweeping: namely, that the self is altogether a fictional construct. (Saunders 2010, 509)

Therefore, given the above statements regarding textual fictionalization, we can consider it as an inevitable result of writing about the self. Making the transition from content to form, there is another important element in discussing and differentiating the forms of auto/biographical writing: the 'formal mode', to use Saunders' terms. He identifies four 'fundamental formal modes': (1) 'autobiographical writing'; (2) 'biographical writing'; (3) 'creative/fictional writing'; (4) 'commentary (usually of the Editorial kind)' (212). This taxonomy provides yet another layer of categorization and understanding of the genre, but they may also exist in combination: "The four modes can also be combined in various ways, and with different ratios of each mode." (213) This is important in terms of integrating *Supraviețuiri* into a certain category of writing because, from the very first chapters, the short story cycle presents both an objective narrator, who presents the life of the young Oscar Rohrllich, and a subjective narrator who, we later learn, coincides in identity with the protagonist.

Finally, let's consider the relationship between text and social space. Given that in our understanding of life writing implies, to a certain extent at least, a literary dimension, but also a connection to the social sphere (especially thematically, through what has been called the critical perspective), the social dimension of the text becomes a significant element to discuss. Referring to Pierre Bourdieu, Margaret Cohen summarizes the inevitable relationship between the literary text and the social sphere:

Bourdieu offers his account as a challenge to Marxist criticism for the direct correspondence it establishes between social formation and text. If a literary text responds to social conflicts, Bourdieu points out, it is shaped by literary as well as social factors, or rather by social factors that are themselves literary, for it responds within a horizon of literary codes and institutional constraints that confront a writer at a particular literary historical moment. (Cohen 1999, 7)

This relationship is all the more important in the case of life writing because, according to Evelyn J. Hinz, one of the main features of life writing is its emphasis on 'reshaping' reality: "Novels are intertextual, in short, but drama and auto/biography are inherently contextual; [...] In both cases, art is less a matter of imaginative creation and more a matter of imaginative re-creation, less a matter of inventing and more a matter of reshaping." (Hinz in Kadar 1992, 199) Finally, Margaret Cohen's approach on the topic of literary genres emphasizes

another important idea: literature as ‘social practice’. In anticipation of another topic of this paper, I recall the statements on the idea of literature as a social practice, based on Fredric Jameson’s observations on the relationship between genre & social life:

The concept may reveal nothing about textuality, but it reveals much about literature as a social practice, for genre is a social relation, or, as Jameson puts it, a social contract. [...] Attention to genre thus counteracts a vulgar sociology of literature that identifies a text’s social dimension on the level of content as well as complicating the Foucauldian equation of a text’s social significance with its participation in nonliterary discourses. As Jameson observes, the problem of genre ‘has in fact always entertained a privileged relationship with historical materialism,’ mediating between individual works and ‘the evolution of social life.’ (Cohen 1999, 17)

This perspective on literature offers a particular agency to the text, allowing it to go beyond the limits of the literary sphere and to become a possible object of study or point of reference for other fields – a pertinent example in this respect, which can also be functional in the case of Radu Cosașu’s *Supraviețuiri*, can be provided by the approaches that bring literature closer to the historical document, functionalizing it as a kind of vehicle of collective memory⁷. Furthermore, unlike autobiography – where the purpose of the text is to present/reconstruct an individual’s life – or autofiction – where the focus is on exposing biographical elements through a veil of fiction, drawing the reader in through the tension between reality and fiction that is implied but not explicitly stated – which can be seen as limiting concepts, life writing and its contents is a much more transdisciplinary concept. Thus, the tools that can be used in analysis can vary from those specific to literary study to those related to sociology or historiography in a general sense, especially if we consider the social and historical stakes that the historical practice of life writing contains. Thus, life writing can also be understood as a cross-genre, where the form of the genre matters less than its content and significance.

⁷ For further reading, see Confino, Alon. 1997. *Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method*. In *American Historical Review*, no. 5, december, 1386-1403; and Mironescu, Andreea. 2015. *Textul literar și construcția memoriei culturale. Forme ale rememorării în literatura română din postcomunism* [*Literary text and the construction of cultural memory. Forms of Rememory in Post-Communist Romanian Literature*].

On the topic of realism and formalism

Another point of interest for this paper is the opening of a discussion about the formal dimension of texts, with an emphasis on the relationship it establishes with realism. I am interested, in this respect, in understanding formalism as developed by Anna Kornbluh in her work *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space*:

Formalism should study how to compose and to direct – rather than ceaselessly oppose – form, formalization, and forms of sociability. A formalism that professes such constituency might be deemed ‘political formalism’ on account of its willingness to entertain the political imagining that can issue from studying forms, and even more so because its elementary affirmation addresses the formed quality of the political as such. Contrary to the destitute paradigm’s ideal of formlessness, a formalism of the political avouches the constitution and agency of forms, underscoring that life itself essentially depends upon composed relations, institutions, states. (Kornbluh 2019, 4)

As we can see, this is a certain perspective, that of ‘political formalism’. But why opt for the political formalist view? Because, as Kornbluh points out, “political formalism evaluates form’s composedness and form’s agency – the contingent and emergent quality of form’s relationality, the dispensation of interrelation and what relations make possible – and thereby approaches politics and aesthetics from the purview of the constitution of social form, not just destituent dismantling.” (4) This is particularly important for our approach because it unites the intention of formal analysis (which I consider necessary in order to complete the critical overview of *Supraviețuiri*, since they have been evaluated almost exclusively through the lens of aesthetic autonomy) with the social dimension of the text, an element of particular importance both in the theory of life writing and in our vision of literature.

Also, regarding the social dimension that matters, I find the work of Mark Fisher *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* an important contribution – both for the present approach and for the more general updating of the theories that have been used in the discussion of Radu Cosașu’s writings. A first element in Mark Fisher’s approach that is important for shaping our understanding of the idea of realism is the conception of a social construction as ‘realistic’ only if it is naturalized first: “Needless to say, what counts as ‘realistic’, what seems possible at any point in the social field, is defined by a series of political determinations. An ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact.” (Fisher 2009, 16) The other fundamental element for shaping

the vision of realism is the understanding of the concept of 'Real' in Lacanian psychoanalysis: "At this point, it is perhaps worth introducing an elementary theoretical distinction from Lacanian psychoanalysis which Žižek has done so much to give contemporary currency: the difference between the Real and reality. As Alenka Zupancic explains, psychoanalysis's positing of a reality *principle* invites us to be suspicious of any reality that presents itself as natural." (17) To deepen the conceptualization of the Real, Mark Fisher notes:

For Lacan, the Real is what any 'reality' must suppress; indeed, reality constitutes itself through just this repression. The Real is an unrepresentable X, a traumatic void that can only be glimpsed in the fractures and inconsistencies in the field of apparent reality. So one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us. (18)

It is not just realism that can only try to imitate reality, and not the 'Real', since the 'Real' is a matter of personal perception. Moreover, the fact that the 'Real' is the 'unrepresentable' rest that reality tries to 'suppress' becomes relevant in discussing texts such as Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri*, where the main stake is not to produce a text that can be categorized as realism, but a life writing. Therefore, in parallel with the problem of capitalist realism that Mark Fisher discusses, the option for life writing over the traditional realist formula could become a much more pertinent formula to represent/invoke, at a textual level, the 'Real'.

Returning to the formalist territory, Anna Kornbluh's approach also tackles the problem of articulating realism in relation to form. In shaping her theory, she starts from the statements of theorists such as Georg Lukács, to get to the link between realism and the construction of the social – of course, she uses terms such as 'to build' to continue the architectural metaphor: "Even across the self-described political awakening in the middle of his intellectual career, Georg Lukács consistently understood realism as this productive building of sociality, and he hinged this understanding to figures of architecture." (Kornbluh 2019, 46) Another important element in Anna Kornbluh's definition of realism is the deterministic link of composition, which is made up only of functional elements that have a role: "true realism, as against naturalism, melodrama, or modernism, inheres in the integrality of every aspect of the composition. No effects without causes, no details without events, no individuality without sociality, no agency without determination." (47) Last but not least, Anna Kornbluh's theory could not be complete without considering the perspectives of Fredric Jameson – who, of course, has a Lacanian theoretical foundation, and a perspective to which Mark Fisher's vision can be likened:

And it is finally this antagonistic whole that Jameson admires, for it eloquently bespeaks an “ambition to grapple with the totality of the social itself.” Totality for Jameson means the “properly unrepresentable ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” — the mode of production, the relations of production, ideology, and their negations, the coexistence of other structures, along with the epistemological impossibility of fixing these dynamic negations and relations. (52)

In this case, the main difference with what Mark Fisher was saying, from a Lacanian perspective, is that Fredric Jameson inserts the concept of ‘totality’ and brings the dynamics between understanding reality and the ‘Real’ closer to an understanding of the social structure – which is composed, in Marxist terms, of modes of production, relations of production, ideology, etc. Thus, these points of view allow Anna Kornbluh to reach the following conclusion:

Realism’s integral modelling of social space braces the forms that constitute sociality, enunciating the political formalist truth that there is no world without form. Realism’s enchantment of quotidian worldly forms animates a constructivist marvel for what can be made. Realism encompasses not the world but a world, drafting a structuration of social space that does not reify the extant order of things even though it acknowledges the inevitability that constructed realities take on ontological solidity. (54)

This point of her approach is relevant, as she manages to integrate in a concise fragment the perspective on realism based on the modelling/building of social space, which becomes the fundamental element of analysis for political formalism.

Formal novelty in *Supraviețuiri*

The theoretical picture I have tried to sketch did not directly concern Romanian literature or culture, which is why I think it is time to shift our attention towards the context of Romanian literature of the 20th century. In his recent study entitled *Naratorul cel rău: un studiu despre realismul românesc: Rebreanu, Preda, Dumitriu* [*The Evil Narrator: a Study on Romanian Realism: Rebreanu, Preda, Dumitriu*], C. Rogozanu mentions, speaking about the mutations of genres “from the metropolis of literature to the peripheries”, that the realist novel shifts its centre of gravity from bourgeois to petit bourgeois society: “Established as a bourgeois genre, a product of pure-blooded capitalism, the realist novel in Central and Eastern Europe moves from the bourgeois point of

view towards petit-bourgeois characters. The further east, the more important the petit bourgeoisie becomes in filtering artistic reality.”⁸ (Rogozanu 2024, 33) This shift from the bourgeois to the petit bourgeois position can only be explained by the more general change in socio-economic conditions in the Eastern countries, where the mass of people were (and still are) part of the middle class, which is why the novel also changes its point of view. Further on, C. Rogozanu notes two moments in the evolution of the Eastern realist novel: “The evolution of the Eastern realist novel seems to follow two stages: mimetism and communist rupture.”⁹ (33) This division into phases is relevant for the present approach, since it marks the strong influence of the mimetic attitude in the configuration of realism, the immediately following moment in the development of the novel being that ‘communist rupture’ – which is largely due to the doctrine of socialist realism. As far as the situation of the Romanian cultural space is concerned, the period of socialist realism was overcome during the so-called ‘ideological thaw’, after Nicolae Ceaușescu became the new leader of Romania. At this moment, a new ‘fashion’ was established in the Romanian novel: the ‘haunting decade’ novel. To understand the form of the novel of the ‘haunting decade’ I recall Alex Goldiș’s work entitled “Pentru o morfologie a romanului «obsedantului deceniu»” [“For a Morphology of the ‘Haunting Decade’ Novel”], where the critic realizes the scheme of the novel by indicating the two fundamental elements. On the one hand, there is the relationship that the novel establishes with the historical past: “It is, first and foremost, a constant alternation of planes, between the present and the past – dimensions that are often seen as antagonistic.”¹⁰ (Goldiș 2017, 497) On the other hand, Alex Goldiș considers the construction of the protagonist to be important for the scheme of the novel of ‘the haunting decade’:

The hero is usually a former activist who is re-educating himself in the light of the new precepts of destalinization. When he himself does not initiate an analysis of the dark regime, the central character becomes its object. At the end of the self-analysis – which also means a reassessment of the world from the roots up – we are dealing with a rehabilitation: the hero goes through, almost step by step, the process of ‘un-enlightenment’,

⁸ “Stabilizat ca un gen burghez, produs al capitalismului pur-sânge, romanul realist merge, în Europa Centrală și de Est, de la punctul de vedere burghez înspre personaje-reflector mic-burgheze. Cu cât mai spre Est, cu atât mai importantă devine mica burghezie în filtrarea realității artistice” (Rogozanu 2024, 33).

⁹ “Evoluția romanului realist estic pare să urmeze două etape: mimetism și ruptura comunistă” (Rogozanu 2024, 33).

¹⁰ “Ea pendulează, în primul rând, printr-o permanentă alternare de planuri, între prezent și trecut – dimensiuni privite de multe ori antagonic” (Goldiș 2017, 497).

as opposed to the 'enlightenment' of socialist realist prose: from a fierce communist, ready to sacrifice lives and nuances for the sake of doctrine, he becomes a hesitant, reflective, complex character.¹¹ (497)

This recipe of the novel is also valid for Radu Cosașu's *Supraviețuiri*, because, in the unfolding of the short stories, we meet both a communist party activist protagonist, who recounts his contributions to the revolutionary movement and later comes to self-criticize his actions, and a more subtle (but present) alternation between the youthful past and a period closer to the present. What we are particularly interested in is not the adequacy to the model of the 'haunting decade' novel, but the way in which the distancing from it is realized – which is, in fact, the novelty element that the *Supraviețuiri* brings. More precisely, it is about the formal change that Radu Cosașu's writings involve. This formal change is related to the writer's choice to compose short stories and is telling of the writer's textual relationship with society, as Margaret Cohen also argues: "to use Bourdieu's terms, genre is a position. Genre designates the fact that writers share a common set of codes when they respond to a space of possibilities, a horizon formed by the literary conventions and constraints binding any writer at a particular state of the field." (Cohen 1999, 17) This idea could be extended along the lines of the reception of 'minor', non-canonical genres during Romanian communism as being close or even synonymous with a subversive genre.

Beyond the discussion about the ideological tensions existing in the Romanian literary sphere at the time, Radu Cosașu's choice to realize a novel of the 'haunting decade' in a different genre may become an important point in the evolution of Romanian prose genres. Although Radu Cosașu was not the first Romanian writer to produce such a text, his writings can be categorized into what theory has called 'short story cycles' or 'short story composites'. Victor Cobuz published in 2020 and 2021 a series of articles using the term 'proză compozită' – a Romanian adaptation of 'short story composite' – and its related theory. In the first article of a cycle of three, Victor Cobuz provides a theoretical framework for 'composite prose', referring to several definitions, taxonomies, and a specialized bibliography. In this respect, for a better understanding of the genre I am particularly interested in L. Ingram's definition of this genre: "the

¹¹ "Eroul e de regulă e un fost activist care se reeducă în lumina noilor precepte ale destalinizării. Când nu demarează el însuși o analiză a întunecatului regim, personajul central devine obiect al acesteia. La capătul autoanalizei – care înseamnă însă și o reevaluare a lumii din rădăcini, avem de a face cu o reabilitare: eroul derulează, aproape etapă cu etapă, procesul „dez-lămuririi”, opus „lămuririlor” prozei realist socialiste: din comunist feroce, gata să sacrifice vieți și nuanțe de dragul doctrinei, el devine un personaj ezitant, reflexiv, complex" (Goldiș 2017, 497).

dynamics of the twentieth-century short story cycle require a modification of our initial definition of story cycles. I will define a *short story cycle* as a *book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts*" (Ingram 1971, 19), and Rolf Lundén's taxonomy from the book *The United Stories of America: Studies in the Short Story Composite* (1999) in which he "proposes four sub-genres: *cycle*, *sequence*, *cluster*, and *novella*."¹² (Cobuz 2020)

The other two articles in the series published by Victor Cobuz deal with the subject of the short story composite applied to various Romanian literary works of the 20th and 21st centuries, texts among which *Supraviețuiri* are also discussed. The critic notes the following: "one of the most powerful volumes about the 'haunting decade' wasn't a novel [...]. The post-Revolution rearrangement brings *Supraviețuiri* even closer to a *sequence*, with a chronological chaining and a coherent main narrative thread."¹³ (Cobuz 2021) His analysis underlines the fact that, in the first edition, the coherence of the stories could not be so easily observed, and this fact has been solved in the second edition, in which the author rearranged the short stories chronologically – an action that resulted, without the author's will, in a kind of trajectory of becoming: "I didn't change them, I didn't bring them up to date, I didn't make them more intelligent, more politically correct; I ordered them according to the eternal and immutable epic law: adolescence, youth, maturity and so on."¹⁴ (Cosașu 2011, 19)

The option for this 'composite' form may have another interesting effect, this time in the sphere of the evolution of Romanian prose. In the chapter 'Serious Century' from the volume *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature*, Franco Moretti discusses the presence of fillers in the structure of narrative and their function, such as their potential to "«reawaken' the everyday, making it feel alive, open" (Moretti 2013, 75). Costi Rogozanu, following Franco Moretti, expands the discussion on fillers to the subject of mutations in the realist novel and notes that: "the mutations of the realist novel are best observed by following the *fillers*, with which the novelist fills the spaces between two intense points in the novel. *Fillers* appear in the nineteenth-century novel, says Moretti, as a natural consequence of the reproduction of bourgeois life, itself made up of

¹² "propune patru subgenuri: *cycle*, *sequence*, *cluster*, and *novella*" (Cobuz, 2020).

¹³ "Unul dintre cele mai puternice volume despre «obsedantul deceniu» nu a fost un roman, ci un volum de proză compozită. Rearanjarea efectuată după Revoluție apropie și mai mult *Supraviețuiri* de un *sequence*, cu o înălțuire cronologică și un fir narativ principal coerent (Cobuz, 2021).

¹⁴ "nu le-am modificat, nu le-am adus la zi, nu le-am făcut mai inteligente, mai juste din punct de vedere politic; le-am ordonat conform eternei și imuabilei legi epice: adolescența, tinerețea, maturitatea ș.a.m.d." (Cosașu 2011, 19).

plenty of dead or unspectacular narrative moments”¹⁵ (Rogozanu 2024, 73-74) and concludes his remarks with the following statement: “these *fillers*, these descriptions of ‘everyday life’, are essential to the realistic novel.”¹⁶ (74) This topic is perhaps quite important to note and discuss in *Supraviețuiri*. Of course, being volumes of short stories, it is almost obvious that the nature of the texts does not permit (or require) the presence of fillers. However, given that critics – both at the time of publication and retrospectively – have also suggested that Radu Cosașu’s *Supraviețuiri* could be seen as a large novel, things could get a bit complicated. If we accept the hypothesis that Radu Cosașu’s writings – although presented as a cycle of short stories, each with a high degree of autonomy – make up a broad novel of the obsessive decade, the absence of fillers could be an interesting element of development of realistic writing. On the one hand, this architecture which does not allow fillers to exist could be explained in terms of an opposition to the traditional form of the novel, understood as the superior genre for the telling of a story of great span. On the other hand, this arrangement in short stories – instead of chapters – could be seen as necessary for a different kind of articulation of textual realism: realism without fillers. Instead of attempting to reproduce or imitate reality – this being the most widespread method – in the case of *Supraviețuiri* the configuration of realism is achieved by shaping the text in a seemingly immediate manner, a kind of immediate recording of reality that is not composed according to aesthetic norms. This way of writing about the past could be related to Walter Benjamin’s perspective on how the past should be recorded: “articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger” (Benjamin 2003, 391) and could serve very well in extending the analysis of life writing towards the approach of the text as a vehicle of memory. At the same time, this method of composing a literary text that can be categorized within realism could be seen as a partial solution to the problem of articulating the Lacanian ‘Real’ or Fredric Jameson’s ‘totality’ at the textual level. The text is much closer to reality than those that aim to do so. Although paradoxical, the lack of awareness/consciousness of the conventions of realism – real or staged – but marked as such in the text could serve a more realistic textual product than one that follows the implicit or explicit conventions of realism.

¹⁵ “Cel mai bine se observă mutațiile romanului realist urmărind *filler*-ele, cu ce umple romancierul spațiile dintre două puncte intense din roman. *Filler*-ele apar în romanul secolului al XIX-lea, spune Moretti, ca urmare firească a reproducerii vieții burgheze, la rândul ei formate din destule momente moarte sau nespectaculoase narativ” (Rogozanu 2024, 73-74).

¹⁶ “Aceste *fillers*, aceste descrieri ale «vieții de zi cu zi», sunt esențiale pentru romanul realist” (Rogozanu 2024, 74).

Finally, this shift towards the short story cycle form could also be important for discussing another key element of prose architecture: the character. In the case of the novel, for example, characters are part of the story, they often have a purpose and/or a function – which is usually observable as the action unfolds. In the case of short stories, given the nature of the text, which involves a less complex and shorter narrative thread, things may differ. But what happens in the case of writings such as Radu Cossașu's *Supraviețuiri* where several short stories make up a novel? In this case, I was most interested in the presence – if any – of the so-called ideologist, the ideologist character, since my approach is interested in the relationship with the social dimension (implicitly economic and political). In his analysis of Liviu Rebreanu's novels, C. Rogozanu opens a similar discussion about the 'position of the ideologist' and the necessity of its presence in the text: "Horatio's position in *Hamlet* is the position of the ideologist, writes Moretti, he is a witness, he is not involved in the intrigues of the court, he has only a 'function', not a 'purpose'. [...] A novel limps badly if it does not present a good ideologue for a virtual party, with a virtual ideology to which virtual readers can adhere."¹⁷ (Rogozanu 2024, 78) Searching in Radu Cossașu's texts for a character with such a function, I ran into a problem generated by the structure of the text: as these are short stories with a high degree of autonomy, the characters who take part in the action are rarely present in more than one story. The next target of the analysis was, of course, the character narrator, but here another impediment unfolded: there are stories in which the narrator is objective and talks about Oscar Rohrllich – as is the case with the story with which the first volume of *Supraviețuiri* opens in the second edition – and there are stories in which there is a first person narrator – stories in which critics assume that this narrator has common identity traits with the author. Thus, we cannot establish that there is only one narrator, and therefore we cannot call this one in the position of the ideologist – unless we call all the narrators of the *Supraviețuiri* ideologists, but this could also present itself as a difficult task, since from one story to the next we have no guarantee that the narrator does not change. Thus, one might conclude that Radu Cossașu's *Supraviețuiri* do not have such an ideological character or that the form of the composite prose does not allow the existence of such a character. The present approach does not allow to confirm or refute an idea like the latter, related to the form of composite prose that does not allow such an ideological character. However, we can say that there is no lack of ideological positioning in *Supraviețuiri*. A demonstration that there is a single common narrator in all the stories that

¹⁷ "Poziția lui Horatio în *Hamlet* e poziția ideologului, scrie Moretti, este martor, nu este implicat în intrigile de la curte, el are doar o «funcție», nu un «scop». [...] Un roman șchioapătă grav dacă nu prezintă un ideolog bun pentru un partid virtual, cu o ideologie virtuală la care să adere cititori virtuali" (Rogozanu 2024, 78).

make up *Supraviețuiri* would be possible and perhaps useful in demonstrating the existence of an ideologist character, but it would require an extended close reading across all volumes and is not a functional solution for the present approach. Instead, we can find a solution by starting with Terry Eagleton's statement about elitism: "for elitism, as Nicos Poulantzas has argued, is a structural trait of the petty bourgeoisie." (Eagleton 1978, 14) If we consider intertextual practice as a mark of elitism, we could build a case in favour of discussing *Supraviețuiri* as a result of an elitist, and thus implicitly petit bourgeoisie, posture. One of – if not the most – used textual practice by Radu Cosașu is the intertextual practice. Thus, the construction of texts based on complex intertextual practices – both in terms of titles, character construction and the events narrated – could be read in an ideological analysis as a sign of a petit bourgeoisie posture.

Conclusions

One of the first conclusions of this approach should be articulated around life-writing theories. The present endeavour has shown that approaching some writings received as literary writings with an autobiographical 'core' as such is much more restrictive and limiting than approaching slightly newer theories or theories more appropriate to the content, context, and intention of the text, as is the case with *Supraviețuiri* and the relationship that can be established with the practice of life writing. The second conclusion that I have reached because of this, and which might be a little more relevant for Romanian literary studies, is related to the updating of the critical bibliography in the case of writers such as Radu Cosașu. The case of Radu Cosașu is, I think, not special, being a Romanian writer who has been analysed almost exclusively through the filter of aesthetic autonomy, which has resulted in him being perceived as a minor writer. However, as the present approach has shown, the application of theories that go beyond the aesthetic factor and look more closely at the relationship of the text with the social sphere, at the form of the text, and what it encapsulates or even new perspectives on realism could be a good way to rediscover these writers who have been recognized as minor writers.

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