

THE CASE FOR ROMANIAN AUTOFICTION. LOVE & ANXIETY IN THE NEOLIBERAL WORLD IN RADU VANCU'S AND SAȘA ZARE'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT. *The Case for Romanian Autofiction. Love & Anxiety in the Neoliberal World in Radu Vancu's and Sașa Zare's Novels.* The origins of autofiction encapsulate this literary species in a postmodernist ethos. Nevertheless, the 2000s generation of Romanian writers developed an appetency for autofiction that exposed the questioning potentialities of self-narration towards the contemporary neoliberal *status-quo*. Being called a hybridization between metarealism and miserable realism (Mihai Iovănel) or an extension of the neoliberal novel (Adriana Stan), theories highlight its ambiguous, volatile, almost non-specific character. However, in the case of Romanian contemporary literature, two post-2000s novels engage in polemics regarding the way in which individuality, memory and trauma are revisited through autofiction, using metadiscourse, biography, and fictive discourse. Radu Vancu's *Transparența* (*Transparency*) and Sașa Zare's *Dezrădăcinare* (*Uprooting*) are exponential in understanding autofiction's main strategies of narration. This paper examines how autofiction evolved after the 2000s generation of self-narrators, trying to question how this literary species fits or challenges the neoliberal political context. Being easy to portray a relative cause for autofiction's focus on individual or social motifs, this paper will dwell into how the self and the interhuman erotic relationships are exposed in the prior mentioned novels. In the second part of the study, an in-depth analysis of *Transparența* will examine how sensibility, eroticism, and anxiety are handled in an introvert autofictional way (Florina Pîrjol), where the decentralisation of self is dealt with maximalist

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strategies. Finally, Sașa Zare's autofictional innovations will portray how the extrovert side evolved in the neoliberal context, proposing a new form of authenticity, where the self and queer eroticism are expressed towards an integrated communitarian audience.

Keywords: *autofiction, neoliberal novel, biofiction, post-2000's novel, eroticism, autobiography.*

REZUMAT. Cazul autoficțiunii românești. Iubire & anxietate în lumea neoliberală în romanele lui Radu Vancu și al Sașei Zare. Originile autoficțiunii prezintă această specie literară ca parte a unui ethos postmodernist. Cu toate acestea, generația 2000-istă de scriitori români a dezvoltat o apetență pentru autoficțiune care a pus la îndoială potențialitățile narațiunii de sine față de un *status-quo* contemporan, neoliberal. Numită drept o hibridizare între metarealism și realism mizerabilist (Mihai Iovănel) sau o extensie a romanului neoliberal (Adriana Stan), teoriile sale emergente au punctat caracterul ambiguu, volatil și lipsit de specificitate al autoficțiunii. Pe de altă parte, în cazul literaturii române contemporane, două romane post-2000-iste construiesc o polemică referitoare la modul în care individualitate, memoria și trauma sunt revizitate prin autoficțiune, folosind metadiscurs, discurs biografic și fictiv. *Transparența* de Radu Vancu și *Dezrădăcinare* de Sașa Zare sunt exponențiale pentru înțelegerea strategiilor autoficționare de narare. Această lucrare examinează evoluția autoficțiunii după generația 2000-istă, încercând să chestioneze modul în care această specie literară se mulează ori provoacă cadrul politic neoliberal. Fiind ușor de construit o cauză relativă pentru care autoficțiunea se concentrează pe motive individualiste sau sociale, această lucrare va investiga cum sinele și relațiile erotice interumane sunt expuse în romanele menționate. În cea de-a doua parte a studiului meu, o analiză mai îndeaproape a romanului *Transparența* va examina cum sensibilitatea, eroticul și anxietatea sunt jonglate la nivel introvertit (Florina Pîrjol), acolo unde descentralizarea sinelui este redată prin strategii manieriste. În sfârșit, inovațiile autoficționale ale Sașei Zare vor portretiza cum latura extrovertită a evoluat într-un cadru neoliberal, propunând o nouă formă de autenticism, unde sinele și erotica queer sunt exprimate către un public integrat narativ.

Cuvinte-cheie: *autoficțiune, roman neoliberal, ficțiune biografică, roman post-2000-ist, erotică, autobiografie.*

Autofiction in the spotlight

During the last thirty years, there have been many debates around what defines a literary text as autofictional. Theorists have tried to decide upon a set of criteria that could constitute the primary toolkit on recognizing an autofictional novel. However, this process has led to a multitude of definitions, categories,

and theories that proved to be inefficient in this endeavour. For some scholars, the growth and relevance of autofiction's narratological strategies, alongside the theoretical process of analysing this literary species proved the relevance and the richness of this subgenre (Effe and Lawlor 2022, 3). Furthermore, it has become a common practice to investigate the autofictional category by theorizing new concepts, exposing the limits of older ones and assuring a level of originality. Consequently, the debate around autofiction has become obfuscated by new terms that aim to impose themselves in the field.² Considering this, I claim that such terminological debates fail to advance new epistemological knowledge because of their obsession for reinventing the area. On this note, I consider that the term *autofiction* is sufficient for the literary species that I shall analyse from now on and I will use this concept not only because it has gained more popularity since its first use in the 1970s – firstly by Paul West in 1972 and, secondly, and within a more generally accepted version, by Serge Doubrovsky in 1977 (Kornbluh 2023, 62) – but also because I believe that an analysis regarding autofiction should focus on its narrative potential, rather than on a specific terminology. On this note, in the first part of my essay I shall respond to some observations made by Anna Kornbluh regarding autofiction, aiming to recover a different face of self-narration. At the same time, I will argue for a narrative-centred approach, while exposing the epistemological and political potential of autofiction in the context of the 21st neoliberal world-system.

Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro observed and condemned a certain “boredom by the lack of novelty” (Deckard and Shapiro 2019, 3) regarding the concept of *neoliberalism*. Consequently, as in the case for autofiction mentioned above, a new set of concepts that aim to describe the contemporary socio-economical world emerged. In line with Fredric Jameson's *late capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh's recent theory coined the concept of *too late capitalism* (Kornbluh 2023, 20) in order to describe the historical segment of the capitalist world-system that comes after postmodernity. For Kornbluh, too late capitalism is “a contradictory moment where the overmuchness of lateness arrests itself” (20). The central consequence of today's economic system is *immediacy*. Kornbluh observes that any form of mediation is erased so that efficiency and capital circulation gain more speed. The absence of mediation from the economic logic of capitalist societies ensures a process of immediation in every cultural field: imaginary, aesthetic, visual, textual. Some features of too late capitalism are: obsessive presentism, lack of symbolic epistemology, a state of constant crisis, doubled by constant solutions served to the public, space-time compression, urgency and atomism. In this context, Kornbluh accuses autofiction to be an immediated literary style, through which authors choose to deny the

² For a detailed list see Cernat (2021, 215-234).

use of fiction in favour for lived, actual experience. Representation, symbolization, polyphony, diversity, and other narrative techniques, in Kornbluh's perspective, are abandoned so that a new literary style, self-centred, atomised around the author's life episodes can prevail.

In a more historical context, the author opposes this immanent attitude towards novelty to postmodernism's experimentalism (62). Metadiscourse, attention to the textual medium, to different narrative styles, all these strategies favoured a fruitful narratological growth that had epistemological implications regarding the way in which fiction is built. However, the 21st autofiction's evolution is considered to be a shortcut between actual life and value. Linking it with the economical circuit of capital accumulation, Kornbluh states that "the category of immediacy situates these antifictional energies in conjunction with the emissive proclivities of a circulation-forward economic phase, with the obfuscation of symbolic code that underwrites digital interfaces, and with the regime of the imaginary that ecstatically charges 'the voice of your own personality'" (61). However, it should be mentioned that the examples she chooses to portray are representatives of a certain category of autofictional authors that adopted this logic of hyper-representation: Karl Ove Knausgaard, Rachel Cusk, and Ocean Vuong. Building on this, Kornbluh not only reduces the imaginary of autofictional writing to a few examples, but she refuses to engage with any theory regarding this subgenre.

In this perspective, autofiction and first-person writing are nothing but results of a culture that atomizes the individual, creating a sense of auto-gratification, privatizing, and thus limiting the perspective and the potential of plural debates. Third-person writing, free indirect speech, on the other hand, are seen as more optimistic strategies that create layers of fiction, amplified by interest for imaginative scenarios and character diversity (67). Kornbluh connects today's appetite for autofiction with the popularization of the personal essay, the social media industry of self-exposure, all of them pointing to the erase of any form of mediation, hence, of symbolization.

Failing to integrate any clear definition of what autofiction is, Kornbluh risks teleological conclusions, blaming it for and reducing autofiction to a passion for the real that manifests through pure representation, without any level of fictionalization.³ However, I suggest a more complex understanding of

³ To be more specific, Kornbluh has at least three errors regarding the emergence of autofiction. Firstly, she considers this species as a reconfiguration of the autobiographical writing, when, in fact, as I claim, autofiction should not depend on its prefix, 'auto', but more likely on its root, 'fiction'. Hence, autofiction should be considered a fictional species, rather than a biographical one. Secondly, she fails to mention the hybrid nature of the species, more precisely the melange between biographical experience and fictional creation. This characteristic represents the key

the concept, given the fact that it could be a methodological error to address this literary species without keeping count of the sum of debates around autofiction.

Although it was constantly under discussion, one of the most generally accepted criteria that mark an autofictional novel is the hybridization of biographical and fictional scenes. An autofictional writer uses episodes from their lives but enriches them with imagined experiences to make sense of a traumatic reality. As Arnaud Schmitt puts it, autofiction can be understood as a baroque version of autobiography (Schmitt 2022, 83), but it remains, nevertheless, a fictional genre (84). The alternation between fictionality and non-fictionality is used primarily in relation with a traumatic experience suffered by the author. Trauma, in most of autofictional texts – and to be even more specific, in women's autofiction – represents a central motif (Jordan 2012, 79). Consequently, the theoretical approach to autofiction as an appendix of autobiographical writing is countered by a fictional-centred position, in which the hybridization of real-life events and imagined ones is seen as more important.

In the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, Johnnie Gratton brings up the psychoanalytical, Freudian shift from 'truth-value' to 'act-value' (Gratton 2001, 86). On this note, it is worth mentioning the importance of the fictional discourse in the narrative economy of autofictional novels. A reading of autofiction that searches for biographical data, as Kornbluh does, reduces autofiction to a detective reading out of which not much can be taken, and this position represents most of the times the position of a realist reader, interested much more in the private information about the author, than in the novel's capacity of proposing debates and ideas. But, as a melange between factual and fictional, autofiction breaks the barrier between real and imaginative, hence, the problem of referentiality becomes less important as one accepts that it is mediated by a literary style anyway. Schmitt discusses about this attention for the writing process: "This is not about verisimilitude, about making fiction look real; the technical core of what we can tentatively call *autobiographical novels*⁴ consists in distilling within the text some personal facts that the reader can identify as such, thanks to biographical data available in the paratextual world" (Schmitt 2010, 126.) Therefore, identity, in the case of autofiction, is constructed not as

element in understanding autofiction. Thirdly, even though she is entitled to observe the immediated character of this species, she fails to recollect the cultural background behind this emergence: the postmodernist death of the author represents the most eloquent example.

⁴ It is necessary to make a terminological clarification about what Arnaud Schmitt understands through 'autobiographical novels': this concept covers up the qualities of the autofictional novel, for the author does not make a precise difference between the terms. He coins the concept of 'self-narration', a concept that has the same function as what we call autofiction.

a diary made of facts, with a correlative in the referential world, but it manifests as an act of the written fictions. The identity, caught between self-narration and self-fabling, becomes an agent through which various narrations, some true, some imagined, reshape reality so that a certain life-episode can be thought not only at a self-centred level, but more complex, adding epistemological and ontological value to such a novel.

Considering this, a second characteristic of autofiction is the onomastic correspondence. Although this criterion is recurring in autofictional theories, there are exceptions.⁵ However, the identity between three narrative instances – author, narrator, protagonist – represents a strategy that blurs the border between real and fiction. Even more, this technique allows autofiction to function as a vehicle that explores identity. This correspondence not only burdens the author with a sense of responsibility regarding revealed private information, but it also implies the reader. The reader no longer responds to the story as they would to invention, but they integrate it closer to their proximity (Sirkanth 2019, 357). The onomastic identity has further implications in the reading process. Understanding autofiction as a performative species (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2022, 30), the narrative voice encourages the reader to “approach the text with two overarching schemata, either in combination or in quick oscillation, and in which they often experience moments of tension or uncertainty about the communicative intention (fictionality/factuality) and/or ontological status (fictive or real) of entities and elements” (Effe and Gibbons 2022, 65). This performative approach implies the reader and highlights that autofiction must be understood not as a mimetic representation of one’s daily life, but as a narrative construct that offers meditative rhetoric with ontological and political implications.

Furthermore, many theorists point out the importance of stylistic choice in narrative autofictions. Serge Doubrovsky, for example, pointed out the relevance of a tempestuous writing, which could surprise through its spontaneity. A Romanian theorist, Florina Pîrjol, observed that, following Doubrovsky’s claim, such a perspective towards style refuses any form of stylization of memory, characteristically more suited for autobiography than autofiction (Pîrjol 2014, 44). What’s more, this refusal for a cosmetic of style has influenced Arnaud Schmitt to call the ‘psychoanalytic angle’ (Schmitt 2010, 126) one of the three criteria that mark a novel autofictional. Schmitt argues that the psychoanalytic interventions could be understood through the lacanian theories according to which the self is constructed based on multiple fictions (Schmitt 2010, 127). This perspective maintains the idea that an autofiction is not just a representation of an individual, but at the same time an interpretation and invention of the self. Furthermore, due to the integrating hermeneutics of author-narrator-protagonist,

⁵ One example in this sense is Philippe Forest.

the story becomes universalist, opening to a more diverse thematic interpretation. The writer isn't practising just a form of therapy but asks questions about the way in which the self is built not only through concrete experience, but through fiction as well.

At a narrative level, this observation highlights what Marie-Laure Ryan evokes by talking about nonfictional stories. She stresses that, while the data from a fictional novel is *a priori* correct, for there is no referential world to be re-presented, but an imaginary, yet potential world, in the case of novels that take our world as referential, the information offered can be either true or false, always blurred by our incapacity to present our reality truthfully (Ryan 2014, 34). Ryan analyses non-fictional stories. However, autofiction, as a *métissage* between autobiography and fiction, situates itself on the threshold between truthful narration and relative representation of reality.⁶ The question of ontological truth comes up in the case of autofiction for, although the novel is based on a known individual – the author on the cover – their experiences and interiority are placed under debate by the difficulty of deciding what is fiction and what isn't.

Finally, one last detail that must be mentioned is a certain innovation in the field of autofiction. Although it is a commonly known fact that this species deals with metafictional techniques, they are not taken as a definitive criterion to make a novel autofictional (Schmitt 2022, 90). However, in an essay dedicated to feminine autofiction, Yanbing Er points out that it is not only the fictional and non-fictional elements that are entangled in the construction of autofiction, but theoretical ones as well (Er 2018, 317). As I shall demonstrate in the case of Romanian autofiction, the majority of these novels engage in a process of self-fictionalization and theorization as well. For them, building up an auto-theory of writing and self-positioning in this theory helps them make sense of their trauma and offers a different perspective towards the sociological context in which they are placed.

The Case for Romanian Autofiction

In the last twenty years, autofiction has been recognized as the trademark for the 2000s Romanian prose writers (Schiop 2024). Obviously, this claim is a generalisation of an entire generation, to be more precise, the millennial

⁶ The same can be said about the historiographic novel. Aiming to reveal the blind spots of history and to dismantle the 'canonized' truth, the historiographic novel – as theorized by Linda Hutcheon – speaks about macro-narrations, while autofiction does the same thing, but at a micro-level. Even more, it can be argued that autofiction makes use of a certain plastic, malleable, characteristic of history, in which the past, either historical or personal, is re-functionalised in order to make sense of the present.

generation, of prose authors. Nevertheless, it is certain that through this generation, during the first decade of the 21st century, autofiction has entered the Romanian literary field. Thus, this literary species sought to react to two lines of thought that elite actors of the cultural scene in Romania imposed in the last decades of the last century. To be more precise, the millennial cohort reacted to the postmodernist tradition of the 1980s, specifically to its overuse of intertextuality, metadiscourse, hermeticism, as well as to 1990s “tiresome moralism and political decline” (Schiop 2024). Hence, more than once, 2000s Romanian autofiction has been described as a discovery of a new form of realism (Bâlici 2021, 76), a refusal of stylistic devices in favour for slang language (Pîrjol 2014, 153), and a total use of radical individualism (Stan 2020, 119). Furthermore, by the second decade of the century, autofiction was overshadowed by the emergence of a new form of third-person realism, either interested in fictional narration, or in a minimalist realism (Stan 2020, 123) (Rogozanu 2021, 74) (Goldiș 2023; 142). However, after the 2000s emergence of autofiction, there are some authors that wrote experimental autofictions, proving that its formal strategies are still in good use to question the socio-political *status-quo* of Romanian capitalist society. The novels proposed for analysis, both published in the last eight years, offer such a retrospective towards the neoliberal system that imposed itself in Romania more aggressively than other countries after 1989.

The process of mapping autofiction in the Romanian literary field was briefly considered by Romanian theorists. However, there are some observations that help us understand how autofiction was imported from its origin country, France, after the first decade of neoliberalism. Before dwelling in such a demonstration, it is worth mentioning that the notion of a literary world-system, as developed by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC 2015), proves to be efficient in exposing the transnational movements of autofiction from core (France) to a semi-peripheral literary field (Romania). Following the idea according to which the literary world-system is a combined, yet uneven ecosystem (WReC, 10) it can be argued that the distribution of autofiction mimics such a disproportioned development. It is sufficient to point out Mihai Iovănel’s brief observation from his *History of Romanian Literature. 1990-2020*, in which he mentions that autofiction appears during the first decade of the twenty-first century, imported from France, “halfway between metarealism and the *updated* realism of the 2000s” (Iovănel 2021, 429).

Interesting enough, most probably because of its short temporal existence in the literary field, Romanian autofiction did not prove that original forms and contents from semi-peripheral countries could be adopted by core

spaces, as the Warwick Research Collective claims (WReC, 55).⁷ The Morettian claim that literary forms travel from core to periphery (Moretti 2000, 58) is more suited to express the emergence of autofictional form in 2000s Romania. Hence, such an endeavour of mapping autofiction in the Romanian literary field must keep count of the formal strategies brought through France and, at the same time, the local material and local narrative voice (Moretti, 65). It is interesting to note that this new fictional species from the West will be the catalyst for the emergence of the so-called *miserabilist* literary trend. The Western form will comprise grunge content, utilising the freedom of expression to its fullest potential and eschewing any vestige of communist influence (Pîrjol 2014, 147-159). Further characteristics of this autofictional narrative voice include: a rediscovery of existential crisis, attention to Western pop-culture, a certain disengagement from society, given by the multiple disappointments that the first decade of capitalist economies revealed in such a short time. Both Pîrjol and Iovănel observed the recurrence of losers and marginalised characters during the first wave of 2000s autofictions. (Pîrjol, 156) (Iovănel, 430) The neoliberal consumerism led to a new form of alienation that was exploited by writing about precarious conditions, liminal spaces, as well as their interactions with the Other.

However, as I mentioned before, by the year 2010, with the effects of 2008-2011 global economic crisis, autofiction seems to have lost its potential. Even more, Adriana Stan observed that autofiction missed its point of questioning the neoliberal *status-quo* by failing to comment “upon relations of capital” (Stan, 117). Thus, she considers autofiction a species of the neoliberal novel not necessary by linking them with the historical context – a genre that appeared in the neoliberal West – but through the way in which the neoliberal illusion of individual freedom and self-expression mimics the autofictional process of melting biographical experiences with fictional narrations (Stan, 123). Hence, the emergence of autofiction, new forms of realism, and popular use of minimalism seemed to be an *athanor* for maintaining a neoliberal positioning, closely linked with the already mentioned personal essay. It is worth mentioning a similar process in the case of Romanian poetry. As Ovio Olaru notices, the 2000s generation of poets – Dan Sociu, Elena Vlădăreanu and

⁷ In this regard, it can be also pointed out that the Romanian literary translation infrastructure lacks tactics for exporting and representing itself at an international level. Although there are some authors that were made visible and succeeded to reach a wide public – Mircea Cărtărescu is the most eloquent case – Romanian autofictional writers did not generally get the chance to gain visibility outside Romania. Adrian Schiop's novel, *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* [*Soldiers. A Bucharest Story*] was translated in several languages, yet there was no critical acclaim. However, the short existence of autofictional writing remains the main cause for this lack of bivalent movement between core and (semi)-periphery.

Marius Ianuș, to name just a few – consists in a antithetic process of self-exposure and building a poetic *persona*. Consequently, the poetic millennial generation has its roots in “the theory of authenticity of a brutal autobiographism” (Olaru 2017, 21). Questioning how autofiction failed to destabilise the hegemonic literary structures, Stan raised three problems. First, autofiction, as a minor literature, was “unable to transcend its authorial narcissism for better aesthetic goals” (Stan, 119). Then, Stan observes, autofiction was too vaguely theorized to be differentiated from autobiography. Finally, “the identity topics within which the concept was confined were too narrow to accommodate the full range of the ideological stances displayed by the new fiction” (Stan). At a distance of more than twenty years from the entrance of autofiction in the Romanian field, I would like to reconsider some of these issues. I will try to explain that Romanian autofiction is an exponential genre for understanding the 2000ss and post-2000ss neoliberal *ethos*, with all its implications in a semi-peripheral literary field.

Firstly, regarding its minor character, it is worth mentioning that queer autofictions such as Adrian Schiop’s *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari* [*Soldiers. A Bucharest Story*] and Sașa Zare’s *Dezrădăcinare* [*Uprooting*] were critically acclaimed. The fact that both have been reedited in new collections or publishing houses confirms their importance in contemporary debates regarding gender identity, liminal spaces, and the manners in which human agents are exposed, exploited, and marginalized in the larger network of the world-system⁸.

Secondly, returning to Stan’s observation according to which the genre was vaguely theorized as a branch of autobiographical writing, I want to point out that autofiction can be placed in the story-narrative category. Florina Pîrjol explains the causality between autobiographies and autofictions, but other critics, such as Alexandru Matei, consider that autofiction is individualized by its intrinsic narrative structure: “autofiction does not have just nerve and rhythm, but it has, most certainly, a storyline” (Matei 2006). A poststructuralist critic such as Vincent Colonna has emphasized that an autofiction should not allow a “figurative or metaphorical value, nor encourage a referential reading that would decipher indirect confidences in the text” (Collona 1989, 10). Arnaud Schmitt claimed that, although it can be called a *baroque autobiography*, autofiction descends from fictional narratives.

Lastly, if we accept autofiction as a fictional species, its thematic and conceptual affordances become richer and diverse. The overall picture of 2000s autofiction proves that this genre is not bound to self-centred narratives but

⁸ We can add that the second edition of *Dezrădăcinare* is enriched with critical assessments from younger and older voices of Romanian literary critics and with an author’s afterword, which gives information about this novel’s writing process.

incorporates new various debates: gender identity (*Dezrădăcinare*, *Soldații. Poveste din Ferentari*), feminist polemics, reacting to a patriarchal *status-quo* (*Est-falia* by Ștefania Mihalache, *Fisă de înregistrare* by Ioana Baetica and, again, *Dezrădăcinare*), mapping provincial spaces (*Soldații* – the portrait of a marginalized neighbourhood; *Transparența* – a provincial city stylistically hyperbolized; *pe bune/ pe invers* and *Pizdeț* – precarious student-life). To those, there are as well problematics regarding known thematics of world literature: memory, identity, eros, and family.

In this context, Radu Vancu's *Transparența* and Sașa Zare's *Dezrădăcinare* can offer a more detailed insight into how trauma is handled by an affected subjectivity. Following Florina Pîrjol's dichotomy of introverted and extroverted autofictional writers (Pîrjol, 120), I argue that Vancu's novel offers an introverted manner of self-fictionalization, in which ample narrative constructs are meant to create a new existential ontology, while Zare's novel uses extroverted strategies of building communities, with a more socio-political implication that is meant to critic the patriarchal structures. In both cases, love and anxiety are leitmotifs that the authors use to react to their traumatic experiences. Even more, these two novels offer an example on how autofiction evolved from its millennial practice, developing two separate tendencies of self-fictionalization. Radu Vancu's novel, although published in 2018, evokes the post-dictatorship years, with their inherent post-romantic ethos. Sașa Zare, on the other hand, explores a more recent chronotope, that gives voice to a new form of self-writing, a socio-biographic one, inspired by Annie Ernaux and in line with Édouard Louis manner of auto-fictionalization. Their novels are worth comparing not just because they tackle similar motifs, but because they offer a diachronic view over the formal changes of autofiction.

Introverted autofiction: Radu Vancu's *Transparența*

In his prose debut, Radu Vancu reiterates Mircea Cărtărescu's narrative strategies, albeit in miniature form. Vancu's *Transparența* is characterised by maximalist tendencies, a mystical cartography, and erudition, and is constructed as a totalising, baroque project with polemical self-fabricating ambitions. Although the book has been criticized with reluctance and received with relative indifference⁹, it consolidates the writer's self-fictional project, a project manifested first and foremost through poetry. The use of biographical material in this

⁹ It is worth emphasizing that, despite the reputation and symbolic capital gathered by Radu Vancu through his volumes of poetry, criticism, and journals, *Transparența* received no nominations or publicity.

manner, as exemplified in *Transparența*, does not result in an excessive amount of biographical information; rather, it is characterised by a stylistic and imaginative engagement with the subject. Consequently, an analysis of the novel must consider the fact that the intimist material was, at the time of the novel's publication, utilised primarily by the poet (with more than nine volumes of poetry), rather than the prose writer. By consolidating his public persona through the three diaries (*Zodia Cancerului* [*Cancer's Zodiac*], *Răul* [*Evil*] and *Boala și Războiul* [*Sickness and War*]), the writer gradually blurred the boundary between public and private. Therefore, if the author's biographical dimension has already made a significant impact on their poetry, diary, and on media platforms (from personal posts to podcasts), it is proposed that the analysis of an autofictional novel such as *Transparența* will provide insight into the fictional methods of the narrative self. The issue of referentiality in the case of such a novel should be considered secondary, with the focus instead being placed upon an analysis centred on the auto-fictionalising dimensions of the narrative.

Transparența is a homodiegetic novel, which tells the tragic love story between the narrator-protagonist and his beloved Mega. Against the backdrop of the story, Vancu creates the panorama of a decadent, free, post-communist Sibiu, which he fantasizes through a historical auxiliary narrative that recounts the birth of Hermannstadt. The literature students' erudite idyll - the text is replete with literary references - is complemented by their passion for pop-rock culture and music. Moreover, the dynamics of the relationship unfold spatially around the Graalaj bar, owned by Karina, which hosts an erudite group of friends, prone to drunkenness and frivolity. The bohemian landscape is counterbalanced by the relationship between the narrator and Mega's father, a former Security member who has quickly adapted to the capitalist system. The end of the novel is built around this chameleonic individual who makes a fanatical speech about the power of money. Vancu is building here a whole moralizing stake that is related to the new danger of the Romanian neoliberal world: money. Apocalyptically, the church in which the speech is being given collapses on the participants and on *el captain*, one of the few survivors being the narrator. Mega dies tragically, and the narrator becomes a witness, whose duty it is to tell the love story. Thanks to guanine nanocrystals, the narrator becomes somatically transparent at moments of extreme emotions (panic, anxiety, ecstasy).

The autofictional dimension of the novel is rendered in a strange key. While the unnamed¹⁰ narrator can be related to the author Radu Vancu thanks to his recognized biographical notes (Sibiu as his hometown, a graduate of the Faculty of Letters, whose youth took place in the 90s-2000s and whose father

¹⁰ There is one exception: in a post-mortem letter to Mega, the narrator signs himself 'R.' (Vancu, 158).

committed suicide by hanging himself), one of the friends of the protagonist and Mega is a character named Vancu, an intellectual poet whose master is Mircea Ivănescu and who will end up committing suicide in the Romanian Academy building. The criterion of nominal identity is dynamited by the author, resorting to the split of identity between an alter-ego, Radu Vancu, and an enunciative instance that fulfils the autofictional criterion. In this framework, the author Vancu puts into practice the psychologizing dimension that autofiction inherently presupposes. The author-narrator-character describes Vancu by taking stock of the knot of people in the Graalaj: "Rather short, fat, with a crown of hair adorning his ears under his bald head, Vancu was the ideal archetype of the provincial poet who feels too big for such a small town" (Vancu, 118-119). By accusing him of arrogance and ridicule, the narrator expels Vancu's alter-ego into a self-portrait critical of his own identity.

Here, a new sensibility is observed. In Vancu's case, the auctorial instance separates the defective ego from the hypersensitive one. Basically, the author-narrator-character eliminates his negative aspects, self-fictionalizing himself into a bearable Radu Vancu, devoid of extravagant lyricism and overly dramatic gestures. Thus, this potential Vancu, the narrator, gives himself the freedom to write and feel retrospectively, shaping the history of Sibiu and its relationship with Mega according to his traumatic needs. Moreover, the line that opens the volume ensures the existence of the autofictional pact and the tendency to oscillate between the real and the fantastic. By saying to Mega, "You know, I don't believe in the reality of the world," (7) the narrator inserts the ontological conditions of autofiction: disbelief in the reality of the world opens the possibility of referential and at the same time phantasmatic narrative. Throughout the novel, the ontology that the author attempts to construct in baroque notes mirrors the formalist autofictional condition, in which the referential and the non-referential are intertwined: "Nothing is what it seems. [...] But, if it is true that nothing is what it seems, then the reverse of the sentence must also be true: everything is what it does not seem. Or even better: what does not seem is everything" (156). The oscillating autofiction between the real and the imagined applies a sense of *mise en doute* (Jordan, 82), where the auctorial ego wishes to camouflage any overt biographical tendencies at the expense of internalized exploration and reconstruction of the self.

In this context, the very idea of becoming transparent is used on an ontological level, adapted to a new corporeal mentality. Any feeling taken to the extreme challenges the protagonist in the process of becoming transparent. Thus, the explosive emotional manifestation is probed by leaving the stage. Narrating his first episode of transparency triggered by rage, the narrator emphasizes the 'damned' character he finds himself in: "I realized then that this

is what all my victories would look like – lonely, terrifying, in a ragged light that only rats and monstrosities like me can enjoy” (Vancu, 79). The fictionalized elements are constructed in such a way as to deflect the autofiction from the biographical element. At the expense of the truth value specific to the diary, the action value gains ground with the stylistic value. The pretentious vocabulary and the phraseological architectonics reveal a baroque stylistics, at times textualist, which supports the processes of fictionalization and enrichment of the mundane reality. At its core, Vancu attempts to ground a new personalist philosophy for the 21st century. By fracturing the linear chronology, fragmenting the narrative through unnumbered chapters, inserting a historical narrative about the founding of Sibiu, Vancu constructs a narrative palimpsest through which the new existentialist ontology of the individual in the contemporary world is deciphered.

Writing becomes therapeutic in this context with the aim of treating the shock suffered, although it is invented. Self-fictionalizing, the author-narrator reconstructs an episode of his life, which he situates in a specific setting: Sibiu. Vancu offers the city a specific aura through fantasizing. The city thus takes on a new decadent value, which, instead of being reborn in the context of a Romania freed from dictatorship, decays: “... all splendid and rotten, all only beauty and decay, grandeur and baroque and conceits built of flour bricks, bricked walls and mold. If ever there could be anything as contradictory as a manifesto for decadence, Sibiu would be the perfect illustration” (93). Thus, Sibiu is given a bohemian aura based on contradictions that allow the space to be homogenized only in affective nodal points: the Graalaj – the Dantean hell of drunkenness and youth – and the central Gothic church – an *axis mundi* destined to collapse.

In the end, Vancu’s autofiction is built on a stylistic and ideational architecture of great scope - at the risk of falling into textualism, pathos and pretentiousness - proposing a new understanding of paradise. By magnetizing it, the project of a possible ideal world takes the form of ruin: “Only what is destroyed can be paradise, fuck off. There is no paradise that is not a ruin...” (426). *Transparența* succeeds through the project of remembrance, in offering an alternative, dialogical, living, and, at the same time, apocalyptic memory, expressing the crisis of a neoliberal world and the chance of a rediscovered but altered individualistic depth. At the social level, the apocalypse cast over the neoliberal discourse becomes a theistic but valid allegory. On the individual level, Vancu actualizes through the metaphor of transparency a new ontological formula, anchored not so much in an ideologically isolated meditation as in a thought of corporeality connected to psychological trauma.

Extroverted Autofiction – Sașa Zare's *Dezrădăcinare*

In spite of the 2000s effervescence, few of the writers launched at that time have kept a stable place in the canon of local literature. Now, twenty years on, the so-called 'survivors' of the millenarian generation are more visible, a sign that Paul Cernat's labelling of the new literature as 'pubescent' (Cernat, 2008) was not exactly wrong. Mihai Iovănel also mentions the fact that the 'maintenance parameters' (Iovănel, 408) of a literary direction were established only then, a sign that a certain maturity of the new literary context would follow, abandoning the influences of communism. Although only a debut, *Dezrădăcinare* has rightly been placed at the forefront of a new phase in autofiction, but also in LGBTQ+ literature.

Sașa Zare's autofiction innovates on all levels – thematically, stylistically, ideologically, psychologically – without breaking brutally with what was before her. Zare rejects the alignment with her predecessors, but without arrogantly judging or demolishing them. Instead, her narrative projects a counter-mainstream community of readers, more politically aware, left wing oriented, which still remains far too little visible in the local space. The individualism of her autofiction shields the author from rude attacks, anarchist-grunge as Iovănel would say (Iovănel and Bâlici 2022), which would perhaps have been expected from an adolescent attitude. The ethos that Sașa Zare proposes is an empathic one, relying on flexibility, understanding and altruism, which will mark this new stage of autofiction, especially from a feminist and intersectional perspective, as it also appears in the writings of Christine Angot.

Dezrădăcinare is both a novel that exposes the construction of a narrative and an autofictional narrative about exile, gender issues, and toxic intergenerational relationships. The structure of the volume assigns two dimensions to the narrative of the Ego. The first, the one furthest from the reader, the main one, which makes up the protagonist's entire narrative, is the story of Sașa Vlas from childhood through her college years. The reader is confronted with two variants of writing an autobiographical novel, the first in the third person and the second in the first person. Both are aimed at narrating, in reparative form, the life and traumas of Sașa Vlas, the writer Sașa and, of course, the author Sașa Zare. The second level, closer to the reader, is that of the writer of this meta-novel, a writer who manifests herself through the diary, through discussions in therapy, and then by direct address to the reader. The central narration is that of the fictionalized character – Sașa Vlas –, and the stylistics of the text, which remains in the first person, creates a striking *mise en abyme* effect. For the same reason, the confessional-reparatory effect is more marked, due to the constant attempt of appropriation of the reader by the protagonist (Iovănel and Bâlici).

The basic elements of autofiction are openly present: the triple onomastic identification, the presence of biographical elements – the scenes exposing the mother-daughter relationship are so incisively narrated that the referential character cannot be ignored, or the scene of sexual abuse, the Chișinău-Cluj transition – the confessional and psychoanalytic character – “When I think of my mother, it fascinates me how she was able to master an adult life as wide as an empire with her temper of a choleric, angry, furious, overly sincere, clinging and always restless child, a mother who never admitted her faults and fought to the end to show you that you were the one to blame” (Zare, 176).

In terms of the narrative strategies, *Dezrădăcinare* can be considered the most complex example of autofiction in which autobiography, fiction-narrative, and theory intertwine. She develops, if not a system, at least a critical consciousness that emerges around each narrative sequence. Starting from the mother-daughter relationship, in which the narrator intervenes to shape the parameters of influence between the two, to the writer’s status in the Romanian literary world, Sașa Zare undertakes a theoretical excursus that revolves around the biographical narrative. The first pages of the novel are highly suggestive. The literary project is analysed from the very beginning: “I think I’ve started writing a novel. Or a novel. Or a short prose. I’m writing it in the third person. Maybe the third person is the right distance between me and Moldova now, a distance to encompass (in my arms) a nine-year cut, a distance-coagulant” (23).

The first-person narration in the second part of the novel follows a long meditation on gender identity, not on dysfunctional relationship or transnational trauma: “Homophobia is something we can’t escape, and it swallows too much of our joy anyway, don’t let it stop you. Stop thinking about it, don’t put up barriers, you write. Write anyway, write anything, write everything. And write.” From this point on, biography and fiction will be charged with a pregnant theoretical side. Such an internalization of the stakes of writing becomes an engine of reaction to referential reality. If Ana-Maria Stoica called the first part of the novel a ‘mock-test’ (Stoica 2023, 111), against the backdrop of the meta-autofiction left abandoned, I think it can also be seen as an incubator of creation, in which trauma, vulnerability, awareness of narrative force are internalized to later implode in the form of a complex, flexible, and militant autofiction.

Although autofiction implies a narrative of the self, in the case of Zare, the heterography has the role of forming a plural zone, where the writer and the reader can meet. Vulnerability as a writer is not only manifested in terms of the traumas announced by the protagonist, but also in terms of her own writing and interaction with the social. At the points where the narrator addresses the reader, this happens by formulating anxieties about reception. In the first part the fear of an aggressive audience is expressed, “I’m afraid that people will use

my text for their homophobic arguments [...] But anyway many people always take out of context, distort, if they want to make green out of red, they will..." (Zare, 130). Later on, the protagonist will accept anyway that any form of rendering the truth cannot avoid a clipping, a disclaimer is necessary, whereby the narrator assumes a *mea culpa*: "In the tradition of romanticizing and aestheticizing suffering, we might think that this is what love is like, lift me up into the clouds, smash me to the ground, etc. Or we might think that Alice and Răzvan are evil people who are mentally torturing an innocent teenage girl. What I'm trying to do here, and I don't know if I'm succeeding, is to distance myself a little bit from each of these narratives" (332).

In the extroverts' milieu, Sașa Zare innovates not so much in the thematics as in the way the stakes are posited. The difficulty of establishing a clear identity remains the challenge that dominates the entire novel: "And if everything is fiction, if life itself is a novel, then, by a very logical phenomenon of reciprocity, only the novel will be able to speak about life..." (145). And if the novel will be labyrinthine, exposing the multiplicity of forms and the uncertainty of a gaze that claims to be all-encompassing, the autofiction proves that identity can never be expressed totally and truthfully. The role of fiction in *Dezrădăcinare* is to dynamite clear categories, to ensure the presentism and authenticity of a plural, uncertain experience where healing is never completed.

Conclusions

In this essay I tried to show how autofiction can address the neoliberal context in a semi-peripheral literary space. Trying to rethink autofiction as a fictional genre, I built up a morphology of autofiction, pointing out the main characteristics that defines it. Hence, I argued that by thinking of autofiction as a fictional and performative genre, this category of narrative structure has a wider potential for emancipatory and critical observation in the neoliberal world-system. Afterwords, I mapped the emergence of autofiction in Romania, offering both theoretical and sociological arguments with which I claim that autofiction represents one of the literary species that can best talk and ask questions about our semi-peripheral context of the world-system network. Even more, I pointed out that the entrance of autofiction in Romania followed the Morettian scheme, in which a Western form was refined with local content and narrative voice.

With the analysis of two recently published autofictions I wanted to show how originality and new autofictional strategies, yet unknown in the wider context of the world-system, emerged in this semi-peripheral space. Taking

a closer look at *Transparența*, I showed how a new ontological theory can be constructed with corporeal aims and with ample processes of fictionalisation. Finally, analysing *Dezrădăcinare*, I evoked how autofiction can imply performative strategies of writing by addressing the reader and aiming to create revolutionary communities built up on true traumas and imaginative, fictional, potential. In a more political perspective, Vancu's novel gives voice to a neoliberal, centrist *status-quo*, while offering a harsh critique of any political attempt towards an anarcho-capitalist attitude, as is the case of *el captain*. Sașa Zare, however, goes even further with her political critique, by denouncing any form of neoliberal hypostasis. Hence, through her novel, a radical left-wing discourse aims to explore an emancipatory potential. At this level, autofiction gains the power of exposing and exploring the truth of the contemporary socio-economical context. This understanding of autofiction not only refuses rigid interpretations where biographical data represents the main point of interest, but opens up the possibility for imagining new solutions for our neoliberal atomized societies.

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