# *THE POETICS OF DUMITRU RADU POPESCU'S PROSE*

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***Abstract:*** *The present article "The Poetics of Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose", contains several considerations on the narrative formula and narrative technique of the most prolific Romanian contemporary writer. The prose of Dumitru Radu Popescu constituted the theme of our doctoral thesis and we believe that Dumitru Radu Popescu, at the age of 75 that he will attain in August 2010, as well as his work, are worth presenting within the section of Romanian literature at your conference this year.*

***Key words:*** *prose, realism fantastic.*

As writer of the contemporary Romanian literature, Dumitru Radu Popescu (born on August 19, 1935) is the founder of an impressive creation, that is unusually broad and of an undoubted value. As proser (short story and novelist writer), playwright, publicist, essayist and poet, the author is appreciated for polificity and originality, for the ability of inventing epically as well as typologically and for the power to innovate and continuously experiment the literary formula, and to sum it all briefly, for his genuine literary talent.

Dumitru Radu Popescu's starting writings (volumes of short prose: *Fuga* and *Umbrela de soare*, as well as the novels: *Zilele săptămânii* and *Vara oltenilor,* are marked by the realities and literature of the "obsessive decade", being included into what was called the *socialist realism* (NEGRICI, 2003:331). Along with the valuable short stories and novel *F*, Dumitru Radu Popescu enters a new literary track, that is sufficiently difficult to mark and define. The prose published during the second half of the 7th decade and during the entire 8th decade (this is the most successful part of his prose creations) falls within the formula of the *artistic realism* (SIMION, 1989: 74-115). Literary criticism mostly evaluates the prose of Dumitru Radu Popescu belongs to realism. Starting from the formula mentioned previously – *artistic realism* – that is extremely comprehensive, interpreters have adopted various phrases: *magic realism* (CIOBANU, 1975: 144), *mythical realism* (VLAD, 1983: 204), *mythological realism* (ROZNOVEANU, 1981: 174), *ontological realism* (ȚEPOSU, 1983:153), *poetic realism* (ARDELEANU, 1978: 53), *hallucinating and eccentric realism* (BĂILEȘTEANU, 1980: 162), or *between realism and fabulous* (LEONTE, 1989: 133) etc. Ovidiu Ghidirmic (2002: 169) writes about *D. R. Popescu and fantastic realism*, and Eugen Negrici (*op. cit.:* 331) includes Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose into the *Stage of the communist nationalism. Tolerated literature. Transfigurations of the reality, Modernising the narration and slipping into the fantastic and mythical by ambiguity, relativization of the message, as consequence of fearing clarity.* Each of the formulations stated are fully justified; we believe the variant of *artistic realism* is the most comprehensive one, while the *fantastic realism* is most suitable one. In essence, Dumitru Radu Popescu writes at the limit, at the border of reality with the imagination, of the real with the unreal, so that we may say his prose is enclosed into what could be called the *imaginary realism* or *unreal realism* (this has been theorised by the French critic Jean Starobinski). The epic cycle *Viața și opera lui Tiron B*, as well as the novels



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after 1989 are also written in the formula of realism. In the first case, the proser has the ambition of writing the total novel, in the other writings, the realism is the starting point, especially for debunking, thusly reaching the surrealism.

A definition of his literary formula is imposed: "D.R. Popescu's literary formula normally associates three elements: *the taste for mystery and spectacular, a rich intrigue* and, installed into the heart of the realistic notation, the *poetics*, preferably manifested for symbols. (…) At the end of the book, the stories are just as turbid, contradictory, and the reader is forced to search himself/herself for a meaning and give a solution." (SIMION, *op. cit.:* 74-75).

**Metaphoric titles**

The titles of Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose are the first sign of a distinct expressivity. When meeting with Dumitru Radu Popescu, he declared that: "The title is a metaphor, a description, an essence. Titles have always preoccupied me. I know there must be a title and I don't how… but I don't know how they come to me. I like the title to announce something". The title of the first volume of short prose was *Fuga*, we think it is very inspired, for telling a story with homonym title, as well as for the writers' literary destiny. The first literary evasion was that during from the socialist realism into the fantastic realism; the second evasion meant the passage from the fantastic realism (the epic cycle *F*) to the realism of the total novel (the epic cycle *Viaţa şi opera lui Tiron B.*), where the writer takes his reader to paths full of shaws. By reading his novels of the 9th decade, one has the feeling of entering into a forest with dense vegetation, of suffocation, a feeling of not knowing where to go. In a way, one feels the experience of the monarch's son in the fairy tale *Tinereţe fără bătrâneţe şi viaţă fără de moarte* - once one has stepped into the new land, there is no way of turning back. Even though it has many failures, the option made was certainly premeditated: in order to get away from the vigilant eye of censure, Dumitru Radu Popescu leads his reader as far as possible, tires him/her out, exhausting him/her, and he gets to write only for himself, as you need a lot of patience and tenacity to follow him all the way till the end. It is a high risk, because along with the bewildering the censorship, the reader was also bewildered and, therefore, the consequences were positive, as well as negative. The third evasion, from the literature of the 9th decade into the one after December, is accompanied by Dumitru Radu Popescu's retreat from public life. Therefore, the writer needed to search for, and we believe he has found on one way or another, his solutions for his crossing moments – "If things would have been clear, I could have found a clearer manner to express myself". (TAŞCU, 1981: 167).

Fascinated by the words *dor* and *duios,* just like his mentor A.E. Baconsky, Dumitru Radu Popescu entitled thusly his two masterpieces: "I have written the short story *Dor*, turning to all its facades this word-sentiment and it is not by accident that in the title of the short story about Anastasia there is the word *duios*… Of course, it is not by chance to have *trecea*… And Anastasia – this is not how the school teacher on the Danube's bench was named, whom I am not sure what her name was! - it was not chosen by chance!" (DUMITRU RADU POPESCU, 2000: 102). The novels of the cycle *F*, especially the *F* and *Vânătoarea regală,* as well as those published after 1989, have the most metaphorical titles, because the "author develops a remarkable technique of the multiple meanings of titles". (MARIN, 2003:235).



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**Open Ends**

As we have noticed, most of the time, Dumitru Radu Popescu opts for the open creations, for interpretable endings, giving the reader almost every time the opportunity of searching for answers and imagining various solutions to the life stories in the pages of his books. "Some have cried the concluding endings or the climax points or the positive clear and direct openings, as they are never encountered in real life." (BOOTH, 1976:86). Among these, we also encounter Dumitru Radu Popecu in the contemporary Romanian literature, whom states that: "A writer must not always write this final chapter, he gets to morally condemn those involved by the crossing opinions of the other characters of the novel and to leave the readers with the pleasure of writing into their minds that final chapter. The quest which the writer begins must be ended by the reader." (TAŞCU, *op. cit.:* 16).

**Narrative Technique**

The novelty of Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose consists firstly in the narrative technique adopted and developed during a period of 5 decades of literature.

If in sketches, stories and short stories, the epic matter is naturally organised, in novels, except for the first two ones, we experience a true surprise: in fact, chapters are some kind of short stories having independent meaning, but also as parts of that respective book. "The Romanian structure is created based on hazard, on the random factor, being rather a matter of an "anti-structure." (GHIDIRMIC, 1983: 4). The unusual construction of the bovel *F* shall also be applied to the other novels of the homonym epic cycle and to the novels of the cycle *Viaţa şi opera lui Tiron B*, respectively to those published after 1989. The independence is often relative, fiven that the thematic, characters and atmosphere (the space remains unchanged, while time keeps on being turned back or forward) are recurrent. This type of writing, so that a chapter-short story would have so much independent meaning, as well as in the economy of the novel, respectively a novel would have independent meaning, as well as in the economy of cycle, is one of the marks of Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose (*Ibidem*). Even more interesting is that the order of the chapter-short story in a novel, as well as in the novels in an epic cycle may be changed, as action does not keep to the chronological criteria (APOLZAN, *op. cit.:* 127). The impression created is that of mosaic, where the comparison with the novel *Şotron* - Julio Cortázar (*Ibidem*), or with a puzzle game (GHIDIRMIC, *op. cit.:* 4) – the climax being reached in the novel *Falca lui Cain*, where the independent and changeable chapters belong to some different literary genres: prose, dramaturgy, poetry, the result is certainly a true literary experiment.

"It may be referred to a *metamorphosis* of the novel: the aim and the matter of telling the story does not have the origins anymore in what is told, but in a reality whose depth, complexity, density abstracts it to the possibilities of the telling the story and analysing" (ALBERES, 1968: 180-181), metamorphosis matching W. Faulkner, as well as Dumitru Radu Popescu. "In the Romanian contemporary prose, this illustrates the direction of the *puzzle novel*. (…) Dumitru Radu Popescu gets the Faulknerian technique of *mutilating time*, of crashing and destroying it. (…) The result of this technique is a turbid chronology, difficult to state. (…) In Faulkner, the order of chapters does not keep chronology. Dating of chapters corresponds to some surprising turning backs and returns in time. Chronology takes its course crossly. (…) The pattern of the Romanian cycle *F* seems to be William Faulkner's trilogy: *Cătunul*, *Oraşul* and



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*Conacul*." (GHIDIRMIC, *op. cit.:* 4).

Even since the apparition of the novel F, literary criticism has remarked that William Faulkner is a stylistic model for Dumitru Radu Popescu (APOLZAN, *op. cit.*: 130). It is obvious there are certain similarities between the Romanian writer's novels and those of the North-American writer. "Two features of Faulkner's prose was especially imposed into the public conscience. (…) First of all, the fact the American writer describes an imaginary land, inexistent on the map – Yoknapatawpha – thusly transforming into the monarch of a world invented by him. (…) Second of all, the courage of mixing the plans of narrating, telling a story, without an obvious logic, full of unusual events, most of them very violent, so that in this luxurious and inextricable confusion, as life itself, to form eventually the image of a primitive and complex world, impossible to understand entirely, but also impossible to ignore. (…) These two features are also encountered in Dumitru Radu Popecu creation, starting with the novel *F*" (STEFANESCU, 1987: 208). The action of the Romanian cycle *F* develops in an imaginary location – a joint place – formed by the villages of Lăzăreni and Pătârlagele, the town Campuleț and university centre Turnuvechi. "Concurrently, upon giving up at the relatively rigorous epic construction in his previous creation, Dumitru Radu Popescu adops a statistic principle, meaning that he narrates anything (and in any order) in connection with his world, convinced that eventually the agglomeration of people and facts are structured by themselves or that, in any case, it is configured *as a whole*. (…) A regime of the odness regime, which critics have called a *modernism baroque*." (*Ibidem*: 208-209).

Besides the pattern of the North-American novel, Dumitru Radu Popescu also successfully acquires the South-American pattern. Thusly, a few of the particularities of his prose may be explained: The existence of the fantastic in its various variants (police, sleep, hallucinating, strange, terrifying, folkloric, parody, grotesque, symbolic, allegoric, parabolic); the dialogues between the living and the dead (incursions of the old lady Sevastița into Heaven and Hell); the impossible becoming possible (reappearance of certain characters – Moses dies at the end of the novel *F* and reappears starting with the royal hunting); the dream; the superstition; application of the captivating process of treating really fantastic things and of treating fantastically real things (fantastic realism); transforming the usual reality into trans-reality, with the consequence of creating by the known areas of the imaginary (fantastic, mythic, sleep) a new territory, that of the fabulous (imaginary geography of the cycle *F*). (Dumitru Radu Popescu also undertakes the temporal patterns: the mythical time (Asturias), the unreal time (Jorge Luis Borges), the essential time (Julio Cortázar), all-embracing time (Carlos Fuentes), the fabulous time – it does not mean the cancellation of historical time, but only its projection from the historical world into that of the archetypes (Gabriel Garcia Márquez).

Of all similarities of Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose with the Latin-American prose, we recall the character Nicanor and the process of simultaneity. The character called Nicanor appears at Gabriel Garcia Márquez in the novel *Cien años de soledad,* as priest, as well as in the novel *El otoño del patriarca.* The name of Nicanor is also encountered in the Romanian onomatology, the deacon Nicanor being celebrated each year on 28$^{th}$ July. The character Nicanor is "key character of the novels, first-rank witness, theoretician of aberrant truth. (…) he is probably the most loved character of D.R. Popescu, the alter-ego and ambassador in the difficult epic cases." (ROZNOVEANU, *op. cit.:* 93).

The process of simultaneity is taken by Dumitru Radu Popescu from the Latin-



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American literature and consists in interfering or overlapping the various narrative moments forming the structure of the work. "The idea is the writer must not introduce a ready-created reality into the work, a life decided beforehand is very modern. (…) He does not provide the illusion of simultaneity (false simultaneity), *he is located right into simultaneity*, accepts the risk of the known thing and gives up the elation of being displayed before the reader as an omniscient creator, but only as a humble selector of truth in a world of relativity". (SIMION, *op .cit.*: 75).

*The fantastic realism* means to treat fantastic things in reality and the real things in the fantastic; the model is writer Gabriel Garcia Márquez (GHIDIRMIC, *op. cit.:* 4). "D.R. Popescu's prose outstands by the fusion of a great number of aesthetic categories: the tragic, the comic, the burlesque, the strange, the terrifying, etc. Among these, the fantastic occupies an extremely important position. D.R. Popescu's prose is included into the formula of a fantastic realism. (…) At D.R. Popescu, we may encounter the following forms, modalities of the fantastic: the fantastic of the strange and terrifying, the somni-fantastic, the mythological fantastic, the metaphysical fantastic, the police-type fantastic and allegoric and parabolic fantastic. It is worth noting that these forms of the fantastic appear almost never alone, isolated, in pure state, but most of the time, they appear together. (GHIDIRMIC, 2002:171). We recall that: *Ninge la Ierusalim,* (*F*), *Marea Roşie* (*Vânătoarea regală*), *Drumul spre Tismana* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*), belong to the police-type fantastic; *Viaţa particulară a elefantului* (*Podul de gheaţă*), *Carul cu fân* (*Podul de gheaţă*), *Cartea transformărilor* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*) to the somni-fantastic; *Ieşirea din lume* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*), *Mitrele vorbea cu florile* sau *Biserica îngropată* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*) to the folkloric fantastic; *Oul de sub stele* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*), *Magdolna* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*), *Fernando* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*), *De la Teiuş la Stremţ* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*) to the strange fantastic; *Poarta grâului* (*Truman Capote şi Nicolae Ţic*) to the hallucinatic fantastic, terrifying; the novel *O bere pentru calul meu* to the allegoric fantastic; *Vânătoarea regală* of the homonym novel, to the parabolic fantastic. Obviously, we have taken into account the dominating tone, as otherwise we may refer to an interpenetration of several forms of the fantastic, for each separate part: in *Ninge la Ierusalim* besides the police-type fantastic, there is also somni-fantastic (the dream with the dead Mongol general), the terrifying fantastic (the incident of the narrator's friend), absurd fantastic (overall atmosphere); in *Marea Roşie* the police-type fantastic is completed by the strange fantastic (the trip and conversation of the main character with the two mysterious women) and the absurd fantastic (the atmosphere of the short story); the novel *O bere pentru calul meu* is a synthesis of allegoric, grotesque and parabolic fantastic; the chapter *Vânătoarea regală* reunites the parabolic fantastic with the symbolic one, etc.

Another stylistic peculiarity consists in the writer turning towards mythology. This is used as a starting point, as Dumitru Radu Popescu practices *debunking* and *rebunking.* If in short prose two myths are valued: that of Electra in *Orestia* in the short story *Dor* and of Antigona in the homonym tragedy in the short story *Duios Anastasia trecea*, the several mythological sources are followed in the novel: the myth of the two lovers of enemy kinsman of the Shakespearian tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Cei doi din dreptul Ţebei sau Cu faţa la pădure*, the bible myth of split brothers Cain and Abel or the tragic myth of the fratricidal conflict between Eteocles and Polinice in the antique tragedy *Cei şapte contra Tebei* in the novel with similar tones, *Cei doi din dreptul Ţebei sau Cu faţa la pădure*, the Christ myth in *O bere pentru calul meu* , respectively a series of old folk faiths and myths.



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Dumitru Radu Popescu knows very well that "mythology potentiates the reality: I am for that literature potentiating the reality, but not to suffocate it" but also that the tendencies of the universal literature, starting with the 20th Century, are debunking, undeceiving and desacralising. "Regarding the mythic, D.R. Popescu does not turn people into myths (like Fanuş Neagu and Ştefan Bănulescu), but he does the opposite. Myths are mocked. In." D.R. Popescu's prose, we assist to a parody of the myths and their degradation." (*Ibidem:* 172).

Dumitru Radu Popescu is attracted by relativisation, as well as by ambiguity and applied them successfully. A plurality of techniques are used in his prose: the technique of monologue (BUGARIU, 1981: 134), the technique of surprise and contradiction (IORGULESCU, 1979: 187). In the novels of cycle *F*, especially in *O bere pentru calul meu*, the proser uses the technique of dialogues within the dialogue, of drama within drama, as well as the reason of the world as theatre (GHIDIRMIC, 2004: 4). A successful aspect of Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose consists in the narrative polyphony (APOLZAN, 1978: 5), particularly experimented in the *Cei doi din dreptul Ţebei sau Cu faţa la pădure*. In cycle *F*, the writer turns towards the technique of allegory: *Ninge la Ierusalim* (*F*) şi *Marea Roşie* (*Vânătoarea regală*) are written in the tone of fantastic-type allegory, while *Boul şi vaca*, *Cele şapte ferestre ale labirintului* (*F*) and *Vânătoarea regală*, from the novel with the same title, in the tone of realist-type allegory.

The narrative cycle *Viaţa şi opera lui Tiron B.* as well as the novels after 1989 are written on one hand, by complying with certain particularities already discussed: the novels are formed by several chapter-short stories, random structure, absence of chronology, multi-perspectavialism, the narrative polyphony, the tone of artificiality, the reason of the world as theatre, and on the other hand, by experimenting new elements: the chapter-short stories belong to a fictive author (Tiron B.), which is likely to create total fiction (*Iepurele şchiop*, *Podul de gheaţă*, *Oraşul îngerilor*), a profound *debunking* (*Dumnezeu în bucătărie*, *Paolo şi Francesca şi al treisprezecea apostol*), a "delirious" construction (*Falca lui Cain*).

The process of reading Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose may be associated to a trip into the reality or into the fantastic and, most often, into a space mixing the real and the imaginary. It is interesting that one never knows what to expect, what surprise is going to bring the next book. After the period of the literary beginnings, impregnated by the reality of the 6th decade, the writer escapes into a world where reality and imagination are consubstantial. In a way, Dumitru Radu Popescu does not leave this land anymore, which it individualises him into the space of the Romanian contemporary literature. During his/her trip, the reader discovers marvellous places – the masterpieces of Dumitru Radu Popescu's epics and, sometimes, less spectacular territories – the writings being less successful. The flora and fauna discovered correspond to the literary formula, as well as to the typology created in the tens of prose writings. The impression at the end of our taken actions is that, once having entered into this maze in Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose, we have been introduced to a particular world, an unique space, afterall, a specific literary style.

Dumitru Radu Popescu creates (because his creation is not ended) "in cascades and in steps", as he declared in an interview a few years ago. The contact with Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose, especially with the novel, is not easy upon the first reading, therefore, it must be re-read and assimilated, in order to discover the true valences. Beyond any hierarchy, we deem that the importance of a literary work lies in understanding and interpretation. Nicolae Manolescu recently declared in a televised interview given to Eugen Negrici that: "The question is not if people read (n.r. being



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convinced reading is performed, because a lot is published), but what they read and, more especially, what is understood from what is read." Dumitru Radu Popescu is an original proser, continuously open to novelty, seeming to be "in the possession of a manufacturing secret, which only he owns" (GHIDIRMIC, *op. cit.:* 4). His true chance of imposing in the Romanian contemporary literature was to find certain rescue literary keys.

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