THE FANTASTIC IN THE PROSE OF DUMITRU RADU POPESCU[1]

Abstract: *The writings of Dumitru Radu Popescu, both short stories and novels, are extremely complex from a stylistic perspective. An important aspect refers to the very narrative formula of the fantastic realism, i.e. treating fantastic matters in a real manner and real matters in a fantastic manner. The generic model is the Latin American prose, especially that of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The prose of Dumitru Radu Popescu is remarkable by the fusion of a wide range of aesthetic categories: the tragic, the comic, the burlesque, the grotesque, the strange, the terrifying etc, the fantastic holding a major position. Its sources are: the anomaly, the fabulation, the dream, the mythical, the magical, the mystery, and its forms are varied: the fantastic of the strange and of the terrifying, the dream-like fantastic, the mythological fantastic, the metaphysical fantastic, the police-like fantastic, the allegorical and parabolic fantastic. As a matter of fact, the whole prose of Dumitru Radu Popescu lies under the sign of the fantastic, since the significant novel and series of novels are called F, which stands for the initial of the fantastic.*

Key words: *fantastic, short story, realism, novel, stylistics.*

The writer Dumitru Radu Popescu belongs to the generation of the 60s, a remarkable generation, if we think of it as the period of: Marin Sorescu, Nichita Stănescu, Ana Blandiana, Ioan Alexandru, Marin Preda, Eugen Barbu, Nicolae Breban, Alexandru Ivasiuc, Augustin Buzura, Constantin Ţoiu, Gabriela Adameşteanu, Mircea Ciobanu, Ştefan Bănulescu, Sorin Titel, George Bălăiţă, Ştefan Agopian etc., a real "constellation of great writers who have imbibed the craft of the great narrative compositions and had begun to feel the taste of analysis, of questioning, of the lapse into the fantastic, of plans' multiplication and style complexity."(Negrici, 2008: 172). It is clear that we face a phenomenon caused by the vastness of the work of Dumitru Radu Popescu, "by far our most prolific writer, the most prolific one in the postwar period." (Ghidirmic, 2004: 3). From an axiological point of vue, we believe that it is not random at all that Dumitru Radu Popescu was the author placed on the top of the list with writers from the most recent literary history. (Manolescu, 2008: 1099-1105).

The novel *F* (1969), the first from the Romanian homonym cycle, is the core around which all the other five novels gravitate. The novelty evinces from the title up, composed of a single letter. Dumitru Radu Popescu gave, on the book's back cover, his own explanation of the title: "…Fugue. Form. Fear. Football. Fair. Felicity. Fantasy. Fire. Fantastic. Famine. Form. Fiction. Football. Fume. Phenomenon. Fatality. Football. F…". The novel's title shocks at first sight but in fact, is trying to get us used to the unusual; the title is absolutely the trademark of Dumitru Radu Popescu. "Everything is curious, unwanted in *F*: the title and the composition, the style and the psychic constitution of the characters […] The only effective function of the F placed on the cover remains to prevent the reader, like a sign on a front door, that, by opening the book, he will enter a strange, dreamy, twisted, disturbed world, a world removed from its own patterns." (Micu, 1969:4). The shortest title in Romanian literature and, possibly, in the world's literature (a literary performance!) can trigger an allegory (or more), a parable or an initiatic meaning. The novel *F* has a three chapters structure, actually three novels: *It Snows in Jerusalem, The ox and the cow, The seven windows of*

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the labyrinth, apparently unrelated. *It Snows in Jerusalem* is a fantastic sequence descending from the novel *At Manjoala's Inn (La hanul lui Mânjoală)* by I. L. Caragiale (Iorgulescu, 1969: 9; Leonte, 1969: 8) or resembling Mircea Eliade's prose (Simion, 1989: 76) and represents the "prologue" (Ungheanu, 1969: 2) or the , "prelude" (Negoițescu, 1969: 3) or the "exhibition" (Apolzan, 1979: 118) for some of the directing lines of the next Romanian cycle.

In the first pages, the narrator, a football coach, relates an accident: a woman cut by the train under the eyes of her husband and children. The teller accentuates the fact that the accident was real:

"It did not happen in a dream, no." (Popescu, 1986: 8), then he remembers a dream or, more likely, a nightmare: "I dreamed that in the centre of the city was a coffin of a Mongolian general, who has been dead for three days. […] everybody said the same thing: the general died of the plague![…] they said: whomever saw the general dies of the plague […] And suddenly everybody realized that we are next and I was certain that I will die too […] a single idea could save me now and I founded it: if no general were dead in the coffin. Yes, this was it, I yield: they were burying an empty coffin […] But somebody then whispered: It does not matter if the Mongolian general is inside or not, whoever saw the coffin dies of the plague. And it was impossible not to see the coffin […] there was no escape left: I could see it. So I kept looking in terror and I woke up …" (ibidem: 8-10). During the dream, a real psychosis is triggered but neither the wake is normal. In a terrible atmosphere: "Blizzard-coloured cats were meowing on the road edge, sometimes wringing and flying in front of the ardent fog lights. Well: the cats I was hearing were real cats […] I was angry because such an absurd thing was happening to me, to hear meowing cats […] I could hear them meowing lugubriously behind me." (ibidem:12-14), and suddenly in front of the coach's car appears "a shadow […] it was an old lady wrapped in some kind of traditional coat […] I gently braked […] I got close to her […] the car slipped facing left and the old lady disappeared under the wheals" (ibidem: 14). The oddities continue more and more: a suspect meowing can be permanently heard and from under the right wheal of the car, a black cat steers at him "with crazy and phosphorescent eyes" (ibidem: 15); "The old lady was cold and it was impossible for me to figure out if she was still alive." (ibidem: 15). The coach decides to take her to the hospital, he puts her in the car on the backseat although he was absolutely convince that she was deadly injured: "What seemed even stupider to me was that everything had become irreversible: you can wake up screaming from a dream and thus all its stories lose their value.[…] But what happens in real life does not go away anymore, no matter what you do, no matter how hard you scream: you cannot possibly wake up in another reality. Except maybe if you were dead." (ibidem: 15). Back on the road, "the cats restarted their meowing" and "the surreal atmosphere" becomes obsessing. In his journey, towards the police station from now, he is able to remember a similar story: a doctor, in a winter night like this one, stepped over an old lady with his car, under the same circumstances. Sure that the old lady was dead and afraid of the police, the doctor took the corpse home and buried it in his garden. His daughter heard him, "she was reading a detective novel at night, with a guy which hides at night a corpse in a hole dug in the garden, sees him and turns him over. The old lady is unearthed and taken to the morgue where they find out that she was not an old lady, she was a man […] the man was the famous thief and murderer who killed countless drivers and who acted with make up on and disguised as an old lady." (ibidem: 17). In this situation, the coach asks himself: "was the doctor guilty or

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not? He had save the world from a murderer" (ibidem: 17), but he did not knew the end to that story. Coming back to his current situation, the coach notices that the old lady's eyes were staring at him: "They were opened, glassy, cold. (...) I immediately decided. I wrap the old lady in the tarp and into the carpet that I was carrying in my trunk and I put her on the top of the car, like a bale […] I opened up the back trunk: twenty something cats jumped out meowing towards me and in an instant, they disappeared like ghosts in the dark." (ibidem: 19). In his journey towards the police station, he hears on the radio the news: "it snows in Jerusalem! Something in the climatic balance turned upside down over there, for a time." (ibidem: 20). At the police station in Câmpuleț he notices that: "The old lady wrapped in the carped was covered in snow. I mean: the carpet was covered in snow." (ibidem: 21). Here, the coach declares that he killed an old lady and, to his astonishment, he finds out that the old lady was actually "a face", a police fugitive (like in the doctor story). The biggest surprise comes at the end, when they observe that: "On top of the car it was no bale, no wrapped up old lady, nothing. And not a trace either." (ibidem: 24).

The novel's title is given by the unusual radio news: *it snows in Jerusalim!* meant to draw the attention on the climatic misbalance and especially, on the misbalance of the natural order of all things. "The meaning of the title is about the unforeseen that the time hides, about the relativity of the balance and order of things and consciences. The natural disorder gives birth to the void and the one in consciences pulls throughout sub-conscience." (Sorianu, 1969: 6).

In this first chapter of the novel *F* there exists a series of key-elements: the season - *winter*, the time – *at night*, the appearance of meowing cats, continuously and suspiciously, the appearance of the old lady, always in a form of a transvestite thief or a murderer but also the oneiric element, the dream that turns into a nightmare every time. All this projected on a screen of obvious evidence: the train accident, the world from the dream with the Mongolian general, the coach and the doctor, those involved in the car crashes, the policemen which always uncover the truth. This fantastic prose was a success for Dumitru Radu Popescu thanks to the reality- dream- reality- unreality- fantastic- reality interferences and to the marvellous parable of the snow in Jerusalem. "The story doesn't have an ending and it cannot have one because any extra information will destroy the feeling of incertitude on which the fantastic practically lives. Did the coach meet the terrible old lady, did he really saw twenty cats jumping from the trunk or everything is an invention of his fantasy under the influence of a bad dream and some stories heard from others? The rule is that we need to know nothing precisely from all this." (Simion, 1989: 77). From here, we will be frequently speaking about Dumitru Radu Popescu's *fantastic realism* (Ghidirmic, 2002: 169), a narrative formula specific for this novelist.

The second narration of the novel *The royal hunting* from 1973, *The Red Sea*, is a fantastic narration, similar with *It snows in Jerusalem* from *F*, also written in Mircea Eliade's style (Ardeleanu, 1978: 55; Manolescu, 1973: 9; Simion, 1989: 88) or in Edgar Allen Poe's (*The crimes from Rue Morgue* and *The Mistery of Marie Rogét*)(Ghidirmic, 2002: 172 ; Simion, 1989: 89). The narrator is a cousin of the prosecutor Tică Dunărințu; he experiences some weird, even inexplicable situations. The atmosphere: "It rains improbably, grey, black, pasting", "a violent rain" (Popescu, 1973: 16) which turns into a "fantastic snow" (*ibidem*: 27) during the evening and even the night. Thus, travelling also on bad weather, at night and through a forest, the protagonist is involved

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also in an accident; here comes the difference though: this story is more likely an incident since it implied a motor break:

"The motor stopped on his one ... technically it was not an accident, I gently entered the ditch and broke a light. That's it. I slightly derailed, that's all. The motor, something on the ignition, does not work and this is different from an accident." (ibidem: 17-18).

The prosecutor's cousin is picked up by an old Pobeda in which there are the driver and on the backseat two women dressed in black. (ibidem:18). The two women are sisters: first "with a short haircut like a schoolgirl" (ibidem: 19), named The Schoolgirl or the Cirque Lady because she apparently had a plastic snake and the second one, a nurse, "the oldest buttocks and pus cleaner in the hospital" (ibidem:21), named The Normalist, are permanently fighting in the car. The freaks continue their fighting even after the passengers reach their destination. The driver decides to take home the two women first and they invite the two men in for a cup of tea. Unlike the atmosphere from It snows in Jerusalem marked by an infernal meowing, here "no cat was meowing" (ibidem: 46), there was "perfect silence" (ibidem: 47). The graveyard silence seems somehow suspicious to Tica's cousin. As some point, he asks for permission to smoke; "I've pooled out my cigarette case and put it on the table where the radio was." (ibidem:46). After having the tea, the two men leave, apologizing for some of the discussions from during the trip. The second day, the protagonist comes to find out he was missing his cigarette case. Looking for it, he remembers: "I left the cigarette case on the table in the two women's apartment." (ibidem:51). He obviously goes to take it back but surprise: at the apartment's door nobody was answering and the neighbours tell him that the sisters were dead! "They were stabbed; their necks were ripped" (ibidem:52) twelve day ago! The stupefaction is huge; he claims that during the night they were travelling together and the others that the women were murdered. The young man is suspected first of insanity and then of murder. The only chance to establish the truth remains the reconstitution. Every time, his arguments are contradicted by the officer Liliac who claims to have been present to their autopsy and funeral: "You weren't with them, you dreamed! The story rumbles around town for two weeks now…" (ibidem: 58). The officer almost forces him to recognize the murder: "You can find some gloves. And even a false track: a cigarette case forgotten in their apartment. I forgot to tell you: the only clue was a silver cigarette case. There you go, this is it, he said and pulled out a cigarette case from a closet.– But there is my cigarette case! And there is a Gallic rooster on it." (ibidem: 60). The officer Liliac eventually accepts to inspect the victims' apartment: "- How can you prove that you are innocent if we go in and find the cigarette case there?– That is precisely what I want: to find the cigarette case. It is the proof that they live and that I was there last nigh and not at some other time and that I am innocent. […] And if we don't find it there, it means that you weren't there last night, means that you were there two weeks ago and you forgot the cigarette case there. And that cigarette case is this, the one in front of you. You have mixed up the cigarette cases." (ibidem:63-65). The end of the story is surprising and, as we are already used, opened: "- Come in, Liliac invites us, opening the door. The house is empty, there are no women. – I sat here with them last night, I said, looking at the chairs. – They are not here, Liliac said. – Here you go, take a look; I showed them my cigarette case on the table. And the ash in the ashtray, yes, take a look,[…] Here you are, this is my cigarette case, I said taking it in my hand and

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opening it to light up a cigarette and then giving it to Tică Dunărințu. He took the cigarette case in his hand and looked me in the eyes." (ibidem: 85).

"The novelist does not give a logical explanation to this strange story and, practically speaking, there is none who would clear such facts. Every witness has his truth and the truth only covers a part of the story's elements". (Simion, 1989: 90). Like we said from the beginning, *The Red Sea* is a fantastic and also detective story which makes us front a *detective fantastic*. (Cristea, 1975: 220; Ghidirmic, 2002: 172). With this type of fiction, the reader has more possibilities of interpretation: "imaginative delirium, influenced by the psychological shock produced by the accident; the time travel, on another world, in the company of ghosts (the signs: the car brand - Pobeda, the two women are dressed in black); the intervention of the real, all under the influence of the accident, the substitution of persons. The end of the novel cannot remove the strong impression of perplexity that the reader fully experiences". (*ibidem*: 173-174).

Thus, *The Red Sea* connects with the *F* thanks to the fantastic register- the resemblance with *It snows in Jerusalem* is obvious. The story refers to the biblical myth of Moses (hence the symbolic title of the narration) in a parodic form, to some popular beliefs thanks to the character Old Lady Sevastita, to the sacred figures (3 - number of passengers from the Pobeda and the number of rehaving the, 7 – the number of years celebrated by the feast for uncle Jeremiah, 12 - number of days passed since the murder of two women).

The novel *A beer for my horse* from 1974 is "of the symbolic-realist persuasion". The horse Mișu is a pretext to analyze a heavy, jammed with guild collective conscience. The real and the fantastic cannot be separated not even for a moment. (Manolescu, 1974: 9) The novel is structured like an allegory. "Talking about horses, the author actually talks about people. The fantastic from *A beer for my horse* is an allegoric and parabolic fantastic, which, without being an authentic form of fantastic, remains a paradigmatic one for the modern prose.[…] *A beer for my horse* is an allegory and a parable at the same time, of the truth's crucifixion in a certain historical period." (Ghidirmic, 2002: 175-176). Dumitru Radu Popescu uses symbols: the collectivity in a state of mystical dementia, the calvaries of the horse reminding of the biblical myth, the fratricide from the family Țeavălungă brings up to date the biblical myth of Cain and Abel.

In the first story from *Truman Capote and Nicolae Tic*, a post- communist novel from 1995, *The book of transformations*, the writer surprise us in a very pleasant way, because of the fantastic atmosphere recalling *It snows in Jerusalem (F)* and *The Red Sea (The Royal Hunting)*. The Artistic finesse is noticeable even from the first queues:

"The wind had no shame. It dazed the mosquitoes, shot down the apples, making them pop, hitting the dry and hard as asphalt dust, it twisted the limes like whirligigs. Suddenly, it started raining. No thunders, no lightning, as if the sky suddenly wanted to bury the earth in a flood of water". (Popescu, 1995: 5). Mircea comes from America to take his daughter and for that, he needs the consent of a certain Ciungu. Finally: "He rose from the deck chair on the terrace under the walnut and disappeared among the sunflower stalks in the night. I did not herd his steps anymore, suddenly, as if a gust of wind threw it over the cement wall into the street or a miraculous power threw him in heaven. However, since then I have not seen him anymore. I thought it was a joke, that he went inside, in the kitchen, [...] he was nowhere, and his three huge,

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American suitcases disappeared as well. There was only one solution: that I might have dreamed it all. But it was not a dream. I remember perfectly: the wind had no shame. It dazed the mosquitoes; shot down the apples... it twisted the limes like whirligigs. Suddenly, it started raining"(ibidem: 8).

Formally, the story is closed but, in fact, the end remains open: did the narrator dreamed or not? Thus, Dumitru Radu Popescu rejoins the technique from the *F* cycle, technique that he has applied successfully and for which he is appreciated in the Romanian literary space.

Of all the other stories, we stop only to *The road to Tismana* which is a prose that breathes the detective fantastic, so successfully put together in *It snows in Jerusalem* or in *The Red Sea*. The action takes place this time in an autumnal décor: "The leaves, the leaves are rolling down the road, yellow, orange, sliding from the right to left of the road, however the wind dictates them, they lift, straining like strange dry, rusty birds, and they pass over the windshield of the car flying, they gather in a scarlet cloud that collapses in an instant, like a dream. " (*iIbidem*:41). The narrator takes in his car (the script is already well known!) a girl dressed in white (a variation on the same theme – the other time it was an old woman or two mature women - but still a woman!). Again, the driver returns from a funeral and the road is marked by the hallucinating appearance of creatures, hedgehogs - like the cats in the past. The driver is involved in an accident, as happened in the stories already mentioned. The young woman continues her way with a blue Dacia, whose driver was asked by the narrator to announce the accident (without victims - a novelty!) to the police. Everything seems to end well, but when the narrator is on the road again, comes the surprise: Going back to Tismana, carefully avoiding the hordes of hedgehogs that overwhelmed the earth.

"Going slowly, waiting to for them to pass... That was my luck, the hedgehogs. For near the bridge at the entrance to Tismana I saw the blue Dacia inverted ... bumped ... steaming ... And the police, and the ambulance, and ... Yes, and on the edge of the road, the girl in white with red stockings, waving at me. I did not pull over, not even out of curiosity. Mean old me…" (ibidem 56).

The writer changes the end, because in the known stories the question was about the old woman's existence, respectively about the two women and now the existence of the girl is certain, the question that arises is about the nature of her existence: is she an evil creature, bringing suffering and even death?

Through the narrative technique, Dumitru Radu Popescu is closer to the North American novel while through the narrative formula, the writer identifies more with Latin American novel. *The fantastic realism* means to treat in a real way the fantastic and in a fantastic way the real things; the model is the writer Gabriel Garcia Márquez (Ghidirmic, 2004: 4; Leonte, 1989: 149; Roznoveanu, 1981: 29; Vlad, 1977: 284). "D. R. Popescu's prose stands out throughout the fusion between a great number of categories: the tragic, the comic, the burlesque, the grotesque, the strange, the terrifying etc. Among them, the fantastic occupies an extremely important position. D.R. Popescu's prose is placed in the formula of a fantastic realism. At D. R. Popescu, the reality is always transformed towards the fantastic, who breaks out directly into the real and the fantastic itself becomes reality.[…] The sources of the fantastic in D. R. Popescu's prose are: (the irregularity), the fable, the dream, the mythic and the magic, the mystery and the bestiary. At D. R. Popescu we can find the following forms, modalities of the fantastic: the fantastic, the strange and the terrifying, the oneiric fantastic, the mythological fantastic, the detective fantastic and the allegoric and parabolic fantastic. Important is that this forms of the fantastic almost never appear

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alone, isolated, in pure condition but, most of the times, together." (Ghidirmic, 2002: 171). We remember that: *It snows in Jerusalem* (*F*), *The Red Sea* (*The royal hunting*), *The road to Tismana* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*) belong to the detective fantastic; *The private life of the elephant* (*The ice bridge*), *The hay farm wagon* (*The ice bridge*), *The Book of transformations* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*) to the oneiric fantastic; *The coming out of the world* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*), *Mitrele talked to the flowers* or *The buried church* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*) to the folkloric fantastic; *The egg under the stars* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*), *Magdolna* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*), *Fernando* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*), *From Teiuş to Stremţ* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*) to the strange fantastic; *The wheat gate* (*Truman Capote and Nicolae Ţic*) to the hallucinating, terrifying fantastic; the novel *A beer for my horse* to the allegoric fantastic; *The Royal hunting* from the homonym novel to the parabolic fantastic. Obviously, we took into consideration the predominant style because otherwise we can talk about a coalescence of various forms of fantastic: in *It snows in Jerusalem* besides the detective fantastic, there is the oneiric fantastic (the dream with the dead Mongolian general), the terrifying fantastic (the story of the narrator's friend), the absurd fantastic (the general atmosphere); in *The Red Sea* the detective fantastic is completed by the strange fantastic (the journey and the conversation of the main character with the two mysterious women) and the absurd fantastic (the atmosphere); the novel *A beer for my horse* is a synthesis of allegoric, grotesque and parabolic fantastic; the chapter *The Royal hunting* joins the parabolic and the symbolic fantastic etc. "If in *F* the fantastic looks like a figure of speech, the novel will after breath throughout the category of the fanstatic". (Roznoveanu, 1981: 179). The models of fantastic from the prose of Dumitru Radu Popescu belong to the Romanian literature: Mircea Eliade and I. L. Caragiale, but also the universal literature: Edgar Allan Poe and E.T.A. Hoffmann. The Romanian novelist succeeds in transforming the common into the fantastic and the incredible into real. "The modern fantastic literature draws its themes from the common existence, detouring the miraculous, the fairy-like, the supernatural. D. R. Popescu applies as well in this case, with good results, a technique that's been verified and that gives to his narration a normal life frame". (Simion, 1989: 77). The writer confessed in that pleasant meeting that we have so many times recalled, that he would like to write a prose like the fairy-tale *Youth without age and life without death* or like the novel *At the tziganes*, out of desire "to produce a *snap* in the pure quotidian". We believe that most of the prose remembered here respond to the exigencies of the fantastic literature:: «"The absolute confidence as well as the complete disbelief bring us beyond the borders of the fantastic; what gives it life is the hesitation", says Tzvetan Todorov.» (Leonte, 1989, 145).

Covering few of the most successful fantastic writings of Dumitru Radu Popescu, we can conclude that a true vision occurs which fusions the different aesthetic categories. "The tragic meets the comic, the sublime and the grotesque, the strange with the enigmatic, the terrifying and the absurd, the sensational with the parabolic, the burlesque with the the ludic, the realism with the fantastic and the fantastic with the funambulesque, in a complex and superior synthesis". (Ghidirmic, 2004: 4). Actually Dumitru Radu Popescu's prose looks like a bazaar in which, thematically and especially stylistically, you can find this, that and the other.

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