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# THE ROMANIAN PROSE AND ITS AGES

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***Abstract:*** *The article approaches several significant moments of Romanian prose in the second half of the 20th century, its thesis being that the short story has been the most approachable genre in the demanding process of prose discourse modernisation. Through the 1960s Generation the Romanian literature has reencountered the high level two previous periods had imposed: the period of the classics (for short stories) and the interwar period (for the novel). The short story meant a first step towards the novels, as all the writers belonging to the 1960s Generation have published novels at the end of the 1960s. A previous, older competition between the types of prose (so much debated in the interwar period) was reactivated. The 1980s Generation will act in the same manner when it will start playing a role on the literary stage. Short stories offered the opportunity for originality to affirm itself, many writers preferring afterwards the novel. The 1980s Generation proved that the resources of short stories are unlimited and far from being approached sufficiently in their intrinsic mechanisms.*

***Keywords:*** *Romanian prose, short stories, 1960s Generation, 1980s Generation.*

In 1940, a hundred years after the publication of C. Negruzzi's famous short story, Liviu Rebreanu wrote an article (less analysed by the researchers of his work) on Romanian short stories and their features and qualities. The writer argued that the early Romanian modern literature was marked by this genre, adding however that "genuine short stories are almost are rare as the novels" (Rebreanu, 101). The distinctions operated are often debatable, yet they give us a notion of a certain way if thinking the relation between the prose and its object, on Liviu Rebreanu's theoretical thinking as well as the roles he offers the species of prose in the investigation of reality.

> The genius of our people – the great prose writer added – our organic peasant essence makes us predestinated to cultivate *the short story as the most adequate genre for the Romanian soul* [emphasis added]. The short novel (or *novella*), similarly to the novel, is a genre for a more evolved culture, I would call it urban if not major (101-102).

There are at least two reasons for us to investigate these assertions: this genre connects the existence of short stories with rural realities (the role of which was significant for the beginnings of the 1960s Generation's literary career, as the following analysis will show) and maintains a distinction between the novel and the short story (possibly emerging from Mihai Ralea's question in his 1927 famous essay "De ce nu avem roman?"[1]

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Even nowadays a "fascination of the novel" is mentioned, younger writers trying to regain the status of the short story.

> It was not the irresistible fascination the one has kept prose writers – and particularly the already known ones – away from short stories but rather the attitude (seemingly difficult to understand) supported by some critics, intentionally or not: only the vastness of hundreds of pages, magnificent design, sophisticated and complex structure, which unfortunately, has also been in many cases fragile (Sin, 114).

Despite the terms of the debate mentioned by Mihai Sin in the paragraph above, it is certain that the decade in question (the 1970s) was dominated by novels while short stories remained an interesting, yet background phenomenon. The comparison made in this respect by Mircea Zaciu with the 1930s is extremely useful, through the elements of similitude detected (Zaciu, 130).

The general image of the evolution of our literature in the second half of the 20th century reveals the fact that short stories are present in a considerable number, beyond other possible categories, classifications or preferences. A significant fact is also that the Romanian literature has then reencountered the high level two previous periods had imposed: the period of the classics (for short stories) and the interwar period (for the novel). We will not be able to discover a unifying coherent direction but the creative effort is impressive, as well as its consequences of amplitude still to be studied. Eugen Simion dedicated the phenomenon several volumes (*Scriitori români de azi*), but, as he was acknowledging at the time, the "the adventure is continuing" (627).

A connection at the aesthetic level could not be achieved, during a certain period, through books such as *Nicoara Potcoavă* or *Mitrea Cocor, Clonț de fier* or *Aventură în lunca Dunării*. Caragiale and Sadoveanu would exert in the 1950s a considerable influence, a sign that social observation and re-evaluation, at the boarder of myth, legend and history, structured a certain manner of perceiving the world and of integrating in it the human being. On the other hand, the acknowledging of the main issue (with the already known errors) – one of Rebreanu's reflexes – suffers from the interventions external to literature. Thus, nobody can be surprised by the absence, during the 1950s, of novels referring to immediate realities, resisting at a prejudice-free reading, external to ideological phantasms. Similarly, it is natural that the "obsessive decade"[2] novels (by Marin Preda, A. Buzura, N. Breban, D. R. Popescu, I. Lăncrănjan, Mihai Sin, Eugen Uricaru, P. Sălcudeanu and others) would be written later. But the aesthetic novelty of a work such as *Morometii* (1955) brought again to the fore the classical image on writing. *Morometii,* the first significant novel in contemporary Romanian literature, would determine, paradoxically, a change of tone in short stories. Marin Preda's and Liviu Rebreanu's influence is indisputable in the immediate period.

Prose had been written also previously to the 1960s Generation. We must consider of a certain interest the publication of some works published in the very year as *Morometii*: Dorel Dorian, *N-au înflorit încă merii* (on the life on a building site), V. Em. Galan, *Vecinii* (on China's revolutionary transformation), Alecu Ivan Ghilia, *Fratii Hutulea* (on rural issues), Dumitru Ignea, *Povestiri* (on the topic of the establishing the new order), Titus Popovici, *Povestiri* (on the transformation of the Romanian village), Alex. Sever, *Boieri si tărani* (on the opposition between peasants and noblemen), Al. I. Ştefănescu,

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*Soare de august* (on the events of the 23rd of August) and others. They show common topics, a uniform style, problems imposed by external factors, while the creative self humbly withdrew when facing the "tasks or duties" of all sorts. It is a matter of embarrassment to visit a dictionary as the one edited by Chițimia and Dima (1979), similarly to the embarrassment of the authors while omitting so many titles, recorded thoroughly in other works, such as *Bibliografia R.S.R*.

In order to discuss the relation between the short story and the novel, it is worth mentioning Mircea Iorgulescu's observation (in his preface to the *Arhipelag* anthology):

> Some periods of social and historical stability have as an epic correspondence the novel, while during tormented, unstable periods, facing sudden and radical changes in all areas, the short story is flourishing (8-9).

Although, indeed, the short story offers more rapid options of action, the problem of the prominence of one or the other of these prose formulas is more complex.

In the 1960s, prose was regaining its natural rhythm through short stories and short novels (or *novellas*). The change was however not due to the discovery of some extraordinary topic. The *What* was doubled with talent, as it happens in literature everywhere and in all times, by *How*. The interest for rural life was maintained, the explanation being that it was the context where the mutation, the effervescence were taking place, the novelty of certain topics allowing a polemic placement, through the sincerity and naturalness of vision, development of original means, regaining of dignity – both of prose writer and of the language - mainly on the field where all these have been compromised. There is also an urban prose, but with more modest achievements.

Twisted heroes, each necessarily confused, frivolous populate Fănuş Neagu's, D. R. Popescu's, N.Velea's, E. Barbu's, R.Cosaşu's and others' prose. The slang and oral features used are a reaction to the slogan-type, expressionless language.

The propensity towards myth and faboulous writing (childhood and youth, always presence) indicates the need for openings that transcend immediacy, reflecting on human destiny in different contexts, compositions, which break the functional narrow straps.

Short prose has been and will remain, within Romanian literature, a field favouring to innovation (not only since Urmuz). All that has impact in the personality of a prose writer can find here great tension accumulation. It is "a labyrinth of novelty and of compromising stereotypes", as Mircea Iorgulescu argues (14).

Hesitations, the taste of dissertation or *sine die* perpetuation of certain formulas are not forgiven. Interviews (as well as other contexts) offer the prose writers the opprotunity to speak about the 1960s as of a unique emergence of the short novel and short story in Romanian literature, confessing the importance of mastering the "science of short story"

In the substance of the volumes *Ningea în Bărăgan, Somnul de le amiază, Cantonul părăsit,Vară buimacă, Iarna bărbaților, Fuga, Fata de la miazăzi, Umbrela de soare, Somnul pământului, Duios Anastasia trecea, Poarta, Opt povestiri, Paznic la armonii, Zbor jos*, we can perceive the signs of a literary time that will be discussed surely in very positive terms.

The short story of the 1960s was the novelty of the day, together with poetry, becoming "poetic" with all the consequences of that. A first step was made by the tendency towards the artificial and mannerism. The excessive interest in "art" and means and not for novelty or

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freshness of other nature led to the creation of a mechanism rather than a school, dissolving too soon the *What.* It was then when the novel appeared; but, one should remember that it was produced by writers around the same age, now focusing on the novel cause.

After twenty years, the path is travelled the reverse way if compared to the 1960s prose writers, which can lead to one of the most interesting prose manners: from the obsession of means to the discovery of life unexpectedness, from short story turned towards itself, to the naturalness of characterising life situations, from the revelation of theories feeding the text mechanism to the revelation of unpredictable notes from one's own existence as well as of others.

These changes transfer to the text the need of not losing the resources of short novel and short story. As it had been proven before and the 1980s Generation also proved, these resources are unlimited and far from being deeply exploited. If we can still speak today, mentioning the 1980s Generation, of a "resurrection of short story" this doesn't mean nostalgia of another literary age.[3]

Young writers have found in short stories the ideal expression for a certain period, characterised by the crisis of literary conventions. The results should not and cannot be ignored. The process of "resurrection" has produced one of the most interesting literary moments, created by works such as those signed by Mircea Nedelciu, Alexandru Vlad, Gheorghe Crăciun, Nicolae Iliescu, George Cuşnarencu, Carmen Francesca Banciu, Tudor Dumitru Savu, Sorin Preda, Radu Ţuculescu and others.

Some of them base their works on the new French novel, R. Barthes's and Tel Quel group theories on the text, with a strong interest in the form. Some researchers tend to believe that 1968 (a year dominated by the novel - N. Breban, Fănuş Neagu, Marin Preda, Zaheria Stancu, Sorin Titel, Alexandru Ivasiuc and others published then significant novels such as: *Animale bolnave, Îngerul a atrigat, Intrusul, Ce mult te-am iubit, Şatra, Dejunul pe iarbă)* determined the change in the prose direction, leading to a hiatus in the short story evolution. It is equally true that focusing on the novel seemed to many at that time a "suicidal solution" as Cornel Regman argues in the preface to the anthology of Romanian short novel and short story (7). In the 1980s, an irresistible attraction for the *genuine* and *real* emerge from the novel, while short prose dissolves into memoirs, diaries, literary portraits, serials. This is a temporary phenomenon, because, as one can see, short prose has its constant supporters. Never before or again in Romanian literature were published so many volumes of notes. Actually, Regman argues (7) that these are disguised short novels and stories. One should not be surprised by the considerable presence of travel accounts (having a strong tradition in Romanian literature) in a period dominated by information and mass-media. It was probably also expression a reaction from the audience, towards counterfeit and manipulation, thus appreciating more the confession and the sincerity of the testimonial.

Eugen Simion's volumes (*Timpul trăirii, timpul mărturisirii*), Mircea Zaciu's (*Teritorii*), Ioana Postelnicu (*Roată gîndului, roată pământului*), Romulus Rusan's (*America ogarului cenuşiu*) etc. and, in another context, Marin Preda's (*Imposibila întoarce, Viaţa ca o pradă*), Ştefan Bănulescu's (*Scrisori provinciale*) have benefitted from, a clearly favourable reception. The novel has absorbed, as a "witness and judge at the same time" a part of the epical energies and eventually determined an actual fashion.

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Theses circulate, become ordinary, common, especially within the „obsessive decade" prose, real events concerning the novel being only those proving inner tension of elaboration and the pathos of their getting engaged in a larger circuit of humanistic reflection. Besides the famous writer (Marin Preda, A. Buzura, I. Lăncrănjan, G.Bălăiță etc.), some new names appear, consisting of genuine revelations.[4]

The short story has followed its own path. One can notice for instance prose writers such as Horia Pătraşcu, with a short story with an impact (*Reconstituirea*, l967), N. Mateescu, Al.Papilian, Dumitru Dinulescu, Gabriela Adameşteanu, Tudor Octavian, Eugen Uricaru, Minai Sin, Ioan Radin, Şt. M. Găbrian, Vasile Andru, Mircea Opriță etc.

The short novel and the short story discover everyday life, its rhythm and sudden, confusing and sometimes dramatic changes happening within the life of the individual. Mircea Iorgulescu's observation gains in this context a polemic note:

> When the novel comes to be obsessed with the important issues and is likely to forget the man, short story recovers the everyday life, the daily, actual, existence, instructing on the opportunities of the parable, of psychological causality, of the confrontation between 'text' and reality, between language and history (14).

## Notes

[1] *Why we don't have novel?*

[2] "Obsedantul deceniu", term given in Romanian for this classification of the novel

[3] See the following articles on the topic: Gh. Crăciun, "Arhipelagul '70- '80 şi noul flux", *Astra*, 1982, nr.8, p. l and M.Iorgulescu, "Literatura tinerilor**",** *România literară*, 1983, nr. 41, p.3; N.Manolescu, "Proza de mâine**"**, *România literară*, 1983, nr.52, p. 9; V. F. Mihăescu, "Resurecția prozei scurte**"**, *Luceafărul*, 31 martie 1984, p. 3;.I. Bogdan Lefter, "Literatură şi societate", *România literară*, 1984, nr. l6, p. 4 sqq..; I.Vlad, "Inepuizabilele resurse ale narațiunii**"**, *Steaua*, 1984, nr.4, p.l4; The symposium "Ateneu" "Realitatea socială şi tinerii scriitori", 1984. nr. 5, pp.2-7; Șt. Ciobanu, "Valori nuvelistice actuale**",** *Luceafărul*, 1984, nr. 27, p. 6 (a series of articles on the topic following in the same periodical).

[4] V. *Caiete critice*, nr. l-2/1985, a supplement of the periodical *Viața Românească*: under the title *Romanul romanesc de azi [The Today's Romanian Novel]***,** different opinions of writers (belonging to different generations) are published.

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