# THE ROMANIAN SHORT STORY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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*Abstract:Often neglected by criticism or treated as an intermediary step in the evolution toward the novel, the brief history of the Romanian short story, born at the beginning of the 21st Century, at once with the ascent of the Internet and the social networks, yet almost inert by the year 2013, when the short story writer, Alice Munro, won the Nobel prize in Literature, is nonetheless an intriguing one. Concise, minimalist, placed in both traditional (rural) and corporate (urban) areas, defined by themes such as impossibility of inter-personal communication, loneliness, childhood, death, sexual desire, erotic initiation, life during the communist regime, escape, compassion, job disillusionment, aging and the passage of time, the short prose of the 2000s speaks of a new literary approach.*

*Keywords: minimalism, dirty realism, hyperrealism, douămiism, single effect.*

Unlike the American short story, the history of the Romanian brief prose is not so well-defined. Leaving aside the primary forms such as "schița" and "nuvela", one can only speak of the Romanian short story genre starting with the 1960s, when the ideological "thaw" provided fertile ground for writers such as Eugen Barbu and Fănuș Neagu. Subsequent to a shaky start, though, the 1980s generation, known as "optzeciștii", turned the brief tale into a literary program. A few notable names are Mircea Nedelciu, Ioan Groșan, Mircea Cărtărescu, Răzvan Petrescu, Ștefan Agopian.

At the end of the 1990s, however, in the aftermath of the Romanian Revolution and in the ensuing socio-political instability, following more than a decade of scarcity, the short story seems to be once more of interest. First seen as an individual enterprise, if we take into account Dan Lungu's *Cheta la flegmă (1999)* or Mitoș Micleușanu's *Organismecanisme* (2002), and afterwards (from 2004) as part of *Polirom*'s "Ego. Proză" collection, a project meant to encourage young writers to publish their work. Paradoxically, the first short story anthology of the 21th Century, published in 2013, *Best of. Proza scurtă a anilor 2000*[1], thought to have been published as a consequence of the Nobel prize in literature being won by the Canadian short-story writer, Alice Munro[2], doesn't mark the revival of the genre.

While Romanian critics and scholars have often seen the short story as an intermediate step towards the novel and have therefore reduced their analysis to empty concepts such as "authenticism", "mannerism", "minimalism", I argue the importance of the brief tale in the evolution of Romanian literature, in spite of its short history. This is why, while my approach is mostly thematical, slightly stylistical, the selection of the writers is a chronological one. Dan Lungu (*Cheta la flegmă*/*Proză cu amănuntul,* 1999/2003[3]; *Băieți de gașcă,* 2005/2013), Mitoș Micleușanu (*Organismecanisme*, 2002), Ioana Baetica (*Fișă de înregistrare*, 2004), Silviu Gherman (*Scurta și plictisitoarea viață a lui Kjus*, 2005), Luca Dinulescu (*Sir Sugismund*, 2006), Sorin Stoica (*Aberații de bun-simț*, 2007), Radu Pavel Gheo (*Numele mierlei*, 2008), Florin Lăzărescu (*Lampa cu căciulă*, 2009), Dan Coman (*Irezistibil*, 2010), T.O.Bobe (*Contorsionista*, 2011), Veronica D. Niculescu

[1] Coordinated by Marius Chivu.
[2] An idea found in a 2014 survey: https://revistavatra.org/2014/11/24/proza-scurta-la-raport-ancheta-revistei-vatra/.
[3] The volume was first published in 1999 and edited in 2003.



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(*Floribunda*, 2012) și Lavinia Braniște (*Escapad*a, 2014) are all worthy of being mentioned in an inventory of the "douămiiști"[4] writers.

**The curse of brevity**

The short story is neither a novel, nor an intermediate stage in the literary evolution toward the novel. In contrast to the novelist, the short story writer cannot afford to drift aimlessly from one description to another, (s)he is not allowed to digress from the storyline or to release the tension, and must be always present (no matter how objective the narrative point of view) in order to captivate the reader.

In *A theory of the short story*, James Cooper Lawrence takes into account the structural side of the genre and talks about three types of stories (mostly American): (1) "stories told historically", "stories told dramatically" and "stories told didactically"[5]. If we leave aside the first one, we can acknowledge the existence of the other two categories when it comes to Romanian short stories[6]. Detached from the brief prose of the 1980s, which rejects ethics and didacticism and, as Gheorghe Crăciun asserts, "was not the kind of prose that would kindly wink at the reader"[7], the stories of the 2000s have a predominantly dynamic nature, establishing a pact of sorts between the reader and the writer.

Good examples of "stories told dramatically" can be found in Radu Pavel Gheo's volume, *Numele mierlei. 50 de clipuri vesele și triste*. The tales in *Numele mierlei...* are mostly based on dialogue, generate situational comedy and usually arise from an inner or outer conflict. One of them, *Prezumția de vinovăție*, can be seen as both told dramatically and didactically, which is why it could be placed in a third category, where the fusion between a play and a moral story could work together. Upon pickpocketing a wallet on a bus, Aurică is taken to the police station, where he pleads for the presumption of innocence. After a few conversations of Caragiale-like comicality and Ionescu-like absurdity, Aurică ends up saying: "Really now, if I weren't such a penniless runt, would any of you had dared touch me? If I'd been one of those big shots travelling around in a beacon lit car, you'd have brought my lawyer immediately and by now I'd be drinking beer in the bar across the street"[8]. The moral of the story, which makes it educational (albeit in a negative way) is stated by the policeman, who advises Aurică to improve his thieving skills and make some friends "because you see how hard it is these days to be working on your own"[9].

In the case of Ioana Baetica's *Fișă de înregistrare* we move from a partial didacticism to a full one, spanning the whole volume. In an attempt to faithfully document the absurdity of everyday life, striving to line up to a so-called authenticist movement, the author relies chiefly on clichés. Thus, ideas like *heroes die just like regular people*, *we await death our whole lives*, *every day passes like the next*, *every man is alone in the face of death* make Ioana Baetica's volume a space where clichés serve a deeply educational purpose.

**Less plot, more disgust**

The stories that do not fit in any of the categories above are without stake, meaning that they have no intrigue and no ending. This is why, in terms of finality − under stood not as a proper ending, but as a closure given by the finite space of the prose − , we focus on stories producing (1) a single effect (in Edgar Allan Poe's theory), (2) multiple effects and (3) no effect at all.

[4] Term often used by literary critics to designate the current generation of writers.
[5] http://www.jstor.org/stable/25121469?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
[6] *Ibidem*.
[7] Gheorghe Crăciun, Viorel Marineasa, in the preface to *Generația '80 în proză scurtă*, București, Paralela 45, 1998, p. 7.
[8] Radu Pavel Gheo, *Numele mierlei*, Iași, Polirom, 2008, p. 30.
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 30.



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A good example is Lavinia Braniște's *Escapada*. The flat characters, lacking a story arc and action to support them and the often open endings are all features of a story without stake and effect. Perhaps the only effect is that of monotony, as mentioned often in reviews of these stories, but this is improper, since, in tone with the tradition established by Poe's gothic stories, literary effect appears as a change in the readers' feelings.

A change in perception, though, is often produced by the setting. Whether the theme is erotic or morbid, the background, typical to a dirty Balkan peripheral space , generates disgust– disgust at people, disgust at surroundings, disgust at existence. In *Organimecanisme*, by Mitoș Micleușanu, the characters die, yell at each other, laugh hysterically, jump out the window, wager to kill themselves, bleed and rot – in *Blestem*, for instance, the character notes: "Rot in hell, she said, and gave me a long kiss [...] Two months later, one day, I felt a strange heat in my throat, then my lips started burning [...] one day later, my tongue started to bleed. In the middle of the street, I felt a taste of mold and rot [...] Certain animals, such as dogs, the great majority of them with bald patches on the left rib, ate pieces of me"[10].

If the American prose based on human typology appears as a reaction to O. Henry's intrigue oriented stories, in the Romanian brief prose of the 21st century the two directions coexist. On the one side, there are tales where the intrigue is of minor importance (as in Dan Lungu's stories) or it is missing entirely (as in Sorin Stoica's and Lavinia Braniște's volumes), meaning that the characters are the sole triggers of the plot, and, on the other, there are stories that would be unable to run in the absence of both the intrigue and the action (as in *Numele mierlei*, by Radu Pavel Gheo, *Lampa cu căciulă*, by Florin Lăzărescu, *Sir Sugismund*, by Luca Dinulescu or *Fișă de înregistrare*, by Ioana Baetica).

### *Dirty realism*, hyperrealism, minimalism

In what started off as his doctoral thesis, *The short story: An introduction*, Paul March-Russel, though he avoids giving a precise definition for the short story, underlines a few important facts when it comes to stories that are neither shorter short stories, nor novellas (since the 19th Century). Among these, especially relevant in the context of the Romanian short prose, is the distinction between *minimalism*, *dirty realism* and *hyperrealism*. This is because in Romanian context minimalism is automatically associated to every type of short story.

Often seen as Post-Postmodernist, the prose of the 1980s, represented by Raymond Carver, Richard Ford or Tobias Wolff, is described in the British literary space as "dirty realism", while in the USA these writers are known as "minimalists". The bond between these two, according to March-Russel, lies, in Jean Baudrillard's terms in what should be called "hyperrealism"[11].

The short story is *hyperrealistic* through those images (of the unreality of consumerist society) that can be imitated, but render reality irretrievable. It is tributary to *dirty realism* through the capitalization, content-wise, on miserable characters and milieus (the working class, living in a post-industrial economic space) and degrading themes (such as violence, drug addiction, sexual harassment, etc.). Minimalism, on the other hand, is connected to more formal features such as small size, conciseness and the refusal of descriptions.

The Romanian 2000[s] short prose has a bit of each and every one of these concepts. It takes a dose of *hyperrealism* by exploiting of the corporate side of a post-communist Romania, has a minimalist approach by brevity and scarcity of descriptions, but is nonetheless anchored to a *dirty realism* mostly on account of the thematic approach, as can be seen in the following pages.

### The thematic approach as an identity card

[10] Mitoș Micleușanu, *Organismecanisme*, București, Ziua, 2002, pp. 11-12.
[11] Paul March-Russel, *The short story: An introduction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, pp. 224-237.



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The short prose of the 21st Century is a favorable environment for noticing a redefinition of national identity. In addition to a proclivity towards a Balkan dirty realism (that can be best seen in the descriptions of internal living spaces), the Romanian contemporary short story is also defined by a sympathy towards outsiders −a hermit preferring solitude in the mountains to any sort of human company, a child rejected by his group of friends, a girl with no hands who was all her life the bodyguard of her best friend are a few such examples of outcasts/self-outcasts. But no matter how strong the impact of spaces and characters, in the absence of the psychological dimension, it is the theme that best reflects the identity of the short contemporary genre.

Judging by frequency, the major themes of Romanian short prose are: impossibility of inter-personal communication, loneliness, childhood, death, sexual desire, erotic initiation, life during the communist regime, escape, compassion, job disillusionment, aging and the passage of time.

A first distinction between the listed themes has to be made between the typical urban themes and the explicitly rural ones. While stories unfolding in an urban background are predisposed to subjects such as the impossibility of communication with each other, loneliness or sexual desire, stories exploring village life and sometimes provincial life (though few) show affinity for themes such as aging and erotic initiation.

Aside from a psychic inability to communicate with others (generated by shame or fear as in *Tatăl meu mă așteaptă la fântână*, by Lavina Braniște), the failure in social interactions is also expressed through fake or meaningless phone conversation (as in *C.V*, a story from *Proză cu amănuntul*, by Dan Lungu). Connected to this approach is the theme of loneliness. Unlike the former, where the inability of communicating with the other can be doubled by a refusal to try, the loneliness is now placed under the auspices of the dialogue. The protagonist of *Alice* (by Silviu Gherman), although he claims to be alone and is no way different from others in his loneliness, prepares for a date with a certain Sgsdgff that he met on the Internet. From the Internet as a driver of solitude we move on to the television. In *Rain man și televizorul,* by Sorin Stoica, the narrator relates "my first television-related memories", how he at one point renounced a school play in favor of the "Cartoon Gala".[12]

If the inability to comunicate with others and loneliness are predominantly urban themes, childhood and death are subjects pertaining to both milieus. When it comes to childhood, though there is little difference between the urban and the rural, an important distinction lies with the narratorial perspective. While Dan Lungu bases a few of his stories (in both volumes) on this theme, mainly told from the child's perspective (like in *Chetă la flegmă,* where we witness the erotical initiation of the infant protagonist or in *De vorbă cu Șopron* where the central character, a little girl, draws a hopscotch court, to converse and play with), most authors invoke the subtheme of lost childhood, in a passéism that becomes a trait of contemporary short story style. Florin Lăzărescu și Veronica D. Niculescu are two main examples of authors recalling childhood in Communist times. In *Lumea interlopă a brusturelui* by Florin Lăzărescu we are told the story of a schoolboy who is required to bring to school 10 kilograms of burdock leaf. Veronica D. Niculescu's 1980 volume, *Fericirile aiuritoare*, invokes an episode in the childhood of a little girl where, after queueing for hours to acquire the items in a shopping list, she ends up spilling the contents of her shopping bag, immediately after becoming aware of her happiness.

Death is another recurring theme for the 2000s brief prose, however, in contrast to the fairly unilateral treatment of childhood, there is a duality between the fatalist vision of death (from the big city) and death as a religious ritual (in the countryside). In *Fișă de înregistrare*, Ioana Baetica says "Communists build large squares, so they can give speeches. Capitalists populate them with skyscrapers, so you can have the freedom to successfully commit suicide, by throwing yourself from the rooftop."[13] Her vision is that of an entire thematic approach. While in the urban space,

[12] Sorin Stoica, *Aberații de bun-simț*, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2007, p. 17.
[13] Ioana Baetica, *Fișă de înregistrare,* Iași, Polirom, 2004, p. 38.



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people die on the street, in the park, away from home, in the countryside death always appears in a familiar space; this explains this dichotomy between death as fatality and death as religious ritual. A few stories that illustrate the urban milieu are *Juan* (Lavinia Braniște), *Nunta*, *Premoniție*, *Taica Toader*, *Tratatul 44* (Mitoș Micleușanu) and *Poveste cu sfârșit* (Luca Dinulescu). In *Tratatul 44*, Anton bets on a so-called *pact 44* that he would commit suicide twice. He climbs on top of his block of flats, produces a nickel-plated gun, but ends up losing the bet. *Poveste cu sfârșit* is another edgy story. Bogdan owns a clock that shows him the time he has left to live. In another part of the world, a researcher is congratulated on his discoveries in the field of human immortality, but "the asteroid that had entered Earth's orbit a few minutes ago, as if to emphasize the arbitrariness of existence, was too large to beheld."[14]

Rustic death, however, as highlighted (best) by Dan Lungu and Dan Coman, is ritualistic *par excellence*; always close to the house, the coffin, the priest and the people who drink and feast around the deceased. As opposed to the tragicalness of its urban counterpart, death outside the city is often under a sign of (mostly situational) comedy. For instance, *Spre cimitir* (by Dan Lungu), ends with the postman who brings the defunct's six-month pension and, passing through, chugs a glass of schnapps. In *debut* by Dan Coman, in addition to mocking the rituals (such as shaking the dead person to get the air out and running the coffin to the grave), death is a good opportunity for the narrator to remember that he had stolen the dead woman's savings to publish his book of poems.

Both short "because the object, that is the material of representation (the story time) (…) or because the manner of representation (discourse time) is concise"[15], oscillating between fantasy and reportage, the Romanian short story of the beginning of the 21st Century bears witness to a literature progressively touched by modern technologies.

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[14] Luca Dinulescu, *Sir Sugismund*, Iași, Polirom, 2006, p. 61.
[15] Chialant, Maria Theresa; Marina Lops, **Time and the Short Story**, Peter Lang, Bern, 2012, p.20.



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