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Narrative Devices in Motion: From Genre Fiction to Mainstream Fiction in Florin Chirculescu's Prose

Abstract: This article explores the dynamics between Romanian genre fiction and mainstream fiction in the postcommunist period, trying to negotiate the instrumentalizations of narrative devices usually found in popular literature (be it fantasy, crime, or mystery fiction) in a novel that transcends normative genre boundaries. Thus, the text traces a specific way in which some Romanian writers (in this case Florin Chirculescu) have navigated the strenuous path brought by capitalism in the local literary scene.

Keywords: Romanian Literature; Genre Fiction; Mainstream Fiction; Maximalist Novels; Florin Chirculescu; Anarchetype.

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Along with changes in society and technology, the last thirty years have also brought about many changes in Romanian cultural and literary production. The opening of the literary market to translations and popular novel subgenres becomes obvious and aligns with a broader trend in Romanian society in the early 1990s. After entering the logic of capitalist consumption¹, the Romanian literary system remains generally dominated by a mainstream that still operates according to the old rules. Meanwhile, the democratisation of access to the digital environment (which, in Romania, begins to take place around 2005)² questions the way in which society, the self and communication are perceived nowadays.³ Consequently, part of the meta-discourse associated with literature is also moving online (forums, blogs, the websites of specialised literary magazines). A significant proportion of this discursive level is thus represented by a segment of non-professional criticism, governed by informal dynamics and formulas (Goodreads, Wattpad), which, however, continues to remain outside mainstream valorization grids. Therefore,

notwithstanding this visible increase in conceptual flexibility, enhanced by the relativisation specific to the increasing assimilation of postmodernism in the local context, literary criticism continues to operate with a rather reductionist binary structure, which opposes mainstream (literary) fiction to genre (popular) fiction.

In addition to this differentiation, the present article aims to address another grid of literary valuation, according to the structure and configuration of literary works, focusing on “the distinctions [that] have been made between high and low styles, high-brow and mass-audience genres (the *Bildungsroman* vs. the detective novel, for instance), and those works that have not complied with the rules for unified and coherent structure” and which “have been relegated to the subcultures and lower genres of popular culture.”⁴ Thus, beginning with the context in which certain forms of popular fiction permeate mainstream fiction or cohabit with the latter starting with the 1990s, the article will try to analyse the means and devices which an author like Florin Chirculescu uses to build a fictional world that arguably lies at the intersection of literary and genre fiction, redefining (or, at least, reconsidering) the aforementioned binary structures.

Under the label of “Postmodern Tolerance”, Mihai Iovănel points out that the post-communist period coincides with an inflation of translations that affects the sales and literary production of Romanian writers. Lacking a protectionist literary politics similar to that imposed by the communist regime, the “Romanian writers, devalued by translations, resorted to pseudonyms of foreign extraction, in a market where they feel crushed by important

foreign authors.”⁵ Popular genres with a strong tradition in communism, such as the detective novel or science fiction, are thus losing ground to translations from foreign literature, at the same time as they begin, however, to permeate the local literary mainstream. On the one hand, this is due to a trend toward experimentation put in practice by mainstream authors of the 1980s generation (Mircea Cărtărescu, Mircea Nedelciu, or Alexandru Mușina)⁶ amplified by the postmodernist relativization according to which popular fiction genres are intended to satisfy the need for entertainment and “the duty to tell a ‘good story’”⁷ in the commodified logic of late capitalism.

Moreover, I dare say, this is based on an intuition that deals with the relation between paraliterature and mainstream literature in a causal manner, rather than in an oppositive, competing one, especially given that “one of the conditions for a strong literature is to have a strong paraliterature.”⁸ Against the backdrop of lamenting the lack of local commercial literature⁹ (which only confirms the intuition above and the relation between popular fiction and literary fiction) and the more generic attempt at debunking the myth of literary popularity¹⁰, I think it is necessary to trace a reverse pattern which lies at the core of this exchange. Reading Nicolae Breban's *Animale bolnave* (Sick Animals), published in the 1960s, Ștefan Baghiu examines the ways in which some novels of the communist period “have combined popular fiction structures with techniques of the canonical writers of Russian 19th century and early 20th century” aiming to “achieve some kind of genre that could break with the dogmatic socialist realism

and gain means to work with new sorts of political and social issues through the novel.”¹¹ Breban’s novel represents “a moment of postwar paradigmatic reinvention”¹² and equates “the case of a literature who had to empower popular fiction genres with high culture techniques in order to create the image of a strong, competitive literature.”¹³ Conversely, I argue that beginning with the 1990s and best exemplified by Florin Chirculescu’s *Greva păcătoșilor sau Apocri-fa unui evreu* (The Sinners’ Strike, Or The Apocrypha of a Jew), published in 2017, we can talk about the case of a literary field which infuses mainstream literature with genre fiction techniques and tropes, undermining, in certain specific instances, the archetypal structures of both genre and literary fiction.

This is the case, for instance, of Eugen Uricaru’s *Complotul sau Leonard Bălbăie contra Banditului Cocoș* (The Conspiracy or Leonard Bălbăie Against the Outlaw Cocoș, 1990), a “complex novel” that uses the typical structure of detective fiction to “meditate on the theme of totalitarianism”¹⁴. In the same vein, Marian Barbu’s *Approapele nostru trădează. Roman semipolițist* (Our neighbour betrays. Semi-Detective Novel, 1992) encapsulates both a paraliterary stance and a literary one, resulting in a hybrid work (“not only ‘semi-detective,’ but also semi-journalistic, semi-metanarrative”), in which “the characters prove to a large extent indistinctive, the disparate scenes hardly merge in a unitary narrative corpus, while the syntax is inconsistent.”¹⁵ Another example, Dan Stanca’s *Muntele viu* (The Living Mountain, 1998) uses narrative devices usually featured in detective and mystery novels to depict an initiation story. The blending of this elements

with those specific to a mystical scenario might constitute the reason for the mixed reception of the novel, reviewed as “strange, frantic, ambiguous”, while at the same time “exceptional, challenging, [and] fascinating.”¹⁶

The chosen examples illustrate a certain ambiguity regarding the classification of this type of literature, mainly occasioned by something that could possibly be described as an “alteration of preordained norms of austerity that [...] determine the satisfaction provided by crime fiction.”¹⁷ A different case that I would like to refer to is that of Mircea Nedelciu, Adriana Babeți, and Mircea Mihăieș’s *Femeia în roșu. Roman retro: (versiune)* (The Woman in Red. Retro Novel: [version], 1990), one of the most acclaimed Romanian postmodern novels published in the last 30 years, that “takes inspiration from the props of commercial literature in order to tell a story with gangsters, prohibition, and femmes fatales.”¹⁸ This metafictional inquiry following Ana Cumpănașu’s journey (“whose biography lies at the *center* of the narrative” – emphasis added)¹⁹ has

a composite aspect, combining a multi-layered case, of documenting the narrative, with the device of exhibiting and demonetization of epic conventions. Despite this complex device that disperses the perspective, fractures the story, and multiplies the narrative authorities, the text does not acquire the negative valence of an anti-novel. Free from the conventions of verisimilitude, from the imperative of organicity and of narrative motivation, the novel does not self-destruct, but purifies itself, rediscovering the

elementary power of fiction to surprise, to imagine extraordinary worlds, facts, and actions.²⁰

Therefore, this complexity and the exemption from narrative limitations constitute elements of novelty and differentiation for this type of novel in relation to its archetypal model. Apart from the center emphasized earlier, the characteristics formulated above could be subsumed to an anarchetypal, atypical structure, produced by liberation from the imperative of organicity and narrative justification. At the same time, however, we know that the morphological class of anarchetypes, as opposed to the archetypal, should allow us to undermine “the use of the structural criterion as a measure of aesthetic accomplishment”²¹ as a reaction to an axiological grid that presents, at its opposite ends, an Aristotelian unified, coherent plot and its chaotic, rhizomatic counterpart, and which tends to relegate the latter as inferior to the first. Admittedly, *Femeia în roșu* turns out even more difficult to assess from a canonical (an)archetypal perspective, especially given the fact that its role as “one of the most prominent Romanian postmodern novels”²² (alongside its portrayal as the “epitome” of a so-called “retro genre”²³) was recently reinforced by its inclusion at the top of Mihai Iovănel’s list of *90 Fiction Titles Representative for the 1990–2000 Period*.²⁴

If the previous examples display the infusion of literary mainstream with genre fiction devices that open an ambiguous space of interpretation and valorization, what could happen when a genre fiction author decides to go the other way round? What does he carry with him from a

literary domain to the other and how novel can the new literary object really be? In what follows, I will explore Florin Chirculescu’s transition from his role as one of the most important post-communist science-fiction, genre-bending authors to that of a maximalist, polyphonic and exhilarant creator, trying to examine the tension between the processes by which excess can be disciplined (or not) and the narrative equipment that might coalesce into a unified, even though difficult to grasp, enriched literary configuration.

Greva păcătoșilor sau Apocrifa unui evreu is too broad and complex a novel to be summarized in a proper manner, largely because of the stories and sub-stories that confer a “quasi-uncharted strangeness in the Romanian literature” to this *big novel*, consisting of more than 1100 pages²⁵ and dozens of interrelated characters that permanently shape the attention of the reader. However, one of the plots of the story observes the last days of Muhammad, focusing on his Jewish physician, Sahib (Barzilai ben Zakai), the author of a fragmented and prophetic book that extends its consequences to a second (contemporary) narrative thread in which the twins Sahib (also a physician) and Mesneraș (a secret agent) are caught in a convoluted sub-plot that has to do with the health system and the ominous possibility of a general strike. In this fictional world of simultaneous, coincidental, overlapping, and synchronous occurrences, certain features usually deployed in genre fiction can be recognized, even though, as we shall see, this is a case of a project that reshapes the tropes and techniques specific to paraliterature. At the same time, Chirculescu’s self-called *mainstream* novel²⁶ aligns itself to some of

the most exciting recent maximalist projects, in an international lineage that could be traced back to a canonical writer like Thomas Pynchon.

Perhaps the most frequent label applied to Pynchon (and to some of its maximalist, encyclopedic successors) by the literary critics is *paranoia*²⁷ (not without reason, as Leo Bersani would argue²⁸). The “paranoid imagination,” says Ercolino, “literally infests the maximalist narrative universe,” giving shape and substance to the plot²⁹, while the conspiratorial imagination can “[map] the world *without disenchanting it*”³⁰ (emphasis in original). The same morphological element consisting of the paranoid, conspiratorial imagination can be detected in several instances in Chirculescu’s book, not only related to the activity of the Secret Services (where it can unsurprisingly be found too), but also in the dynamics between the health union groups and their political counterparts, in the religious conflict surrounding the death of Muhammad, or at the micro-level of the Jewish domestic household, where Sahib can hardly negotiate the emergence of Zamira, the she-djinn that occupies a central role in the context of the religious tensions, as well as in the (prophetic) Book that Iașa Litvak, Sahib and Mesneraș’s friend, makes an obsession for almost fifteen hundred years later. Everybody seems to doubt everybody, while even the telepathic connection between the twins – after all, a channel of direct, non-infested communication, supposedly free of conspiratorial distortions – is seen as “a curse.”

At the same time, this conspiratorial imagery establishes a frame of reference more common to the popular fiction than to the literary, mainstream one, namely the

articulation of a dimension specific to the mystery fiction that involves foreshadowing and the employment of clues aiming to engage the reader in a more active and deeper manner than the mainstream literature. Even though the novel does not build up toward a unified meaning that could equate the solving of a mystery puzzle, the *mise en abyme* that enables the intervention of Sebastian A. Corn³¹ in the narrative and the omniscient voice that seems to wink at the reader³² have the double function of undermining the realist valence of the story and of relativizing, in a specific postmodern fashion, the purity of fiction genre(s), contributing to the “mingling of different aesthetic codes” and playing their part in the formation of an “*aesthetically hybrid genre*.”³³

Moreover, regarding the possibility of reading *Greva păcătoșilor* through a genre fiction lens, it should be noted that the author makes use of several tropes that are frequently used in crime, or detective fiction, even though the numerous stories and sub-stories do not involve a concrete murder or any crime relevant to the functionality of the narrative aggregate whatsoever. At a structural level, for instance, “[t]he elements common to all crime fiction – or at least to the great majority of the genre – are the form and the focus on producing a certain reader response, particularly, a feeling of suspense and/or curiosity.”³⁴ Even though this type of reader response is hard to evaluate in a scientific manner, the intention of the author to arrange the fragments of the story according to a logic of suspense is visible enough. Speaking of maximalist novels, Ercolino notes that “the fragment not only serves as the basic morphological unit located at the core of its

peculiar organization, resulting as we know from an inextricable intermingling of chorality and polyphony, but it is also the tool which enables the deployment of the novel's extraordinary diegetic exuberance."³⁵

Building exactly upon this diegetic exuberance, I would argue that Chirculescu manages to create the reader response mentioned above by shifting the narrative perspective at certain key-moments of the novel, adopting the structural tactic of alternating series of related chapters with cliffhangers lacking the subsequent follow-up. On the other hand, episodes such as the disappearance of one member of Sahib's household, the Bedouin Jalal, are addressed in an expeditive manner (only seven pages later, the character appears again, as if nothing had happened) seem to signal a deliberate reaction to the standardized forms of framing narrative content in a meaningful way. This oscillation between pointedly expressive textual procedures and the deadpan manner of depicting events, can also be observed in relation to the gray-ing out strategy deployed by the author in the case of Sahib-the-physician-of-Muhammad.³⁶ He writes the future that he remembers³⁷, trying to organize a chaotic narrative material with the ambition of reaching some sort of spiritual beacon. In the final part of the book, an omniscient narrator participates more and more in the story, perhaps with the intention to assist this organizational effort. However, this attempt could almost be ruled out, given the fact that the same omniscient textual device signals that the character Buraq gets "out of [his] hand."³⁸ In an almost archetypal instrumentalization³⁹, the sequencing of images and associations that could evolve to a 'totalizing' meaning are

eschewed, while the emergence of this omniscient presence coincides with yet another recurring textual strategy belonging to popular (this time fantasy-related) fiction, in which Sahib-the-leader-of-the-present-day-medical-union is assaulted by a variety of inner voices from the past, one of the most memorable episodes revealing Sahib-the-physician-of-Muhammad addressing his contemporary double.⁴⁰

When it comes to the double, one of the most important and effective tropes used in the crime fiction, Chirculescu obviously uses this technique as an 'imitative form' "through which the excess of information" should be "structured and reined in."⁴¹ However, the production of *Greva păcătoșilor's* maximalist plot does not comply with this aesthetic imperative of order. In a rather cumulative and anarchic fashion, the device of the double is altered and exhausted until it disrupts (rather than organize) any quantifiable scenario. Mara's double (Mara 2.0), for instance, projected by Mesneraş on an online dating platform, upgrades into an uncontrollable new version (3.0) that 'haunts' her creator⁴², while the relation between the two Sahibs is ambiguous enough to generate a sort of polyvocal back and forth that complicates the causality laws of the prophetic Book even more. The Book itself, along with the legend of Parsifal, should presumably guide the evolution of the plot, as Mihai Iovănel accurately observes⁴³, according to a mythical paradigm that could possibly "impart order to [the] diegetic material."⁴⁴

However, I agree with Iovănel that this is not the case, meaning that the quest for the Grail is unfruitful, and the reader is invited by this "profound melancholy" to "return, in a loop, to the beginning of the

novel.”⁴⁵ One of the reasons for this displacement of the Book or Myth from the center of this maximalist narrative could reside in the fact that the versions of the story contained by Sahib’s Book are ever changing, ever competing⁴⁶, thus losing their logocentric power of systematizing the fictional substance. For me, the book written by Sahib and all the controversy surrounding it echoes the ‘Entertainment’ videotape from David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, a rather disturbing element that amplifies the hypertrophic structure of a comparable maximalist, excessive, and, I dare say, anarchetypal novel.

Of course, the present article constitutes just a brief investigation of the post-communist period with an explicit focus on the relation and the potential tension between Romanian genre fiction and

mainstream fiction. Certain features that are usually perceived as fixed points around which the fictional material is attracted in a centripetal development may also morph, as it was shown in the case of Florin Chirculescu’s *Greva păcătoșilor sau Apocrișa unui evreu* and play an opposing active role in the centrifugal impulse of a text with anarchetypal tendencies. All things considered, the textual configurations, the valorization strategies, and the cultural dynamics (in a broader sense) referred to in this text should be thoroughly investigated further.

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NOTES

1. Mihai Iovănel's article "Mobile Frontiers. Instrumentations of Paraliterature in Modern Romanian Literature (1878-2018)", *Transylvanian Review*, XXVIII, Suppl. No. 1, 2019, p. 75-82, later extended in his *Istoria literaturii române contemporane: 1990-2020* (The History of Contemporary Romanian Literature: 1990-2020), Iași, Polirom, 2021, p. 437-489, formulates a concise and accurate periodizing description of the mutations encompassing, inter alia, the Romanian paraliterature during the 1990s.
2. Max Roser, Hannah Ritchie and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2015) – "Internet". Published online at OurWorldInData.org. Retrieved from: '<https://ourworldindata.org/internet>' [Online Resource].
3. Vlad Pojoga, "Network Everything: Society, Publics, and Selves in the Digital Age", *Transylvanian Review* XXXI, Suppl. No. 1, 2022, p. 58-69.
4. Corin Braga, "Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after 'Structure'", in Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian (eds.), *Theory in the "Post" Era*, New York-London-Oxford-New Delhi-Sydney, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, p. 136.
5. Iovănel, *Istoria*, p. 445.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 443.

7. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, Taylor & Francis e-Library Edition, 2004, p. 63.
8. Andrei Terian in Corpul T's *Dezbateri: Proza românească în mileniul III (2001-2013)*, Nov. 2013 [Online Resource].
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10. Lincoln Mitchel, "When Popular Fiction Isn't Popular: Genre, Literary, and the Myths of Popularity", *Electric Literature*, Apr. 2016 [Online Resource].
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12. *Ibid.* p. 9.
13. *Ibid.* p. 5.
14. *Dicționarul cronologic al romanului românesc 1990-2000*, Bucharest, Editura Academiei Române, p. 35.
15. *Ibid.* p. 82.
16. *Ibid.* p. 350.
17. Thilottama Tharoor, "Red Herring and Read Alerts: Crime and its Excesses in *Almost Blue* and *Nairobi Heat*," in Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D'Haen (eds.), *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, New York-London-Oxford-New Delhi-Sydney, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 35.
18. *DCRR 1990-2000*, p. 25.
19. *Ibid.* 25.
20. *Ibid.* 25.
21. Braga, *op. cit.*, p. 135.
22. Andrei Terian, "Principles for an Evolutionary Taxonomy of the Romanian Novel", *Transylvanian Review* XXXI, Suppl. No. 1, 2022, p. 20.
23. Anton Cosma apud Terian, *op. cit.*
24. Iovănel, *Istoria*, p. 490.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 392-393. For a more in-depth presentation of Florin Chirculescu's activity as a science-fiction writer and a significant contextualization of his role in the literary field starting with the postcommunist period as well as his "symbolic" decision to sign his latest book with his real name, instead of his well-known penname, Sebastian A. Corn, see Iovănel, *Istoria*, p. 390-394.
26. Florin Chirculescu, "Timpul e adevăratul nostru dușman", Interviewed by Doinei Tronaru, *Adevărul*, 03/10/2018 [Online Resource].
27. See, among others, Steven C. Weisenburger's *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion*, Athens, Georgia, University of Georgia Press, 2006[1988], George Levine and David Leverence's *Mindful Pleasures: Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1976, or Stefano Ercolino's *The Maximalist Novel*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic Publishing, 2014.
28. Leo Bersani, "Pynchon, Paranoia, and Literature", in *Representations*, no. 25, 1989, p. 99-118
29. Ercolino, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 109
31. Chirculescu, *op. cit.*, p. 1069.
32. *Ibid.* p. 506-507, 603, 722.
33. Ercolino, *op. cit.*, p. 136.
34. Andreas Hedberg, "The Knife in the Lemon: Nordic Noir and the Glocalization of Crime Fiction," in Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D'Haen (eds.), *Crime Fiction as World Literature*, New York-London-Oxford-New Delhi-Sydney, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, p. 14.
35. Ercolino, *op. cit.*, p. 72
36. Chirculescu, *op. cit.*, p. 931-935.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 1093.
39. Braga, *op. cit.*, p. 126.
40. Chirculescu, *op. cit.*, p. 739-741.
41. Tom LeClair apud Ercolino, in *op. cit.*, p. 78.
42. Chirculescu, *op. cit.*, p. 956.
43. Iovănel, *Istoria*, p. 393.
44. Ercolino, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
45. Iovănel, *Istoria*, p. 393.
46. See, for instance the almost self-generating pattern of the dramatized version of the story (p. 805), or the uncertainty surrounding the translated version of the story (p. 1022).