

THEORETICAL PREMISES FOR A CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP "INVENTING WRITERS" AT THE STYLISTICS OF THE ROMANIAN LANGUAGE COURSE

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Abstract

The present research examines the theoretical and methodological premises concerning a creative writing workshop entitled "Inventing Writers", planned within a Stylistics of the Romanian language course, based on the idea of stimulating students' creativity by inventing biofictions (fictional writers), exploring various aspects of literary creation and the writing process, biography. The concept of biofiction and its theoretical framework (how it combines elements of biography and fiction) are explored.

Keywords: biofiction, biography, creative writing, imaginary, "Inventing Writers" etc.

One of the cross-curricular competencies formed in the Romanian Language Stylistics course, related to the unit of learning Fiction Style, is the competence to create belletristic texts as such (literary texts/texts marked by literariness).

While we recognize that "automatism, routine, and 'intellectual rituals' are necessary in the learning economy because no heuristic, creative approach can develop without its opposite, the algorithm, (B. Rey, 1996; C. Cuciș, 1996) it is nevertheless equally true that we cannot speak of real skill development unless, instead of knowledge transfer, the teacher asks students to rework the problem originally and efficiently" [1, p.50]. "The central issue, not an easy one, remains the creation of learning situations that include challenging tasks for students, through which they can make sense of what they have learned. Based on the idea that knowledge is not "formed" by nature, but in the process of acquiring it (Romița B. Iucu, 2001), the teacher designs and organizes learning situations in which the operations to be learned are not communicated to the students, but the students themselves are stimulated and supported to form them; thus, "the mechanisms that serve for learning become themselves the object of learning" [ibidem].

The **idea** for the creative workshop "*Inventing writers*" came spontaneously from reading the book *Ateliers d'écriture littéraire*, a collection of materials on conceptualizing and conducting various types of writers' workshops at both university and pre-university levels. Of the many types of literary workshops/experiences presented, our attention was drawn to the workshop *Inventing Writers (Inventer des écrivains)*, a contribution by Jean-Benoît Puech, to which we will refer

below. By his own admission, in the 1970s, Jean-Benoît Puech had a predilection (which was not widely recognized at the time) for imitating historical, referential, non-literary texts, for various pastiches: "J'ai du goût pour ces livres. Ce n'est pas seulement une perversion esthétique, j'aime aussi apprendre des choses sur la vie privée à travers tout ce qui est d'ordre biographique, et je préfère les apprendre ainsi plutôt que dans des études de cas trop brutales"²[5, p.308].

Jean-Benoît Puech suggests extending the study of biographical paratext to real writers, noting that what is true concerning the creation of imaginary writers is also true for real writers. Both real and imaginary writers are "le produit d'un même système d'activités" ("the product of the same system of activities"). The only difference between real and imaginary writers is, according to the author, their physical presence (i.e. "you can shake hands with a real writer", and preferably the hand with which he writes, Jean-Benoît Puech suggests)³.

Jean-Benoît Puech's research focuses on the writer as an object resulting from a series of practices of various kinds: verbal-discursive, iconographic, semiotic (taking into account the imagination/reconstruction of the space of the writer's home/workplace; circle of friends, social context, etc.)⁴. As a teacher, he taught an undergraduate course in which he dealt with the biographical aspect, which, according to the author, does not overlap with biography ("ce qu'on appelle le biographique, qui n'est pas la biographie, récit de la vie"), but includes a set of actions/practices, the object of which is the life and personality of the writer, not reducible to verbal-discursive practices ("l'ensemble des activités qui ont pour objet la vie et la personnalité de

² Translation in English: "I have a taste for these books. It's not just an aesthetic perversion, I also like to learn things about private life through biographical material, and I prefer to learn them that way rather than through overly violent case studies." [5, p.308]

³Jean-Benoît Puech claims: Car je me suis aperçu qu'en fait tout ce qui était mis en place pour créer un écrivain imaginaire était semblable à ce qui était mis en place pour les écrivains réels. Je me suis aperçu, si l'on peut dire, qu'au niveau verbal et à condition que le pastiche soit sérieux, il n'y a pas de différence entre un écrivain imaginaire et un écrivain réel. Tous deux sont le produit d'un même système d'activités. La seule

différence est évidemment, dans un cas, la présence d'un corps : on peut serrer la main d'un écrivain réel. Mais est-ce bien la main qui écrit ?" [idem, p. 307]

⁴In this regard, Jean-Benoît Puech noted: „[...] j'ai commencé une recherche sur l'auteur en tant qu'objet d'un certain nombre de pratiques, essentiellement verbales, mais aussi iconographiques, et plus largement sémiotiques, comme l'installation ou la reconstitution de la maison de l'écrivain, ou comme les commémorations par les associations d'amis d'auteur, pour voir comment l'auteur était le produit de ce réseau de pratiques". [idem, p.307-308]

l'écrivain, ces pratiques n'étant pas réductibles aux activités verbales»)[*idem*, p.308].

Here it is worth noting that the specialist is not so much interested in the personality of the writer as in his/her personage: "Je me suis moins intéressé à la personne de l'écrivain qu'à son personnage, et il m'est apparu qu'il y avait une mise en scène de ce personnage à travers diverses activités. Certaines de ces activités concernent sa parole et même sa voix (interviews, entretiens, conversations) que j'ai appelées «dialogues»; certaines concernent son apparence physique, que j'ai appelées «masques et costumes» (ce sont les portraits, écrits ou iconiques); d'autres concernent les lieux où il vit, où il écrit, et même où il situe ses œuvres, que j'ai appelées «décor»; certaines activités relèvent du témoignage immédiat ou ultérieur (journal ou souvenirs) et je les ai appelées «le drame» et enfin, l'activité principale, ou du moins synthétique, concerne la biographie, et je l'ai appelée la «mise en scène générale» (il peut y avoir plusieurs représentations successives!). Toutes ces activités font appel à des tiers, les «agents du biographique» attachés à l'institution littéraire, les «machinistes». J'ai donc fait un cours assez traditionnel sur toutes ces activités. J'ai parlé aussi de l'aspect historique du biographique, de l'«invention de l'auteur»⁵[*idem*, p. 309]

Jean-Benoît Puech's vision is one in which projection is carried according to the principle of Russian dolls (or drawers – "drawer within a drawer"), i.e. a real writer contains within himself an imaginary writer (a complex repertoire of versions of the real writer, i.e. several possibilities/versions of imaginary writers of the same real writer).

It is an extrapolation of the psychotype, the affective patterns/modes of the real writer/modus dicendi, modus vivendi, modus sentire onto the imaginary writer of the writer. It is a construction of the 'body' (corpus) of the imaginary writer, but not in the sense of a "body in the flesh and bones", but a "staged body, like that of a personage" ("[...] un corps même, mais qui encore une fois n'est pas un corps de chair et d'os, qui est un corps construit, un corps mis en scène, comme celui d'un personnage" [*ibidem*]).

⁵ In English translation the quote reads as follows: „I was not so much interested in the writer's personality as in his personage, and it seemed to me that there was a staging of that personage through various actions. Some of these actions concern their speech and even voice (interviews, conversations), which I called "dialogues"; others relate to his appearance, which I called "masks and costumes" (these are portraits, written or iconic); still others concern the places where he/she lives, where he/she writes, and even where he/she places their work, which I've called "décor"; some activities reveal immediate or later testimony (diaries or memoirs), and I have called them "drama", and finally, the main, or at least synthetic activity, is related to biography, and I have called it "overall staging" (there can be several successive performances here!). All these actions involve third parties, "biography agents" representing literary institution, the "stagehands". So I did a fairly traditional course on all these actions. I also talked about the historical aspect of biography, about the "invention of the author". [*idem*, 309]

⁶As the author confesses „Je voulais essayer d'attirer l'attention sur tout un paratexte qui est peut-être une périphérie à

Thus, the specialist emphasizes "the whole paratext which can be a periphery passing through the centre", considering here the magazines and radio and television broadcasts about literature, the articles in the catalogues of house-museums, etc.⁶

The concept of the workshop "Inventing Writers" also implies certain types of constraints: in addition to the literary ones mentioned above, there is also a sociological constraint. The latter concerns the socio-professional context (the writers fit into a specific environment, they do or do not follow a career with all the stages of their career path, etc. - their biographical "baggage" that they carry with them). Before introducing this type of literary writing workshop as part of an undergraduate course, Jean-Benoît Puech followed a long path of "initiation", writing a collection of short stories and a novel. His book *Bibliothèque d'un amateur* (1978) took the form of a small imaginary library in which each chapter is a summary accompanied by a commentary on an invented work. The work contains fifteen texts that would belong to the library of an amateur whose personality is revealed through the grid of the contents of this library⁷. It was only after the publication of this book that Jean-Benoît Puech would turn to doctoral studies and a university career, during which time he would learn that what he had done was not something original, but a literary species that he began to study with great care. Jean-Benoît Puech thus evokes, „J'avais appris qu'on nomme ce genre la «supposition d'auteur». Depuis longtemps des écrivains ont inventé des écrivains et ont écrit des livres sur les livres que ces écrivains imaginaires sont censés avoir eux-mêmes écrits. J'ai donc décidé d'étudier de tels ouvrages et tous les cas de figures possibles dans ce genre particulier. Je me suis adressé à Gérard Genette dont j'admire l'œuvre de critique et il a accepté de diriger cette étude⁸".[5, p. 306]

As can be deduced from the above, the biographical element/biographical dimension has strongly impacted the "flood of the imaginary", which requires a brief outline of the theoretical framework of the problem concerned. Thus, since the 1930s, they discuss

faire passer par le centre: les journaux et les émissions de radio et de télévision sur la littérature, les articles des catalogues de maisons-musées, les iconographies, etc. Il fallait aussi attirer l'attention sur les caractéristiques génériques de ces types de discours, puisqu'il faut connaître les traits caractéristiques d'un texte pour pouvoir l'imiter. [*idem*, p. 310]

⁷About *Bibliothèque d'un amateur* (1978), Jean-Benoît Puech affirms that: „C'est une série d'une quinzaine de textes censés appartenir à la bibliothèque d'un amateur dont la personnalité se révèle à travers cette bibliothèque car les livres qui la composent ont des points communs (essentiellement thématiques ou de construction, bien sûr, puisque les citations qui permettent d'en connaître le style ne sont pas fréquentes) [*idem*, 305-306]

⁸English translation: „I learned that this genre is called "author guessing". Writers have long been inventing writers and writing books about the books these imaginary writers would have written themselves. I therefore decided to study such works and all instances of this particular genre. I approached Gérard Genette, whose work as a critic I admired, and he agreed to direct this study.

about the affirmation of a distinct genre - biofiction⁹. Considered a relatively recent “genre, difficult to delimit and little known outside contemporary literary research” [2, p.128], biofiction or literary fiction, “phénomène littéraire contemporain et transnational” [4, p. 3], stands out, in the words of Alexander Gefen, as “a massive fact in literary and cultural history” (“fait massif d’histoire littéraire et culturelle») [3, p.128], thus exploring “a new biographical imaginary” focused on an interest in writing ‘lives’. Biofiction is a literary form that combines elements of biography and fiction, being a literary re-imagining of the lives of real individuals (writers, artists, etc.) through their fictional representations. The phenomenon of biofiction crystalized thanks to postmodernism, which played a catalytic role in the development of biofiction, but experts note the tendency to transgress postmodernism: «Cependant, la biofiction sort actuellement des limites de la logique propre au postmodernisme. Ses innovations formelles, ses jeux avec les frontières entre fait et fiction et ses reconfigurations de l’histoire ont été largement influencées par la pensée postmoderne, mais ils ont également commencé à dévoiler de nouveaux mécanismes de symbolisation qui s’écartent de ce paradigme et redécouvrent des sensibilités modernistes ou victoriennes. Nous postulons que l’exploration des relations complexes de la biofiction avec le postmodernisme éclairera la plasticité du genre à travers le temps et révélera sa capacité à mettre en dialogue différentes époques littéraires»¹⁰

In his study *Inventer une vie*, Alexandre Gefen reveals the importance of human life as a literary and cultural theme in contemporary French literature. His preoccupation with the lives of personalities or characters, whether illustrious or anonymous (insignificant), is based on the exploration of imagination and singularity through fiction. The invention of lives with a hybrid status (referentiality plus fictionality) represents a type of literature that belongs, as the author estimates, to “the tradition of vanities and literary tombs”: «tradition des vanités et des tombeaux littéraires: les biographies imaginaires ressassent le drame de la dissipation des possibles dans l’action et la tragédie de la mort individuelle. Le nouveau s’y décrit comme un champ d’emprunts, patents ou latents, à des formes d’enquêtes mais aussi de narrations funèbres parfois aussi archaïques que celles de l’hagiographie» [3, p. 8]. Biofiction is recognised as «art littéraire de la mémoire» (Gefen), a transhistoric “genre” („l’héritage immémorial d’un genre transhistorique” [ibidem]. It discusses a generation of writers who refuse to make a strict delineation between the narrative forms of conventional and fictional biography.

Biofiction is placed under the sign of the return of the Author, being understood as a “substitute autobiography” that turns to the narrative of another to access one’s own Self («substitut de l’autobiographie» effectuant un «détour nécessaire» vers le «récit de l’autre (...) pour parvenir à soi», la biofiction y est d’emblée placée sous le signe du «retour du sujet», tandis que le «retour de l’Histoire») [*apud. idem.*, p. 373].

Although there are differences between traditional biographies and fictional biographies (biofictions), both forms are essential in contemporary literature, as experts argue. Contemporary writers approach life writing as an attempt to undertake a referential putsch to rediscover transitivity («un putsch référentiel pour retrouver une «transitivité») [3, p.8]. The aim of biofiction is, therefore, to rediscover and capture the essence of the individual with its light and shadow (Jungian speaking), both positive and negative, a form of appropriation of individuality and individual sensibilities. Invented / re-invented lives form a “literary mythography”: «mythographie proprement littéraire fondée sur (,,) le sentiment moderne du particulier et de l’innéritable: elles enrichissent, aux marges de la grande Histoire, nos existences de nouveaux possible [idem].

Biofictions take a particular interest in the lost world of the past and at the same time stand as solutions against the inexorable passage of time and the perception of history as a destructive force, concerned with a re-evaluation of referentiality and a new form of literary expression. The emergence and development of biofiction thus rests on a belief in written memory, a humanist aspiration for bookish glory, a textual survival in the face of oblivion: „foi contemporaine dans la mémoire écrite, nos rêves humanistes de gloire livresque et notre religion de la survie textuelle aux forces, actives et passives, de l’oubli”[idem, p.10].

In this vein, it is also worth noting that biofictions based on real lives/personalities, trying to get into the ordinariness of singularity or to penetrate the mystery of destinies decreed exceptional («l’ordinaire de la singularité ou à pénétrer dans le mystère de destins décrétés exceptionnels») [idem, p. 9]., are, in fact, an opening, offering the reader a space for reflection and projection of their own existence: „ un désir d’existence toujours ouvert tout en rendant au lecteur un espace où projeter ses propres possibles, souvent hors le monde (ibidem). Biofiction thus captures the diversity and complexity of human experiences, offering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of lives or, as A. Gefen puts it, „constitue les vies en destin, met en œuvre une intelligence de la totalité vitale, offre un horizon romanesque ou minuscule, tragique ou ludique à nos précieuses variations” [3, p. 10].

⁹Alain Buisine is credited with conceptualizing the word biofiction [4, p.9] - «Biofictions», *Revue des sciences humaines*, n. 224, 1991, p. 7-13, and Marcel Schwob’s work *Vies imaginaires* (1895) marks the birth of this composite genre. R. Barthes, in turn, introduces the notion of biographem («biographème»)

¹⁰English translation: However, biofiction transcends the limits of postmodern logic. Its formal innovations, its play with

the boundaries between fact and fiction and its reconfigurations of history have been largely influenced by postmodern thought, but they have also begun to reveal new mechanisms of symbolization that depart from this paradigm and rediscover modernist or Victorian sensibilities. We postulate that exploring the complex relationship of biographical fiction with postmodernism will shed light on the genre’s malleability across time and reveal its ability to bring different literary epochs into dialogue.

The importance of this kind of literature lies in the fact that it can be seen as a complementary way of understanding the world, a way of recovering the individual dimension of abstract issues, offering the possibility of approaching/reflecting through concrete/specific cases, probing the effects of emotion and imagination: „un mode complémentaire de compréhension du monde, de ressaisie de la dimension individuelle des problèmes abstraits, d’une pensée par cas, et reconnaîtront l’efficace de l’émotion et de l’imaginaire” [*ibidem*].

In conclusion, there are sufficient theoretical premises that favour the exploration of biofiction in a creative writing workshop such as “*Inventing Writers*” at the Stylistics of the Romanian Language course, which is not only a creative learning experience but also an opportunity to explore and discover one's own skills and passions in the field of literature and creative writing.

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