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## AGLAJA VETERANYI – THE AUTOFICTION OF A NOMADIC EXISTENCE

The literary transpositions of the self – included, as a defining “umbrella term”, in the category of *life-writing*, namely those texts with an (auto)biographical and memoir character –, through which the authorial self subjectively transposes their inner thoughts and experiences, have gained along the years an increasingly significance within literary studies. Over the last decades, a literary category that can be considered separate within the narratives of the self, bordering autobiography and fiction, is *autofiction*. The term was initially proposed by Serge Doubrovsky in the novel *Fils*<sup>1</sup> (1977), and it launched, with its first attempts of definition, a series of polemics regarding its nature and its conceptual delimitation.

The present research does not propose an exhaustive presentation of the attempts to define what is (or is not) autofiction, although I will appeal to some of the most rigorous conceptual delimitations, but a presentation of how autofiction imposes itself as a solution (and manner of escaping of the self) for different traumatic experiences. Beyond the *trauma narratives*, which expose, in a fictional universe, various traumas and traumatic experiences, autofiction allows the (auto)fictional transposition of the self through subjective, authentic and truthful recollections and expositions, so that the effect of the narrative act works in a double sense most of the time: both from the self towards the reader, and from the literature itself to the affected self. Representative in this sense are Aglaja Veteranyi’s novels – or better said, *autofictions* – *Why Is the Child Boiling in the Polenta*<sup>2</sup> and *The Shelf of the Last Breaths*<sup>3</sup>. These literary works represent the core of the present paper. The two texts offer a subjective transposition of the child and, at the same time, of the teenager Aglaja, strongly affected by her family’s migration and the accumulation of traumatic experiences lived throughout their nomadic existence. Coming from a family with a significant matriarchal basis, the subjective feminine narrative voice accumulates and at the same time recounts the narrative through an uninterrupted stream of consciousness. She recalls the traumas that the former communist regime in the country caused to the

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<sup>1</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* [*The Son*], Galilée, Paris, 1977. Unless otherwise stated, the quotations are translated into English by the author of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *De ce fierbe copilul în mămăligă* [*Why Is the Child Boiling in the Polenta*]. Translated by Nora Iuga, Iași, Polirom, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *Raftul cu ultimele suflări* [*The Shelf with the Last Breaths*]. Translated by Nora Iuga, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Iași, Polirom, 2019.

family, and records the consequent necessity of constant migration. In the case of Aglaja Veteranyi, migration from one country to another transfers the character into an autofictional universe, literarily transposed as a form of prose with strong autobiographical and subjective underpinnings.

Thus, as a “fiction of the self”, autofiction represents a mode of narrative creation around which a multitude of perspectives and definitions still gravitate. Serge Doubrovsky himself has repeatedly reconsidered the initial definition provided on the back cover of the novel *Fils*. For Doubrovsky, autofiction represents the “fiction” of events and happenings with a realistic character at the center, in which “the language of the adventure has been entrusted to the adventure of language in its total freedom”<sup>4</sup>. The innovation that Doubrovsky brings to literary prose does not consist in redefining the narrative limits of the novel, but in the clear demarcation and, implicitly, in the “distance” between autobiography and (auto)fiction. When he talks about the nature of *self-narration*, Arnaud Schmitt discusses this precise distinction imposed by Doubrovsky, namely the differentiation between the categories of (auto)biography and fiction: “It was conceived as a sort of memoir with a hint of fiction, in other terms as a novelistic autobiography, not as an autobiographical novel”<sup>5</sup>. Schmitt himself perceives the cognitive side of self-referential texts as defining for this distinction: “a creative form of self-referential texts, memoirs nourished by the most innovative narrative energy”<sup>6</sup>. In the case of autofiction, in its mix with biographical elements the share of fiction counterbalances biography, a perspective also supported by Vincent Colonna: “‘Autofiction’ is fiction, and only the name of the author is real”<sup>7</sup>.

Addressing the degree of authorial involvement in the narrative act, Marjorie Worthington also mentions the transposition of the image of the author into the text. Most of the time, this – the autofictional transposition of the author – can be found in the guise of the main eponymous character, who also takes on the role of the subjective narrative voice but who cannot be identified with the author himself:

The primary defining trait of autofiction as I define it is the inclusion of a characterized version of the author, usually as the protagonist. I say characterized version of the author because as autofictional narratives unfold, it becomes patently clear that, although they share a name, the protagonists and the authors are not identical to one another<sup>8</sup>.

Even if autofiction allows the creation of a character with the same name and similar existential traits as those taken from the author’s biography, there is no

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<sup>4</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils [The Son]*, Paris, Galilée, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> Arnaud Schmitt, “Self-Narration”, in Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (ed.), *Handbook of Autobiography/Autofiction*, Boston – Berlin, De Gruyter, 2018, p. 659.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction et autres Mythomanies Littéraires*, Paris, Tristram, 2004, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of “Me”: Contemporary American Autofiction*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2018, p. 18.

relation of equivalence between the two narrative instances, as in the case of diaristic writings or memoirs, for example. Precisely from this point of view, therefore, autofiction is not (only) autobiography, its innovation and creative originality consisting in the fictional transposition of realistic elements taken from the author's biographical journey. The narrative "truth" is imposed, thus, as distinct from "the historical or biographical factuality"<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, the delimitation from autobiography is also noted by Hywel Dix, in the introduction to the collective volume *Autofiction in English*<sup>10</sup>. Autofiction, in Dix's view, presupposes a greater "degree" of "experiencing" the "limits of the self" – an assumption of creative freedom therefore – which is implicitly much more permissive, the author claims, than the simple exact reproduction of already (arch)known biographical facts: "It is, moreover, a form of autobiographical writing that allows a degree of experimentation with the definition and limits of the self, rather than the slavish recapitulation of known biographical facts"<sup>11</sup>. Likewise, the status of autobiographical literature is substantiated by Philippe Lejeune in *The Autobiographical Pact*<sup>12</sup>. The autobiographical account requires, in Lejeune's view, a "pact" between the confessional voice and the reader, by means of which the identification of the authorial instance with the narrative instance can be recognized thanks to the common name<sup>13</sup>.

However, autofiction claims itself as a distinct literary species. If Lejeune speaks of an *autobiographical pact*, Jacques Lecarme theorizes instead the *autofictional pact*<sup>14</sup>. Fictional elements and strategies, once applied to realistic and subjective renderings of the authorial self, distort the accurate unbiased rendering of facts. Autobiographical fiction thus moves away from the realistic horizon of the related facts but still maintains a correlation between itself and the fictional creative process. The connection between fiction and reality comes, most of the time, from the liberating effect produced at the moment of the self's transposition into a fictional universe. As Hywel Dix notes in the introduction of his edited volume, autofiction becomes a process of (self)exploration and (self)experimentation of the evolution of the authorial self, founded on the traumatic experiences that drive the self towards confession in order to overcome the trauma more easily:

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22: "In autofiction, as in all fiction then, narrative 'Truth' is distinct from historical or biographical factuality".

<sup>10</sup> Hywel Dix (ed.), *Autofiction in English*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Pactul autobiographic [The Autobiographical Pact]*. Translated into Romanian by Irina Margareta Nistor, București, Univers, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Philippe Lejeune, "The Autobiographical Contract", in Tzvetan Todorov (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 193.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Lecarme, "L'autofiction, un mauvais genre?", in Philippe Lejeune (ed.), *Autofictions & cie*, Paris, RITM, 1993, pp. 227-249.

In this sense, autofiction is a project of self-exploration and self-experimentation on the part of the author. This in turn is partly because many works of autofiction have been written in the aftermath of some kind of traumatic experience – real or imagined – so that the process of writing in response to trauma can be seen as a means of situating the self in a new context when other relational constructs have been removed or jeopardized<sup>15</sup>.

Such effects of the transposition of a traumatically affected self can be found in the autofictional works of Aglaja Veteranyi. The narrative voice recounts events that fall within the sphere of trauma, and some of them are represented by the constraints to which the author's family is subjected by the former socialist regime. Agnieszka Mroziak and Anja Tippner also talk about the traumatic effects of socialism – captured in autobiographical novels and autofiction – in a study published in the *European Journal of Life Writing*<sup>16</sup>. Under different forms of literary exposition included under the category of life-writing, such as autobiographies, autofictions, memoirs or diaries, the authors choose to confess their own experiences of the years dominated by socialism<sup>17</sup>. Literature – and, implicitly, autofiction – becomes, in this way, not only a form of creation that supports its own fictional universe, but also a close connection and a manner of communication between generations and distinct social categories. The evocation and transmission of personal memories mark the intergenerational differences especially as the authors as adults reproduce events experienced in childhood or adolescence:

The protagonist/narrator of most analysed texts is a child/adolescent whose biography, or at least some of its elements, can be easily linked to the biography of the author [...]. This makes the works in question a kind of record of a generational experience of the authors [...] for whom the memory of late socialism is also the memory of their own childhood and adolescence<sup>18</sup>.

This is also the case of Aglaja Veteranyi, who exposes her childhood and adolescence as traumatic stages that marked her entire evolutionary path, from the migratory journey and the conflicts in the dysfunctional family she grew up in, to the communist political restrictions in her native country.

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<sup>15</sup> Hywel Dix (ed.), *Autofiction in English*, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Agnieszka Mroziak, Anja Tippner, "Remembering Late Socialism in Autobiographical Novels and Autofictions from Central and Eastern Europe: Introduction", *European Journal of Life Writing*, 2021, 10, pp. 1-14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5: "An important source employed by contemporary scholars of late socialism are various types of personal documents and life-writing: autobiographies, memoirs, letters, diaries, photographs. These materials, which are indispensable for analysis of the specificity of the epoch, are also a tool of communication within and between various social and age groups. Particularly valuable in this regard are not only autobiographical texts, but also autofictional ones, which feed on stories of life under socialism and process them in various ways".

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

Thus, Aglaja Veteranyi's prose could be qualified as trauma narrative, stories that represent, most of the time, an attempt to translate painful experiences into language ("trauma narratives represent the written accounts of survivors' struggles to put their experience into comprehensible language"<sup>19</sup>). The attempts to fictionalize trauma can also be found in autofictions (*trauma autofiction*), a literary category that subscribes to the multitude of forms of trauma narratives but to which a higher degree of experimentation is attributed, since the characterological delimitations are not yet completely established in literary criticism<sup>20</sup>.

However, unlike the purely fictional narrative, what autofictions of trauma allow is an objective "distancing" of the authorial self from the traumatic event, so that its rendering is accomplished with the fullness of the lived event and not just as succinct naming of subjective fractions retrieved from memory. In this way, the issue of the distinction between author and narrating character reasserts itself, as the "extratextual author" of autofiction becomes an "avatar" of the fictional entity. In spite of this, the similarity of the names of the two narrative entities provides "credibility"<sup>21</sup>, so that the trauma is attributed to the author because it has a high degree of veracity. Simona Mitroiu also talks about the difficulty of confessing trauma. When the author recalls his/her past, he/she becomes a witness of the evoked events<sup>22</sup>. The "distancing" from the related facts, previously mentioned, can be reinterpreted by this double act of testimony and, at the same time, of confessing one's own past, through which the authorial self exposes itself publicly, in the full intimacy of one's thoughts and experiences.

Aglaja Veteranyi is, therefore, an author who transposes her migratory experience on the border between the biographical and the fictional. The Romanian origin writer settled in Switzerland at the end of a long journey with her

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<sup>19</sup> Marjorie Worthington, *The Story of "Me"*, p. 99.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 99-100: "Through the inherently split subjectivity of its author-character, autofictional strategies allow for the depiction of a critical distance from a heretofore unrepresentable traumatic event. The author-character becomes both an avatar for the extratextual author and a fictional character whose depiction need not adhere to the strict tenets of truth-telling. In other words, the 'fiction' part of autofiction allows for a departure from a strict adherence to referentiality in order to shape the story that is difficult to tell. At the same time, and somewhat ironically, the onomastic connection between author and author-character (the 'auto' part of autofiction) lends a kind of credibility – whether deserved or not – to the trauma fiction".

<sup>22</sup> Simona Mitroiu (ed.), *Women's Narratives and the Postmemory of Displacement in Central and Eastern Europe*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 6-7: "In speaking about the personal past, one becomes a witness to past events, as personal memories and experiences are brought into the public arena. This act is no easy task, and the process of witnessing and testifying (and the relationship between direct witnesses and indirect ones, and the connection of memory and postmemory) is one of the most complex and multi-layered relations that can be analysed in the realm of memory studies".

family. They left Romania in 1967 with the circus where they were working because of the rigors of the communist security services and the oppression to which different members of the family were subjected. Their itineraries included not only European countries, but also regions of South America or Africa, with the circus where the author's mother, as well as her husband and sister, worked. The biographies of the Romanian origin writer record a traumatic childhood lived with parents working as circus performers, her childhood experiences also representing the background of her pseudo-autobiographical accounts in the two published novels, *Why Is the Child Boiling in the Polenta* and *The Shelf of the Last Breaths*.

In an article dedicated to Veteranyi's novels, Ștefan Fircă notes that her work is "specific to the aesthetics of autofiction" ("The ambiguous status of the voice [...] is specific for the aesthetics of autofiction"<sup>23</sup>), an aspect that can also be inferred, in my view, from Aglaja Veteranyi's own statements regarding the veracity of her writings. In an interview given to Rodica Binder, when asked about the "line between reality and fiction" in her works, Aglaja Veteranyi states that this aspect is not "important" to her: "I don't want to write the truth, I'm not writing a history book, I just want to 'erzählen' ['to tell']"<sup>24</sup>. Her purpose as an authorial instance is, beyond the memoir transposition of the facts, a fictional one. Considering her novels as part of the category of autofiction is thus valid, as fragments from the traumatic biographical experience of the author of Romanian origin are narratively integrated in the fictional transposition of realistic experiences.

Thus, Aglaja Veteranyi's first novel, *Why Is the Child Boiling in the Polenta*, represents a fictional attempt to transpose the traumatic subjective experiences of a narrative voice who still finds herself regressing to an infantile stage which, however, subliminally hides an early traumatic maturity. In an article from *Steaua* literary magazine dedicated to the comparative analysis of Veteranyi's and Herta Müller's works, Dana Bizuleanu notices that the novel imposes itself as a "Gordian knot" of childhood trauma: "Veteranyi's novel severs precisely the Gordian knot of childhood trauma, its narrative building a universe of silence through the eyes of a child in the process of becoming"<sup>25</sup>. The narrative is circumscribed to a "universe of fear and childhood marked by the limits of subsistence"<sup>26</sup>. Forced to leave the country because of the communist restrictions

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<sup>23</sup> Ștefan Fircă, "Adapting In-Betweenness: Transpositions of Aglaja Veteranyi's Literature in Theatre, Music and Film", in Hajnal Király, Zsolt Györi (eds.), *Postsocialist Mobilities: Studies in Eastern European Cinema*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021, pp. 232-262.

<sup>24</sup> Rodica Binder, "Aglaja Veteranyi – Salt mortal de la circ la literatură" ["Aglaja Veteranyi – Deadly Leap from Circus to Literature"], *România literară*, 33, 2000, 31, p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Dana Bizuleanu, "Limbaje ale traumei: Aglaja Veteranyi și Herta Müller" ["Languages of Trauma: Aglaja Veteranyi and Herta Müller"], *Steaua*, 64, 2014, 3-4, p. 75.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

and prohibitions, the family subsists due to the mother's circus act of hanging herself from the wire of a trapeze by the length of her own hair. The danger of her acrobatics is deeply felt and internalized by the child who anticipates, witnessing helplessly at the same time, the fatal moment of her mother's deadly fall, out of a paralyzing fear of losing her.

In fact, the interiorization of fear gives birth to the fictional story of "the child who boils in the polenta", a leitmotif at the level of the narrative that is also present in the title. The story is initially concocted by the narrator's sister to distract her during her mother's performances, but it is amplified by the subjective narrative voice as the sense of abandonment becomes more acute. The more intense the danger of losing her mother (and remaining alone, in a perpetual state of abandonment), the more the atrocities and sufferings of the narratively projected "child" intensify. Boiling in the polenta becomes, from my perspective, a mask of projecting her inner suffering and fear:

When I imagine how the child boils in the polenta and how bad it hurts, I stop thinking incessantly that my mother could fall from up there, from above, she says. But it doesn't help at all. I always have to think about my mother's death so that it doesn't take me by surprise<sup>27</sup>.

The child boils (in polenta), as a double fictional transposition of trauma. Therefore, the novel projects a narrative within another narrative, through which the trauma of the child is rendered by the elements of physical suffering. The association with the culinary sphere is representative for the entire prose of Aglaja Veteranyi. For that matter, it is not at all intriguing why "polenta" is chosen as the boiling medium, and not basic water or any other liquid substance – including tar, maybe. "Mamaliga", perceived as a traditional Romanian dish, offers the literary image of a symbol of national identity. The fictional character of the "child" "boils in the polenta" because the narrative self, strongly linked to the Romanian national space through the gastronomic sphere – and the analysis of the novel will strengthen this vision – also "boils" in its own suffering. Internal grinding and deglutition are achieved through constant decomposition processes.

Of particular interest in the fiction of the traumatic migratory experience is the way in which the sense of belonging is diluted and, at the same time, condensed in the various forms and spaces with which the narrative subjectivity comes into contact. These forms are most of the time spatial metaphors that can be associated with what Dana Bizuleanu calls "transfer-images"<sup>28</sup>. For example, the trailer that

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<sup>27</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *De ce fierbe copilul în mămăligă*, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Dana Bizuleanu, "Limbaje ale traumei", p. 75: "They are the narrative vehicles that metaphorize the characters' physical and mental displacement, conveying their traumatic dimension and configuring it spatially and temporally. In turn, the transfer images can textually signal other traumas, being mechanisms that coagulate the imaginary marked by limit experiences".

represents the family's home at the time when the child's parents are acrobats at the circus is perceived by the narrator at an identity level: "The circus is always abroad. But the wagon in which we live is always at home. I open the door of the car as little as possible so that home does not evaporate"<sup>29</sup>. The fragility and securing familiarity of that space is so accentuated due to the eternal temporary character it carries, that the narrative instance tries, with obvious concern, to save the stability of the home that the "wagon" offers for as long as possible. The national space is no longer perceived as an identity due to the prohibition to return to the country, imposed by the socialist regime ("THE DICTATOR SURROUNDED ROMANIA WITH BARBED WIRE"<sup>30</sup>). The traumatic dimension of the space-wagon can also be noticed in the novel. The female narrative voice, in a presentation of the divinity she trusts to protect her mother, describes one of the culinary-spiritual rituals attributed to the supreme deity seen in the guise of an all-protecting God:

In every new town I dig a hole in the ground in front of the wagon we live in, I stick my hand in, then my head, and hear how God breathes underground and chews. [...] / GOD IS ALWAYS VERY HUNGRY. / He also drinks my lemonade with pleasure, I stick a straw in the ground and offer him a drink to protect my mother. / And I also lay for him there in the hole a bit of the tasty food that my mother cooks<sup>31</sup>.

The narrative voice of the main character constantly feeds, in a ritualistic gesture, the sacred monster in the hole dug in the ground, lest it "consume" her mother because it might feel uncontrollably hungry. The child Aglaja also offers him "the tasty food that her mother cooks" to complete this Pantagruelic feast and, at the same time, to point out her mother in his divine protection through the quality of her gastronomic preparations. It is worth mentioning the connection that the girl maintains with the divinity, the connection allowed precisely by the "foreign" space, as in her native country any form of faith was forbidden by the communist rigors: "THE DICTATOR HAS FORBIDDEN GOD. / But abroad we are allowed to be believers, although there is almost no Orthodox church. Every night I say the prayer I learned from my mother. At home, children are not allowed to pray or to draw God"<sup>32</sup>.

Even if the narrative voice can be difficult (or even impossible) to identify as belonging to a (certain) space because "the circus is always abroad", never "at home", what she as a feminine voice reveals as affective identity is designated by the culinary sphere. Traditional Romanian dishes, specific tastes or smells, all ensure, along with the ever-moving caravan, a much-coveted feeling of stability,

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<sup>29</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *De ce fierbe copilul în mămăligă*, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

safety and belonging: “Mother’s ripe eggplants smell like home everywhere, no matter what country we are in”; “I know my country by smell. It smells like mom’s food”<sup>33</sup>.

Thus, the migratory space, geographically indeterminate and generically called “abroad”, is nevertheless perceived as a space of abundance. The allusion is, of course, to the restrictions imposed in the country under communism, when families often faced significant shortages of basic food. The idea is reinforced by the description of certain actions that demonstrate the incredibly difficult life that the family had to face in order to survive: “here we live like rich people; after the meal we can throw the bones out of the soup without feeling remorse, while at home we had to keep them for the next soup”<sup>34</sup>. Because of the lack of permanent sources of food, the family is forced to reuse certain products to ensure an additional meal that does not require many other ingredients. The affectivity manifested at the olfactory level is therefore representative in the case of Aglaja Veteranyi’s writings.

In this way we could say that an identity by extension of the native country, of the native territory is achieved through the culinary and olfactory elements that define it. At the same time, the connection with the maternal entity (“my mother’s food”!) and, implicitly, with the space of her origin is an intrinsic one. The narrator’s psychological comfort is ensured not by the simple preparation of some specifically Romanian dishes, but by the action and identity imprint of the mother in perfecting the dishes. In the aforementioned interview given to Rodica Binder, the author declares that food has constantly represented an identity and psychological boundary to which the family referred at significant moments:

My mother always prepared food for me, Romanian food, and I thought that this is Romania, this is home, this is love; my mother shows me her love through food; *sarmale*, polenta... it’s something beautiful, isn’t it? But something that has a certain power over me. When she can’t speak, when she cries, my mother goes to the kitchen and cooks. My mother’s sister died half a year ago. My mother took her food to the hospital; Aunt Reta was dying and we were all... eating. And for me, all things are one: food, crying, joy, that’s how it’s been in my family, that’s how I’ve always felt<sup>35</sup>.

Thus, the figure of the mother plays an overwhelming role throughout the entire traumatic existence of the daughter. Often characterized by her actions as a twisted mother, the decisions made by the maternal figure and often her neglect, including the girls’ abandonment in an orphanage, deeply affect the narrative self. The entire narrative imaginary is circumscribed to her affectively potentiated corporeality. The phantasmagorical projections of the fatal end of the mother’s fall

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Rodica Binder, “Aglaja Veteranyi – Salt mortal”, p. 21.

are also depicted through elements of an affected corporeality: “I see her setting fire to her hair with burning torches, the way she falls to the ground laughing. And when I lean towards her, her face decomposes and turns into ashes”<sup>36</sup>. These elements imaginarily depict the subjective voice of the girl. The female character feels the possible loss of her mother deeply and traumatically because there is an umbilical connection between the two: “Before I was born, I was an acrobat on a wire for eight months – I was standing on my head. I was in my mother’s belly, she was doing splits on the high wire and I was looking down or standing on that wire. Once she could no longer get up from the rope and I was ready to fall out”<sup>37</sup>. The period of gestation is felt as an identity boundary between the narrative self and the maternal one, and the fear of falling off the wire – enhanced by the role of an already established destiny – is present even at the fetus stage.

There are aspects of the circus life that render spatiality unfamiliar. In verse prose, the narrative voice records: “But also the foreigners mean us harm. / I am not allowed to leave the living car alone. / I’m not allowed to play with the other children. / Mother doesn’t trust anyone. / I have to learn this too”<sup>38</sup>. Thus, the “foreign space” that the circus designates is also marked by solitude, a state that comes mainly from mistrust towards the other – the foreigner who could at any time become a potential danger by denouncing the family to the communist security services (“If they found out who we are, we will be kidnapped and sent back, my parents and aunt will be killed, my sister and I will starve and everyone will laugh at us. When they fled Romania, my parents were sentenced to death”<sup>39</sup>).

In addition to leaving the country, which the girl’s mother and her husband do to escape the prohibitions of the communist regime, their life at the circus involves a constant migration, a perpetual exchange of space and, implicitly, a deterritorialization imposed at regular intervals. For the narrator self, the lack of stability imposed by this nomadic life creates strong emotional effects: “The closing of the tent is everywhere the same, like a great funeral, always at night, after the last performance in a city. After the circus fence has been removed, strangers sometimes come to our living quarters and stick their faces to the window. I feel like a fish at the market”<sup>40</sup>. Leaving a space is equivalent, in the narrator’s view, to leaving vitality itself behind. Migration is thus associated with a death ritual dominated by a perpetual sadness.

Also worth noting is the symbolic element used in delimiting the space circumscribed by the circus performance from the rest of the territory, namely the “fence”. Its setting up creates a small identity space, while its removal analogously

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<sup>36</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *De ce fierbe copilul în mămăligă*, p. 26.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 44.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 28.

restores the nomadic character of the protagonists. The raising of the fence also symbolizes, at the level of the collective subconscious, a removal of the limits of the personal space attributed to the artists. The “strangers”, led by a curiosity bordering impertinence, “stick their faces” to the window of the wagon both out of a desire to know the intimate space of those admired on stage, and as a sign of the non-recognition or even the annulment of their personal identity.

The nomadic experience of life at the circus ends, however, with the act of a father with failed directorial ambitions. He “steals the money from the circus cashier”, something that triggers, once again, the family’s imperative need to emigrate to another country. The decline of the family begins with this last escape. Not having a stable home anymore, abandoned by the paternal figure together with his biological daughter, Aglaja and her mother prolong their nomadic life by living in hotel rooms where they try to keep fragments of the Romanian national-identity imagery. For instance, the mother kills and skins chickens in the bathrooms of hotel rooms as a basic means of subsistence (“WHEN THEY ARE CUT, CHICKENS SHOUT IN AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE! WE CAN UNDERSTAND THEM EVERYWHERE”<sup>41</sup>). With these events dominated by instability, the image of the symbolic family is reconstructed from a matriarchal perspective. Unable to continue her acrobatics because of repeated accidents, the mother becomes the promoter of the girl’s variety show career. The narrator’s inner trauma is deepened with the failure of her career at the cabaret as she finally turns to her aunt, often identified as a second maternal entity: “When she came back, I called my mother AUNTIE, and my aunt MOM”<sup>42</sup>.

The events, rendered in a manner that often defies logical and chronological exposition by recollection and description of moments that occur in the subjective involuntary memory, are presented retrospectively in the form of different narrative flashbacks. Aglaja Veteranyi does not write the epic text by chaining and alternation, but with the help of short, contrapuntal sentences, each sentence starting at the beginning of the line, leaving the impression of the organization of the text into verses and stanzas. To these are added the multiple sentences rendered in capital letters. Short sentences, again succinct, but which capture in the concreteness of just a few words ideas of a marked tenseness.

Since her second novel, *The Shelf of Last Breaths*, is built like the first one, the works of Aglaja Veteranyi both illustrate the concept of picto-novels, creations in which, beyond the direct textual message, the impact is the indirect one, at the subliminal level of the organization and writing of the text. Literary critics

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 131.

associate these creative strategies with literary surrealist techniques, many of them seen as reinterpretations of pointillism<sup>43</sup>.

In this respect, the author's second novel, *The Shelf of Last Breaths*, appears as a continuation of the first one – not only from the point of view of the continuation of the traumatic migratory process of the teenage girl Aglaja, but also from the point of view of the selected narrative form and method. Thus, the autofictional transposition of the author's destiny is offered not only a narrative extension, but also certain details that bring depth to the existence of the female alter ego character. In this second novel, a significant role is played by the theme of death, especially observed in the stages of carnal disintegration and the aunt's death. However, the theme is already announced in the motto ("We are longer dead than alive, therefore in death we need much more luck"<sup>44</sup>), a line belonging to the aunt's character. Their entire destiny is thus placed on the verge of chance.

Moreover, the death of her aunt becomes a strong intertext found even at the level of the title. The noun "shelf" is, of course, a symbolic term with a bookish connotation. Generally meant as a material element to support and store books, the shelf designates an entire space of written worlds that wish to be discovered. Such a written universe, with ambitions of (self) revelation to the reading public, is also the inner world of the author. However, attached to the "shelf" is a specific attributive construction – "of the last breaths". Are these the aunt's "last breaths" constantly attended to by the suffering relatives around her deathbed? Or the "last breaths" of the author herself who, after writing the novel, commits suicide, the novel remaining a legacy work? The interpretations can, of course, be multiple.

However, on associating the title of the novel with the fictional universe it creates, the last breaths may be all the fictional instances whose existence loses its consistency with the passing of aunt Reta into non-existence – "the last gasps", we might say, of vital energy of the still-living entities. In addition, the action begins with an instructive description of how to prepare the funeral cake, a symbolic dish by means of which a direct reference to the national identity specific to the Romanian space can be perceived, namely the traditional custom of commemoration by preparing and offering "*coliva*" in memory of the deceased: "The wheat boils in the tenth water, he said. / Nine heavens? / Yes, for every sky, a cleansing [...] Vanilla. / Rum. / Almond extract. / Sugar. / Salt. / Grated lemon peel. / Raisins"<sup>45</sup>.

With the young girl's affective oscillation between the two female entities both acquiring maternal values – the mother and the aunt – considerations regarding the identity crisis of the character are expounded on in the novel, an

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<sup>43</sup>See Ștefan Fircă, "Adapting In-Betweenness".

<sup>44</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *Raftul cu ultimele suflări*, p. 10.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 11.

aspect also noticed by Werner Löcher-Lawrence and Jens Nielsen in their foreword to the book (“Identity crisis is doubly marked: by the mother’s lack of love and by exile”<sup>46</sup>). Suffering her own emotional crises marked by several significant episodes of alcoholism, the mother amplifies the traumatic experiences of her daughter who, subconsciously, emotionally distances herself from her, favoring instead the aunt’s protective persona: “If I love my aunt more than my mother, my mother’s beautiful eyes will quench me. If I love my aunt more than my mother, my mother will leave my aunt in Paris. If I love my aunt more than my mother, I feel sorry for my mother”<sup>47</sup>. The narrative voice does not decide on a definitive break with the mother figure, not because of the depth of their mother-daughter love, but out of regret for the possible consequences of the mother’s emotional abandonment. Possible explanations could be found through psychoanalytical interpretations, but *The Shelf of the Last Breaths*, like the author’s first novel, mainly captures traumatic episodes of migration and constant nomadism amplified by the lack of devotion and love displayed by the mother, the only remaining parental figure.

The migrant status perceived by the female narrator is presented in the form of daily reflections, notations and observations of cruel and eccentric lucidity, specific to the author’s literary style. For example, the phenomenon of migration manifests itself as an identity at the level of verbal language. The assimilation of the languages specific to the countries where the family travels is not perceived at a cognitive level, but at a bodily, biological level (“I am growing into foreign languages, first the swear words, then the declarations of love”<sup>48</sup>). In this metalinguistic evolution, the first assimilated elements are, of course, the notions specific to the vulgar colloquial language, after which affection manifests itself at vocabulary level. Besides that, the narrative subjectivity records, on several occasions, the difficulty and cultural shock represented by the differences between the two national languages and, at the same time, the need to assimilate them for the best possible social integration: “The other children are not afraid, they speak the same language. We also speak their language, but they don’t speak ours. [...] My sister and I speak to each other in our language”<sup>49</sup>.

The familiarity between the two sisters is manifested at the level of their national identity by their speaking the same language. The narrator’s consternation arises from the fact that the effort to learn new foreign languages is necessary only in their case, while the process is not reciprocal: those of other nationalities do not have to learn the girls’ mother tongue. “IN EACH LANGUAGE THE SAME

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 137.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibidem* p. 62.

<sup>49</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *De ce fierbe copilul în mămăligă*, p. 86.

THING IS CALLED DIFFERENTLY”<sup>50</sup>, states the subjective narrative voice, venting her frustration with the need to learn different foreign languages.

Moreover, the culture clash also comes from the apparently general perception of the Western society, according to which in the case of a migrant it was necessary to find out if their emotions are manifested transnationally, so that they could comfortably identify psychologically with the adoption space. Thus, the leitmotiv question, repeatedly addressed to the narrative voice (“Do you like it here?”) gives rise to real confrontations with her inner self:

Do you like it here? In all countries everyone wants to know the same thing. Only in Romania no one asks you about it, says my aunt. [...] Do you like it here? We always had to answer YES to this question there. Yes, it was very bad in Romania. Yes, it’s very nice here. [...] Being an emigrant and returning – even if only temporarily – to the country you left is an absolute, internal and unshakable contradiction. The one must exclude the other<sup>51</sup>.

In the collective view, the emotional attachment to the country you migrate to must be manifested singularly. As far as the abandoned native country is concerned, on the contrary, the attitude imposed is one of rejection. “The one must exclude the other”, the narrative voice records, projecting the regime of affective exclusivity that Western societies adopt regarding the feelings nurtured by migrant subjects.

Likewise, the identity of the migrant narrator self acquires multinational valences that are psychosomatically integrated. Throughout the entire process of self-formation, the homodiegetic narrative voice experiences not only alienation from the native territory, but also disintegration and, along with it, a deconstruction at the bodily level that marks the itineraries of their artistic journeys and expeditions:

I was conceived in Krakow, says my mother. Conceived in Krakow and born in Bucharest. I’m a Wallachian. What is a Wallachian? My nanny’s hands came from Germany. My appendix remained in Czechoslovakia, in a military hospital. [...] My tonsils remained in Madrid<sup>52</sup>.

The transnational character that the destiny of the narrative voice acquires after leaving the country, and her uprooting, are apparently anticipated and even imposed from birth. Conceived in Krakow, the narrator is taken care of by a German nanny while her corporeal transnationality is marked at a visceral level, as the removal of her appendix is performed in Czechoslovakia and the operation to extract her tonsils is performed in Spain. Deterritorialization, along with bodily decomposition, are anticipated biologically also by the maternal corporeality,

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>51</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *Raftul cu ultimele suflări*, pp. 62-65.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

albeit to a lesser extent. Only her mother's "bile", as a visceral symbol, remains in Africa: "My mother's bile remained in Africa, in a hospital run by nuns"<sup>53</sup>. Every location of these medical acts becomes potentiated symbolically. Through "adoption organs", spatiality acquires a metaphorical character while at the same time becoming a link between territorialization and corporeal geography. Migration is, therefore, a complex process of (re)forming a corporal geography identity framed by the spatial indeterminacy of the territory of adoption.

In the case of the aunt, the narrating character does not recall such disembodiment. On the contrary, as far as she is concerned, she recalls a kind of affective augmentation manifested at a physical level: "Living for a long time gave my aunt a long heart. She grew up in the direction of her parents' grave"<sup>54</sup>. The identity link with the native land is perceived in the case of the aunt not only by the "growing of the heart", but by its specific direction towards the commemoration of the deceased parents. The symbol of the aunt's parents' tomb remains an identity marker. Among the three female instances, the aunt is the one who eventually manages to visit the country. "Eight years younger than in reality, she traveled back to Moldova, to her relatives"<sup>55</sup>, records the narrative voice. Following the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the family consider returning to the country. During the visit to her relatives, "a farewell after twenty-five years", the aunt takes care of the administrative aspects of the family, but the visit also represents a good opportunity to get to know the new members whom she did not have the opportunity to meet before that moment: "She bought cemetery plots, baptized children, bought an apartment, a second one for her uncle and a third one for her refrigerators. She kept frozen lamb and pork. All the newborns were named after her. Or after me. Even chickens or rabbits bore my name"<sup>56</sup>.

With a special literary style, Aglaja Veteranyi builds, under the "umbrella" of autofiction, the literary journey of a character for whom the phenomenon of migration is constant and unequivocal. The author memorializes traumatic events from her own autobiography in a fictional manner marked by originality and narrative creativity. The perpetual migratory transmutations generate deep suffering and trauma for the little girl who lacks identification with herself and with the geographical spatiality in which she is forced to integrate following the family's exile. The two literary works of the Romanian-origin author are ascribable, thereby, to the category of *trauma autofiction*. The lack of stability, not only geographical, but also affective, occurs at the identity level in the case of the female narrative voice, in the form of a void in (re)knowing one's self. For the child traumatized by the constant fear of losing her mother, the feelings of

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 84.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*.

protection and emotional safety come from an entire matriarchal universe, which in turn falls apart with the passing of the aunt. To conclude, Aglaja Veteranyi's autofiction is built by means of a particular form of narrative acuity which captures, subliminally, the trauma of an existence marked by forced exile. The impossibility of a definitive return to the country of birth, especially due to communist prohibitions, accentuates the state of "non-identity" of the fictional figures, so that we deal with multiple ontological voids projected into the autofiction of identity trauma.

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### AGLAJA VETERANYI – THE AUTOFICTION OF A NOMADIC LIVING (Abstract)

In the field of life-writing, autofiction represents a literary category placed at the border between fiction and autobiography. Often perceived as similar to fictional (auto)biography, autofiction represents a fictional writing based on the experience of the self. Such creative strategies have been adopted by the Swiss female writer of Romanian origin, Aglaja Veteranyi. Within her two novels, *Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta* and *The Shelf with the Last Breaths*, the author creates a surreal narrative fiction based on her traumatic childhood experiences. The multiple traumas that the child faces are mainly caused by the migratory experience that the family has to deal with. Because of the oppressive communist regime in the country at that time, Aglaja's mother decides to leave the country with her daughter and her sister working at an international circus. Through the lens of affects and feelings coming not only from customs, food, but also family traditions constantly associated with those from the native country, the main character subjectively exposes her migratory living. Thus, the aim of this paper is to analyse Aglaja Veteranyi's autofictional work, in order to observe the way in which migration together with the never-ending pressure of the communist regime that does not allow the family to turn back into the country become a severe traumatic experience for the subjective female narrative voice. Originating from a Balkan territory, Aglaja Veteranyi becomes a transnational writer that presents through different fictional strategies the traumatic autobiographical experience of migration.

*Keywords:* autofiction, migration, trauma, affect, transnational writer.

### AGLAJA VETERANYI – AUTOFICTIUNEA UNEI EXISTENȚE NOMADE (Rezumat)

În cadrul scrierilor memorialistice (cunoscute sub denumirea de life-writing), autoficțiunea reprezintă o categorie literară plasată la granița dintre ficțiune și autobiografie. Percepută deseori drept ficțiune autobiografică, autoficțiunea reprezintă o scriere ficțională bazată pe experiența sinelui. O asemenea strategie narativă este preluată și de către scriitoarea elvețiană de origine română, Aglaja Veteranyi. În cadrul celor două romane ale sale, *De ce fierbe copilul în mămăligă* și *Raftul cu ultimele suflări*, autoarea creează o ficțiune narativă suprarealistă bazată pe evenimentele propriei copilării traumatice. Multiplele traume ale vocii narative sunt în general provocate de experiența migratoare pe care o trăiește familia sa. Din cauza opresiunii comuniste din acei ani, mama Aglajei hotărăște să părăsească țara alături de aceasta și de sora ei, fiind acrobată în cadrul unui circ internațional. Prin intermediul afectelor și al sentimentelor provocate nu doar de obiceiuri, mâncare, ci și de tradițiile propriei familii, constant asociate celor din timpul șederii în țara nativă, personajul narator își expune subiectiv experiența migratoare. Astfel, cercetarea își propune o analiză a operei autoficționale a Aglajei Veteranyi, cu scopul de a investiga modul în care migrația și presiunea constantă din partea regimului comunist, care nu permitea familiei întoarcerea în țară, devin o traumă profundă pentru vocea narativă feminină. Originară dintr-un teritoriu balcanic, Aglaja Veteranyi devine astfel un scriitor transnațional care își prezintă, prin diverse strategii ficționale, trauma experienței autobiografice din timpul migrației.

*Cuvinte-cheie:* autoficțiune, migrație, traumă, affect, scriitoare transnațională.