Errata to life or on autobiography

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Résumé *: Les écrits autobiographiques sont séduisants pour le lecteur ainsi que pour le théoricien narratif. Le premier est appelé à chercher des réponses à ses questions sur la vie et la mort. Le deuxième, à réfléchir sur la modalité du soi de s'évader en tant que faire semblant de chercher sa propre plausibilité. Le dernier livre de Gabriel Liiceanu* Lettres à mon fils *(2008) peut offrir un bon prétexte pour regarder de plus près la génétique de l'autobiographique dont la loi est constamment brisée pour mieux illustrer sa substance. L' épistolaire de Liiceanu donne l' occasion d' illuminer des notions comme: intentionnalité, fidélité ou le pacte autobiographique (Lejeune, 1982), autonomie, propre accomplissement et transcendance (Olney, 1972, de Man, 1979, Derrida, 1988), discours réflexif, performativité et cognitif (de Man, 1979), discours confessionnel (Gusdorf, 1956), propre cohérence et corps (Barthes, 1977), nom propre (Derrida, 1988) et figure du père / de la mère (Barthes, 1977, Derrida, 1988). Liiceanu essaie de reconstruire le 'tissu du soi' / du cœur (Freeman, 1998) et, très discrètement, il pousse les limites de sa mémoire vers les limites de notre propre mémoire en relevant ainsi la différence problématique de l'autobiographique.*

Mots-clés*: l'autobiographique, mémoire (culturel/ moral), histoire, 'tissu du soi'*

Autobiography and the problem of meaning

It is already a commonplace, in recent debates on narrative, (1) to consider the idea of narrative an important way of establishing a more humane, interesting, and appropriate approach to human lives than, for instance, the more positivistic approaches; and (2) to see narrative not like a constituent of life itself, but rather an imposition upon life, that is, a construction or fiction, which strives to give form to what is essentially formless and, quite often, meaningless. As there remains "a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and an end", as Kermode suggests (1967, p. 4), there also exists the "power to manipulate data in order to achieve the desired consonance" (1967: 9). This may well relate, as far as autobiography is concerned, to what Rimmon-Kenan calls (2002) a shifting but stubbornly tenacious divide. The divide places the autobiographical on the side of nonfiction, although distinct from biography and history in its greater use of fictional strategies such as dialogue, interior monologue, autodiegetic narration, and its address to readers.

Nonetheless, there remain a number of troubling thoughts, as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe (2008), informing our conceptualization, and subsequently our understanding, of what is at stake in autobiographical acts. Such as, the fact that self-representations and acts of self-narrating are always located, historical, subjective, and embodied; the fact that storytellers rework and improvise upon established forms, such as apprenticeship story, or narrative of becoming of consciousness to compose identities; or the fact that no coherent self predates a story about identity since each of us lives in time and takes ever-changing perspectives on the moving target of our pasts. This reinforces the idea that both the storytelling and the self constituted by it are narrative constructions of identity, and that autobiographical telling is performative rather than cognitive, since it enacts the self thus giving rise to the narrating "I"—which is never stable, but fragmented, provisional and with many referents. Those various identities presented by the narrator are directed, in turn, to different addressees or audiences, which may also carry along boundary confusion within the narrative. That is why "life narrative" (Smith and Watson's term), while engaging historically situated practices of self-representation, will constantly escape strict affiliation in terms of generic aesthetics, forms, usages and receptions. However, in the mid of an ever increasing autobiographical boom, Smith and Watson take the difficult task of addressing four issues which speak to the special status of the autobiographical and 'tease out' particular aspects of

that special status, with a view to making narrative theorists rethink the complex practices of autobiographical writing. The four issues relate to: (1) autobiographical hoaxes and the status of the autobiographical pact; (2) how to read postcolonial writers who efface distinctions between the autobiographical and the fictive and the status of marking the withholding of autobiography as an "out-law" rhetorical move; (3) the ethics of narrative witnessing to suffering, loss, and survival and the status of witness narratives for narrators and readers; (4) the materiality of the narrator's body and the status of materialized self-representation in the autobiographical (2008: 358). As the above issues involve life narratives dealing especially with trauma, the two theorists come to raise unsettling questions relating not only to an ever more complex genre but also to the broad debates on the aesthetics, politics and ethics of narrative.

In what follows, I intend to examine how such revisionist issues underpinning theoretical studies on the autobiographical find ground in autobiographical writing. To this purpose I turn to Gabriel Liiceanu's epistolary *Letters to My Son/ Scrisori catre fiul meu* (2008) — a life narrative with considerable potential to inform the contemporary scene of theoretical debates about the nature of narrative, the autobiographical included.

Liiceanu's *Letters to My Son* or the 'narrative fabric of the self'/heart

The Romanian philosopher, writer, and professor, Gabriel Liiceanu (b. 1942), in *Letters to My Son* —awarded the *Book of the year* prize for 2008—, rejoices in contemplation of, dialogue and quarrel with his self, mind, and the world, under a literary convention—epistle writing—, he deliberately adopts. The *Humanitas* Publishing House, in the online presentation of the book, writes under genre: "a Gabriel Liiceanu series"; and Liiceanu himself, in his interviews/ book launching presentation, says that the confessional story within the covers of a book must also benefit from the "presumption of innocence", that is to be considered in relation to the author quality of the writer and not the writer in flesh and blood. That is to say, Liiceanu insists, 'it doesn't write "autobiography" on the front cover, and it is extremely difficult to establish how much literary travesty a 1st person narrative involves. The book is not a documentary book about me, but starting from several life experiences, very often fictionalized, it becomes a book about all of us. The problems of meeting the other sex, for instance, or of the meaning you give to a life, are not only my problems. Mine are the answers which can be compared to the readers' own answers' (*Interview*). Liiceanu also explains that the letters represent just a literary convention, and the addressee, his son, in the book, is no more than a literary character —which is to say, each reader can impersonate "the son" from the title.

Mircea Cărtărescu, in turn, on the book release occasion, stresses the value of the book as a vehicle for reaching its author—an author, whom one can best love or hate but rarely understand. When Cărtărescu calls the book a "manuscript in a bottle entrusted to the ocean," he, among other things, asserts (1) the privilege of literature/writing—seen as the possibility of storing and transmitting simultaneously; and (2) the difference of the autobiographical as a genre—not least because both writers and theorists negotiate its fluid and permeable boundary in multiple ways. Asserting this difference, I claim that Liiceanu's epistolary is the case of a life narrative which, while following almost all the conventions of an autobiographical writing, also contests them through a camouflage-paratext (foreword, title, subtitles, interviews, public addresses), meant to show (a) that the distinction between "fictional" and "nonfictional" is ever more problematic; and (b) that fiction's credibility is a much stronger issue than reality's notorious lack of credibility. My further claim is that the real stakes of Liiceanu's book are to reconstruct the 'fabric of the self'/ heart (Freeman, 1998), from his

own memories and the history's memories, which he can't help summoning up and thus bringing forth in front of a superior authority.

Despite the many disclaimers, Liiceanu's book *is not* an autobiographical hoax, as Lejeune's autobiographical pact— "an intention to honour the signature" (1975/1982) — confirms. Liiceanu's narrative does not flout Lejeune's contract referring to the "identity between the author, narrator, and the protagonist" (1982: 193): Liiceanu authors a book about Liiceanu, the father, man, and philosopher, which he narrates in his own voice. The narrative abounds in biographical data satisfying the claim to the "real" as Lejeune's contract of identity presupposes. There are real locales from the author/narrator/protagonist's life (e.g., Caracal, the dwelling place of his grandparents and uncle; the Cezieni mansion, his mother's birth-place; Dr. Lister 69, his childhood address, etc.); real people with real biographies (his son, Stefan, Liiceanu's mother, his cousin Adrian, Constantin Noica, Andrei Plesu, Henri Wald, etc.); CV entries/biographical data (studies; scholarships), and references to his/others' published books. What remains indeed deceptive is the "truth" of the flesh-and-blood author, which can't be but an inaccessible and constantly reconstructed truth. The paratext (the author's pointers to the texts) has, for that matter, an unpacking function, so as to unveil the multiple conflicting discourses of truth, experience, and authority the autobiographical engages with in its representation of subjectivity. The foreword establishes literary convention—letter writing; addressee—his absent son/confidant; rhetorical method—ivy-like approach, which means to grab hold of no matter what, if one wishes to come to master the whole matter. The confessional discourse informed by the consciousness of the self encourages the inward-turning gaze, characteristic of the autobiographical, and suggestive of the figure/ground game the author intends to play: the heart becomes in turn figure and ground upon the many transfigurations it goes through: whether subject or object of investigation; whether in the hands of the "heart electrician" or his mother's, or a witness to his son's meaningful silences/remarks/pranks, or as shifting self in search of its own plausibility. The epistolary is divided in two parts: the first part, "American Story," comprising nine letters, covers his visit to America occasioned, apparently, by a heart intervention Tim Talbert "the electrician" fixes; the second part, "Your quarrel with life," comprising seven letters, covers the essentials or Rilke's "Ein Hauch nur" ("a breath of wind") from apprenticeship to witness stories through ruminations on human life under the surveillance of death. Moreover, the foreword, deeply dialogic and rhetorical, pre-enacts the scene of reading, through liminal directions for interpretations, which attempt to mediate tensions between speech and writing, between author and absent addressee/ narratee. The Liiceanu of the foreword and of the letters has a humanity that the Liiceanu of the interviews/ public addresses seems to lack, or differently said, the first writer finds the humanity the second writer is so keen to hide. Since, according to Lejeune, the autobiographical pact is not violated, readers can for now be at peace and take Liiceanu's book as referring to a "real" experienced world that, however remembered, they can imagine as compelling and immediate—which, I think, is not far from the writer's intentionality. In what concerns the instances of fictionalizing, those "maskings of facticity," as Smith and Watson term them (2008: 359), they are necessary responses to time, place, circumstance, and purpose, and not evidence of violations of the autobiographical pact. And, there are, in the book, plenty of examples of such touching transfigurations of the material world. As when dramatically monologizing about the first kiss/date in Cişmigiu (34); as when impersonating Michelangelo's *David*, the standard of beauty, force, desire (41); as when splitting the firewood (74); as when describing Noica's handwriting (107); or when mythologizing the house in Dr Lister 69 (123); or when staging the cake-predator ritual (168-9); or when simply preparing the tea (194). These "maskings of facticity" are certainly more compelling than the accuracy of historical facts of self-reference, which certain readers may feel better drawn to.

Even these empathetic readers attracted by the promised (and honoured) intimacy and immediacy of the first-person voice must be satisfied by Liiceanu's stories/letters that release charges of affect, intensities registered in the body/heart—fear, anger, shame, self-pride, pride, horror—, Dan Mihăilescu rightly calls the "letters of a samurai." But, the "maskings of facticity", with relevance to the problematic situatedness of autobiography, may also point to what Paul de Man (1979: 919) identifies as the interest in autobiography: to show that all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language or tropes. Or differently put, autobiographies produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek, not to mention that they always contain the epitaphic (de Man, 1979; Derrida, 1988), that is, they posit a face and a voice that speaks to us, as it were beyond the grave (Liiceanu, en connaisseur of the autobiographical as "tanatography", imagines, in the foreword, that this book could become "the last of his life" (5), as he knows too well that his proper name, signature, autograph will long survive him and "already survives him" (Derrida, 1988: 49), as to be confirmed by the pages on "[his] planetary celebrity". 54-8).

Another issue Smith and Watson raise is that of narratives of witness and the readers' response to them (2008: 364-66). The theorists argue that such narratives which confront readers with overwhelmingly emotional episodes of dehumanization call the reader to an ethical response through their affective appeals for recognition. In their words, "scenes of witness are ones in which the narrator, the story, and the listener/ reader are entwined in an ethical call to emphatic identification, recognition, and oftentimes action" (364). I can only hope that Liiceanu's readers of *The Letters* are also called to emphatic recognition, identification, and ethical action, when the author rummages, now and then, though our narrative unconscious. As when he writes about the avatars of emigration as in the case of Martin S. Martin, former Martin Constantinescu — a high-status heart surgeon from Fundeni, a sort of "genial potter" competing the Original Creator (18) — who was forced to "steal" to America in 1985, so as not to be thrown into prison (18-20) — just one example of two many; or when remembering the impact of the "royal delirium" on the Easter Day of 1992 when King Mihai returned to Romania after 45 years of exile as a token of people's/his own need for the triumph of love as a communal project (81); or when discussing how much *the Americans* enjoy cherishing their former generations, and traditions (73); or when reminding of our five decades of history of hatred (82); or when referring to the sheer poverty Romanians have known for so many years that they have lost the aesthetic meaning of cooking (92); or when bringing to the forth of our memory the fate of intellectuals in Romania, as for instance the 1950s lot of philosopher Noica, who were all put to jail (112; 145); or when mentioning Ceauşescu's absurd urbanization policies (127; 130), and the new "class struggle" impetus in the epoch (145); or when x-raying the present-day Romanian society, wherein good-doing as well as the practice of the intellect are just faint/disused folk-tales memories (226). Moreover, by resurrecting the mother figure in the pages of his book, Liiceanu purports to take his mother/our mothers out of the anonymity Derrida fated her/them to. The deconstructivist thinker, not unjustly, speaks about the mother and father as being the dual inheritances of language: the formal, scientific, dead paternal language and the 'natural, living mother tongue'. Language must pass through the body by way of mouth and the ear, and, in this way, it takes what is already dead and regenerates or revitalizes it as the 'living feminine'. The price of the mother's positioning as the vital principle of language, according to Derrida, is that she herself does not live or speak. She is fundamental but she is also anonymous: "Everything comes back to her, beginning with life; everything addresses and destines itself to her. She survives on the condition of remaining at bottom" (Derrida, 1988: 38). Liiceanu, instead, decides "să nemurească"/ "to immortalize" (Liiceanu, *Interview*; the Romanian word has an arcane aura the English word misses) his mother, so as to better understand his own fabric of the self/heart as a continuum, which, as the author explains,

means to prolong your life with the generations which preceded you (149). The troubling evocation of the mother figure, in Liiceanu's case, calls on certain readers' memories of their own mothers, who thus feel entwined in an ethical call to emphatic recognition: as when thinking about their mothers' striving to make ends meet ("The three jobs of my mother," 158); their sacrifices to make their children's future possible, since, "the investment in the possible is never visible", (179); their existentialist dillemas children will notice long after (152), or their little vanities children will remember long after they pass away (165); but mainly as an etalon of normality, "stronger than history" (174), whose protective, upright spirit keeps children sane in insane historical times. This doesn't necessarily mean that Liiceanu's mother is the generic Romanian mother figure. Not unlike Roland Barthes, who, in his autobiographical quest for the 'essence' of his beloved mother, tries, by looking at a photograph of his mother aged 5, to connect to the "real" of the past (*Camera Lucida*, 1984), does Liiceanu, by looking at a photograph showing his mother as a young woman with a short hair cut, *à la garçonne*, as if she were ready for a *rendez-vous* with life itself (157), imply that no image (photography) can ever quite seem to give his mother back to him. When reading the copy-book journal his mother writes at 80 (154-56), Liiceanu tries to lead himself back to the space of the personal (feminine or maternal), which is also an unrepresented space that exists outside or beyond the text. Confessional discourse in this case, as in all cases according to Derrida, necessarily broaches something unclosable, something which can never be laid to rest, something that exceeds rationality.

Paul de Man (1979) warns us that the 'performative' (what it does) will always be in excess of the cognitive (what it means) dimension of autobiography. The textual 'I', the critic asserts, seeks out excuses to perform itself; it creates dramas in order to stage the 'real' drama of the 'self. In other words, the text, paradoxically, generates guilt in order to justify the excuse rather than the other way around; it is in search of an excuse for its own being, a reason for coming into existence at all. Liiceanu's text is no exception. The author also generates guilt so as to generate excuses for its own being, since, he tells us, "shyness is the source of all [his] audacities" (15). As for instance, when he speaks about his "English-linguistics castration," occasioned by the Swedish flirtation story he invents (14-6); or when he humorously tries to solve the charade of Martin's phone number, he entitles "Here come the Americans or the IQ of the Romanians" (21-27); or when he, while at the University of Aachen, must prove himself, and show the world how good a Romanian can be at learning German (10-11).

But, the performative which invites a reading that engages the autobiographical narrative as *embodied*, draws attention, according to Smith and Watson, to several issues: how the narrator's body and its visibility is tied to various communities; which cultural meanings are attached to the narrator's body inside and outside the text; whether the body is ritualized and eroticized as a locus of desire or viewed as an impediment to its circulation; the relationship between the material body of the narrating "I" and the body politic; and the body as a site of knowledge and knowledge production (2008: 367). Very much like Roland Barthes in his own autobiography *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1977), Liiceanu admits that a coherent self is a fiction, that it must always involve being seen from a distance, through the perspective of the *other*; or, as Barthes asks and answers simultaneously: "Where is your authentic body? You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image" (1977: 152). With Barthes, as with Liiceanu, the 'body' creates a "passion of meaning" (1977: 161), a disturbance or space where something happens to *language*, where the body's presence both animates and displaces meaning, makes meaning both mobile and irrecoverably somewhere else: "meaning, before collapsing into in-significance, shudders still […], it remains fluid, shuddering with a faint ebullition" (Barthes, 1977: 97-8). Liiceanu's body in performance means both to show and incarnate his character, as his body can belong to

different scenes, without becoming merely a representation of the body. When the narrator-protagonist, aged 13, discovers in the mirror, in his grandparents' house, his nude body (36-40), he, in fact, procures himself an illusion of identity, an imaginary wholeness, wherein, though, both past and future representations of the self are necessarily rooted; he also learns that there is no way back through the mirror, nothing, no one, exists on the other side; or as Barthes says, "[t]he image-repertoire is taken over by several masks (*personae*), distributed according to the depth of the stage (and yet *no one – personne,* as we say in French – is behind them) (1977: 120). Liiceanu's body cultural meanings relate, on the one hand, to hedonism or the "big tiny pleasures" of life as he calls life's little rituals that help us go on (187; 188; 193); and, on the other hand, to several teachings philosophers (he included) can't help passing on. For example, out of the one thousand and one stories that make up Heidegger's great story of man's *Befindlichkeit* ("affective situatedness") (92), Liiceanu chooses to refer to what Heidegger calls indefinite ("faceless") fear or *angoisse,* which represents our very human condition of finding ourselves thrown to ourselves into a world of finitude: "The faceless fear, *l'angoisse,* climbs inside me, at various intervals, coming from *ahead of me,* from my own ending, which nevertheless permeates each and every second of my life, as its ultimate horizon" (95). Liiceanu's bodily pleasures are, like for the rest of us, crushed between "our moral memory" (apud Alexandru Dragomir, according to Liiceanu), and Heidegger's *angoisse,* between remorse and death. Or the teaching on the encounter with *the other,* or Plato's "black horse," he explains by building on Derrida's *Aphorism in counter-time* (which causes Romeo's and Juliet's unfulfilled love) and Schopenhauer's cruelly proclaimed incompatibility of sexes. But, throughout the book, there is Noica's blessing shadow: the profound teachings, informing Liiceanu's apprenticeship, relate and refer to this deeply humane philosopher, teacher and person—one who believes in the "fatality of goodness" (60; 75; 106; 110-11; 113-21; 124-5).

Conclusion: Cultural/historical memory and autobiography

If, according to Liiceanu (40-1), Michelangelo's *David* needs a story-crutch (the Biblical story which describes the battle between David, the champion of the God of Israel, and Goliath, the representative of paganism) to ascend the throne of an idea—that of the splendor of adolescence's potentiality—, then Liiceanu's life narrative also needs the crutch of the fictional to reweave the narrative fabric of his self and the other. *Letters to My Son*—a mixture of fabulation and actual experience—shows how a writer and philosopher imagines to knit back together the narrative fabric of the self which, severed from the mythical/philosophical domain, has become ever more frayed.

"This thing, that has a code and (not) a core," as Ezra Pound would say, brings together the intangible personality with the veracity and substance of historical fact. Liiceanu's epistolary may be a minefield for the unwary reader, but, for the narrative theorist, it may be a field of play and an occasion for critical reflection on changing reading practices and ethics.

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