

The Intertext as Discursive Subversion: *Legături Bolnăvicioase/ Love Sick*, Cecilia Ștefănescu

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Abstract

Approaching a topic yet unexplored in Romanian literature – a lesbian relationship – the novel Legături bolnăvicioase/ Love Sick opens the path for an interest stirring analysis on its thematic and narrative construction, but obstructed, nonetheless, by prejudice and prudishness. The love story between the narrator and Alex (her girlfriend) is, ultimately, a pretext for a piece of écriture féminine, typified by language and imaginative specificities. While following a feminine, autofictional pattern, the novel enters an intertextual dialogue with a series of texts belonging to the (male) canon of erotic literature. If the title alludes to a novel of “sentimental education”, reminding of de Laclos’s masterpiece, Les Liaisons dangereuses ou lettres recueillies dans une société et publiées pour l’instruction de quelques autres, the novelesque discourse displays the intertextual game in an autofictional key, occasionally subverting male patterns. Along these lines, the present paper aims at analysing the functioning of intertextual mechanisms as means of subverting the male discourse, but also the manner in which the feminine discourse challenges canonical conventions and traditional reception.

Keywords: intertext, autofiction, feminine writing, erotic literature, discourse

Feminine literature – a marginal one?

If literature is based on a tradition built by authors, editors, critics and literary historians, who, through vision, education or mode of existence, founded an institution for themselves, where exactly could women-authors be placed in a literary order established by men and why should their literature be considered different? In such a case, when discursive representation is conditioned by gender differences, subversion becomes almost compulsory:

Les femmes écrivains et l'institution littéraire ont toujours été prises dans une dialectique subtile. Les femmes ont conscience de leur force subversive. L'institution tente de l'ignorer, de la neutraliser ou de la récupérer. Les

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femmes sont prises entre le désir d'être acceptées et le besoin d'affirmer leur transgression. Pour trouver leur place, leur voix, elles doivent, au risque de se perdre ou de se leurrer, gommer ou clamer leur différence. L'institution parce qu'elle a le pouvoir de légitimer semble être maîtresse du jeu: en fait il lui faut s'adapter: tenter de classer, casser le mouvement, capter la crue. [1]

Penetrating literature despite their labelling as “eternal feminine” or the rhetoric of fluidity, fragility and grace, women-authors adopted an attitude perceived as revolutionary, reforming, which would soon turn into *difference*. However, from the difference understood as either superiority or inferiority, today, one may speak of the acceptance of the feminine condition and of a superior understanding [2], without any necessary reference to masculinity. Social change also has an impact on literature, in a territory where women-authors must establish a rapport with *the other* literature. The way in which texts always refer to other texts comes to reinforce the idea that no text ever lives isolated, nor can the reader construe a text outside the Great Text, without establishing intertextual relations to other texts.

With Julia Kristeva’s “absorption and transformation” of the texts but also with Ricœur’s quasi-world of texts, intertextuality becomes an all-times method of constructing the text, especially a postmodernist one, which best fits textual deconstruction, or the ambiguization and the indeterminacy of the work. In what concerns the literature of “the most part of the minority” [3], the reference to the great literature also meant the reference to the masculine canon, and, even though identifying means to bring the marginal to the centre has never represented a priority, a woman’s voice seems more entitled to claim literary territories.

The marginal literature label is not always a negative aspect – one may think, with Deleuze, that, when one writes, one does it from a minority position. Nonetheless, this does not mean that one’s writing necessarily addresses a limited community. Between the extreme singular and the world’s universal, the writer attempts to defamiliarize common language, whilst the writing is an attempt to short-circuit it through the singular, but also through the universal. Therefore, women-authors write from a less privileged position, but they have equal reception rights.

A special category of “feminine literature” is represented by autofiction, identified as a literature of intimacy, narcissistic, *du petit moi*. An entire list of equivalences, of rapports implicitly actuated in the critical, social and media discourses, is ultimately reduced to the idea

that feminine writing is able to render especially women's intimacy, their speaking only about themselves, therefore, of no interest to a larger category of readers and unable to reach the domains of the real, or of a common discourse. However, these labels are blurred, and an equidistant positioning is imperative.

Cecilia Ștefănescu – An interesting debut

The year 2000 brings the reunion, in a slightly modified formula, of a group of young authors, encouraged by Mircea Cărtărescu and Florin Iaru. After her debut with *Ferestre '98*, Cecilia Ștefănescu joins Ioana Nicolaie, Marius Ianuș, Ioan Godeanu, Domnica Drumea, Angelo Mitchievici, Doina Ioanid, for the publication of a collective volume of poetry and some prose texts, entitled *40238 Tescani*. The texts, experimental, fantastic, in the line of the avant-garde writers between the two world wars, are not signed, with the confessed aim of ignoring the individual voice and of melting in a common voice expressing a single poem, collective and anonymous. Predominant in the volume are fantasy, improvisation, freedom understood as voluptuous departure from dogma [4]. The 1990s, spent in the *Litere* literary circle at the Faculty of Letters, close to the master, Mircea Cărtărescu, and her colleagues, have strongly impacted the literary profile of Cecilia Ștefănescu, not only in what concerns her themes, but also her stylistic formulae [5].

In an article that aims to provide a bigger picture of the Romanian prose in the 1990s and the 2000s, but also to motivate historically, socially, and from the publishing perspective the changes at the level of the Romanian prose, Bianca Burța-Cernat [6] cautiously includes Cecilia Ștefănescu's book in a grid which ranges from catastrophic to exceptional, in the category "good/interesting/well-written", together with novels by Radu Pavel Gheo, Dan Lungu, Cezar Paul Bădescu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici and Ana Maria Sandu – all published by Polirom in *Ego. Proza* collection. The authoress's debut as a novelist has been considered either a moment that could have inaugurated an entire series, similar in point of theme and writing [7], or a form of following a tradition of male erotic literature, irreverently placing itself (through stylistic or thematic inadequacy) behind great names, such as D. H. Lawrence or Henry Miller [8].

Reception criticism aside, it is obvious that the collateral project of the book, the film directed by Tudor Giurgiu, has functioned, as the authoress herself admits [9], as "scaffolding for the promotion of the

book” and its authoress. In addition, an important factor was the selection of a fragment from the novel for the inclusion in the programme *Les Belles Etrangères*, together with renowned names such as Ștefan Agopian, Mircea Cărtărescu or Ana Blandiana. Aside from the literary visibility which this project has brought to her, the participation in this project is regarded by the authoress as a chance for the book to enter a circuit, through its cultural message, and less as a bold momentum in the conquest of the West:

Nu am așteptări mari. Într-un fel sunt realistă. Niciun scriitor care vine dintr-o cultură mică nu se poate duce acolo gândindu-se ca va cuceri Vestul. Eu mă bucur de această selecție. Mi se pare că e un pas înainte. Singura mea dorință este ca, prin mine și prin modul în care ne vom prezenta, să deschidem o poartă. După prezența noastră, editorii francezi ar putea să fie interesați și de alți autori. În România, sunt foarte mulți autori, mult mai importanți decât mine în orice caz, care ar trebui traduși. (Ștefănescu in Simonca 2005)

[I don't have great expectations. I'm realistic, somehow. A writer from a small culture can't go there with hopes to conquer the West. I'm happy for this selection. It seems a step forward to me. My only wish is to open a gate, through me and through our presentation. Afterwards, French publishers might become interested in other authors. There are a lot of authors in Romania, much more significant than me, at any rate, who ought to be translated.]

Erotic literature and pornographic literature

When the reader is placed, against the background of the title, the motto and the theme of homosexuality, face to face with the novel *Legături bolnăvicioase* [Love Sick], the first impulse is to qualify it as an unusual exercise in pornographic writing. As pornography is transgressive, aiming to render with maximum visibility what society reduces to a minimum visibility, it is associated with the non-aesthetic, or, more recently, with the atopic discourse:

S-ar putea vorbi despre discursuri atopice în cazul practicilor care, asemenea pornografiei, nu au într-o oarecare măsură un loc de manifestare, care pătrund în interstițiile spațiului social. Pornografia împărtășește această atopie cu alte practici verbale, care variază în funcție de societăți: cuvintele obscene, cântecele deochiate, ritualurile de vrăjitorie sau satanice etc. sunt tot atâtea practici atestate constant, dar ținute sub tăcere, rezervate unor spații de sociabilitate foarte restrânse sau unor momente foarte deosebite (cf. carnavalurile de odinioară). (Maingueneau 2011:28)

[One may speak of atopic discourses in the case of those practices which, the same as pornography, do not have, to a certain extent, a space of manifestation, penetrating the interstices of the social space. Pornography shares this placelessness with other verbal practices, varying in rapport to societies: obscenities, lewd songs, magic or satanic rituals, etc. are practices constantly attested that go unmentioned, set apart for very limited social spaces or for very special moments (as is the case of the carnivals of old).]

Nonetheless, the scandalous vocabulary of the scurrilous scenes is long in coming, until the end of the novel, as the dirty, vicious universe in which the two “urban nymphets” consummate their love does not abuse their story in any way.

Povestea noastră a crescut firesc, cu atingeri întârziate, cu schimb încrucișat de haine, procedeu prin care căldura și mirosul corpului uneia treceau în stăpânirea celeilalte, cu singurătăți împărțite în două și cu plăpumi aidoma [...] Nu, între noi nu era sex sau fantezii terminate în masturbare și orgasm, pentru că firele ce ne legau nu duceau decât spre săruturile inocente și spre spaima de trupuri răsfirate pe cearșaf și spre oribila lumină a dimineții. Dar erau mirosuri de vin fiert cu scorțișoară, ceai cu lămâie, parfum de mosc, bomboane cu nucleu de cocos, prăjituri glazurate, zorzoane peste zorzoane, teancuri de cărți, vorbe-n vânt, haine aruncate care-ncotro, somn, vis, uitare, acum, când Alex e departe de toate astea, în micul ei orașel, cu secretul fericirii pus bine, în șifonier, printre puloverele de mohair. (Ștefănescu 2011: 22)

[Our story grew naturally, with belated touches, with cross-exchanges of clothes, a means for the warmth and the scent of the body of one of us to be transferred into the possession of the other, with shared solitudes and blankets. [...] No, there was no sex between us, neither fantasies ended up in masturbation and orgasm, for the threads tying us only led to innocent kisses and a dismay of bodies sprawled on the sheets, towards the horrible morning light. There were, however, scents of mulled wine with cinnamon, lemon tea, mosque, coconut sweets, trinkets and trinkets, piles of books, flummery, clothes all over the place, sleep, dream, oblivion, now, when Alex is far from all these, in her small town, with the secret of happiness carefully concealed in her cupboard with her mohair sweaters.]

In the writing exercise, the pornographic image is replaced with an erotic one – as feminine specificity [10] in the use of the code – acquired

through the overbidding of the poetic function with a wide range of techniques (metaphors, metonymies, repetitions, ellipses, suggestions, ambiguities, etc.), and later through a certain tension between nude and dressed, the art of seduction, satisfaction of desire through contemplation, and stress on the foreplay – all these make up a poetic prose marked by aestheticism and refinement:

Erau însă zile când nu aveam curajul să ne desprindem din așternuturi, de frică să nu pierdem legătura cu vizuina caldă care ne ținea alături. Rămâneam atunci ore întregi cu capul în pernă, gură în gură, respirație și expirație, furându-ne una alteia aerul. Nu prea vorbeam, lipsite de vlagă, însă îi simțeam mâna strecurându-mi-se obosită în chiloși, printre picioare, și cu degetele își făcea loc prin despicătură, pipăindu-mă, mai întâi timid, apoi pentru a-și încălzi degetele. Nu era nimic excitant în gestul ei, îmi părea mai degrabă un oftat, la fel de firesc ca nevoia minimalistă a organismului. (96)

[There were days in which we didn't even have the courage to get out of bed, fearing that we might lose the connexion with the warm den that kept us together. We used to stay for long hours with our heads on the pillow, mouth to mouth, breathing in and out, stealing each other's air. We were hardly speaking, languid, but I could feel her hand insinuate into my pants, between my thighs, and the fingers that made way for her through my slit, touching me, shy at first, then just to warm her fingers. There wasn't anything arousing about her gesture; it rather seemed a sigh, as natural as the minimalist need of the body.]

The novel, which deals with a taboo topic, enters the game of mosaics and imagistic concentration, of an excessive aestheticisation, here and there, in which sensuality and sexuality contrast with repeated regressions to the childhood space, with the stylised writing of feminine *écriture*. As a matter of fact, out of this veiled game criticism can take out only the aspect of straightforward, bold writing, much in the way in which Gheorghe Crăciun did when the novel was released:

[...] o carte cumplit de sinceră și nesfârșit de cinică. Murdară și frumoasă. Amară și viscerală. Absurdă, amenințătoare, dezabuzată, colcăind de frustrări și fantasme, scrisă parcă în ciuda marilor cărți ale iubirii. O carte care sfidează prejudecățile și gunoiul de sub covor al fricilor noastre. O carte care vorbește despre „dragostea amestecată cu sex și rușine”. Paginile ei îți ard piele, cuvintele ei te sufocă de duhori și parfumuri. Bisturiul din mâna Ceciliei Ștefănescu taie în carne vie. Cu o decizie și o siguranță

narativă ce ar trebuie să dea frisoane multor prozatori cu firmă de astăzi. Nimic retoric, nimic liric în această carte scrisă de o femeie la primul ei roman. Unul dintre cele mai bune romane de mici dimensiuni din toată literatura română. (qtd. in Chevereșan 2006: 128-129)

[...] an awfully honest and endlessly cynical book. Dirty and beautiful. Bitter and visceral. Absurd, threatening, disabused, swarming with frustrations and phantasms, written, seemingly, despite the great love books. A book that defies prejudices and the dirt under the rug of our fears. A book that speaks about "love combined with sex and shame". Its pages burn your skin; its words suffocate you with stench and scents. The scalpel in Cecilia Ștefănescu's hand cuts deep. With determination and a narrative certainty which should make many highbrow writers of today shiver. No rhetoric, no lyricism in this book written by a woman, at her novel debut. One of the best short novels in the entire Romanian literature.]

Intertext and subversion

Apart from the autofictional discursive grid and from the bag of tricks of erotic literature, the novel reveals, at a superior level, a subversive intertextual dialogue that undermines the masculine discourse. The many types of intertextuality – collage, ludic valorisation of traditional experience, parody, pastiche, quotation, paraphrase, cultural allusion as superior form of interaction of the great universal text – subvert an established discourse and aesthetically valorise the feminine experience. In what follows, some of these intertextual forms will be outlined in two large categories – the surface signs, distinguishable at the discourse level, and the depth signs, identifiable in the inner texture of the text.

I. Surface intertextual forms

Pastiche – the title of Cecilia Ștefănescu's novel is, obviously, a pastiche of the title of a novel of sentimental education [11], reminding of de Laclos's masterpiece, *Les Liaisons dangereuses ou lettres recueillies dans une société et publiées pour l'instruction de quelques autres*. The ethical intentions by which de Laclos justifies his courage to publish the famous letters ("Utilitatea lucrării, care probabil va fi mai contestată, mi se pare totuși mai ușor de stabilit. După părerea mea, înseamnă să faci un favor moravurilor dacă dezoăului mijloacele pe care le folosesc cei cu moravuri stricate pentru a-i corupe pe cei cu moravuri sănătoase și cred că scrisorile acestea vor putea concura eficient la atingerea acestui scop" (de Laclos 2007: 7) [The usefulness of this work, which will probably be contested, seems to me easier to establish.

In my opinion, is a favour to mores to reveal the means used by the vicious to corrupt the pure, and I believe that these letters are able to effectively concur in the attainment of this goal]) are not complemented by the *lesbian liaisons* between the narrator and young Alex, or by the incestuous ones between Kiki and her brother, Sandu. More than a parody of the novel of manners, *Legături bolnăvicioase* is made up of a sum of identitary adventures of the authoress, recovered with the tools of specular autofiction. The bildungsroman is deconstructed by the mainly fragmentary, disruptive, fluctuating writing that breaks the story of a destiny.

Quotation is present in the novel in the form of a motto, and represents, together with the title and the incendiary theme of lesbianism, the editorial strategy of promotion [12] used in the case of most autofictions. The opening fragment, that might suggest a reading in the reductionist grid of the Polish writer, does not lead the text: *Inferior pentru că e tânăr. Rău, pentru că e tânăr. Senzual, pentru că e tânăr. Trupesc pentru că e tânăr. Distructiv, pentru că e tânăr. Și în această tinerețe – demn de dispreț”* – Witold Gombrowicz, *Pornography*. [Inferior, because he’s young. Evil, because he’s young. Sensual, because he’s young. Bodily, because he’s young. Destructive, because he’s young. And in his youth – despicable.] A pornographic literature crisis? It has been accepted that pornography, together with rape, prostitution or domestic chores, is, generally, a feminine experience. Nonetheless, the canonical writers of pornography are men. With a profoundly feminine activism, Cecilia Ștefănescu writes about a topic of interest using the tools of sensuality, of the visceral, yet coy, with remarks of implausible chastity:

ne-am îmbrățișat, s-a aplecat peste mine, cu ochii puțin umeziți (Cristoase, ce-o mai iubeam!), mi-a mângâiat fruntea, pentru prima oară mi-era frică de sex (care-mi bătea ca o inimă între picioare), părul ei, în cădere, a făcut un zid opac în jur, puteam să cred ca am adormit (însa știam perfect ce se întâmpla, eram jumătate din buricul pământului); i-am simțit mai întâi răsufierea pe obraji; apoi buzele și limba făcându-și loc, saliva puțin sărată, pentru ca treptat sa nu mai simt nimic; adică palmele care coborâseră de pe umeri pe șani, prin bluză, cu mișcări oarecum grăbite să nu strice efectul. Însă eram așa de încordate, încât nu după multă vreme am obosit. Ne-am dezbrăcat cu repeziciune și ne-am băgat sub cuvertură. Am adormit în câteva secunde. (86)

[we hugged, she leaned over me, with watery eyes (Christ, did I love her!), she caressed my brow; for the first time, I was afraid of sex (which was beating like a heart between my legs), her hair, while

falling down, made an opaque wall around, I could believe that I had fallen asleep (but I knew precisely what was going on, I was half of the hub of the universe); I first felt her breath on my cheeks, then her lips and tongue making way, her slightly salty saliva, and then, gradually, I couldn't feel anything else – her palms going down from my shoulders to my breasts, through the shirt, with rushed moves, somehow, for fear she might ruin the effect. But we were that tense that we got tired pretty soon. We quickly undressed and slipped under the blanket. We fell asleep in a few seconds.]

Cultural allusion – the Sapphic love of the two young students is pursued amidst books, and allusions to various books are frequent. Beyond the hedonist meaning of the act of reading, the confrontation scene with the great male auctorial models is described in powerfully erotic tones:

După somnul de după-amiază, a urmat romanul (Pardaillan și Fausta, Cei trei muschetari, Tess d'Urberville, Jennie Gerhardt, Pe aripile vântului, Forsyte Saga, Nora, Roșu și Negru...) – posesiv, mâncător de timp, amant și prieten, cu care-am făcut casă bună timp de aproape cinci ani, nelipsit de pe măsura de la capul patului. Ne închideam amândoi în dormitor, iar el îmi vorbea câte-n lună și în stele. Dar mai cu seamă m-a ajutat să-mi fac prietene, femei de o frumusețe năucitoare de care, în scurt timp, m-am îndrăgostit nebunește. (29)

[After the afternoon nap, there came the novel (*Pardaillan and Fausta, The Three Musketeers, Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Jennie Gerhardt, Gone with the Wind, Forsyte Saga, The Red and the Black...*) possessive, time-consuming, lover and friend, with which I played house for almost five years, always present on the small table near the bed. We used to lock ourselves in the bedroom, and it kept spinning yarns. But, most importantly, it helped me make friends, women of a ravishing beauty, with whom I fell in love like a lunatic.]

Discourse deconstruction, established (mainly) by the male tradition, is produced through fragmentation/discursive breaks. In what its composition is concerned, the novel is a cleavage of two writing patterns – a love story discourse that marks the passage from pubertal crisis to mature femininity, and a discourse of fragmentary notes (*My Sweetest Box*, diary parts, love letters, oneiric descriptions, etc.). In the autofictional sense, some parts remind of the *consonant writing* of Dubrovsky. If the novels of the French academic are placed under the sign of the transcription of the unconscious, then the autobiographical

act is not aware or programmed, but is rooted in desire. The novel *Legături bolnăvicioase*, on the other hand, is made up of words let to fall on paper, words called by the nostalgia of the return to the past, and then by the interstices between the novelist and the tradition of the masculine discourse. With her novelistic project, the authoress intends to invent a new, personal language, for a singular confession that would eventually lead towards a process of pursuit, discovery, affirmation, and, last but not least, creation of the self – even with the tools of automatic dictation:

Supărare, acadea, Herculane, pete roșii, bosumflici, sperietura naibii, băiatul dirigintei, iubire, apreschiuri, sinucidere, fete peste fete, mode, septic, gheață, telefon acasă, nefericire, întâlniri, cochetărie, medie la purtare, sex, nebunie, fugă, rucsac kaki, pantaloni cadrilați, tibi, dor de părinți, singurătate, sendoișuri, rotofeată, ciorapi de bumbac, șorțuleț, apret, mama [...] sanchi balamale, de kiki, de miki, de mine, KIKI, cî-i-cî-i, da, da, kiki, ki?, k'k', chi-chi, key-key, spre poartă, ușă, caramba, kiki, ușcheală, kiki, șterge-o, măi kiki, lacrimă, obraz, sărătură, kiki, pulpîțe grāsane, kiki, te-am iubit, kiki, m-ai trădat, ca o iubită adevărată, kiki, pick-up, semnal M, supărare [...] (51-52)

[Anger, lollypop, Herculane, red spots, grouch, damn fright, form mistress's son, love, après-ski boots, suicide, girls on girls, fashions, septic, ice, phone, home, unhappiness, dating, dalliance, demeanour grades, sex, craziness, elopement, rucksack, kaki, Tattersall trousers, tibi, homesickness, solitude, sandwiches, pursy, cotton socks, pinafore, mum, rubbish, kiki, miki, me, KIKI, ki-i-ki, yeah, yeah, kiki, ki? k'k', chi-chi, key-key, to the gate, door, beat it, kiki, jigger, kiki, skidoo! yo kiki, tear, cheek, saltlings, fat buttocks, kiki, I loved you, kiki, you betrayed me, like a true lover, kiki, turntables, semnal M, anger [...]]

II. In-depth intertextual forms

The change in perspective through the valorisation of the feminine experience is both an autofictional pattern, and a means of affirmation of feminine identity. At a first glance, Cecilia Ștefănescu's novel is niched: it is an autofiction with an uncomplicated plot, sufficient to support a stylistically-infused writing. The feminine voice, risking to succumb under the burden of the beautiful writing, explodes, here and there, in a discourse of femininity, corporeality, confused sexuality and even lesbianism, all transposed in a language which seems to have been invented for feminine writing (*fetițește* – girlishly, *domnișorești* – miss-like, *cămăroi* – large pantry, *vacanțieri* – holiday-makers). For Simone de

Beauvoir, love between women represents contemplation, an attempt to recover the self through the other, or, in other words, the manifestation of a split, schizoid identity. Along these lines, a scene of irrepressible eroticism, like a streak of lightning, becomes rather a form of self-discovery, and the description abounds in elements of interiority:

Îmi ascultam inima bătând leneșă în piept. Alex se sculase de la masă și trecuse dincolo. Am auzit-o cum s-a trântit pe pat. [...] Ca o mătă cuminte, m-am dus după ea, m-am întins și eu și mi-am pus capul în poalele ei. Se repezeau înapoi amestecate toate imaginile, cădeau înăuntru, intrau în strițațiile blugilor ei, râulețe de amintiri făcându-și loc prin material spre nu-știu-unde. Doar figurina lui Kiki mai rămânea lipită pe suprafață, plimbându-și degetele prin părul meu și invitându-mă pentru o ultimă oară să ne confruntăm piepții cu micile buline maronii, să încercăm să ne dezlipim inimioarele ieșite pe dinafară. (51)

[I was listening to my lazy heart beat in my chest. Alex had finished lunch and gone to the other room. I heard her throwing herself on the bed. [...] I followed her like a nice kitty, lay down and put my head on her lap. All images withdrew, fell in, entered the streaks of her jeans, rivers of memories making way through the texture, heading towards I don't know where. Only Kiki's figurine remained glued to the surface, walking her fingers through my hair and inviting me, for the last time, to confront our chests with small brown dots, to try to unstick our outward little hearts.]

The masculine model turned fragile is made up of a series of images that reverse the perception which literature, the Bible, or the visual arts have bestowed upon the feminine model. An assembly of attitudes specific to women, which differentiate them from men, femininity has meant, so far the antithetic rapport to masculine patterns. Equally subversive, the male presence in the novel is reduced to sketches that enter a dialogue with the established pattern: men are fragile, apathetic, incapable of love, and brutally intervene between the two lovers.

Chapter 1, *Renato*, brings in the homonymous character, the one who will shoot down in flames the romantic visions of pubertal Kiki through disgust for foreplay or uncontrolled polygamous impulses:

[...] după-amiezile de sex în care ne călăream până la dezgust, până simțeam că încep să mi se ia sute de piei și rămân doar un pumn de gânduri zdrențăroase. Dădeam pătura la o parte și săream direct în baie, unde rămâneam ore întregi, bălăcindu-mă în cadă [...] (20)

[...] the afternoon sex, when we rode each other to sickness, until I felt that hundreds of skins fell off me and I remained a handful of tattered

thoughts. I would take off the blanket and run to the bathroom, where I stayed for hours, wallowing in the tub [...]

The second chapter, *Renato și bucătăria* [Renato and the kitchen] gives the character a miniature, artificial portrait, a replica of the *baby doll* labels:

Renato seamănă incredibil de mult cu băiețelul-balerin xilogravit pe cutia mea de dulciuri. Era o figurină cu mâini și cu picioare suple, încălțat cu niște ciupici de balet. Aveam sentimentul că mă privește din cutiuța cu reproș și dragoste. [...] Îmi băgam cutiuța sub plapumă și mi-o strecuram pe sub pijamale, pipăind-o cu pielea burții. (40-41)

[Renato resembles so much the dancer-boy engraved on my sweets box. It was a figurine with slender arms and legs, and ballet shoes. I felt like, from the little box, he was looking at me with reproach and love [...] I used to hide the box under my blanket, then under my pyjamas, touching it with the skin on my belly.]

What was considered a compositional shortcoming of the novel [13] or a mismatch between title and content is inscribed, in this subversion grid, in the category of reverse representations. After the lover Renato, the lover Sergiu fails in the attempt to impose himself as a memorable figure – he is all words, nothing more:

Mă săturasem să-l ascult. Pentru mine, toate poveștile de amor sunau la fel. Nu era nimic spectaculos în balmăjirea lor, tot farmecul (vreau să zic farmecul amintirii lor) rămânea undeva în stomac, ca un gol de aer. În rest, numai vorbe, vorbe, vorbe... (Ștefănescu 2011: 75)

[I'd had enough listening to him. For me, all love stories sounded the same. There was nothing spectacular in their ubble-gubble, all the charm (the charm of memory, I mean) remained in my stomach, like an air pocket. Other than that, only words, words, words...]

The feminisation of the world through discourse places Cecilia Ștefănescu under the influence of Simona Popescu and other feminine or masculine names of present-day literature [14]. Nevertheless, the authoress goes beyond the oneiric-surrealist grid of her congeners, as her epic is rather realistic. The oneiric school perceptions are opposed by a sudden return to a stunning reality:

Blocurile aveau în ochii mei de adolescentă mofturoasă aspectul ostenit al gospodinelor, femeii care nu se mai gândesc la sex sau la oglindă, ci poartă stigmatul mirosului de tocăniță și al ciorbei cu perișoare. Iar construcțiile

supraetajate, adormite în griuri, cu balcoanele cojite de tencuială, aidoma unor săni flasci și căzuți, aduceau a femei înșelate, îmbătrânite și scoase din funcțiune. De fapt, ca să fie sinceră, întreg orașelul de provincie, cu oamenii lui, cu vorba lor târăgănată și șâșăită, cu timpul blegos și asexuat, cu străzile pustii, cu bărulețele meschine și întunecoase, cu magazinele prin care bătea vântul uscat, cu ploaia mocănească, în fine, cu căminul ca un hambar unde stăteam înghesuie patru fete în cameră (băieții fiind cazați într-o aripă separată), toate mă făceau să mă scârbesc de acel loc și să mă înfund mai abitir în cărțile mele de poezie modernistă, în comentarii foarte complicate și în discuții pe teme de examen. (8)

[In my finicky teenager eyes, the blocks of flats looked like tired housewives, women who never think of sex or the mirror, but are stigmatised by the smell of stew and pottage. And the superposed buildings, asleep in grey, with balconies with exfoliated plastering, like floppy, lax breasts, reminded me of some cheated women, aged and shut-down. As a matter of fact, to be honest, the whole provincial town, with its drawling people, its sexless and gawky time, its empty streets, its shabby, darkly little bars, with stores where you felt a dry wind blowing, with the drizzle, and, finally, with the dormitory like a barn, with four girls crammed in a room (the boys were accommodated in another wing of the building) – all made me sick of that place, eager to plunge deeper in my modernist poetry books, in complex commentaries and in discussions on exam topics.]

Along the same coordinates of a universe under the feminine lens, one may also mention the ample gastronomic visions, in the form of inventories that express nostalgia for a world in which they are not hierarchized yet:

De fapt, pachet e un cuvânt prea mic pentru sacoșele cu care plecam încărcate: torturi de ciocolată, torturi diplomat, torturi cu cremă amaretto, cu arome de migdale, cu cremă mocha, prăjituri flancate cu bezea, siropuri curgând alene pe burtoaiile de frișcă, straturi de creme aliniat în mii și mii de culori (lămâia alături de Mahonul de cacao, rozul delicat al zmeurei cu amestecul de ciocolată cu lapte frecat cu unt și zahăr), patinoarul întunecat al glazurilor și al zahărului ars pe care moșăia mai mereu câte un turnuleț de alte și felurite creme, cei doi bulgărași de zăpadă lipiți la mijloc cu cremă de cafea neagră, amăruie, prin care găseai pitite stafide și nuci pralinate, cupele transparente prin care se vedeau globulețe de înghețată înotând deja prin suc de ciocolată, purtând tichii în formă de limbi de pisică[...] (81-82)

[As a matter of fact, pack is too small a word for the loaded bags we used to carry: chocolate cakes, whipped cream cakes, amaretto cakes, with almonds, mocha, marshmallow, with syrup dripping lazily on the

cream big bellies, layers of cream aligned in thousands and thousands of colours (lemon near mahogany cocoa, the delicate pink of the raspberry with the milk-chocolate mix blended with butter and sugar), the dark skating rink of the frosting and caramel, on which there was always a tower of various creams, the two little snowballs bound with black coffee cream, in which were hidden raisins and praline nuts, the transparent cups revealing ice cream balls swimming in chocolate sauce and wearing cat tongue shaped caps...]

Avoiding a rakish exhibitionism or the appetite towards the taboo dimension of existence, Cecilia Ștefănescu is, together with Ioana Baetica and Ionuț Chiva, one of the novelists who attempt at the reconfiguration of the literary discourse in the 2000s. Sex as a tool for knowledge is doubled, in *Legături bolnăvicioase*, with bookish inroads to the subconscious of some characters with a programmatic sensitivity. Beyond the generation labelling, the experimentalism of the autofictional formula, or the fracturing credo of the multiplied identities, the novel remains a (feminine) endeavour to enter a rapport with the traditional (masculine) discourse.

Notes

*The paper has been translated from Romanian by Oana Gheorghiu and Steluța Stan

[1] Béatrice Slama, De la « littérature féminine » à « l'écriture-femme » : différence et institution in *Littérature*, nr. 44, 1981. *L'institution littéraire* II. pp. 51-71.

[2] As claimed by sociologist Alain Tourraine, the acknowledgement and affirmation of our own identity are specific to our times. "I am a woman" means that the woman constructs herself as a woman, that the behaviour and judgement values she formulates are organized around her feminine identity: positive, when they back up her conscience as primarily a woman, and negative, when they occult her self-affirmation as such. This statement is essential, as it places the woman firstly in a rapport with herself, and only secondly in relation to *the other* (the man). Self-affirmation as a woman brings about, first and foremost, a change of paradigm: women exist by themselves and for themselves.

[3] Writing on Romanian postmodernism, Mircea Cărtărescu remarks that, despite the incipient stage of the Romanian feminist studies and the few studies in literary theory and criticism, the feminine condition and literature – as domains of the margin – acquire increased interest: "Condiția «celui de-al doilea sex» (Simone de Beauvoir), privită din toate punctele de vedere posibil, de la cel biologic până la cel filozofic, de la feminismul militant la cel teoretic, constituie una din marile teme ale postmodernității, prea complexă ca s-o pot dezvolta în studiul de față. Nu există domeniu al cunoașterii umane în care feminismul contemporan să nu fi creat o breșă prin deconstrucția presupuziției de masculinitate a «omului» (văzut mai întotdeauna ca man – în detrimentul lui woman – și nu ca human being) și prin edificare unei perspective feminine." (Mircea Cărtărescu, *Postmodernismul românesc*, Humanitas, București, 2010, p. 221). ["The condition of the 'second sex' (Simone de Beauvoir), regarded from any possible perspective, from biologic to philosophic, from militant to theoretical feminism,

is one of the greatest themes of postmodernity, too complex to enlarge upon in the present study. There is no field of human knowledge in which contemporary feminism has missed creating a breach through the deconstruction of the presupposition of man's masculinity (almost always seen as man – to the detriment of woman – and not as human being), and through the edification of a feminine perspective.]

[4] Alex Ștefănescu (“Poezie cu unică folosință”, in *România Literară*, nr. 5, February, 2000) argues the experimental dimension of the volume not only through its quality as collective writing, but also through the freedom of expression, which does not always prove advantageous to the text: “*Fugă de idei, sentimentalism, melodramă, o gramatică laxă - acestea sunt cele mai evidente caracteristici ale textelor. Li se adaugă o revărsare de cuvinte licențioase și expresii argotice, folosite însă nu provocator și viril, ca în proza lui Henry Miller, de exemplu, ci tot dintr-un fel de dezmaț leneș, din plăcerea de a renunța la orice efort intelectual și de a atinge (cu mâna, pe sub plapumă!) zone lingvistice erogene.*” [Rushed ideas, sentimentalism, melodrama, lax grammar – these are the most obvious features of these texts. Adding to that, there is a flow of ithyphallic and argotic phrases, which are not used provocatively and manly, as is the case with Henry Miller's prose, for example, but as a result of a lazy debauchery, of the pleasure of giving up any intellectual effort and of reaching out (with the hand, under the blanket) erogenous linguistic areas.]

[5] Through its themes and writing techniques, even the 2002 novel is analysed in direct relation to the activity of the literary circle: “*Cartea de debut a Ceciliei Ștefănescu stă sub semnul viziunii cenaclului Litere, anii '95 -'97, cenaclu condus de Mircea Cărtărescu: tematica în proză se rotește discret în jurul eroticii (și, mai general, a corporalității) adolescente; sunt expuse rafinat, cu grijă, obsesiile, gândurile tânărului abia ajuns în facultate; un biografism care a atins și extreme, mulți dintre scriitorii formați în acel cenaclu reluând în scris experiențele lor din exact acea perioadă [...]. Romanul Legături bolnăvicioase respectă în primul rând regula cantității (este de mici dimensiuni), are o temă care aduce cu ea o întregă paradigmă de ambiguități de care au profitat mulți scriitori contemporani: bisexualism, homosexualism. Tonul biografic este răsturnat: se relatează la rece o serie de experiențe, senzații, obsesii, vise, amintiri, un set de episoade, cititorului revenindu-i misiunea de a recompune puzzle-ul, de a-l reconstitui. Narațiunea este fragmentată după regulile (încă nescrise) ale scrierilor memorialistice, tonul nu este însă acela al unui autor care dorește o relație directă cu mărturia sa.* (Costi Rogozanu, “Tinerii între ei”, in *România Literară*, nr. 37, September, 2002). [Cecilia Ștefănescu's debut novel is under the sign of the vision of the *Litere* literary circle, led by Mircea Cărtărescu: the theme discreetly revolves around adolescent eroticism (and, especially, corporeality); the obsessions and thoughts of the young person, just admitted to faculty, are introduced with refinement and care; a biographism that reached extreme limits – many of the writers formed by that literary circle exposing, in writing, their actual experiences of those times. [...] The novel *Love Sick* abides by the rule of quantity (it is a short novel), features a theme which brings about an entire paradigm of ambiguities that have inspired many contemporary writers: bisexualism, homosexuality. The biographic tone is upside-down: sober accounts of a series of experiences, sensations, obsessions, dreams, memories, a set of episodes forcing the reader to reassemble the puzzle. The narrative is fragmented, following the (yet unwritten) rules of memorialistic writing, yet the tone does not seem to belong to an author who wants to have a direct relation with her confession.]

[6] In her article, Bianca Burța-Cernat considers collections like *Fiction Ltd.*, *Ego.Proza* (Poliorom), and *Debut* (Humanitas). ‘Cum mai stăm cu proza românească? (I)’, in *Observator cultural*, nr. 360, February, 2007.

[7] In the article 'Erotism de atmosferă' (*România Literară*), Marius Chivu notices the rapidity of the novel's entrance on the Romanian literary market, as well as in the area of criticism, regarding it as a pathfinder for a new kind of literature: "*Puține romane de debut, postdecembriste, și-au câștigat o notorietate a lor așa cum s-a întâmplat cu romanul Ceciliei Ștefănescu, Legături bolnăvicioase: comentată favorabil, epuizată din librării (chiar dacă tirajul relativ mic face irelevant acest aspect) și intrată destul de repede în bibliografia unor cursuri opționale sau chiar făcând subiectul dizertațiilor universitare, cu o traducere în franceză (în cadrul proiectului Les Belles Etrangères) și o ecranizare (în regia lui Tudor Giurgiu) aproape gata. Acum trei ani, când a apărut prima ediție, subiectul cărții i-a entuziasmat pe comentatori prin noutate și i-a făcut să creadă că romanul inaugura o serie. Acum, după debutul unei generații întregi de tineri prozatori, putem trage o surprinzătoare concluzie: de fapt, cartea Ceciliei Ștefănescu n-a fost urmată, în plan literar, de nimeni.*" [Few debut novels published after December 1989 have gained as much notoriety as Cecilia Ștefănescu's novel, *Love Sick*, favourably commented on and sold out from bookstores (although the small circulation makes this aspect irrelevant), included soon enough in the bibliography of some elective courses, and even made the topic of some dissertations, with a translation into French (as part of the *Les Belles Etrangères* project) and a film adaptation (directed by Tudor Giurgiu), almost completed. Three years ago, when the first edition was launched, the theme excited the critics with its novelty and made them think that this novel might inaugurate a series. Now, after the debut of a whole generation of prose writers, one may surprisingly conclude that Cecilia Ștefănescu's novel wasn't followed by any other.]

[8] In the article *Intimități* (in *România Literară*, 48/Dec. 2005), Daniel Cristea-Enache reproaches to Cecilia Ștefănescu and other women-writers of her generation the artificiality of a borrowed formula: "*Bizareriile și perversiunile sexuale sunt descrise cu o răceală clinică și într-un mod pe cât de meticulos, pe atât de artificial, ca și cum mai multe dintre degetele scriitorului ar fi ocupate cu răsfoirea unui manual al pozițiilor amoroase. Diferența dintre D.H. Lawrence și Henry Miller, pe de o parte, și închipuitele bacante dâmbovițene Claudia Golea, Ioana Baetica și Cecilia Ștefănescu, pe de alta, vine nu numai din izbitoarea denivelare artistică; ci și din modul radical deosebit în care bucuriile cărnii se amestecă în cele ale scriiturii. La cei doi maeștri, proza respiră erotic și atracția sexuală împinge lumea înaintea. Universul cărții e organic la propriu și la figurat, membrele anatomice realizând o dublă copulație, stilistică și biologică. Romanele pulsează după ritmul interior al personajelor, inspiră și expiră aerul acestora, devin febrile odată cu ele. La studentele noastre conștiințioase, sexul - ca și drogul - reprezintă o temă pentru acasă, executată cu râvnă școlărească. Scenele «încinse», lungi și redundante, aproape plicticoase prin mecanica lor, sunt așezate la rând ca păsărelele pe firul de telegraf.*" [The whimsicalities and sexual perversions are described with clinical rigour, meticulously and artificially, as if the writer's fingers were busy skimming through a manual of sexual positions. The difference between D.H. Lawrence and Henry Miller, on the one hand, and the self-conceited bacchantes of Dâmbovița, Claudia Golea, Ioana Baetica and Cecilia Ștefănescu, on the other hand, comes not only from the striking artistic unevenness, but also from the radically different ways in which the pleasures of the flesh combine with the pleasures of writing. In the case of the two masters, the prose breathes of eroticism, and sexual attraction pushes the world forward. The book's universe is organic, literally and figuratively, the anatomic members performing a dual - stylistic and biologic - copulation. The novels pulse in the inner rhythms of their characters; they breathe in and out their air, and become feverish at the same time with them. In the case of our diligent students, sex (just like drugs) represents their homework, executed with school-like application. The 'hot' sexual scenes, long and redundant, almost boring

due to their mechanic nature, are aligned as little birds on a telegraph wire.]

[9] "E trist să atârnăm de bunăvoința altora" [It is sad to depend on someone else's kindness]. Interview with Cecilia Ștefănescu, in *Observator cultural*, 292/Oct 2005. The interview was taken on the occasion of the selection for the collective volume *Les Belles Etrangères*.

[10] D. Maingueneau considers the traditional distinctions and places pornography in relation of definition and characterisation with the erotic: "The distinction between pornography and eroticism is marked by a series of oppositions, both in spontaneous opinions and in elaborate arguments: direct vs. indirect, masculine vs. feminine, barbaric vs. civilised, rough vs. refined, trivial vs. grandiose, prosaic vs poetic, quantity vs. quality, cliché vs. creativity, mass vs. elite, commercial vs. artistic, facile vs. difficult, banal vs. original, univocal vs. pluri-vocal, matter vs. spirit, etc." (Maingueneau 2011:38)

[11] Although the official translation of the title is *Love Sick*, the literal translation would be *Sickly Liaisons* (translator's note).

[12] An editorial strategy meant to ensure the visibility of the novel *Legături bolnăvicioase* is mentioned by Florina Pârjol in her study: "Cazul e interesant pentru că, separat de momentul colectiv al campaniei poliromiste, ridică o problemă nouă pentru mediul românesc, aceea a importanței covârșitoare a promovării și a vizibilității pe piața literară. [...] Subiectul «tare» i-a adus cărții succesul de librărie, în vreme ce scriitura feminină, insuficient și inegal reprezentată în proza postdecembristă, i-a asigurat atenția criticii." (2014: 183) [The case is interesting as, apart from the collective moment of Polirom campaign, it raises a new question for the Romanian environment, that of the overwhelming importance of promotion and visibility on the literary market. [...] The "hot" theme brought the success of the book in point of sales, while the feminine writing, insufficiently and unequally represented in the Romanian prose after 1990, brought it to the attention of critics.]

[13] "Capitolele nu constituie unități semnificative în economia romanului, ci adițiuni de scene operate fără o minimă logică discursiv-combinatorie. Autoarea le-a considerat, probabil, încheiate, rotunde, atunci când i s-au terminat foile tip A4 sau mina din pix. În capitolul al treilea (sic!), intitulat Renato și bucătăria, numitul Renato apare târziu, ca să dispară instantaneu. Dar nu-i așa că sună bine - Renato și bucătăria?" (Cristea-Enache, *Intimități*, in *România literară*, nr. 48, December, 2005) [The chapters do not represent significant units in the economy of the novel, but scene additions without a discursive logic of combination. The authoress probably considered them done at the end of the paper sheet or of the refill of her pen. In the third [sic] chapter, entitled *Renato și bucătăria*, the said Renato appears quite lately and disappears instantly. But *Renato și bucătăria* sounds awesome, doesn't it?]

[14] Such a filiation is mentioned by Marius Chivu in his article in *România literară*: "O anume voluptate lingvistică a inventarierii olfactiv-culinare o pune pe Cecilia Ștefănescu în descendența Simonei Popescu cu care împarte și tema spațiilor închise care acutizează percepțiile, poemele studențești ale Anei Maria Sandu din Amintirile unui Chelbasan pot fi puse în relație cu poemele lui Kiki, iar preumblările prin vechiul București te trimit, evident, cu gândul la Bucureștiul subteran din proza lui Cărtărescu. Însă, în ciuda acestui inevitabil aer de familie, Cecilia Ștefănescu are o voce a ei și nu-mi rămâne decât să aștept cu nerăbdare apariția, deja anunțată, a noului ei roman cu un titlu (sper să nu devin psihanalizabil) la fel de erotic: *Intrarea soarelui*." (Marius Chivu, 'Erotism de atmosferă', in *România literară*, nr. 39, October, 2005) [A certain linguistic voluptuousness of the olfactory-culinary inventory places Cecilia Ștefănescu in line with Simona Popescu, with whom she also shares the theme of the closeted spaces which heighten perceptions - the student poems of Ana Maria Sandu

from *Amintirile unui Chelbasan* may be placed in relation to Kiki's poems, and the wanderings through old Bucharest suggest, inevitably, the underworld Bucharest in Cărtărescu's works. However, despite this unavoidable familiar air, Cecilia Ștefănescu has a voice of her own, and I can only wait, anxiously, the already announced release of her new novel, with similarly erotic title (I hope I won't become psychoanalysable): *Intrarea soarelui* [The Sun Entrance]].

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