

“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA  
FACULTY OF LETTERS  
DEPARTMENT OF WORLD AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

**Narrative Identity in the Contemporary Novel – Psychopathology and Poetics**

Scientific supervisor:

Prof. Dr. Corin Braga

PhD candidate:  
Elena Butușină

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## *Summary*

*Keywords:* autism, contemporary novel, autobiography, poetics, non-fiction, narrative identity, psychopathology, Temple Grandin, Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, Rupert Isaacson, Donna Williams, Daniel Tammet, Mark Haddon, Simon Armitage, Francisco X. Stork, Oliver Sacks, Dean Koontz, Tom McCarthy, Chuck Palahniuk, Jonathan Franzen, Viktor Pelevin, Chloé Delaume.

During the last two decades, a great number of studies have been dedicated to autism spectrum disorders (ASD). The results of serious continuous research, conducted by multidisciplinary teams in specialized centers, published in academic reviews or on electronic sites dedicated to the topic, are doubled, in an overwhelming manner, by the tendency to popularize the subject among the unspecialized public. This phenomenon – consisting of an infinite series of personal blogs, social networks or books addressed to a wide audience – is generated mostly by parents of children diagnosed with ASD, by so-called high-functioning autistic individuals who managed to describe and share their experience - alone or helped by editors -, and by therapists. These last ones function as mediators, and their multiple role is very important. On the edge of the approaches to the phenomenon that some even call “the autism epidemic”, contemporary artists gather ideas for their projects from both discourses. Either expressed by means of visual arts, cinema, performance or literature, these artists represent a distinct category, and the leading ideas of their works centered on autism are diverse and significant for the age we live in. Approaching works inspired by the autistic experience (no matter the genre they belong to, but mostly written, visual and performative), a research like the present one can lead towards numerous directions; it can speak about the syndrome, the medical practice, the social rehabilitation/ integration of autistic individuals, but also about the audience, the education or the policies supporting a social cause.

Belonging to the realm of comparative literature, this study’s central intention is to reveal one more subtle connection between literature and contemporary life. The analysis unveils and discusses aspects that tend to become constancies of an identity discourse that is being

configured narratively. The personal history narrated connects all the sequences that compose the postmodern puzzle of the identity. Being either the story transmitted by the patient to the therapist, the one taken further by the therapist, or the one remembered by the narrator and written down in order for it to survive the passage of time, the one invented departing from real data, or the one symbolically created by the fiction writer, the narrated history is profoundly personal, and its structuring route reveals incipient transformations of the poetic process.

I believe that such a thesis attempts at repairing or, at least, mediating the contradictory relation between contemporary representations of autism – representations that have various expressions and languages, but similar essential aspects that my study shall emphasize gradually. Beyond the deconstruction of certain clichés and automatisms of the general public’s perception of the subject, as well as of certain market mechanisms that sometimes govern the publisher’s options, the central idea of the study is, as the title itself suggests, the emphasis of an indissoluble connection between the structure of the contemporary novel and the mechanisms activated by the emergence of the discourse of the autistic experience. Inside the apparently closed, autarchic, even violent, autistic individuality, one can discover, as in a microcosm, true creativity, governed by a set of fluctuating rules that are continually moving and hypersensitive to the outside world. The autistic individuality, lacking the constancy induced by reason, brings forward the sensorial, repairing a connection that the technological society might have distorted. Through an extreme receptivity towards details usually ignored by neurotypicals, the autistic individuals, portrayed by their own autobiographies or by the fictional works, advance the essential idea of a necessary awakening from an automatism of perception, the deconstruction and then the reconstruction of our own perceptive and socializing configurations. Furthermore, the traditional references are, to a certain extent, broken, and the question surpasses the rhetoric and reaches the semiological. The semiotic process reveals the transition from the clinic case to the literary one, representative for the fictional hero of today. And the hero of the popular fiction today stands for the contemporary reader, due to a process of narrative contamination.

The analysis is hybrid, but constructive and innovative, emphasizing the link between medical science and literary poetics, through the comparative analysis of fictional and non-fictional narrative structures. In the diagram formed by the apparently distinct pieces discussed, the connections are important because they reveal areas of indeterminacy. The method applied is

initially inductive, following an intuition concerning the explanations that can be replaced by personalized descriptions that, juxtaposed, confronted and finally conjugated, could lead towards possible dialogues unexplored so far. But the vast majority of the analysis is deductive, examining the text in the light of the theoretical considerations stemming from the clinical discourse, following a coherence suggested by the (sometimes multilayered) structure of the texts, in order to synthesize, eventually, the distinct elements that compose, kaleidoscopically, a moving image of the identity narrating its own story meant to gain confirmation.

The first chapter debates aspects that define a fluctuating narrative identity, specific for the contemporary era. Pleading for an analysis of the otherness in contemporary narrative, I accept the definition of the identity as a liminal construct, susceptible to fall into terminological traps or to acquire a secondary significance. In view of establishing a theoretical approach for the analysis of the autistic discourse, arguments from two relatively new fields of study emerge. These two – Trauma and Affect Studies - are quite influent in today's theoretical discourse and their methodological variations contribute to the reception of an identity like the one analyzed in this study. In addition, in order to render possible an analysis that accepts its own delimitations and discursive contaminations, I present the transgressive work of Fernand Deligny, one of the first researchers of the autistic individuality. A pedagogue and an artist, he realized the first mappings of the emotional routes covered by autistic children, during a series of experiments that facilitate the essential distinction between *faire* and *agir* (making and acting), between narrative and performance, proved later on by the autistic autobiographies and the fiction inspired by these ones.

The second chapter presents aspects of ASD that help realizing the link with the narrative mechanisms discussed in the second half of the thesis. I describe ASD, hypotheses concerning them, the difficulty of diagnostics and nosologies, using ideas belonging to three of the most renowned Western researchers of the phenomenon – Theo Peeters, Simon Baron-Cohen and Uta Frith. The accessible explanatory character of these studies facilitates the entrance into the life narrative, but also the accommodation of the large audience with a different sensibility. Tackling also topics like activism, mechanisms and traps of popularizing the subject, the chapter discusses representations of the autistic subjectivity that are visible in the contemporary culture, but also medical notes of the pioneers of present day theory (Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger). The end of

the chapter facilitates the passage to the literary part, bringing arguments from the philosophical discourse on psychopathology (through Antonio Damasio's theory on the so-called "neurology of identity") and on what used to be regarded as an abnormality until the general acceptance of the obliging political correctness.

The literary body analyzed is divided in three main parts, three separate chapters densely connected. Its first part, corresponding to the second chapter of the thesis, comprises a series of books written by authors who have been diagnosed with ASD. Before analyzing Temple Grandin's autobiography, I discuss Oliver Sacks' manner of reconciling medical and popular literature. His attitude is explained through a short digression into the neurological narratives of his predecessors (A.Luria, L.Vygotsky). I begin analyzing the autobiographies with the volume that changed the way of thinking about autism, a volume that has been republished, updated and asked for many times during the last two decades. Grandin's explanations of the process of thinking in images, along with the series of existential experiences provoked by this approach, represent the adequate entrance into the universe of the ASD personality. The other autistic authors analyzed are Donna Williams, Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay and Daniel Tammet. If the first two cases mentioned present the result of an intricate ASD diagnosis, Tammet's case reunites two possibly limitative labels – Asperger syndrome and the so-called savant idiot syndrome. The extreme sensoriality, the war with the outside world, the perpetual lack of adaptability and the refuge into alternative realities are the common denominator of these three life experiences. What is different is their way of acknowledging the diagnostic, of overcoming it, of converting it into one more reason to explore the world and, above all, of turning it into a coherent written story. Each one's extremely personalized manner to transmit his/ her experience by narrating it, orders the chaos of sensations and tries to communicate beyond the borders of the "mindblindness" that replaces the empathy of the everyday norms. Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay's case is brought into this context due to its lyric transgression of the epic, but also because of its eloquent example of transculturality, an idea I will mention several times. This part of the study includes Tammet's complete synaesthetic narratives, too, previously only sketched by the others. The opening of the issue of the autistic identity within the narrative realm is essential here, together with the discovery of certain perceptual mechanisms that inspire the fiction writers, in more or less distorted shapes. Just like in the second part of the literary analysis (where Simon Armitage represents the exception from the narratives expressed by

autistic voices), I include an exception from the rule in this part, too – the book written by Rupert Isaacson. Written in the 1<sup>st</sup> person, it tells the father's experience of an initiating journey to Mongolia in order to reach a series of shamans who could heal his autistic son.

The fourth chapter debates the transition from medical case to literary subject, analyzing novels that, in various ways, describe the detective-like experiences of the characters that follow the path of justice (repairing an injustice done to somebody else or, in Armitage's case, coming to terms with one's own past). The analysis of Mark Haddon's, Francisco X. Stork's, Dean Koontz' and Simon Armitage's novels constitutes an occasion to reveal the spectacular mechanisms of audience success. These works can be deconstructed or criticized for using a series of clichés concerning autism, with the purpose of gaining the public's attention (a successful attempt, according to the number of sales). On the other hand, what I am interested in is, in this point of the analysis, the pattern that the literary character follows, the emphasis of the elements that contribute to its credible autonomous identity, behind the standardized constructs that become visible after a first reading.

The third part of the literary analysis, corresponding to the fifth chapter of the thesis, represents the final step of the overall analysis. It refers to contemporary novels inspired by the transformations of the narrative identity, partially influenced by figures such as the autistic ones, but with no explicit diagnostic. This absence of the medical label stands for a discursive deadlock, but also for a deeper change into the contemporary reader's own horizon of expectations. The cases tackled here belong to Jonathan Franzen, Viktor Pelevin, Chuck Palahniuk, Chloé Delaume and Tom McCarthy, the last four of these being extremely transgressive formally and violent towards the reader's expectations, while the first one undermines his discourse with its politic dimension. Yet, all of them implicitly plead for a transgression meant to favor an authentic dialogue. The order in which the books are analyzed is not aleatory; instead, it runs parallel to the gradual emphasis of images that can define simultaneously the narrative identity, as in a kaleidoscopic reflection of the isolated pieces. The ambiguity of the space and time coordinates, the dialectics between mythology and technology and its impact on the disintegration of the identity, the derisory discovery of mysticism, the deliberate dissolution into televised realities, all these represent constant elements of



contemporary fiction that, next to the already discussed issues concerning the autistic discourses, complete the fluctuating image of the narrative identity.

All the elements analyzed intersect in the following points: acknowledging the split between individuals and within the individual, characteristic of today's society, as the main cause for the transformation of human sensibility; the fascination for a non-Western solution, a resurrection of the holistic Oriental thinking, capable of reconciling numerous components of the identity; the return to the interdisciplinary experiment and the creation of an area of communication between science and art, as solutions able to produce, within the Western multicultural world, a real therapy; the medical anamnesis and the therapeutic dialogue – constantly appearing behind identity narratives; the necessity to analyze the media clichés concerning autism, from the perspective of the reception theory and of their impact on the development of the ASD discourse; the necessary confrontation with an alienating self-discourse. The transition from medical to literary case, from the clinical to the novelesque is representative for the hypochondria and the self-centered return of a solipsistic society. Having reached this point, the conclusions of the first three chapters converge on proving how fiction is infused life at a subtle level, so far difficult to conceptualize theoretically. In other words, the character's action, his/ her story's performance generates a new matrix inside which the story can unfold and the identity can function. The reciprocal genesis of the story's content and of the form free from rigid stylistics, thus becomes obvious. The comparative analysis of the real, diagnosed autistic sensibility and of the problematic personality in the contemporary novel reveals filiations unthought-of before. Therefore, rethinking the fictional space of the novels discussed, in correspondence with typically autistic perceptive fluctuations, contributes to a reciprocal illumination of certain aspects that, considered separately, would be difficult to explain.