RELATIONAL SELF-REPRESENTATIONS OF QUEER LIVES AND POLITICAL OPPRESSION IN ROMANIAN LIFE WRITING

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Abstract: *The article examines four autobiographical works written in the second half of the 20th century. The texts chart their authors' experience of non-heteronormative identity construction alongside a history of political oppression during the communist regime in Romania. In addition to self-identifying as homosexuals and reflecting upon the interconnection of their sexuality, cultural background and discourse position, Ion Negoițescu, Mihai Rădulescu and Petre Sirin, who knew each other well, were part of a larger network of like-minded friends and interacted intensely with key figures of the Romanian interwar intelligentsia. The analysis looks at their texts through the lenses of performativity, positionality and relationality and shows that, despite their genre heterogeneity, Negoițescu's unfinished autobiography, his correspondence with Radu Stanca, Rădulescu's posthumous collection of autobiographical writings and Sirin's auto/biographical account of his relationship to Rădulescu can all be read as relational life narratives. On a formal level, the posthumous publication of the texts dislocates the life writers from their autonomous position through shared authorship with the editors. On a content level, every life writing piece analysed here combines performative narrative self-construction with representations of personal relationships. A close reading of the texts reveals how engaging with stigmatized homosexual experience and at the same time adjusting to conservative stances of the Romanian high culture disrupts the linear narrative of autonomous self-development and provides accounts of queer subjectivity that challenge both rigid genre and gender boundaries.*

Key words: *autobiography, relationality, queer, Romania, political oppression*

Introduction

This article explores autobiographical works by Ion Negoițescu (1921-1993), Mihai Rădulescu (1919-1959) and Petre Sirin (1926-2003) which were published posthumously and have been to date the only examples of queer life writing in Romanian literature. In addition to sharing a non-heteronormative sexuality and reflecting upon its interconnection with other aspects of their life stories, all three life writers – the celebrated literary critic Negoițescu as well as the less famous musicologist Rădulescu and documentary film director Sirin – aspired to play

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a significant role in Romanian mainstream culture and were part of a cultural network afflicted by political persecutions in the 1950s and 1960s.

The present article originates in a paper accepted for publication in a projected thematic issue on Central and Eastern European literary representation of non-heteronormative masculinity by the Australian e-journal *Sextures* which eventually went offline. A second occasion to present the same topic to an international audience was a project entitled "Alternative Formen der Sexualität in der rumänischen Literatur nach 1945. Eine literaturhistorische Spurensuche" hosted by the German department of the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj and the University of Innsbruck[2]. Both times I considered the scarcity of autobiographical testimonies telling the story of queer lives in communist Romania and only a selected corpus of texts by the three authors mentioned above seemed an appropriate choice for describing the queer autobiographical discourse in Romania. The present article maintains the focus on the three authors, while extending the corpus of texts to Negoițescu's correspondence, which hasn't been addressed previously. Given the centrality of friendship in the life writings of the three authors, the present analysis focuses not only on the "performance of identities that become constitutive of subjectivity" (Smith, Watson, 2010, p. 214) but rather on the "relational structure of the autobiographer's identity" (Eakin, 1999, p. 60). At the same time, it reflects more deeply on the research methods and the theoretical frame by placing the analysis at the intersection of life writing studies, queer studies and Romanian literary studies.

Queer readings of Romanian literary works or studies focusing on LGBTQ representations in the Romanian literature are still scarce in the academia. Moreover, as the researcher in gender and queer studies Ramona Dima (2018) remarks, they are rather mapping exercises to identify Romanian literary texts with queer potential than in-depth studies of the literary phenomena from a queer perspective. Larger attempts to identify historical material for research in the nascent field of Romanian queer literary and cultural studies briefly analyse Negoițescu's *Straja Dragonilor* [The Dragons' Watch][3] without addressing the life writing narratives by Rădulescu and Sirin. Angelo Mitchievici describes Negoițescu's *Straja Dragonilor* as "Bildungsautobiographie" (Mitchievici, 2010) and Dima as "memoir" (Dima, 2022, p. 96) without further differentiation in point of literary genre.

One of the main theses of this article is that all selected texts fulfil the conditions of autobiography, even though under special circumstances that are to be discussed below. These circumstances relate to the second major thesis of the present paper, i.e. the relational character of the self-representations and the collaborative narration strategy that places emphasis on the relationships and

2 The paper appeared in the conference proceedings. Cf. Maria Irod: *Homoerotik und Subjektkonstitution in den autobiografischen Schriften von Ion Negoițescu (1921-1993), Mihai Rădulescu (1919-1959) und Petre Sirin (1926-2003).* In: *Studia UBB Philologia*, LXI, 4, 2016, pp. 73-88.
3 The title refers to a place in the old town of Sibiu usually known by its German name Dragoner Wache, i.e. Dragons' Guard or Dragons' Watch, the Dragons being an old military order.

interactions shaping lives and life narratives. In my argument, I take the position of the reader as a starting point, as Lejeune does: "in reading them [the texts], it is we who make them function" (Lejeune, 1989, p. 4).

In what follows, I attempt to show how the analysed texts function as coherent life narratives not only about the writing self but also about its "involvement in another's life and story" (Eakin, 1999, p. 60). In doing so, I will examine them through the lenses of performativity, positionality and relationality[4] as main interpretation categories in life writing studies (Balestrini, 2017, pp. 92-94).

At this point, a terminological clarification regarding the term "queer" is needed, especially as it is used on texts that do not participate in any theoretical or political paradigm built around this concept. In employing the term "queer", I value its contingency (Butler, 1993, p. 230) compared to the concurrent concept "gay", while being fully aware of the inadequacy of both words in capturing the particularities of self-reflections written in the non-English-speaking-world at a time when such identity categories were hardly available. While trying to highlight the uniqueness of each author's cultural self-expression, the present article embraces the constructivist commonplace that individual and collective identities are malleable and historically determined by discursive practices as well as the general assumption that literature, including life writing, does not merely reproduce reality, e.g. by simply integrating non-literary discourses, but reflects it and modifies it at the same time.

I. Negoițescu: *Straja Dragonilor* [The Dragons' Watch] (1994)

Two facts stand out about Ion Negoițescu[5]: he was deeply driven by his homosexuality and he had a leading role in literary networking[6] during the communist regime. Both fundamental aspects of his personality are reflected upon in his life writing works.

The only work in the corpus analysed here that has received critical attention is Negoițescu's *Straja Dragonilor*, first published in 1994 and issued in two further editions by the reputed publishing house Humanitas. The autobiography, left unfinished at the time of the author's death, made Negoițescu the first Romanian writer to publicly acknowledge his homosexuality. A cursory look at the book's reception in Romania's mainstream literary criticism shows that the author's status as a famous literary critic and political dissident, on the

4 In the context of life writing, the category of performativity shifts the focus away from the stable identity of the autobiographer toward the constructed identity of the narrator. Positionality refers to the use of discursive strategies that signal the moral, political and cultural stance of the narrator. Finally, the concept of relationality points to the way in which autobiographical identity is constructed in relation to others.

5 The author signed his texts only with the initial of his first name, i.e. I. Negoițescu.

6 The Romanian-American scholar Virgil Nemoianu (b. 1940), who knew Negoițescu well, emphasizes his excellent connections to major authors such as Lucian Blaga, Eugen Lovinescu, Liviu Rusu, Tudor Vianu and Petru Comarnescu and his mediating role between older and younger generations of Romanian writers (Nemoianu, 2021, p. 12.)

one hand, and the artistic merits of the text, on the other hand, are the main tenets of the critical approach to Negoițescu's autobiography.

At the first glance, to describe *Straja Dragonilor* as a relational autobiography would be far-fetched as the book meets the genre expectations of classical autobiography on a formal level. Its opening line evokes Goethe's famous incipit of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*: "I came into the world on the 10th of August 1921, two hours after midnight"[7] (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 35). The first passage continues very much like in Goethe's autobiography with a short comment linking the autobiographer's birth circumstances to his personality traits, followed by situating the narrated I within his familial and social context. The two chapters of Negoițescu's unfinished autobiography recount experiences from the autobiographer's first twenty years of life. It makes sense to read Negoițescu's text as "Bildungsautobiographie" (as Mitchievici does), given the author's early interest in German classicism. We can even consider this late autobiography as the fulfilling of Negoițescu's youthful project to write "a *Bildungsroman* in Goethe's style" about his "erotic experience and education" (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2022, p. 94). *Straja Dragonilor* seems to have been conceived as a linearly structured life account that was interrupted in its 'cradle-to-old age' chronology only by the autobiographer's death. Even though this autobiographical model might place emphasis on the time dimension of the life narrative, *Straja Dragonilor* can be productively read alongside a "topography of autobiography" as described by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (2010). These spatial aspects disrupt causality and allow free associations and retrospective interpretations that do not fit into the chronology (Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2010, pp. 195-196).

The titles of the two chapters, "The Ball Dress" and "Called to the Headmaster's Study", hint at two major themes explored within Negoițescu's life narrative: the feminine element in the autobiographer's personality, nurtured in the family and the private space, and the masculine world of school and politics. This seemingly rigid gender binary is disrupted by means of narrative organization. Even though both chapters thematize family relations, school memories and sexual experiences in early childhood and in teenage years, the first chapter revolves around childhood experiences and environmental factors that influenced the autobiographer's later development on a rather subconscious level, while the second chapter explores the protagonist's entrance in the public sphere, the main aesthetic and ideological orientation that crystallized during the high-school years and the conflicts arisen from a turbulent political climate. The ball attended by the narrator's parents and the encounter with the school's principal might be regarded as minor events in the autobiographical development depicted in the book. Nevertheless, they function as subtle textual organizers attracting significant memories and arranging them into a meaningful narrative order. The spatial dimension of remembering, foregrounding objects and places that are significant for the narrator's identity formation, shifts the focus away from the linear succession of events and its implicit teleological construction of an

7 All translations from Romanian and German are mine.

autonomous subject to the narration act itself that brings disparate emotionally laden "autobiographical occasions" (Smith, Watson, 2010, p. 214) together. Thus, Negoițescu's life narrative attains a high degree of performativity in the sense of self-reflexivity and "mediation of the act of narration on the level of the narration" (Berns, 2014). The narrating I permanently shifts back and forth between memories situated at different points in time and place, reflecting upon their affective interrelations and their role in connecting different instantiations of the self. The ball dress episode coalesces around histrionic elements showcasing the fluid relation between play-acting and authenticity. The interaction of domains like *haute couture*, performance arts, aesthetics and transvestite practices and the remembered lived experiences underscores the gendered dimension of narrative performativity. The core event in the first chapter takes place far from the protagonist's home, in Galați, a port town on the Danube that Negoițescu's narrator exoticizes and contrasts to his native Transylvania. It features the 10year-old narrated I, anxiously anticipating the upcoming military ball his parents were going to attend and passionately counselling his mother how to dress (Negoițescu, 1994, pp. 89-91). The boy's enthusiasm about his mother's clothes and his active involvement in the process of dressmaking goes beyond mere anecdotal experience. The narrator often leaves the chronological path to explore interrelated meanings, especially of potential achievements and failures in his life history. The genuine pleasure derived by the child from engaging with his mother's clothes is embedded in a narrative context tracking back the narrator's aesthetic predispositions. The narrating I asks himself whether fashion could have been a more suitable domain for him to manifest his "aesthetic vocation" (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 90) and goes on to remark that despite his childish exuberance and communicative urge he also failed to embrace a pedagogical career (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 90).

The child who puts on his mother's dresses, the adult who counsels his mother in buying hats and dying her hair, the art connoisseur contemplating paintings, the child enacting self-directed plays and singing opera arias before other children from the neighbourhood, the melancholic child experiencing "guiltless guilt" (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 82), the avid reader, the solitary adolescent pursuing sexual encounters in closed spaces (e.g. in the storage room of a fellow schoolboy) or in public places (e.g. by furtively petting anonymous men in cinemas) are all puzzle pieces the narrating I uses to make sense of the hybridities that constitute his identity. This narrative identity is constructed apart from the traditionally male-connoted career path, but also beyond the stereotypical image of a marginal effeminate man.

The second chapter is very dense in information and references, embedding the narrated life in its historical and cultural context. Even more than the first chapter, it displays a tortuous style with complex and interrupted syntax. An extreme example of this broken narrative mode, rendering the distorted way in which memory meanders back to undesirable recollections, is the very opening passage of the second chapter. After a plain first sentence stating that the 14-year-

old was called by the school's principal to his study, a digression comprising seven pages (Negoițescu, 1994, pp. 129-136) summons up memories related to the cultural developmental level of the narrated I. It briefly tackles the atmosphere of Romanian patriotism in Aiud (a Transylvanian city where Negoițescu attended his first two years of high-school) and dwells on the protagonist's reading habits, his first literary attempts and his family's connections to major Transylvanian writer Liviu Rebreanu. The whole passage is full of self-ironical comments about the narrator's youthful literary production and it retrospectively focuses on the oscillation of the narrated I between modernist, cosmopolitan aesthetics and traditionalist values. Thus, before the main plot line is resumed, the reader is provided with significant background information combining biographical and historical material to emphasize the experienced state of confusion at a time of rising fascism in Romania. The school's principal wants to know from the top pupil Negoițescu whether there are members of the Legion of the Archangel Michael[8] among his fellow students (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 136). The protagonist's vague answer comes four pages later when we learn that the principal's inquiry only prompted the teenager's curiosity about the clandestine movement. The narrating I comments on his past naiveté: "What prophet would have dared to whisper in my ear then: sooner than you could imagine, you will be one of them?!" (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 140). At this point, it seems appropriate to ponder on the communicative role assumed here by the author of the autobiography, bearing in mind that the life writing text is "a site of constructing, negotiating, defending, or reformulating subjectivity in view of experienced historical change" (Depkat, 2019, p. 139). After the "ethical turn" (Pop, 2022, p. 48) in Negoițescu's biography, following his involvement in 1977 in the human rights movement around Paul Goma[9], politics became a matter of high concern in the writer's life, manifested especially in his journalistic activities during the exile years[10]. *Straja Dragonilor*,

8 The Legion of the Archangel Michael, also known as the Iron Guard, was a Romanian fascist organization that emerged in the 1920s as a students' antisemitic movement; it was banned because of repeated political assassinations and finally disintegrated after a failed coup in 1941. Unlike other European fascist movements, the Legion held mystical views inspired by Christian orthodoxy which appealed to a wide variety of people, including some prominent Romanian intellectuals. Historian Roland Clark describes the Legion as "one of the largest and most enduring fascist movements in interwar Europe" (Clark, 2015, p. 4) and attributes its popularity to its ideological mix of nationalism and spirituality: "Led by the charismatic Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, legionaries combined political assassination, street violence, and antisemitic hate speech with romantic nationalism, religious symbolism, and charity projects. They claimed that they followed a "religion," not a political party, and they described the Legion as a "spiritual" movement whose aim was to create a "new man" through suffering and sacrifice" (Clark, 2015, p.2).

9 In 1977 Negoițescu signed an open letter of solidarity with the Romanian novelist and dissident Paul Goma who had been arrested by the Securitate after having drafted a petition against Ceaușescu's social and cultural policies. Threatened by the authorities with prosecution for homosexuality, Negoițescu retracted his support for Goma and expressed regret for his statements against the regime.

10 In 1983 Negoițescu left Romania for good. Until his death he contributed to Radio Free Europe and to several Romanian diaspora magazines. He expressed critical opinions of Ceaușescu's National Communism, and also about political developments in Romania after the fall of the communist regime in 1989.

as a life narrative written shortly before the author's death, adopts a positionality reflecting the public image Negoițescu had achieved throughout his whole career. Negoițescu's autobiography does not hide his short-term involvement with the Legion of the Archangel Michael but rather tries to identify the cultural and historical circumstances that endorsed it. In doing so, Negoițescu's life writing piece troubles the linear progressive narrative of an autonomous intellectual agent, uncoerced by irrational influences. In struggling with the recollection of his legionary past, the narrating I makes use of narrative techniques and stylistic devices that emphasize the distancing of the present self from his past errors and confusions while reiterating the unreliability of his memory (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 146, p. 150). The frequent flashbacks and flash forwards take the reader out of the chronological order and explain the narrator's idiosyncrasies in their evolution, foregrounding the cultural formation of subjectivity. Enumerations of titles read by the narrator at different stages in his life are intertwined in the reflexive account of past events and their partially contradictory representation. The young Negoițescu wrote surrealist poems that impressed his girlfriends (Negoițescu, 1994, pp. 166-167), was enthusiastic about Romanian contemporary art as well as European modernism with its "deconstruction of the natural" (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 165) and expressed vivid interest in foreign, even exotic cultures (Negoițescu, 1994, pp. 190-191). Spirituality, especially of Catholic persuasion, is depicted as a constant source of inspiration in the narrator's life, unrelated to his fleeting fascination for the legionaries, but rather embedded in the larger context of aesthetical and mystical experience (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 146). A significant passage towards the end of the second chapter reflects upon the highly contradictory discourse position[11] of the narrated I, at a time when he published both decadent lyrics and ultranationalist articles (Negoițescu, 1994, pp. 200-201). The narrating I asserts his present position by commenting negatively on a late interview with the nationalist, Christian Orthodox thinker and former political prisoner Petre Țuțea (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 200). Elsewhere the narrator considers himself "cured" of the fascist "disease", in contrast with other Romanian interwar intellectuals like Țuțea, Eliade or Noica (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 210).

The autobiographer never refers to male bonding as an important element of his political activity. On the contrary, his individualistic nature resented military discipline and he maintains he was not inclined to conspiracy (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 145). As a matter of fact, Negoițescu was never interested in adventure or detective fiction; the hyper-masculine heroes therein stimulated his "erotic rather than his heroic imagination" (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 144). But maybe it was this very eroticized fascination with virile men that unconsciously led the young Negoițescu to his early political commitment. The Legion's strong emphasis on masculinist ideals of violent bravery and sacrifice reminds of the common stereotype of the feminized Jew as agent of cultural and moral decay. And in the background lurks the "disgusting" figure of the effeminate and decadent homosexual whom the

11 The concept "discourse position" is used here as understood within the critical discourse analysis, i.e. as "specific ideological location of a person" (Jäger, 2001, p. 48).

young Negoițescu despised. Of the three life writers discussed here, Negoițescu is the only one who uses the identity category "homosexual" in respect to himself (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 65, p. 150). But he also uses it as a derogatory term about others. A significant passage recounts how the 17-year old Negoițescu was approached by an older man whom the narrator retrospectively compares to Oscar Wilde after his release from prison. The gentleman started a conversation and they eventually shook hands, a short physical contact which the narrated I found disgusting when he realized that the stranger might be homosexual (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 153). Elsewhere the autobiographer recalls the attraction he felt as a high-school pupil for a fellow student who embodied "utter normality" and contrasts this remembered figure with another schoolfellow whose reputation as a homosexual made the latter repulsive in his eyes (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 173). We could interpret these instances of contingent use of an identity category by using insights from the field of affect studies. Within this framework, disgust is seen as a speech act which renders its object equally fascinating and repelling by activating latent emotional reactions associated with words (Ahmed, 2004, p. 84). A strong tradition that condemns sexual desire between men as abomination is reinforced by the narrator's dwelling on his past seemingly natural repulsion towards people incarnating this type of desire.

On the whole, it can be argued that *Straja Dragonilor* makes use of the genre conventions of classical autobiography but at the same time breaks with the linear depiction of a coherent self in its developmental pathway in a twofold way. At a formal level, its "strategies of emplotment" (Depkat, 2019, p. 139) favour spatiality over temporality and organize the memories in narrative patterns, coalescing into the main thematic concerns of sexuality, spirituality, literature and politics. The distance between the narrating and the narrated I is made very clear, especially by the former's cultural affiliation to democratic values which enables him to look critically upon past errors. The retrospective interpretation of past events – e.g. the memory of an early homoerotic experience intertextually linked to a poem by Rimbaud (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 124) – is frequently used and suggests the high performativity of the autobiographical text. At a content level, Negoițescu's autobiography parts with the "compartmentalising mode" of life writing that expels destabilizing private and emotional aspects from "conventional, masculinist (and heterosexist) life history" (Rassool, 2020, p. 124). In *Straja Dragonilor,* the author practises a sort of "self-exposure" (McCarthy, 2023) that blends the private and the public in a way unprecedented in Romanian life writing[12]. The polarization of the feminine and the masculine is disrupted by associating feminine attributes with the narrator's self-construction, especially in the ball dress episode, as well as by highlighting the role of female mentors,

12 I am aware that this interconnection of private and public aspects in one's life suggests a feminist interpretation context ("The personal is political"). Without being documentedly embedded in any feminist or queer framework, Negoițescu's autobiography shocked its Romanian audience in the nineties not only by challenging the stigma associated with non-normative sexuality but also by oversharing intimate details and thus challenging the Romanian "civilization of modesty and ethics of what is proper and what is not" (Simion, 2007, p. 4).

like Ana Slăvoacă, thoroughly portrayed in the second chapter, in introducing the protagonist to the male-connoted world of high culture.

Finally, Negoițescu's autobiography can be regarded as relational in the sense proposed by Schoof (2023, p. 7), i.e. as written "in response to an implicit query made from a specific cultural context". We can argue that Negoițescu writes his autobiography against the norms of a so-called shame culture prevalent in Romania (Simion, 2007). As it has been shown (Pop, 2022), the commitment to morality is a constant of his work. That explains the emphasis Negoițescu puts on his autobiography as a crowning of his literary career. His youthful plan to relocate the Romanian culture within a classical, humanist setting of Western descent is doomed to failure because of the political context. Therefore, the autobiography is Negoițescu's last attempt to assert his position against an orientally coded shame culture – based on outer instances – and to plea for embracing a guilt-centred approach, which relies on the individual's conscience and his inner sense of wrong and right.

I. Negoițescu, Radu Stanca: *Un roman epistolar* [An Epistolary Novel] (1978/2021)

If relationality is present in the background of *Straja Dragonilor*, the other work analysed here, in which Negoițescu shares the authorship with the poet and playwright Radu Stanca (1919-1962), turns the relationship between the two letter writers into its central element. The correspondence of Negoițescu and Stanca is deeply rooted in their friendship and both authors repeatedly reflect upon its meaning in their lives and also upon letter writing as a necessity originating in the frustrated desire of communicating with the absent friend. Indeed, the "epistolary I always constructs their identity in relation to the letter's addressee" (Depkat, 2019, p. 140). But the letters regularly exchanged between Negoițescu and Stanca over a period of 15 years are more than "traces of past communication between real people" (Depkat, 2019, p. 140). The correspondence is described by the co-author and editor Negoițescu as a "Bildungsroman" (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, p. 10). In editing his correspondence with Stanca, whom he calls in *Straja Dragonilor* "my great friend" (Negoițescu, 1994, p. 157), Negoițescu shifts the focus on two elements which according to Lejeune are central in autobiography: the mainly narrative character of the text and the individual life as a primary subject (Lejeune, 1989, p. 5). The retrospective perspective is given by the editor's very act of arranging the letters so that they can tell the story of a past stage in his life in relation to and as reflected by his friend Stanca. Drawing on Petrarch's *Epistolae familiars,* research emphasizing the literariness of the epistolary genre points out that Petrarch's project to collect his Latin letters in a book turns the individual letters into parts of a unitary work accounting for the evolving of personal conscience along a whole lifetime (Guillén, 1994, p. 13).

We have a similar situation here as the correspondence of the two young members of the Sibiu Literary Circle was edited by Negoițescu after Stanca's premature death and provided with the title "epistolary novel", suggesting

a narrative dimension and a certain degree of fictionality. There is a clear intentionality and a sense of superior coherence which place these collected letters in the proximity of the autobiography.

The possibility of reading letters as novel-like prose is highlighted by Livius Ciocârlie in the foreword to his book *Mari corespondențe* [Great Correspondences] which analyses, among other letter exchanges between writers, I. Negoițescu's and Stanca's "epistolary novel". Ciocârlie employs a reader-oriented approach when he states that any text, regardless of its initial intentionality, can achieve literariness if it stimulates the reader to create an imaginary universe (Ciocârlie, 2019, p. 8). When reading letters that are not addressed to oneself one tends to concentrate on their existential content and reflect upon human nature and psychology in a similar manner to when novel characters are considered (Ciocârlie, 2019, p. 8).

The first edition (1978, republished in 1998) encompasses a total number of 303 letters, of which 209 were authored by I. Negoițescu and the remainder 94 by Radu Stanca. To the second edition (2021) 20 letters were added, so that it contains 222 letters written by Negoițescu and 101 by Stanca. The fact that the letters and passages which are absent in the first edition mainly deal with Negoițescu's sexual orientation but also with other biographical elements he was trying to hide, such as his conversion to Catholicism, leads to the assumption of self-censorship. A startling detail is the total absence of letters by Radu Stanca in the interval from August 1947 to July 1948, even if Negoițescu's letters from the same period read as if they were part of an epistolary exchange. In his foreword, deploring certain flaws in the narrative unity of the epistolary novel, Negoițescu maintains that some letters by Radu Stanca have been lost (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, p. 9). Actually, as the editor Ion Vartic explains in two footnotes (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, p. 9 and 516), the missing letters were destroyed by Negoițescu's parents after his arrest in 1961, along with other potentially compromising documents[13].

Negoițescu and Stanca befriended each other in Sibiu where the University of Cluj took refuge in autumn 1940 after the Second Vienna Award which separated Northern Transylvania from Romania. The familiar atmosphere of the smaller town Sibiu was a catalyst for the literary talented and like-minded students to establish more personal relationships with each other and with their professors, especially with Lucian Blaga[14]. Both Negoițescu and Stanca were actively involved in various activities like informal literary meetings, lectures and debates. Inspired by German classicism and opposing nationalist and orthodoxist currents in the Romanian literature, several students gathered around the ideal of aesthetic autonomy, advocating the alignment to a larger Central European cultural discourse. After the war and his return to Cluj,

13 This episode of Negoițescu's mother burning her son's manuscripts, including his early diaries, is related in *Straja Dragonilor* (1994, p. 106).

14 Lucian Blaga (1895-1961) was a poet, philosopher, playwright and translator, one of the main representatives of Romanian modernism and a commanding personality of the interwar cultural life. He taught cultural philosophy at the University of Cluj from 1939 to 1948, when he was dismissed for refusing to express support to the communist regime.

Negoițescu tried to maintain the cohesion of the group and planned to edit a magazine named *Euphorion* – an intertextual allusion to Goethe's *Faust* and the integration of Germanic spirit and Classical Greek culture. Negoițescu's plans also included a publishing house and a theatre which should have promoted only Romanian literature following the principles of the Sibiu Literary Circle. The project was hindered by the political environment, and only in 1990 could a new edition of the magazine be published in Sibiu at the initiative of young writers eager to continue the tradition of the Literary Circle. I. Negoițescu contributed to all issues until his death in February 1993.

There are several dominant thematic areas that can be identified in the letter exchange between Negoițescu and Stanca, such as the intertwining of ethics and aesthetics as the fundamental idea promoted by the Sibiu Literary Circle, the disquieting situation of the two friends nurturing their utopian dream of reconstructing the Romanian culture based on highest axiological principles and, on a personal level, Stanca's declining health, his passionate love affairs with different women, as well as Negoițescu's torments of unrequited homoerotic love. An analysis that would go beyond the scope of this article can show how Negoițescu's reflections upon his own sexuality and his strategies to legitimize it by means of cultural references change along time. The interconnectedness of the self-reflexive movement and the epistolary I's effort to elaborate the "Euphorionist" vision of a mature Romanian culture points to the discursive constituting of Negoițescu's non-heteronormative identity and the performativity of his identity formation through letter writing.

Ciocârlie's reading of Negoițescu's and Stanca's divergent "performances" and "positions" (Balestrini, 2017, p. 93) as an opposition between the creator's self, following a cultural goal, on the one hand, and the personal self, expecting psychological support, on the other hand (Ciocârlie, 2019, pp. 310-311), makes the evolving relationship between the characters of the epistolary novel appear more clear and the narrative better structured as they really are. When he suggests that Radu Stanca's fragile personality would have needed more personal support from his friend and that Negoițescu failed in that respect (Ciocârlie, 2019, p. 310), Ciocârlie does this mainly to contrast Stanca's hesitant attitude and depressive mood with Negoițescu's "pathetic" exaggeration of Stanca's creative force (Ciocârlie, 2019, p. 307) and thus uses his "position of the reader" (Lejeune, 1989, p. 4) to make the correspondence function as a psychological novel. To be sure, his reliance on the first, censored edition of the correspondence contributes to Ciocârlie's truncated image of Negoițescu as a chilly, almost asexual character, philosophising on love rather than experiencing it. A careful reading of the integral edition shows that Negoițescu's epistolary I experiences the whole range of erotic feelings – from infatuation to loving intimacy and purely sexual attraction – changing his perspective on eroticism according to biographical circumstances and adapting his sharing of intimate details to the dynamics of the letter exchange. There is also enough evidence of Negoițescu providing Stanca support in personal matters – from his deeply felt condolence letter after the death of Stanca's father

(Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, pp. 182-183) to his advice in sentimental affairs[15] and the affectionate admiration for Stanca's wife[16] – as well as critical feedback on Stanca's work and concrete initiatives to help him publish.

The integral edition of the *Un roman epistolar* provides scarce but valuable insights into social relations and networks connecting the Sibiu Literary Circle to intellectual circles in Bucharest in which political dissidence and queer sexuality played an important role. In a letter from October 1957, complaining about financial difficulties and lack of accommodation in Bucharest, Negoițescu mentions Mihai Rădulescu as his temporary host and mediator of literary connections (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, pp. 497-498). Two years later, after Stanca's short trip to Bucharest, Negoițescu writes that he regrets not having spent more time with his addressee because of the panic induced by Ovidiu Constantinescu (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, p. 513), a writer whom Negoițescu had befriended in Bucharest. The editor's explanatory footnote mentions police investigations against homosexuals as the reason for Constantinescu's fears. Nevertheless, Negoițescu's letter fails to mention that Mihai Rădulescu was in prison at that time.

Mihai Rădulescu: *Jocul cu moartea* [Playing with Death] (1999)

Mihai Rădulescu's only publications during his lifetime were short musicological essays. The posthumous life narrative *Jocul cu moartea* borrows its title from Rădulescu's best known essay on Mozart and was edited by his brother, medical doctor Dan Rădulescu. This publication is actually part of a larger project initiated by the historian Stelian Tănase. Tănase's book *Anatomia mistificării* [The Anatomy of Mystification] (1997; 3rd edition, 2009) is a comprehensive documentation of the political process that led to the sentence of two major figures of Romanian culture, Constantin Noica[17] and Dinu Pillat[18], along with other political dissidents. Mihai

15 Unsure which of the two women he was dating at that time to invite to the New Year's Eve party organized in Cluj by members of the Literary Circle, Stanca asked Negoițescu to make the choice (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, p. 331).

16 Radu Stanca married the actress Dorina Ghibu (Doti) in June 1951, at a time when he was working as a stage director in Sibiu. There are several passages where Negoițescu expresses great admiration for Doti as a person and as an actress (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, pp. 396-397, p. 408, pp. 323-324). In December 1957, Negoițescu wrote to Doti complaining that he had not received any news from Stanca for a long time (Negoițescu, Stanca, 2021, p. 499).

17 Constantin Noica (1909-1987) was one of the most important Romanian philosophers. He represented, along with historian of religion Mircea Eliade and philosopher Emil Cioran, the so-called golden generation of interwar Romanian intellectuals. In spite of his youthful enthusiasm for the national and mystic dimension of Romanian fascism, Noica never joined the Legionaries. During World War II he lived mainly in Germany, where he attended Martin Heidegger's lectures. After his return to Romania, Noica suffered persecutions at the hands of the communist regime, which accused him of nationalist and reactionary views. He was sentenced to forced domicile and eventually to 25 years in prison. After his release, he worked for a while as a researcher in the Romanian Academy and settled eventually in a small cottage in the mountains, where he was regularly visited by his disciples. These 'private lectures' were documented in a book by Gabriel Liiceanu, the founder of the Humanitas Publishing Group, and contributed to Noica's fame after the fall of the communist regime.

18 Constantin (Dinu) Pillat (1921-1975) was a writer and literary critic. He had already published

Rădulescu, whose name might have been completely unknown to most readers before the publication of Tănase's documentary book, was associated with this group of political dissidents due to his close friendship and long correspondence with Constantin Noica. Arrested in spring 1959 and initially sentenced to five years in prison for homosexuality, Rădulescu was eventually charged for sharing hostile ideas about the regime and transferred to another prison where he was found dead in his cell on 31st October. He supposedly hanged himself using a piece of torn garment. Nevertheless, speculations about a possible murder under torture could not be excluded, and his death remains a mystery.

As the subtitle[19] suggests, *Jocul cu moartea* is a collection of various autobiographical subgenres. Diary jottings, personal essay-fragments and letters are arranged chronologically in a cradle-to-grave narrative. The book comprises six chapters focusing on the different stages in Rădulescu's life, from adolescence until his death. The editor provides each chapter with biographical information that gives the whole work narrative coherence. Even though Mihai Rădulescu's name on the front cover suggests an autobiographical pact as defined by Lejeune, i.e. we can read the book simply as a life account of its author, there is also another possible reading inspired by a relational approach that destabilizes the "conventional assumption of autobiographical monologue" (Rüggemeier, 2018, p. 95). If we acknowledge the fact that not only the very existence of this book, but its structure as a life narrative are the work of the editor, *Jocul cu moartea* can be read as relational auto/biography[20] based on a mix of autobiographical and biographical material. Dan Rădulescu assumes the role of a discreet narrator, focusing on his brother as protagonist. But whereas "[p]roducing an account of another's life normally belongs to the domain of biography [...] when the biographical subject is a member of one's own family the line between the genres blurs" (Miller[21], 1996, p. 2, qtd. in Rüggemeier, 2018, p. 83). Beside being the co-author of the book, Dan Rădulescu is also part of the narrated world, as he is the addressee of many letters by his brother. Interestingly, he does not include his own part of the correspondence, so that it is only Mihai's voice that we hear throughout the life narrative.

In initiating the posthumous dialogue with his brother, Dan Rădulescu reflects on the cultural norms that shaped his brother's self-accounts as well as on the specific context of the book's publication, thus pointing to another level of relationality identifiable in *Jocul cu moartea*, which is of discursive nature. We can read *Jocul cu moartea* as a piece of the relational network centred on

two novels and several essays and was assistant professor of literature at the University of Bucharest when he was arrested in 1959 and sentenced to 25 years of hard labour for authoring a samizdat novel (*Așteptând ceasul de apoi* [Waiting for the Afterlife], first published in 2010).

19 "Însemnări, pagini de jurnal și corespondență", i.e. „notes, diary jottings and correspondence".

20 The life writing scholars Egan and Helms coined the term "auto/biography" to suggest the hybridization of the two genres in relational self-narratives. Cf. Susanna Egan / Gabriele Helms: *Life Writing*, in: Eva-Maria Kröler (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*. Cambridge 2004, p. 216, quoted by Rüggemeier, 2018, p. 82.

21 Nancy K. Miller: *Bequest & Betrayal. Memoirs of a Parent's Death*. New York, Oxford 1996.

the historical exploration of the Noica-Pillat trial. In his preface, Dan Rădulescu credits Stelian Tănase with opening up the path of the publication of Mihai Rădulescu's autobiographical writings. Accordingly, he constructs the book in response to the implicit demand of a heroic life narrative featuring a politically and sexually oppressed protagonist. In choosing the way in which his brother's life story is presented to the posterity, Dan Rădulescu tries to adapt to a conservative Romanian high culture on which, in his view, the book's reception depends. Mihai Rădulescu's homosexuality plays a crucial role in his brother's editorial reflections which present it as the "main problem", due to the "prudishness" of the "Romanian mentality" (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 8). Dan Rădulescu regards his decision to publish explicitly homosexual passages in the text as a courageous act, and the publication of the book itself as "moral repair for a man who had to suffer because he could not be like everybody else" (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 8). This blending of inborn deviance, suffering and moral purity is a rhetorical thread running through the whole book, from the editor's motto which quotes *Hamlet* on "these men, carrying [...] the stamp of one defect, [...] be they as pure as grace"[22] to Mihai Rădulescu's own reflections on his sexual otherness. Only Dan Rădulescu uses the word "homosexuality" in his preface (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 9), whereas the autobiographical texts employ dysphemistic and euphemistic phrases like "my misfortune", "my plight" (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 373), "my passion" (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 374), "my erotic singularity" (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 450), avoiding pre-determined identity categories and linking non-heteronormative sexuality to the life writer's tendency to self-abasement, his adaptive behaviour patterns (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 381) and his feeling of being less real than other people (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 451). It was Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* that Rădulescu chose as a main reference point in his process of coming to terms with his homosexual desire. In a diary entry from 1942, Rădulescu recalled having read the novel six years earlier, in a French edition, and having felt great relief at the realization that there were many other people "like me" and that "these things could be depicted in such a high and pure manner" (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 94). As Jonathan Dollimore contends, Hall did something of immense significance by conjoining in the central character, the "masculine" lesbian Stephen, "the (religious) martyr and (romantic) outsider", where "each identity offers, and reinforces in the other, images of a superior sensibility and integrity being persecuted by the ordinary and the normal" (Dollimore, 1991, p. 49).

Rădulescu also records the strong and contradictory impression Negoițescu's flamboyant personality[23] made on him. The two men met in Cluj in 1949 through the mutual friend Constantin Noica and their relationship had its ups and downs. Nevertheless, a letter from 1957 stylizes Negoițescu's friendship into a major source of reassurance in Rădulescu's life:

22 A longer passage from Act I, Scene IV is quoted in original and in Dan Rădulescu's own translation.
23 Two letters from April 1949 – one to his mother and one to his good friend Alexandru Dragomir – praised Negoițescu as the most brilliant of his new acquaintances in Cluj (Rădulescu, 1999, pp. 337, 343). In January 1950 Rădulescu again wrote to Dragomir expressing his bitter disappointment with the "real person" he discovered behind Negoițescu's "angelic mask" (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 356).

> You are one of the few whose words really matter to me. ...It is a great joy – maybe the greatest and, to be sure, the purest joy people like us can afford – to feel the other beside you, full of life, as you feel a lover or a military comrade (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 474).

This letter also attests to Mihai Rădulescu's ideal of male friendship, which he placed above all other forms of human affection. While Noica stirred his intellect with his "urge to team work based on a common worldview" (Rădulescu, 1999, p. 86), Dragomir[24] and Negoițescu were "closest" to his "deepest aspirations" (Rădulescu, 1999, pp. 474-475), which might have included the freedom to speak openly about his sexuality.

Petre Sirin: *Castele* în *Spania* [Castles in Spain] (2013)

This book meets the criteria of relational life writing as it obviously departs from the classical focus on individual autonomy to construct the narrator's identity in relation to other persons (Balestrini, 2017, p. 93). Sirin's autobiographical account focuses on events between 1949, when he first met Mihai Rădulescu, and 1959, when Rădulescu died, and reads as a coherent narrative, alternating diary entries from that period with retrospective recollections. *Castele* în *Spania* can also be read as a love story with a historical background. All through the book we can trace the evolution of Sirin's feelings for Mihai Rădulescu from their first, rather indifferent encounter to intense physical attraction, consuming passion and finally up to Sirin's enduring attachment beyond Rădulescu's death.

Sirin's self-account is also relational on a formal level, due to an authorship situation similar to Rădulescu's life writing piece. Sirin had initially planned an auto/biographical narrative in two volumes, the first one comprising Rădulescu's letters and diaries[25]. The project was abandoned when Rădulescu's autobiographical material was published by his brother. Sirin died four years later, in 2003. When *Castele* în *Spania* [Castles in Spain] was published in 2013, possibly as a follow-up to the collection of texts by Mihai Rădulescu and to Stelian Tănase's documentary about the Noica-Pillat trial, parts of it had already been published before. Tănase drew heavily on Sirin's unpublished manuscript in his reconstruction of the events surrounding Rădulescu's death. Sirin's literary estate – comprising his unpublished manuscripts – is in the possession of his life partner, Alexandru Lupescu (b. 1934), who edited and prefaced the present edition. At their home in Bran, Lupescu preserved Sirin's entire archive, which documents relationships and "traces of past communications" (Depkat, 2019, p. 140) within a friends' network, providing a detailed picture of male homosexual life in Bucharest in the mid-twentieth century. Dedicated to the memory of George Tomaziu[26] and

24 Alexandru Dragomir (1916-2002) was a philosopher. A close friend of Constantin Noica and a former PhD student of Martin Heidegger, he had to interrupt his studies and leave Germany during World War II. Later, for fear of political persecution he led an anonymous life of poverty, with no possibility of publication or of an academic career. His philosophical notebooks were published posthumously by the Humanitas publishing house.

25 Cf. the editorial note (Sirin, 2013, p. 2).

26 George Tomaziu (1915-1990) was a painter, book illustrator and writer. During World War II, he

Dinu Albulescu[27], Sirin's archive provides, as Depkat shows in respect to letters, "more than purely verbal texts" (Depkat, 2019, p. 140), containing visual material that complements the written one. Since 2018, Sirin's archive has been part of the main collection of the Museum of Queer History and Culture in Romania (Buhuceanu, 2022, p. 144).

The relational character of Sirin's life narrative is underscored by the subtitle, which describes it as a "family chronicle". The title itself is a metaphor referring to the author's network of homosexual friends. By making up an imaginary world placed in thirteenth-century Spain and populated by knights, bishops and other noblemen like the King of Portugal (Mihai Rădulescu), and the Great Inquisitor (Dinu Albulescu), Sirin created a safe space of psychological comfort for himself and his friends. The metaphor of castles in Spain is significant for the formation of a self-conscious homosexual male community in a time of oppression. Without a political agenda, and lacking the means of public communication, Petre Sirin and his friends resorted to this type of social and cultural isolation in order to resist the oppressiveness of everyday life in communist Romania. The core group constituted in the library of the French Institute in Bucharest at the time that this was led by Roland Barthes (1947-1949) (Sirin, 2013, p. 50). After the French Institute was dissolved by the communist regime, the friends continued to play the game initiated by Barthes. They met regularly and spoke mostly in French to both protect their privacy and to signify cultural superiority. New contacts were established through personal recommendation; friends introduced their lovers or new homosexual acquaintances at the 'Court of Spain', so that over the years the group developed into a network of social and sexual relations, maintaining its coherence through shared intellectual interests and a common alternative slang.

Rădulescu himself met Sirin through a mutual friend (Sirin, 2013, p. 15). This reveals how homosexual relations were interwoven with other social bonds. Negoițescu does not seem to have belonged to the core group of Sirin's friends as he does not have a nickname, but he was introduced at the 'Court of Spain' by Rădulescu and spent some time with Sirin and other 'Spanish knights'. In a letter from 1956, Sirin recounted how impressed he had been by Negoițescu's "erotic madness" on a trip to the seaside with himself and Rădulescu (Sirin, 2013, p. 233). Even though there are frequent mentions of affairs and flirting outside

was an agent of the British Intelligence Service and led a group of Romanian collaborators. In 1944, he was convicted for espionage but was soon released, as Romania joined the Allied forces. During the communist regime, Tomaziu was imprisoned for 13 years for his wartime activities. In 1969, he left Romania with the help of the British government and after a short stay in London he settled in Paris. His memoir *Figurant d'epoque* was originally written in French and appeared in 1995 in Romanian (*Jurnalul unui figurant 1939-1964*, transl. by Mariana and Gabriel Mardare) and in 2015 in English (*The Witness*, transl. by Jane Reid).

27 Dinu Albulescu (1914-1965) was a translator of French literature. He was also the life partner of George Tomaziu and one of his closest collaborators in the espionage group. Albulescu was arrested together with Tomaziu in 1944 and was also imprisoned during the communist regime. After his release, he was harassed by the Securitate and he committed suicide.

the borders of 'Spain', the book does not provide any details about cruising possibilities in Bucharest at that time and remains focused on the central group of friends, tracking their relations, quarrels and reconciliations and, in some cases, their premature and violent deaths. The last page of the book (Sirin, 2013, p. 285) is a short note from 1990 that lists all the friends who died of an unnatural death, who either killed themselves to escape public defamation and imprisonment or who were killed during trial.

Sirin's self-reflections also display aspects of intersectionality. A point of divergence with Rădulescu was the fact that Sirin was neither the crude, working-class man whom Rădulescu perceived as sexually attractive, nor the sophisticated erudite celebrated by the interwar intelligentsia. Moreover, Rădulescu regarded Sirin's common-sense, domesticity, and his taste for popular entertainment as mediocre. In a diary entry quoted by Sirin, Rădulescu dwells on his incompatibility with the so-called "average" man (Sirin 2013, p.163). Sirin concluded that class differences might affect interpersonal relations (Sirin 2013, p. 163): a meditation on the way that closed circles of intellectual elites resisted forced class egalitarianism by reinforcing interwar conservatism in this period.

Sirin's attitude towards Constantin Noica is also significant in this context. While acknowledging Noica's status as mentor for a whole generation and for Romanian philosophy, Sirin could not cope with the philosopher's past enthusiasm for the Legion of the Archangel Michael. Not even Rădulescu's argument that Noica's involvement was purely intellectual and motivated by his fear of the Bolshevik peril could dissuade Sirin from finding it morally questionable (Sirin, 2013, pp. 46-47).

Conclusions and outlook

This paper has shown how the life writings of Negoițescu, Rădulescu and Sirin make use of different genre conventions and narrative strategies to perform a non-normative sexual identity within the constraints of cultural conservatism and political oppression. From a reader-oriented perspective and in spite of their genre heterogeneity, all texts can be read as autobiographies, i.e. as coherent retrospective accounts of individual lives. Nevertheless, all texts disrupt the linear narrative of autonomous self-development by engaging with disturbing emotions and reflecting upon the "decisive (negative) impact" of social norms on the autobiographers' life-experiences (Schoof, 2023, p. 5). Negoițescu's, Rădulescu's and Sirin's life writing pieces are also fragmentary (either unfinished or subjected to (self)-censorship and a selection process by the editors). As authors, Negoițescu, Rădulescu and Sirin were partially deprived of control over their autobiographical communication by the posthumous publishing of their works, a situation which endorses an idea inherent in Lejeune's autobiographical pact, namely that "the self might be a creation of language", turning "the identity between author, narrator and character" irrelevant and shifting the focus on "how such an identity can be conveyed to, and conceived by, readers of self-referential narratives" (Allamand, 2018, p. 53).

Reading these autobiographical works along the categories of performativity, positionality and relationality challenges any assumption of identifiable authorial intentions behind the texts that can be attributed to the historical actors Negoițescu, Rădulescu and Sirin. The awareness that these life narratives are only puzzle pieces in a larger project of historical research investigating political repression of the interwar intelligentsia in communist Romania opens up a research path that foregrounds the discursive positions of the life writers in relation to those of the editors. With the possible exception of Mihai Rădulescu, whose diaries and correspondence seem to have been entirely made available, from the other two authors readers still expect further publications. Negoițescu's diary, due to be published thirty years after the author's death (Hurezeanu, 2002), is in print, while Sirin's *Castele* în *Spania* is just a small part of this author's unpublished autobiographical material. Future research could focus on the way in which the editors' positionality and their affiliation to the liberal intellectual group around the Humanitas publishing house intersected with the life writers' positionality and how this influenced the published autobiographical material. As it seems clear that the publication of Rădulescu's and Sirin's life narratives by Humanitas is only due to the authors' close relationship to Constantin Noica, the mentor of the editorial group's founder, it is worth analysing the appropriation of queer narratives by the still conservative Romanian high culture.

From the relational character of the life narratives analysed in the present paper arises the need to delve deeper into the dynamics of interpersonal relationships that marked the life writers' self-understanding and positionality. Therefore, another topic of a future network-oriented analysis could be to investigate the literary interactions between queer and non-queer members of artistic communities affected by political oppression in communist Romania.

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