
The Role and Effect of Autofiction in the Novel *Teino Kor* by Genovel-Florentin Frăţilă

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to look at the effects and consequences of using autofiction in the novel *Teino Kor* by Genovel-Florentin Frăţilă, published in 2024. Readers are eager to enter the story when they realize that its author is a character in it. The story becomes all the more fascinating and believable as they follow the footsteps of the author in rediscovering the past. The mystery is a philosophical one, yet the adventure is very exciting. The external journeys and searches for meaning accompany the inner world of characters from all historical ages. The novel creates a fantasy world which relies on real world elements, making it both fantastic and real at the same time. The fantasy world cannot, therefore, be dismissed as simply a figment of the imagination. We can consider the fantasy aspect as part of the hypotheses we usually make about the past and philosophical speculations. The methodological framework of analysis is reader response criticism. Readers are involved emotionally in the story and they are also prompted to interpret and analyse the story based on their background knowledge as they go through it and as they make sense of it.

Key words: fantasy, reality, philosophy, Postmodernism.

Introduction

We are by now familiar with the fact that a story told in a novel does not need to adhere to a fixed structure or pattern. A novel can tell the story in any way the author chooses: the plot does not need to be chronological, the story does not need to be about external incidents, about adventures, and it does not need to have beginning, middle and end. We, readers have seen this new structure of the plot with Modernism, with authors such as Virginia Woolf who wished to create a new type of novel, which would rely on poetic prose. The boundaries between genres have become blurred, with lyricism entering the stage

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in the novel, which is usually associated with prose.

The distinctions between genres and the way in which they should look like still exist, nowadays, for readers. It is enough for us to look at the novels and stories that are currently being written in online writers' communities, on the social media accounts of authors, as well as in online book readers' communities, where users post their book reviews. These observations hold true at the level of international communities, from abroad as well as from Romania. We can notice right away that readers appreciate a well-told story, full of suspense, well-developed characters, good visualization of the characters and action, together with a fast pace of the story, which should not be crowded by descriptions and psychological analysis. These latter two elements lead to the story advancing at a slow pace, and to readers getting lost in the abstract reflections of the author and of the characters as well. What is more, a very clear style is nowadays appreciated and used, with clear and not too long sentences. The style is simple, colloquial, and not overcharged with figures of speech. A pruned writing style is highly appreciated, as readers manage to get through the story in the novel at a very fast pace, not making too much effort and leaving them time to read and engage with more stories after the one they have just finished. Readers nowadays in online communities prefer to engage with the story, which makes it an advantage to send readers into completely different worlds than their own. An exceptional situation is also highly appreciated, such as a historical episode, with a mystery attached to it and an alternative exploration of it. Additionally, the exploration of the world of minorities is also a good way to gain interest. Fantasy stories are also highly appreciated due to their potential to transport readers into an alternate version of reality. In the meantime, the characters need to be easy to identify and resonate with for readers. They should be likeable and familiar to readers, so that they can see in them people they usually interact with, or themselves, based on the way they think, feel and act.

Nowadays, anyone has the freedom to publish a story. He or she does not need to. The author of the present paper has witnessed the popularity starting from online social media of authors who are not famous except for in their niche, and in small circles. Among such authors we can find the following: Razvan Teodor Coloja, who has written, among other novels, *Soldati ai terebentinei* (2015)/ *Soldiers of the turpentine*, which focused on a group of characters from the rockers' subculture, and Cynthia Orszag, whose recent novel, from 2024, *Soare de iarna (Winder Sun)*, features a story from 1983 Russian Socialist Republic, which is a historical thriller, as well as a love story.

Cynthia Orszag has also written the novel *Art Nouveau* (2021), which is a story taking place in the 1960s, in the famous casino in Constanta, Romania, by the seaside, where a young Frenchman is looking for a painting with magical and strange powers. Her novel *Scrum in vant* features Darius, a young man from the Rroma minority, who faces a hard life.

Genovel-Florentin Frățilă is an author who has become well-known in the online haiku communities. He is a member of the Romanian Kukai group led by Corneliu Traian Atanasiu, and his haiku poems are well appreciated there. He is one of the personalities of the group and of other national and international online haiku communities. His novel, *Teino Kor*, published in 2024, includes a character whom readers identify as himself, or, at least, partly himself. This character is called Giani and has written the haiku poems Genovel-Florentin Frățilă did. Some of these poems are recognized by the members of the Romanian Kukai group and other haiku authors and readers preoccupied by haiku poems as his very own. A blog address which belongs to him can be accessed by readers and it belongs to Frățilă. The title of one of his haiku volumes which is read by other characters is also one that exists in reality and which readers can go through themselves. This is his debut novel, *Picuri de rouă* (*Dewdrops*). In addition, there are real-life, historical places in Romania which are presented, together with members of the Romanian royal family. What is surprising is that the author of the novel manages to introduce himself in the fictional world, making readers wonder which parts of the story are true about himself and which are pure fiction. In addition to this, readers are introduced into a mystery regarding the way in which characters from various ages start exploring the mystery of the Golden Tablets from Sinaia, whose origin lies, according to the story, in the ritual Zamolxis from Dacia goes through. Zamolxis is presented in the novel as a human being, and not as a god. This is the belief of poet and philosopher Radu Muresan, who sets out to decipher the tablets, after completing his studies at the University in Vienna. There are nine tablets, grouped three by three as follows: Knowledge, Love, and Wisdom. Later on, a count living in France hopes to find the way to decipher the tablets by using the cipher inspired by the fixed format of the traditional haiku poem: 5-7-5 syllables and three lines. Knowledge of philosophy, ancient Greek, philosophical reflections, history, mythology, religion, as well as the pure experience of love are all explored and met naturally in the lives of the characters working out to understand the messages on the ancient tablets.

This is the world where the character of the author of this novel,

Giani, manages to explore, together with the readers. Giani makes the author of the novel explore together with the readers the mysterious world of the Eleusinian mysteries and rituals Zamolxis goes through at the Greek temples with goddesses Demeter and Kore, the history of the royal family, the character of Queen Maria of Romania, and her interest in the message of the tablets, as well as in philosophical reflections that are part of Radu Muresan's poems, the search for the meaning of the tables Muresan goes through and his genuine interest in their message.

The present paper will focus on the introduction and presence of Genovel-Florentin Frăţilă in his own fictional world as the character Giani and the significance and effects of his presence.

Materials and Methods

The presence of a character which is the author of the story in a novel or work of fiction in general, such as a short story means more than metafiction. Metafiction shows a character reflecting on the very act of writing, and who is aware that he or she is writing a story. While this character may express opinions belonging to the author, this character needs not to be the author or suggest him or her as a character in his or her own story. The character Giani, whom we identify as the author of the novel *Teino Kor*, reflects in the beginning of the story on the process of writing as in the Prologue he explains the context in which, a part of this novel has been written and published: *A Zen Pseudo-Diary (my translation)*. The Poet of Mauve is another character from reality entering the fictional world. Giani also reflects on the way in which he sees some of his haiku poems and makes some short comments about them.

The character Giani claims that he has written a haiku poem which he translated into English, inspired by the context of his own isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, when he was impressed by the situation of the many cases in Italy. The poem sounds as follows: "coronavirus –/ the our morning prayer/ is for Italy" (Frăţilă 2024: 7). There is a mistake in the English language which is noticed by his son. Another poem is written by Giani for the Romanian Kukai context, which exists in real life and where he has participated for the March contest with the word *mill* as a prompt. One version of the poem is the following: "decayed mill –/ time slowly grinds/ the old walls" (Frăţilă 2024: 8, my translation). Giani analyzes this version as follows: it "captures the essence of Zen philosophy regarding the passage of time – which is ephemerality" (Frăţilă 2024: 8, my translation). The comment continues: "Each person is consumed throughout life by desires and ambitions. Yet, for the mill of destiny, these are merely

illusory shadows of the mind. In the end, we all come to be worn down by the impassive mill of time" (Frăţilă 2024: 8, *my translation*). The second version, "decayed mill –/ ground through its cracks/ the moonbeams" (Frăţilă 2024: 9, *my translation*) is considered by Giani to move "into the realm of the fantastic" (Frăţilă 2024: 9, *my translation*). In addition, Giani offers us an insight into the specific features of the haiku poem, which anticipates the philosophy of the enlightenment and the total harmony and interconnection referred to by the Golden Tablets:

Apparently and bizarrely, in this haiku, the celestial seems defeated by the earthly. Although not explicitly mentioned, time is the test that proves the opposite. The earthly is subject to time, which is born of light. The illusory self is fleeting, while the gentle light of the spirit remains immortal. This light breaks through, dispelling the shadows of the ego, to resonate with the celestial harmony of the music of the spheres. (Frăţilă 2024: 9, *my translation*).

When readers return to the prologue and to the above quotation from it, they recognize the way in which this comment foreshadows and resonates with the philosophical reflections belonging to Radu Muresan about the contents of the tablets. What is more, Giani presents and reflects on the form of the haiku poem in general:

Beyond dogmas, cultures, and traditions, these small poems of Japanese origin are inspired mostly by nature. In its generosity, with boundless and unexpected imagination, nature often offers sublime images, which the author captures in seventeen syllables. Thus, an authentic haiku can convey unique emotions to that reader with a refined spirit. (Frăţilă 2024: 8, *my translation*).

The apparently metafictional level serves as a starting point to introduce the author of the novel into his own fictional universe. The Prologue serves for offering the basic and most relevant information about the novel's author, whom the readers will identify later on when he writes down his *Zen Pseudo-Diary*. While having the author present the way in which he has written the novel in the Prologue can be a usual aspect found in a novel, what strikes our attention as readers is the way in which the author is gradually introduced as a character in his own work of fiction. He is one of the characters reflecting philosophically on his own life, and on the message of the tablets. His own work interrelates with his personal beliefs and life, in the same way as in the case of Radu Muresan. The message of the golden tablets and their

search for their meaning is interconnected and overlaps with their own search for the meaning of life, of themselves, and with the reflections about their relationships with the others, as well as to their surrounding environment, which includes the ideas circulating at the time in their society. While Radu Muresan is a version of a character inspired by a real-life poet, namely Lucian Blaga, Giani is the real Genovel-Florentin Frățilă. However, the author of the novel is placed in a world which moves in-between the real and the fantastic.

How can we explain this state of affairs related to the way in which Giani is the actual author of the novel? We can rely on the concept of autofiction, which was coined as early as 1977 by Serge Doubrovsky and which has been defined as follows: "Autofiction is a narrative whose characteristics correspond to those of autobiography, but which claims its identity as a novel by acknowledging that it blends facts drawn from reality with fictional elements" (Doubrovsky 1977, qtd in Lecarme 1993: 227). This definition relies on the idea that reality and fiction can be united through the presence of the author in the story as a character. It is the author of the novel in the case of *Teino Kor* the one who makes the connection between real world and fictional world, introducing familiar elements and realistic elements into an adventure belonging to the realm of fantasy.

Another definition of autofiction is the following: "Autofiction is first of all a very simple device: it is a narrative whose author, narrator and protagonist share the same nominal identity and whose generic title indicates that it is a novel" (Lecarme 1993). In the case of the novel *Teino Kor*, the protagonist Giani and the narrator Giani are identified by readers as Genovel, since they assume it is a short form of his name. The name Giani makes readers feel that they can address the author as a close friend, as likely only friends call him this way.

Schmitt (2022: 83-89) underlines that, in order to claim that a literary work is autofiction, at least one basic criterion needs to be met, such as onomastic correspondence or similarities in the author's and character's biography. Both criteria are met in the case of Giani in *Teino Kor*. On his blog, Frățilă (2008-2015) has posts starting in 2008 and ending in 2015, where his winning or commented haiku poems, diplomas, and haiku volumes are posted. The address of the blog in the novel is a real one, working to be consulted by the readers. This element adds to the biographical similarity of Giani as a haiku author. For Schmitt (2022: 83-89), further elements, called enhancers, such as the metafictional comment may make the effect of autofiction stronger. However, these are not essential, in the opinion of Schmitt (2022: 83-89). In the case of the novel *Teino Kor*, the metafictional comments are

related to what a haiku poem is, some examples, and about how they have been written. In the Zen journal held by Giani, readers notice how the haiku poems have been written during the journey with the count, searching for the haiku poem to illuminate him in the understanding of the golden tablets. The golden tablets, once deciphered, consisted of poems reminding of haiku poems through their number of lines and syllables. Even if they were not genuine haiku poems, they were the key to wisdom and insight. Once arranged to fit in the code and guided by the flower of life, the letters on the tablets, based on their numbers of syllables, started making sense for the characters. The texts on the tablets were philosophical, abstract poems under the form of haiku poems.

For Worthington (2019), "Autofiction is a highly metafictional genre." We can identify here in autofiction the presence of self-reflexivity, as well as parody used in Postmodernism. Self-reflexivity refers to the way in which a work of literature or art can reflect on its own status, creation, as well as structure. With the information in the prologue, and the presence of the Zen journal held by Giani, readers enter a world which they are prepared to see a fiction. In the meantime, even if readers know that this is a work of fiction, as they know that Giani is writing a novel, this does not make the adventure in the novel, throughout the ages, any less thrilling. The adventure remains a genuine one, and readers do not distance themselves from the idea of fiction and adventure. They live all the incidents and historical episodes, as well as the philosophical reflections and relationships which are romantic or of friendship of the characters. The author of the novel becomes a character searching himself for the meaning of the main aspects of life and which are represented in the classification of the tablets. Philosophical reflections accompany us throughout the course of our lives, to the extent that we can claim that philosophy is a part of the life we are living. The question related to the meaning of life is an age-old one, and one present on the golden tablets, as well as in the emotional and reflective life of the characters. The author, Giani, is portrayed of starting off on an adventure of discovery of the meaning of life, through a literal journey through Romania with the count. The journey also has a psychological or philosophical, symbolic side, as Giani starts reflecting on the meaning of life. Radu Muresan has also reflected on its meaning, which was, for him, love, while for Giani, as suggested by the count, it may simply lie in the fact of actually living one's life. The golden tablets invite to philosophical reflection. The haiku poems written by the character Giani and by the real-life author, Genovel-Florentin Frățilă, show us how the haiku poems become a

means of philosophical reflection about what is currently going on around us, e.g. during the pandemic or during travelling with the count, as well as in everyday life. Giani simply stops at times to reflect on life, which does not undermine the reality of the fictional world, as we would expect from the feature of self-reflexivity of a text. The fact that we are led into a world of fiction does not make readers discard it, since it still holds on to philosophical truths. The philosophical reflections, which can hold valid at any time, save the fictional world from being considered purely fictional. The romantic relationships also transcend fiction, just as they transcend time. Romantic relationships and the wish for philosophical reflections about the meaning of life remain universal across time, which ensures an element of reality to the world of fiction. In this sense, even if it is fiction to some extent, the story in *Teino Kor* remains valid across the ages. The golden tablets offer us universal values and principles.

Schmitt (2017) believes that "Reading autofiction ... requires additional cognitive effort ... a refusal to lose track of the reality beyond the text." The philosophical reflections and the hypotheses related to Zamolxis being a god, or to the meanings of the tablets, together with the ideas about Giani becoming a Populist political leader, as a maire, meaning a leader belonging himself to the people, not to the elite, and caring about the actual well-being of the people, as well as with the interpretation of the haiku poems help preserve the realistic aspect of the story. Reality is highly present in the fictional world. Thus, the boundaries between reality and fantasy are clearly blurred in the case of the novel *Teino Kor*.

The haiku poetry volume *Dewdrops* by Frăţilă (2020) starts off from the following haiku poem: "dewdrops -/ the sun scattered/ in thousands of pieces" (Frăţilă 2024: 118, my translation). The dewdrops are considered to refer to a new beginning. The count hears Sophie telling him that she has received other haiku poetry from Romanian as well, while these volumes were translated from Romanian into English. It is during this moment that the count starts thinking of deciphering the tablets using syllables. At home, the count draws the Dacian flower, then starts placing the syllables two by two next to the opposed petals of the flower.

Another occasion when Frăţilă (2024: 283, my translation) writes a haiku poem while travelling with the count is the following:

As they were leaving Sinaia, the Caraiman Peak appeared before them in stony majesty. On its crest, at the crossroads between sky and earth, stood the renowned iron cross erected in 1928 at the request of Queen Maria, also known as the Queen of Hearts. Today, it is recorded in the

Guinness Book as the tallest cross placed at such an altitude. Its tip pierced a translucent cloud, and the light thus poured out formed a mystical halo around it. Giani was counting, using his fingers, the syllables of a haiku in which he tried to capture the grandeur of that moment:

silver halos –
the Cross on Caraiman
pierces through the clouds

In this haiku poem, readers can understand the context in which it was written by Giani, as well as his feelings. While the haiku poem is understood as being objective, its indirect language does make readers feel what the author has felt at the moment. Giani was clearly impressed by the Cross on Mount Caraiman. This is just one example when Giani writes in his Zen journal. The haiku poem, as it is accompanied by text, could be considered in such a case and in others similar to it a haibun poem. The haibun poem relies on text and haiku poem, which complete one another.

The analysis of the novel *Teino Kor* and autofiction has relies on the readers' reactions, which is why reader response approach (Mart 2019) was considered relevant throughout interpreting this novel. Readers react emotionally to any novel or text in general which they read. They also interpret and analyse in an attempt to understand any text by relying on their background knowledge. In the case of this novel, they rely on their own life experience and search for meaning of life, and also in some cases on knowledge about the haiku poem.

Results

The novel *Teino Kor* relies on autofiction at the time when the story switches to the contemporary period, and when Giani's adventures are followed. The entire adventure starts in ancient times, in times of legends, when Zamolxis, the human being, goes through a rite of initiation, then continues with the rediscovery of the past and with the philosophical reflections on life mainly belonging to poet and philosopher Radu Muresan. The story ends with similar philosophical reflections of the count and of Giani, the haiku author. The golden tables, therefore, invite to reflection. Autofiction makes the story all the more believable and thrilling, once Giani is identified as the author of the novel and of the haiku poetry volume *Dewdrops*. His involvement convinces readers of his passion about the topic.

Conclusions

Autofiction in the novel *Teino Kor* invites readers to accompany Giani in his search for meaning in life while he tries to solve the mystery of the golden tablets. The golden tablets have been part of philosophical questions about life of people living in several ages throughout history. One common feature of people living in several ages is that of asking themselves philosophical questions about life.

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