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Textual Strategies in George Bălăiță's *Lumea în două zile*

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Abstract

The structures and techniques employed by George Bălăiță illustrate the (neo)modernity of his texts, with *Lumea în două zile* standing out. The narrative structure, the reinterpretation of the investigative plot, metatextuality, dichotomies, and dualities make *Lumea în două zile* a profoundly modern novel, with an experimental dimension akin to postmodern prose, while the intertextual insertions place the novel in a perpetual dialogue with other established works. The characters who populate the universe of *Lumea în două zile* have extraordinary destinies, situated on the frontier between the real and the magical. In this imaginary space, both life and death exist, these natural conditions intertwining and complementing one another naturally during the two days of the solstice and within the two distinct spaces in which Antipa reveals, in turn, his domestic and infernal faces.

Keywords: narrative, investigation, metatextuality, transtextuality, mise en abyme.

Introduction

The novel *Lumea în două zile* [*The World in Two Days*], published by George Bălăiță in 1975, is an extraordinary literary work of its time; it was praised by literary critics upon publication and has received widespread acclaim. Valeriu Cristea considers *Lumea în două zile* to be "a (very) complicated, (very) modern novel. It has therefore been justifiably discussed in terms of its play on narrative, the comedy of literature, parody, irony, and bookishness" (Cristea 1984, 165). *Lumea în două zile* is a total novel, featuring new narrative techniques and multiple characters who compete in reconstructing the image of the protagonist (Antipa); it is a political parable, a text with multiple intertextual references, a parody of the natural condition of life, and an amalgam of destinies that play at life (and at death!).

Textual Strategies

The title functions as a "mirror that you place in front of a novel" (Ricardou, qtd. in Apolzan 1979, 14), thereby revealing the multiple interpretive dimensions of the phrase chosen by the author: *Lumea în două zile* is, therefore, among other things, an imitation of reality, an *imago mundi*, a representation of life, and an attempt to capture the concreteness of the world in words. The title, as a textual threshold, also suggests creation, with the author viewed as a demiurge, a creator of worlds. Mioara Apolzan (1979, 15–6) believes that, at first glance, the title may seem elliptical, and that, through the impersonal note it contains, the noun *lumea* (world) becomes synonymous with "life,"

with the whole, with the entire universe; “*în două* (in two) implies a division of a whole, a dichotomy, a binary principle, duality, while *zile* (days) constitute the temporal dimension intended to serve as a temporal marker. The meanings of the (solstice) days perfectly overlap with the two parts of the novel. This cardinal number recurs throughout the novel: two days, two solstices, two women, two parties, two pairs of dogs (those who love each other on the first day, and those who merely wish to mate on the second), two seasons, two manifestations of the weather/nature running wild, mocking us, etc. Elena Dan (1996, 260) states that the “world” in the title refers to the inner universe, to the world within us, and, by extension, to the creator’s world, because the mirror serves to reflect the personal double—the psychic/psychological universe. The narrative seems to detach itself from history and objective time and is set in a mythical time, as evidenced by the fantastical, magical aspects of the events recounted (which make up the bulk of the novel).

The creative logos is also reflected at the level of narrative structures: Bălăiță chooses the format of a detective novel (“the presence of detective stories in Romanian novels published under communism gives one pause for thought!”¹ (Negrici 2003, 304)): Judge Viziru, a friend of the protagonist, Antipa, returns to Albala seven years after Antipa’s death to shed light on the deceased’s life, drawing on the testimonies of August, Pașaliu, Professor Baroni, and the tape recordings from Dr. Lambrino, who had cared for Anghel after his hospitalization; After Viziru’s death, the investigation is continued by Alexandru Ionescu, “the novel that contained a novel thus becoming, in turn, a novel within a novel” (Ștefănescu 1987, 221).

Thus, the “main” narrator is Viziru, who takes on the task of recounting Antipa’s life, returning to Albala after seven years and following a terrible illness—one from which he no longer believed he would escape with his life—to find out just how far one can push the limits of a joke (the limit turns out to be death). His endeavour is impressive, and his desire to uncover the truth about Antipa’s life makes him unstoppable (as he uncovers many details and secrets about the protagonist). The novel also includes his own account of his friend, since he himself had been present at the party at Moiselini’s tavern. The man who takes over the investigation, Alexandru Ionescu, is not mentioned in any of the others’ testimonies, even though he had been there, as he himself states, with sadness:

I don’t understand: why doesn’t Viziru even mention my name in passing? At least say this much: ‘Alexandru was silent,’ or ‘Alexandru was next to me and said...’ Because I was with them! I know them well; we used to see each other often, sometimes every day. Now we’ve all gone our separate ways. But I was there, always with them—in Moiselini, on the street, and so on. And when Zota died, and when they made that bet on Biducă, the guy from the public bathhouse. I went to Antipa’s house, to Albala, and to Druică’s in Copăcioasa; I listened to Pașaliu, and Dr Pușlenghea would have me stick out my tongue and say ‘aaaaaaa’ in a heartbeat, and Lăduncă was my teacher in night school—how could I not know him!? As for Viziru, I can say that we both went through thick and thin together in Dealu-Ocna. So why is he staying silent? Has a notebook gone missing? ... (Bălăiță 2009, 469).

It has thus been claimed that the narrators are Viziru and Alexandru Ionescu (who can also be interpreted as the first reader of this account of Antipa’s fate), while the following passage has been completely overlooked: “Nothing has been heard of this A.I. lately. Some say he may have emigrated to Australia.” (69). These statements imply the

¹ All translations from Romanian are ours.

existence of another, unnamed narrator who can speak of both Viziru and Alexandru Ionescu. Thus, as if endlessly, “another text ‘swallows’ the previous one; another investigator (for example, Al. Ionescu) takes up the narrative baton, being—as Eugen Simion observes—a narrator without a narrative.” (Rachieru 1985, 230). The novel is constructed through a chain of testimonies from characters who knew Antipa. The stories follow one another, building on one another, but they also intertwine, overlap, contradict, and, in some cases, exclude one another (when the characters-narrators hold differing opinions about Antipa). Antipa’s life is thus reconstructed and reimagined (although, since the story is told by different people—subjective and unreliable narrators—we cannot know for certain what the true picture of Antipa is).

The act of creation and the conventions of novel-writing are evident in the numerous sequences of meta-literature, in which Judge Viziru (the author’s alter ego) comments on the labour involved in the creation of a literary work. Although the writing process sometimes overwhelms the writer with a multitude of details and the inherent gaps that may arise—creating incoherence and disrupting the logic of the subject—he continues to write: “Yes, I am gathering evidence,” writes Judge Viziru (the notebook with yellow covers, the number 3 on the first blank page, the rest covered with small, hastily scrawled letters). “There are too many facts; I am overwhelmed by their truth, but I cannot stop. As I write, vast gaps emerge between what I seek and what I find.” (Bălăiță 2009, 110). Although the artist’s project began as a joke, Viziru is determined to continue until he achieves an extraordinary result, until he produces a work of lasting value, because the artist is ephemeral, while art is enduring, even eternal—we can speak of the interplay of the theme *exegi monumentum*:

I’m writing all this without rushing. I think to myself: to be able to write whatever comes to mind, to censor nothing, to create a colossus of words—something like the Sphinx or the Golem—that neither the desert wind nor any magic spell could destroy. To be able to say—even while whistling with my hands in my pockets—something steadfast, definitive, nothing provisional. Although a thought that contradicts everything creeps in: didn’t I myself set out on this path as a joke? ... (142).

Writing is a demanding activity, but the satisfaction derived from a successful piece of writing outweighs the fatigue accumulated after a night of writing. For the writer who is devoted body and soul to his work, nothing matters except the fruits of his labour—not even basic needs like food and drink; all that matters is refining the manuscript to give it the best possible form. When inspiration strikes, the literary work flows effortlessly, and the writer feels empowered to offer the world a valuable piece: “I’m going back to the table. I’ve written a lot tonight. As they say, I’ve been productive. I don’t feel tired; rather, a kind of vibrant energy is rising to the surface of my skin. My mind is clear, and my body is content.” (143); “I carefully set aside piles of useless words. I’m not wrong in saying: a warm, stifling stench rises from them. I don’t drink, I don’t eat. Sweat gushes from its hidden springs.” (146), “But now I’m going to sit down at the table and write. I feel like I can.” (343).

An instance of metatextuality is also evident in the “testimony” of Professor Baroni, who points out—in one of the book’s many instances of *mise-en-abîme*—that Viziru’s text is a novel constructed using well-established literary techniques. In other words, the character “reveals” the author’s ideology implicitly by “bringing to the fore”

the act of writing/reading, by laying bare the techniques, and by exposing the fictional nature of the book as it is being (re)written:

And if it really is a book, don't write anything in it about my way of life, about the fact that you found me alive, nothing about the objects you see here, about their condition, about the house, the place, and the air you breathe here—nothing. None of the trivialities with which you adorn your books. Because, I know, it'll still be a book. (116).

In terms of structure, the novel is divided into two parts (followed by an Epilogue), titled “Day One” and “Day Two” (the placement of the ordinal number at the end has been compared by critics to biblical language), which correspond to the two (mirrored) images of Antipa (“Thus, the domestic man and the infernal man within Antipa’s shell” (285)). In fact, the character’s duality is ingeniously captured through the *mise en abyme* technique: the dog Argus writes a philosophical poem titled *Mondo Cane* (132), which consists of two parts: *Domestica* (“deals with things that are calm, certain, amusing, but devoid of danger”) and *Infernalina* (“deals with things that are turbulent, dark, and irrational”), showing how “within a single being, these two states are active and in a relative balance, which is precisely what makes the species so charming.” Another instance of *mise en abyme*, noted by Corina Ciocîrlie (1998, 154), can be found in the description of the cup from which Felicia drinks her coffee: a “large cup made of cheap earthenware; a rabbit wearing golf pants is also drinking coffee beneath the cup’s glaze, in a similar cup.” (Bălăiță 2009, 105). Felicia’s cup is, of course, one of the many mirror-like symbols that reflect the palimpsestic structure of George Bălăiță’s novel.

On both days, every moment is fully explored, and the events are presented symmetrically. The first day begins with Antipa’s rebirth (see the description of the awakening process in the novel’s opening pages) and ends with a birth: Maria, Antipa’s neighbour, gives birth. Day two ends with Antipa’s death, but the novel’s plot continues with the birth of Felicia’s son in the Epilogue. The two days correspond to different spatial settings: the first day depicts Antipa in Albala, in his marital home, alongside Felicia (“My home is everything to me. And Felicia is the lady of the house.” (105)), and on the second day, we find him in Dealu-Ocna (“an equally insignificant provincial town, where the commuter train on the Albala–Florești line stops to let off just a few passengers.” (Ștefănescu 1987, 220)). Bălăiță himself draws an equal sign between Albala and Bacău as they were in the author’s childhood. This space is, all the more so, one filled with calm, love, and the tranquillity of home.

The techniques employed (for example, the insertion of kitsch), the use of myth devalued through parody, as well as some of the themes addressed by the author (among others, the relationship between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, between light and darkness in the human being) led Mircea Cărtărescu to align his novel with the postmodern paradigm:

As has been noted, the aesthetic ‘category’ at the centre of Bălăiță’s world is that of the ‘fool,’ a special variant of the grotesque that evokes a certain mischievous, folksy laughter. Ultimately, through his depiction of the two polar festivals—the solstices—George Bălăiță describes two carnivals, that is, two manifestations/betrays of the sacred through its parody in a mundane register. The technique is distinctly postmodern, and the subsidiary modernist structure, rather than conflicting with the alluvial and randomised surface, enhances it and brings it to the fore. (Cărtărescu 1999, 338–9).

George Bălăiță had adopted Joyce's prose style (from *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*), constructing, within a limited time frame, a world with a complex structure that brings together human destinies dissected and analysed through techniques such as flashback, foreshadowing, introspection, free indirect speech, etc. Adrian Dinu Rachieru also notes the influence of Joyce's style:

Joyce's model channels our writer's narrative and descriptive energy, imposing a new epic convention on the development of prose during the interwar period. The pioneer James Joyce, by chronicling in *Ulysses* the eighteen hours of a lowly Dublin clerk, rejects linearity, defies time, and multiplies narrators (perspectives) as he glides through the flow of inner existence, transforming sequence (coherent chronicle) into simultaneity. (...) All the more so, this novelistic chemistry is present (and, at the same time, difficult to discern) in the works of a booish writer who (...) bypasses broad, clear-cut time, developing the imagination in detail. (Rachieru 1985, 228).

The details in the portrayal of the life and fate of the lowly civil servant Antipa bring the world of *Lumea în două zile* closer to that of the novel *Ulysses*, transforming Bălăiță into a Joycean writer who revitalises the techniques of novel-writing.

Transtextuality

A very important aspect of the novel is its transtextuality. The novel features conspicuous references to various authors and books. "We will define intertextuality—drawing on a well-known definition formulated by Julia Kristeva—as 'the indication that a text reads history and integrates itself into it'" (Hăulică 1981, 19) or "'the interweaving within a text of statements borrowed from other texts' or 'the transposition of one (or more) sign systems into another'" (Kristeva 1974, 59 qtd. in Cornea 1998, 82). For Riffaterre, "'intertext is the set of texts that can be associated with the one we have before us, the set of texts recalled from memory when reading a particular passage'" (Riffaterre 1981, 4, qtd. in Cornea 1998, 83). Cristina Hăulică believes that "the most stable intertext is, without a doubt, that formed by 'favourite authors,' to whose texts the writer (reader) constantly returns with an unsettling fascination" (Hăulică 1981, 73). In *Palimpsestes*, G. Genette "takes as his starting point the notion of 'transtextuality' or 'textual transcendence,' distinguishing five subcategories: intertextuality proper (...), paratextuality (...), metatextuality (...), hypertextuality (the relationship by which one text derives from another through transformation or imitation), and architextuality (...)" (Cornea 1998, 84–5). "The hypotext is the text that is quoted or imitated (the source text)." (Ungureanu 2010).

As Corina Ciocîrlie notes,

The mosaic of literary references (Gogol, Lewis Carroll, Goncharov, Strindberg, Joyce, Robbe-Grillet) constantly shifts perspective until—in the second part of the narrative—the initially depicted negative image of the universe takes shape. The author directs the reader to various novelistic structures, which he deconstructs or transforms, sublimates or exaggerates, reassembles parodically, or rewinds at an accelerated pace. (Ciocîrlie 1998, 148).

George Bălăiță (2009) chooses to mention the names of certain writers only in some cases [Gogol (75), Goethe, Schiller (110), August von Kotzebue (116), Heine (150), Johann-Joachim Winckelmann (151), Marin Sorescu (156), Rilke (217), Vergiliu (232), Goethe (236), Masoch (332), Arghezi, Bogza (394), Coșbuc, Topârceanu (424),

Alecsandri (451)] or just the title of the work [*Le Diable boiteux* (*The Devil upon Two Sticks*), *Белые ночи* (*White Nights*) (76), *Stan the Unlucky* (86), *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*) ((180), *Little Red Riding Hood* (206), *Kaiserchronik* (231), *Zhongyong or The Doctrine of the Mean* (302), *Hamlet* (419)] or provide both bibliographic references [*Firenze ai tempi di Dante* by Robert Davidsohn (75), *Geschichte des Orients* by J.B. von Weiss (110), *La Mystique esthétique et le vrai Romantisme* by Robert de Souza, *Esquisse d'un programme néoclassique* by Emile Bernard (242)].

Other cases are those in which the reader is given only certain clues as to the origin of a phrase: “You might still escape from the belly of a fish, but try, young man, to get out of the narrow belly of that sinful mackerel.” (Bălăiță 2009, 90) – a reference to the biblical myth and, perhaps, to Marin Sorescu’s dramatic parable; “I saw his face up close, just as Gulliver had gazed from a quarter of a foot away at the face of the very kind giant queen of Brobdingnag” (109) – a reference to *Gulliver’s Travels* by Jonathan Swift; The line “The pond behind the dead palace” (198) is part of Bacovian’s poem *Ancient Twilight*; the cat Murr, with whom Antipa has an imaginary dialogue, is “borrowed” from Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann, from *The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*; The lines “Better to be lonely and forgotten,/ Lost, to withdraw indifferently,/ In this country full of humor” (415) are from the poem *With you* by George Bacovia. The conversation between Pașaliu and Antipa is an important sequence in the text, in terms of transtextual references: “‘Do you know Poprishcin?’ Antipa asked me one day. ‘Which Poprishcin?’ ‘What do you mean, which one? Axenti Ivanovich Poprishcin, the full-time advisor—the one who used to come to work early in the morning and sharpen His Excellency’s quills.’ ‘The madman?’ I said. ‘The madman who kept a diary and mixed up the dates—writing ‘the year 2000’ and ‘Marchober’ and all sorts of other nonsense—and thought he was the King of Spain?’” (75), since fundamental similarities can be drawn between Gogol’s madman and the fanatic Anghel. It is no coincidence that Anghel exclaims, regarding his stay at the sanatorium, “How free I am here, alongside the King of Spain and the Queen of Sheba” (495), and August, who has come to visit the hospice, is asked by the gatekeeper Tănase “to keep in mind” that “he comes from somewhere else”: “November 3, the year one thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine” (502).

Another character “borrowed” from Gogol (from the novel *Dead Souls*) is Chichikov: “A gambler, a prankster—dead souls that no one is buying this time. Chichikov is dead.” (Bălăiță 2009, 118); moreover, Chichikov also appears in Anghel’s biography, from the time when he was still a boatman: “‘I am Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov,’ he told me, ‘a college counselor and landowner; I am travelling on personal business.’ I waited a while longer, but no one else came.” (Bălăiță 2009, 304–5). “It is no coincidence,” Valeriu Cristea points out, “that in the novel, the madman Anghel (...) meets Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov before he meets Antipa. The order established by literary history is thus respected within the narrative’s chronology as well: first comes the archetype, and then its imitation and parody”. (...) The novel *Lumea în două zile* was written, as noted at the end of the volume, between Oct. 15, 1971, and Feb. 8, 1973. Around the same time, the critic Lucian Raicu was working on his essay titled *Gogol or The Fantastic in the Mundane*, published in early 1974. “It is therefore no mere coincidence that Lucian Raicu was the first critic to read *Lumea în două zile* (even commenting on it upon its publication on the book’s back cover): the novel’s Gogolian atmosphere drew this Gogol scholar to it in a mysterious and irresistible way.” (Cristea 1984, 170–4).

Another example of transtextual construction is the reinterpretation of the title of Lewis Carroll's book (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*): "Felicia's Adventures in Wonderland," reviewed as follows by Monica Spiridon:

In its own way, the enchanting fiction concocted by the logician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll) is one of the most sophisticated and eloquent models of the semantic universe. From the domestic world where she thwarts her sister and nanny (as Antipa calls the "scrupulous" Felicia), Alice ventures beyond: passing through the looking-glass (as Antipa would so love to do), or falling down a bottomless well, as he himself dreams of (...). There—whether in the realm of playing cards or that of chess—she encounters a world of convention and strict hierarchy, where conventions and principles of order reign undisturbed. The courtly hierarchy and the immutable rules of the game (prescribing only actions to be repeated ad infinitum) freeze every realm Alice visits into an identity that is essentially itself, forcing it to "copy" itself endlessly. (Spiridon 2000, 60).

Biblical parodies are also significant in terms of the texts' meanings: in Day One, in which the characters celebrate Christmas Eve, Mrs Stănciulescu comes to announce that "Mary is giving birth." (Bălăiță 2009, 257) – "Maria, you know her—the girl who stayed with the Marcocis two years ago" (258). The humour arises when the others forget the girl's real name and start arguing about it: "Maria? What Maria? There's no Maria—the girl's name is Valeria. (...) But Valeria isn't really Valeria, dear; she goes by Magda" (258–9). The parallels with the Christian story continue: "They, too, give birth wherever they happen to be" (a parody of the scene of Jesus' birth in the manger); "She gave birth to a strong boy" (259). The story of the Jews' forty-year wanderings through the wilderness is parodied in the same way ("Moses wandering through the land" (380)), as well as the well-known Bible verse John 1:1—"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and God was the Word."—"In the beginning was the cactus" (487).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the structures and techniques used illustrate the text's modernity. The book's structure (hinted at in the title), its thematic structures, textual strategies, the investigative novel format, and its metatextuality make *Lumea în două zile* a profoundly modern novel, whose experimental and playful-parodic dimensions—and whose vision, at times, as Mircea Cărtărescu points out, with the experiments of postmodern prose. Intertextual references place *Lumea...* in a constant dialogue with other acclaimed works, under the guiding influence of the library, which attracts and captivates both discerning readers and casual readers alike—all of whom are undoubtedly fascinated by the proliferation of fictional worlds (including through the skillful use of textual "mirrors") and its playful, parodic structure, which in some cases conceals a subversive political message.

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