Discourse and Image in the Postmodern Text*

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Résumé: *La postmodernité impose à la littérature une toute nouvelle perspective sur la production du texte littéraire élaboré, actuellement, comme un puzzle, par la réordination des structures textuelles et, implicitement, des structures sémantiques. Métafictionnel par définition, un tel discours établie des rapports différents avec l'auteur/le narrateur, dont il bloque les fonctions téléocentriques. En échange, ce discours se manifeste comme structure dissipée dont l'auto réflexivité et le manque de linéarité gagne une fonction de construction.*

Mots clés : *Texte postmoderniste, structure dissipée, métafiction, émergence du sens*

The socio-cultural background of postmodernity implies a change in mentalities which brings forwards different concepts such as: pluralism, decanonisation of culture, tolerance, the minorities' right to identity. As Ana Bantoş says, "against the background of ,the end of history' that Fukuyama talks about or the Euro-Atlantic cultural expansion (Huntington), the identity discourse grows more and more self-conscious"[1] in its attempt to gain independence off the old values of the authoritative Centre. Postmodernity has witnessed a genuine scientific explosion rejecting all kinds of determinism: the indeterminacy theory of Heisenberg, the theory of chaos, the "fractas" theory of Mandelbrot. Lyotard considers that, being "interested in the quantum, in the conflict with incomplete information, in the 'fracta', in catastrophes or pragmatic paradoxes, the postmodern science builds up the theory of its own discontinuous, catastrophic and paradoxical evolution."[2] On the other hand, the concept of "globalisation" seems to properly define the new postmodern "unity within diversity" which is characterised, as Ihab Hassan notices, by "an epistemological obsession with fragments or fractures and corresponding commitment to minorities in politics, sex and language. To think well, to feel well, to act well, to read well, according to this episteme, is to refuse the tyranny of wholes."[3]

Literature itself bears a change in structure, ideology and discourse, enhancing a different way of translating world into fiction. The new scientific theories become the roots of writing, radically changing the act of reading too. David Porush, in its "Prigogine and Postmodernism's Roadshow" [4] says that "the literary text is best viewed as the result of the intersection of the author's mind with a very peculiar technology (a sort of antimechanistic technology) designed in its most advanced forms to capture the evanescent movements and fluctuations of the mind itself. (…) It illustrates how literature generally may act as a self-organizing system, growing willy nilly through bifurcation points towards higher orders of systematic organisation. Far from taking the fun out of reading, this growth towards structure is thrilling and mysterious, since the reader is a participant, urging the novel onward in its headlong rush towards revelation." If we look upon postmodern texts as ever *emerging* fictions, then we must discuss about their self-organizing function used to re-read and re-write reality. From this point of view, "postmodern fiction in particular struggles to establish itself as that alternative which Prigogine alludes to as <<a new mode of description in which time and freedom, rather than determinism, would play a fundamental role.>> In postmodern fiction (…) we find an emphatic divergence from the naturalism and mechanical plots found in the nineetheenth-century novel (Austen, Dickens, Stendhal, Eliot, et.al.) and a definite break from the mock determinism we find in modernist novels by Joyce, Raymond Roussel and Kafka. Instead, the postmodern novel and its precursors emphasize the contingent, the random, the systematic, the irrational, the unmechanistic and the subjectivistic experience of time

opposed to enslavement to clockwork regularity and chronology." [5] Metafictional in nature, the postmodern discourse endows the fictionalised worlds with fragmented images overtly reflecting their inner structure and aesthetic identity. The quest for truth eludes the phenomenal spaces to enter the epistemological ones, pointing our at least four main features: nonlinearity, self-reflexivity, irreversibility and self-organization. Peter Stoicheff views the text as *dissipative system*, especially the postmodern ones: "A fiction text contains many strategies for metamorphosing the apparent chaos or randomness of phenomenal reality into an order comprehensible to its reader. Usually, a text employs these strategies covertly and thereby sustains the illusion that it does not mediate between reader and world, but opens a neutral window onto that world for the reader. As a consequence, the strategies recede beneath the surface of the text's significant intensions, to counsel calmly and imperceptibly the reader's impression of the text's neutrality as the reading process continues, maintaining what Roland Barthes sceptically terms <<the totalitarian ideology of the referent.>>" [6] The self-reflexive narrative becomes a key feature of the metafictional text, as the subject in question is neither the ontological nor the phenomenal universes external to it, but the complex *discourse in becoming*: the finite textual space enhances infinite number of possible meanings as "metafiction exploits the understanding that a text cannot be an author-s wind-up watch confidently demarcating the universe, submissively consulted by the reader and that instead it is a chaotic system created by the text's limitless potential for interpretation and the author's relinquished power. This diminished status of the author precludes a magnetic north of truth in the text and frees signification to disseminate in ever-burgeoning patterns." [7] Disregarding the hierarchies of meaning, the postmodern self-reflexive discourse turns into a labyrinth texture aiming at exposing both the covert structures that allow fiction to masquerade as reality and the processes of manufacturing illusion by revealing its artifice. The continuous game of interpretation and deconstruction is sustained by the metafictional *mise-en-abyme*, creating a pattern that stretches not toward meaning, but around it.

Nevertheless, "the metafictional text alerts its reader to the possibilities of self-generative readings that are latent in any text; in fact it produces a multiply-interpretative and highly self-conscious reader. Marked by an absence of theological meaning and a celebration of superficial pattern over significant depth, metafiction sensitizes the reader to transcoding rather than to certainty." [8] It is the main specific status of metafiction, one that pleads for the praxis of significance through which the old unitary Image on world brakes into multiple fragmented glasses ever mirroring themselves. As Peter Stoicheff notices, "our worldly narratives, through which we construct what we think of as reality, are themselves a tissue of previous narrative texts with which they blend and clash, and which we choose to interpret in various ways. (…) A Euclidean narrative produces a Euclidean understanding of a Euclidean world. The metafictional narrative of chaos produces a metafictional understanding of a metafictional or chaotic world. The difference is that in the latter the process of sel-interrogation is built into the narrative, freeing it from the tautological determinism that inhabits earlier narratives." [9]

From this point of view, the descriptive function of Image entails the isotopic relation between seeing and interpretation, or, in other words, it puts "image as active synthesis" [10] to work. This kind of narrator "is starting from sensations to make up images during his permanent strive to recuperate both world and his own identity." [11] The self-reflexive and ego-centered quests inter-mingle through which the *panopticum* – like discourse echoes infinite dissipated narrative instances. As Carmen Muşat pertinently notices, the polyphony of the authorial ego is brought forward during the conscious attempt to re-define text as heterotopy / "heterarchy" [12], a "chaotically ordered" discourse inevitably narrated by a dissipative voice. The metafictional extensions signal various

grades of the textual bodily profiles: the text that assists to its own *becoming*, the worldly universe witnesses the rise of the emergent worldly texts, the author who is looking for his textual body (a theme of interest for Gh.Crăciun, for instance).

Thus, the analysis of postmodern metafiction leads to the inner mechanisms of how discourse interrogation re-constitutes text and world. On one hand, the mimetic text makes up the illusion that it generates information about the world, on the other, the metafictional text reveals world constructed nature. Rejecting any hierarchical arrangement of the reality levels, postmodern metafiction generates meaning through dissipative structures and, sometimes, even local vortices. The latter allows the mixture of time and space within a text which is declared to be fragmentary and discontinuous, thus imposing simultaneity as new ontological order.

Notes

1. **Ana Bantoş,** Poezia postmodernă şi fenomenul globalizării**, in:** Identitatea limbii şi literaturii române în perspectiva globalizării**, Iasi, Trinitas, 2002, p.405 (n.b. our translation)**
2. **Apud Mircea Cărtărescu,** Postmodernismul românesc**, Bucharest, Humanitas, 1999, p.42**
3. **Ibidem**
4. **David Porush, "Prigogine and Postmodernism's Roadshow" in** Chaos and Order. Complex Dynamics in Literature ant Science, **edited by N.Katherine Hayles, University Chicago Press, 1991, p.76**
5. **Ibidem, p.77**
6. **Peter Stoicheff, "The Chaos of Metafiction" in** Chaos and Order. Complex Dynamics in Literature ant Science, **edited by N.Katherine Hayles, University Chicago Press, 1991, p.85-86**
7. **Ibidem, p.88**
8. **Ibidem, p.93**
9. **Ibidem, p.95**
10. **Carmen Muşat,** Strategiile subversiunii. Descriere şi naraţiune în proza postmodernă românească**, Piteşti, Paralela 45, 2002, p.97(n.b. our translation)**
11. **Ibidem. (n.b. our translation)**
12. **Ibidem, p.120 (n.b. our translation)**

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