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Ambiguity as a Paradigm in D. R. Popescu’s Novels

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Ambiguity as a Paradigm in D. R. Popescu's Novels

Abstract

Keywords: ambiguity, paradigm, symbolism, postmodernism, intertextuality, variable focus, pluriperspectivism

The doctoral thesis, **Ambiguity as a Paradigm in D. R. Popescu's novels**, aimed at highlighting the defining feature of the novelistic prose, the openness of the semantic space of the narrative discourse, the capitalization of the multiple valences of meaning of the phrases and texts, the production mechanisms, the epic formulas, the techniques, procedures, ways of achieving linguistic and stylistic ambiguity as well as some competitive interpretations suggested by the literary critics.

Beneficiary of hundreds of exegetical pages, systematic studies or monographs, approved in literary histories, a leading writer, acclaimed for the mimetic side, for the diversity and virtuosity of his writings in prose and drama, D. R. Popescu is approached here in terms of a stimulating reading scales designed to cover the innovation, the versatility and the creative resources used by the author especially for the renewal of the novel in Romanian literature, the synchronization with the other branches of art.

The keywords of this paper are: ambiguity, variable focus, proliferation of the epic, epic-cores, dialogism, inquiry, debate, ambiguous man, demythologization, remythologization, maze, duplication, non chronology, large and small universes, dragging into the fantastic, bestiary, symbolism, theatricalization, parody, sarcasm, intertextuality, postmodernism. The subject being a vast one, involving the debate and the analysis of all the seventeen novels written by the author so far, we have designed the work in accordance with a well-defined plan involving five chapters.

The first direction of our research, **Ambiguity – Characteristic of the Artistic Language**, highlights how D. R. Popescu ensures the “openness” of the semantic space of the narrative discourse at the levels of the aesthetic option, the artistic vision, the epic fantasy, the vocabulary, the epic syntax and the morphological and stylistic levels. The analysis of the production mechanisms of ambiguity is supported by a large body of examples. In this first chapter we also made a chronology of D. R. Popescu's novelistic works. First of all, we

identified an early stage with two novels *Zilele săptămânii* and *Vara oltenilor*, less interesting concerning the themes. The writer's talent became noticeable from the second stage of novelistic creation, with the *F* cycle, consisting of six novels, most notably being *F* novel and *Vânătoarea regală*. We called the third stage that of the "total novel", with the cycle *Viața și opera lui Tiron B*, respectively the volumes *Iepurele șchiop* and *Podul de gheață*, some novels that underline how literary works are created. The artistic components of a literary work are listed in the *Preface*: time in art, the relationship between the narrative instances: the narrator, the reader, the character and references to the story mission, to literature as a branch of art and as a form of problematization. At this stage we have also included and analysed the novel *Orașul ingerilor*.

The next stage is that of demythologization and we included novels such as: *Dumnezeu in bucătărie*, *Truman Capote și Nicolae Țic* (romantz), *Paolo și Francesca și al treisprezecelea apostol*, *Săptămâna de miere*. The novelist configures a mythological framework, allowing to distinguish a process of rewriting some myths, making, in fact, a deconstruction of the myths sustained by the political power: the myth of the promised land, the messianic myth, that of Cain and Abel, the enemy brothers, the myth of paradise lost, the labyrinth myth, etc., the author's intention being to suggest the communist dystopia.

The last stage is related to the novels published after 2000: *Falca lui Cain* (2001) and *Intoarcerea tatălui risipitor* (2008). The first novel makes clear references to the Bible, showing, however, all features of the post-modern novel such as polymorphic appearance, the multiple perspective affecting the consistency of the story aiming at maintaining the reader in the text with the false promise of secret discovery in the end, harmless information, essays, newspaper articles, dispersal, fragmentation issues, intertextuality by insertion of 91 poems called *Calendarul nebunilor*, the three acts of the play *Luceafărul porcilor*, the essay *Secolul Marx* and two articles, one dedicated to Che Guevara and the other dedicated to Lupeni miners' tragedy. The last novel, *Intoarcerea tatălui risipitor*, under the disguise of demythologization, is an indictment of present society, an x-ray of the transition that no longer ends and an ironic treatment of the war, as a social phenomenon, the war which still takes place in various parts of the world with the participation of Romanian troops too.

In the second chapter, entitled **Epic Formulas of Ambiguity in D. R. Popescu's novels**, we started from the novelist's preference and constant, that of openness to technical renewals, authentic and continuous in the artistic transfiguration of truth, of the great problems of the world captured by narrative perspective, by the character-narrator who is the first, or the second, or even the third in the story. Therefore we focused on narrative techniques such as: the spraying of the narrative perspective doubled by dialogism, by using the interior monologue, the recording of unspoken thoughts simultaneously with the action, by the multiple focusing of the narrator's

consciousness; the overlapping perspectives, the proliferation of the epic in terms of several “voices”- a way of producing structural ambiguity; the alternating narrative perspective obtained by the duplication of some of the characters; the cumulative anticipation through the resumption of some motifs, sequences or characters that by gradual amplification change significantly; the cumulative circularity of narrative stories, by resumption of some events, characters from different angles and perspectives; the use of time anticipations or repetitive patterns, the use of film techniques such as: the flash-back, the retrospective, foregrounding, turning destinies, the alert passing from one idea to another etc.

Another epic formula of ambiguity, of suggesting the human complexity as infinite possibilities through amalgamated, unusual, heterogeneous structures, is that the “big issue” is emerging through “small issues”, “small universes” that the author fragmented, developed independently in different epic nuclei, so every detail, which initially seems trivial, it should be noted, because no one knows in what context is significant and the author does not repeat it to make it easier to understand. The “big universe” fits into the “small worlds” that we encounter in the novels as either interrogative or doubtful, imaginative, ritualistic.

Ambiguity is also amplified by epic pretexts such as inquiry and debate, dragging into the fantastic, the bestiary, demythisation, remythisation, theatricalization, evoking historical and social phenomena, the availability for post modern epic procedures such as intertextuality, polymorphic appearance and the atomization of the subject. The investigation resumed and deepened through hearing as many characters-witnesses, as many voices causes epic proliferation leading to failure in establishing clear points of reference. The investigation is not a legal process in D. R. Popescu’s novels; its role is to examine the status of people to understand the events, the implication of individuals in such events, becoming a questioning of the human condition, the depositions constantly multiplying, so that the assumptions, the logical reasoning in some epic sequences are illogical in others. The investigation to discover the truth becomes a way of discussing the most important social, moral, political and philosophical problems. As epic pretexts, investigation and debate do not clarify the situations but they are designed to introduce the reader through a thicket of facts, events, to plant traps that would crumble the reader’s assumptions, causing to seek more competitive interpretations.

The intrusion of the fantastic into reality leads to ambiguity, to disruption of the relationship between signifier and signified, causing a rupture, a discontinuity of the action, which raises a distressing atmosphere of horror. The fantastic ranges from one novel to another. If in *Împăratul norilor* we meet a fantastic of folk origin, in *F* the fantastic is parodic, grotesque, in the novels *Oraşul ingerilor*, *Dumnezeu in bucătărie* the fantastic is related to dreams, then in

Iepurele șchiop, Truman Capote și Nicolae Țic the fantastic is thanatic and finally in *Podul de gheață* we meet the mythical fantastic.

Also, the introduction and the use of bestiary compete to highlight the faces of truth. The animal symbolism is different from one epic nucleus to another, from one novel to the other. For example, the horse conveys his meanings and multiplies his significances depending on social and deeply spiritual changes people pass by. He will be in turns a symbol of death, of damnation, of the macabre but also a symbol of life and innocence, freedom and especially the symbol of truth. The substitution of people with animals in allegorical anecdotes represents an indirect form of facts, events, a bestiary that involves ambiguities the reader is forced to decrypt.

Ambiguity is also enhanced by the processes of demythisation and remythisation. D. R. Popescu uses the myth as an ambiguous formula and as a dissimulation strategy, based on the force of the resymbolisation of the reality, relating the myth to the political context. D. R. Popescu desecrates the myths and mystifies ordinary realities out of the need for invention of the contemporary society. Using the Bible as a mythical reference leads to the distortion and inversion of the original significations, and the way in which communism as an occult mythology deforms the sense of the paradisiacal chronotope is obvious in the novels through the dissolving of some symbolic structures. The epic situations bear the imprint of mythical thinking: the initiation, the death, the rebirth, also the characters are built using the technique of the archetypal foreshadowing, the heroic and symbolic amplification of their features, through spatial and temporal coordinates which disclose the functionality of a reiteration pattern. We also witness a process of inventing mythical scenarios. Desacralization, demystifying, distortion, concealment is how the author's own writing is. It appeals to mythology to suggest concepts such as freedom, heroism, good and evil. Demystifying vision springs from the conviction that only the recognition and acceptance of mistakes could save the Romanian nation.

Theatralization, the circus world, the evoking of historical and social phenomena are ways through which the reader is drawn to reveal anything beyond, in a space of narrative discourse, all turning into a kind of consciousness examination.

In the last novels, the use of parody as ironic quotation or appropriation, the use of intertextuality, of discontinuity, of the amalgam of literary genres, but also the use of the satire, the philosophical discourse, the aphoristic game, the anecdote increase ambiguity and require some effort from the reader, an effort almost similar to that of the creator.

I called the third chapter **Ambiguous Characters and Uncertain Truths**, in which we pointed the duality, the otherness of the characters who play two or more roles. The author uses techniques and procedures specific to the dramatic genre such as: the disguise, the incognito, quiproquo, the change of names, twin confusion, the memory loss, the duplication, the

overturning and collapse of a false hierarchy of authority. I showed that the author always uses a mechanism of contrasts in characters building, thus the characters are both executioners and victims, martyrs and harlequins, witnesses and newsmongers, informers and thrusters, fools, clowns and sages, presented in an ambiguous situation always between tragic and comic. Using the biblical or the Greek myths, such as the labyrinth, the author manages to create ambiguous characters located on a winding route where the courage and cowardice, the affirmation and negation face and the longing for freedom is stuck. Most of the characters are portrayed by the polyhedral reflection process. At this stage we remind about the obsessive character, Moise, of the *F* cycle, unique in Romanian literature by his strongly contrasting traits. Greedy for power, Moise loses his reason, destroying everything, devouring not only his enemies, but also his friends, family, reaching to self destruction as Ouroboros.

We presented in antithesis the characters of the novels in subchapters entitled: *The Investigator and the Raisonneur*, *The Fool and the Wise*, *Witnesses and Newsmongers*, *Traitors and Thrusters*, *The Visionary Circus*, *Puppet Characters*, *Evil Women*, *Mythical Heroes*. Through the characters' actions and deeds, the author reveals a cruel situation, the essential truth of a "sick time" when the dehumanization, human degradation, psychological crisis, the evil took over the universe of life.

In the next chapter, **The Dissolution of Time and Space**, we have shown that ambiguity is increased by temporal overlaps, by non chronology, by the use of time anticipations and repetitive patterns leading to a mixture of time structures as in an illogical game. D. R. Popescu has no interest when the events occur, but he is interested in their connection. The epic time is individual, historical, cosmic or universal. Interferences occur between these temporal forms leading either to disruption, fragmentation, or to time dilation, resulting in ambiguity. The individual and the historical time are perceived differently from one narrative unit to another, memories, interpretations of characters are added and there is no temporal sequence of actions which makes the reception difficult and ambiguous. Even the grammar is "confused". There are sequences in which the present tense of the verbs alternates with present perfect and past forms even in the same sentence. Combining verb tenses suggests either simultaneity of the present actions or giving the events a grotesque size.

Regarding the space I thought the same as the literary critics Mircea Iorgulescu, Mirela Roznoveanu that is confusing, discontinuous, impersonal, sometimes imaginary, tracing to a certain extent the influence of Faulkner. We distinguish several areas of the epic: the epic space of the narrator, the witness' space, the imaginary space of the voices and a physical space, a geographically one. Given the way the space has left its mark on the personality of those who

have lived there, we referred to a space of confinement, of prison and atrocity, an evil space of punishment, a labyrinthine space, a space of initiation and a space of sacred paradise.

Therefore, temporal plans are confusing and overlapping and the space is generally an imaginary one, which causes ambiguity and requires the reader's attention in perception and understanding.

In the fifth chapter, called **The Derision of the Language**, I highlighted how the author succeeded by using a bushy, labyrinthine style, sometimes prolix and through a caustic language, to reveal the dramatic truths of the time, opening a new direction in prose. Interfering the modes of exposure, the narrative is repeatedly interrupted, the characters' monologues being introduced trying to explain their actions. Sometimes, through the soliloquies, the characters show their inner drama. Dialogue is more used than the narrative itself; it often becomes a quick exchange of words to demonstrate opposite ideas. The dialogue is fragmented, fragmentation marked graphically by ellipsis, which makes the character involved in the conversation to perceive only some fragments, echoes from the speaker's lines. When the tension increases, the lines become sarcastic, labyrinthine, so the desires plan is confused with the real plan. The description used to complete the images is customized with a rhetorical style, hyperbolic images, with enumeration and repetition inducing obscurity, with literary terms joining the trivial ones.

Incoherence, fragmentation, elliptical utterances are also produced by the use of punctuation such as brackets, suspension points, quotation marks, question and exclamation marks. The orality of the language within brackets often contrasts to the philosophical essayistic style. The trivial language, vulgar terms, the mixture of regionalisms, authentic words and expressions slide into ridicule and are meant to suggest illiteracy, violence as a form of maximum power. The derision of the language also results from the ability to perform lexical innovations, puns obtained through the internal means of enriching the vocabulary such as derivation, composition and also by separation, spelling, repetition of syllables, tripling of sounds and rhythmical words with incantatory effects.

The interference of the narrative modes of exposure, the interference of the stylistic registers, lexical innovations, the punctuation used to enhance the attitude of the speakers are obviously innovative brands used by the author to demonstrate that we can not mimic the predecessors, that there are processes, methods and new resources through which prose should be synchronized with other branches of art.

In the last part of the thesis, **Conclusions** - which is a summary - I mentioned some comments I reached to after the text analysis of the seventeen novels published by the author so far. The strengths of the prose in the obsessive decade of the 1960 represented a concern for D. R. Popescu too. The imaginary of the communist era, which is to be found in his novelistic

prose, can be understood if it is related to the psycho-historical context which is circumscribed. The characters representing the power, signified by the destiny of perpetrators and victims are outlined in the imaginary of the novels, taking into account the scenarios of an age which assumed a messianic utopia. In this respect, the novelist has created a variety of narrative techniques of ambiguity, making them unaffordable traps in the novels. To point out the truth in totalitarianism and in order to reveal the brutality and cruelty of the communist regime, the author turned to the use of some labyrinthine pathways. The novels remain as a testimony about the abuse of social, political, moral transformation, about their causes and at the same time, are clever references to the perpetrators of the atrocities of the totalitarian system. Therefore, the fear of accessibility, of finding the symbols too easy, determined also finding new narrative techniques which represent the source of the renewal of the prose written by D. R. Popescu. His novels show an impressive creative ability in revealing the depth of the human universe, the author's unicity among contemporary writers.

Taking all these into account, we can say that Dumitru Radu Popescu is an original writer, always open to novelty. In addressing and writing this issue of research and analysis I have accessed the imaginary theory, I have used many critical studies of narratology, various dictionaries, books and literary history. Following the findings I have demonstrated in the five chapters of the thesis, point by point, that the main feature of D. R. Popescu's novelistic work, ambiguity, not only raises competitive interpretations, but it is also an essential contribution to the renewal of the Romanian prose, the synchronization of the Romanian literature with other branches of art.

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