

For a Semiotic and Cognitive Approach to Romanian Postmodern Poetry

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Abstract

Our article deals with the directions of development in Romanian literary semiotics and in international semiotics presenting a brief introduction to Romanian postmodern poetry suitable for those encountering this 'exotic' literature for the first time (an outline of different groups of poets and considerations of how Romanian postmodern poets relate to the postmodern theory we are familiar with). The second part of the article presents a model of textual analysis for postmodern poems based on M. Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978) re-read in the light of cognitive concepts and theories in an attempt to obtain a detailed understanding of the semiotics of Romanian postmodern poetry.

Key words: *literary semiotics, Romanian postmodern poetry, cognitive theories, textual analysis.*

Our article is divided into three parts: the first part sketches the directions of development in Romanian literary semiotics and in international semiotics and a brief introduction to Romanian postmodern poetry suitable for those encountering this 'exotic' literature for the first time (an outline of different groups of poets and considerations of how Romanian postmodern poets relate to the postmodern theory we are familiar with), the second part presents a model of textual analysis for postmodern poems based on M. Riffaterre's *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978) rethought in the light of cognitive concepts and theories in an attempt to obtain a detailed understanding of the semiotics of Romanian postmodern poetry, and a third part devoted to conclusions. As regards the poets and texts I have selected I have chosen poets I feel are exemplary and important in terms of defining the literary trend with a special focus on the most recent volumes of poetry.

Romanian literary semiotic tradition has sought to advance textual analyses solely with a linguistic point of departure, either by linking the text to verbal language or by conceiving texts as having verbal language as its primary model being severely influenced by French structuralism. In this way we have obtained approaches of the first level of texts — that of propositional content or sign inventories and their combination rules despite the fact that understanding literary texts means to understand their inventories below and above the sign limit and the set of combination rules of a given language. Literary semiotic studies have proposed ad hoc practical accounts of meaning of a literary work starting from the linguistic level. Since it seems that we learn to use words in relation to the persons and objects around us it results that a lexeme is more important as a metalinguistic referring expression than as a bearer of syntactic or grammar information. Consequently, we need content schemata rather than formal schemata in textual analysis.

Recent developments of literary semiotics after the adoption of Peirce's pragmatic semiotics as the frame theory for research have established three directions of interrogation: 1. the analysis of language-world relationship, 2. imaginative reading, 3. interpretation as dialogic production of shared knowledge (Veivo, 2007). The analysis of language-world relationship requires elements of natural languages semantics, imaginative reading requires elements of psychology and neurosciences, which explain the process of reading and comprehension, and interpretation as a dialogic production of shared knowledge requires elements of text and information processing. These directions extend textual analysis far beyond the linguistic frontiers of texts involving interdisciplinary data, pluralistic methods and the conciliation of Saussurean's *sémiologie* with Peircean *semeiotics* in an attempt to see literature as a simultaneously linguistic process and product of signification and communication (cf. Johansen, 2007: 2) tied to social and cultural practices as well as to our biological makeup (Veivo & Ljungberg, 2009: 1).

For didactic reasons rather than intrinsic features Romanian postmodern poetry has been classified into three main classes: poetry of the 80's, poetry of the 90's, and the so called **Generation 2000**. All these classes may be described in terms of postmodern features: eclectic methodology, 'mobile' poetics, readiness to experiment, ironic and ludic attitude. The delimitation of literary texts on the criterion of generation is rather irrelevant because there is no group coherence but poets with heterogeneous personalities and a great variety of linguistic structures. Romanian postmodern poetry is in a close relationship with its social context: poets of the 80's wrote under totalitarianism, in the last decade of communism, so they had to

be subversive and highly allusive in order to survive as authors of literature; the poets of the 90's wrote in a period of intense freedom of speech but in the context of fast and significant economic and political changes (Boldea, 2005: 2) and they felt the need to mirror these transformations. The poetry of the Generation 2000 has been viewed by the traditional critique as a form of biographical, neoexpressionistic and despicable writing having the function to exorcize and cure its authors through the text. At the stylistic level, it is considered to lack any artistic artifice, poet's attitude being that of neglecting stylistic and compositional polishment (Mincu St., 2007: 9). Called 'radicals' or the **Romanian Beat Generation** because they have written under the influence of The West Coast American Poetry and The New York poets these authors—the 'fracturist' wing—graduated philology, literature, communication, etc. which means they master the language use and creative writing techniques. Their texts are dominated by reality and biographical details in other terms by the relationship between reality and self (Bodiu et al., 1999: 7) as in all postmodern poetry. Getting close to the real and the concrete involves changes at the level of the poetic language: «one cannot breathe anymore within poetic patterns which lose denotatum in the dust of connotations» (Cărtărescu, apud Bodiu et al., 1999: 7). Traditional verse with rhythm and rhyme is rejected and highly metaphorical lines avoided. Realistic poetry tend to be metonymic signs linked by their associations to each other. It uses a variable, almost always unrhymed line, expressive popular idioms or speech, straight to the point, often bitterly, humorous, with a rhythm of its own. Under these circumstances new research instruments are required for textual analysis.

Postmodern poetry in general and the poetry of Generation 2000 in particular illustrates the premise of cognitive linguistics that there are no differences between general and poetic use of language, there is nothing inherently different in the form of literary language both of them reflecting cognitive processes. The text, its referents and the interpretation are conceptual, we think and write things in the forms we do because our minds are 'embodied' not just literally but also figuratively. Our experiences are involved in and expressible only through patterns of language that have their roots in our material existence.

In a postmodern poem the reader has to make sense locally because he has to face a flux of verbal 'found objects', shifting styles and registers, literary allusions, narrative episodes and descriptive scenes. Poems are areas of discourse where items of observation, contextual thought and quotation briefly appear in an apparently arbitrary act. This heterogeneous material is usually bitterly criticized by literary critics who reduce the postmodern poems to a skeletal structure of narrative nodes.

Since it is difficult to focus on the surface structures of postmodern poetic discourse, upon what the reader recognizes and identifies as style because there are no obvious structures of this type in postmodern poems we are forced to study 'actual' language as a link between the real world and the conceptual one because programatically it is a poetry of everyday experiences. Consequently, a model of analysis suitable for postmodern poetry has to combine linguistic analysis with theoretical considerations on cognitive structures and processes in order to give a full description of the artefact that a postmodern poem is.

Cognitive-semiotic approaches have tried to offer satisfactory solutions to the problem of metaphor in poetry by combining elements of conceptual metaphor theory, blending theory and cognitive semiotics (Line Brandt & Per Aage Brandt, 2005). On the other hand, cognitive

poetics at his turn has tried to offer a means of describing and delineating different types of knowledge in a systematic way, and a model of how to connect these matters to the language of literature focusing on reading (Stockwell, 2002: 4). Any eclectic model of this type intends to give more than a description of literary language, they target to explain how literary meaning is created in the production and reading of a literary text.

Abandoning the descriptive accountant of the language features of the text —rather mechanistic and non-evaluative— textual analysis and literary semiotics seem to head an inevitable **cognitive turn** which emphasises thinking and imagination instead of the primacy of literal meaning.

The following poem is based on the topic/theme/subject of «no exit/no escape from human condition»:

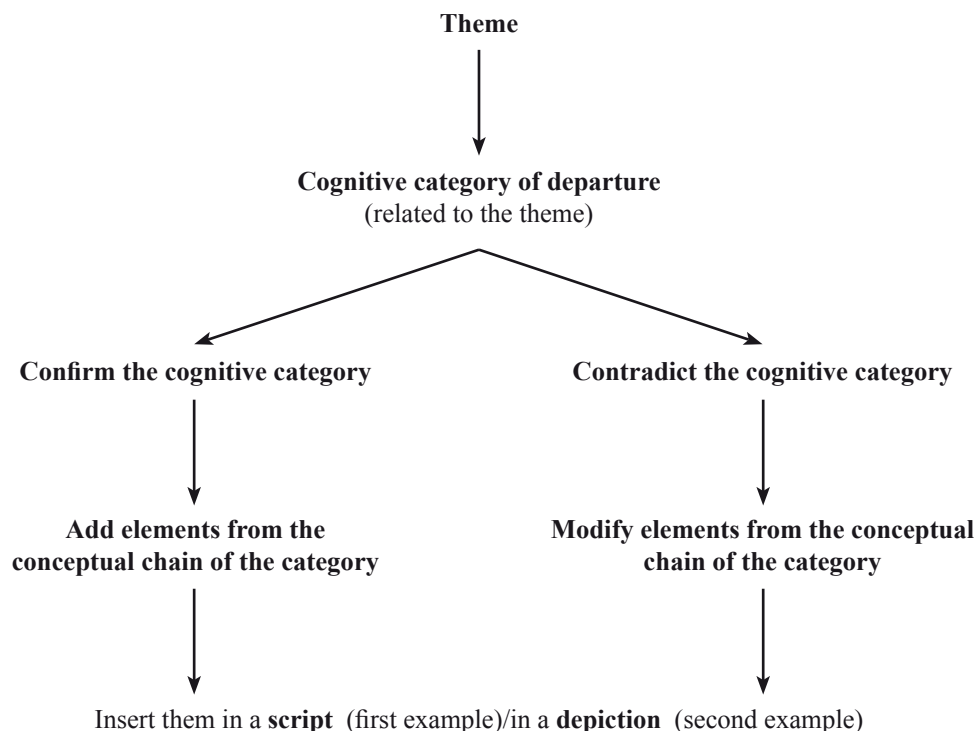
*We knock on the doors for them to open, to
let us on, but those on the other side don't hear us and
they too knock on the doors for us to open and let them out
and when they open it's ourselves we bump into
but we don't pay attention to ourselves and we say we want out and they say
[we want in, don't take the door away with you,]
we wouldn't have anything to open on the way out,
there would remain a blank spot in the wall, we won't find any way to get out.*
(Ioan Es. Pop)

Once a writer decides to write a poem on this idea he has to package it into words, to give it a lexical form and simultaneously he has to relate it with something that is intrinsically connected at the conceptual level with his idea. So he will choose among categories related somehow at conceptual level. He has to write with categories like *to get out/to get into, inside/outside, lock/unlock, door, house, etc.* and cannot use just any lexical repertoire with no conceptual link with his idea. A poem about **exit** cannot rely on categories concerning food, plants, clothes, etc. Even if the poet decides to develop the idea metaphorically he has to start from the above mentioned categories as a basis for his poetic metaphors. The next step is to decide if he describes and develops the idea verbally or with nominals. If he decides to render it verbally he has to prepare a motion picture sequence, whereas if he will do it with nominals he will sketch a still photograph. In the first case he has to prepare a **script/scenario**, in the second case a description. In both cases he has to choose a **cognitive point of departure** or a **cognitive reference point** which will trigger the content schemata of the literary text. In this poem the cognitive reference point is **DOOR** which activates knowledge structures people have from common routines or events involving the category (going into, getting out, knocking, ringing a bell, etc.). From this cognitive reference point the author starts to generate the poem and the reader to interpret it. They do not start from a sort of dictionary — type semantic description of **door** like /object/, /physical/, /non-living/, /artifact/, /furniture/, /used for closing an entrance/, etc. which gives a description of the referent but from essential knowledge concerning **doors** in accordance to their experiences: doors close, separate, delimitate spaces, etc.

The first line of a postmodern poem activates a schema which is either confirmed or disconfirmed by what follows by means of elements from the conceptual chain of the cognitive point of departure/category. The cognitive category of departure have a solid reference in our experience, it is a **basic level category** in terms of prototypes theory. In most cases these are words we learn directly from experience not through descriptions. From the beginning reader is anchored in a vocabulary that is rapidly and accurately accessed. In most cases the first line is itself a linguistic structure we might use in any other context of everyday life. It assumes that the referents are accessible to the reader.

Both writer and reader rely more on non-linguistic language than on the linguistic features of sentences, and writing /reading process does not activate lexemes like dictionary entries or inventory. Non-linguistic knowledge about the world does perform an important role in generating and understanding the lines. In postmodern poetry the denotation of a lexeme is no longer important more important it is now the role or function of the objects, properties, activities, processes and events in the life and culture of the society using the language.

The writer does not operate any selection of lexemes according to their syntactic and semantic specification he operates at another level he writes intentionally to convey a category by means of a conceptual chain. Once he chooses to write about a certain theme/topic/subject he has to choose a conceptual category which will help him to write either directly or indirectly about a topic, it depends on the way in which he will convey the topic: consciously or unconsciously (as in surrealistic texts). For instance, in our poem the topic is triggered by the particular category DOOR. A topic is triggered first by means of a particular category and not necessarily by the entire sentence in which the category occurs which is in fact built around it. A postmodern poem can be schematized as follows:



There is always a conceptual dependency at the level of a poem first because this dependency is intrinsic to any natural language and secondly because a poem is an intentional construct which in most of the cases 'illustrates' a theme that is likely to function as a category itself since it has meaning maximizing potential (Willie van Peer, 2002).

The second example is a poem on the idea 'self exposed to others':

*In front of the window
 a shirt
 like a tongue
 pulled
 at the passers by
 hangs
 and dries
 on the wire
 how stupid
 it is
 and what an insult
 it is wet
 what a shame
 for
 the master
 what a shame it is
 all soaking wet
 and it hangs
 stretched
 like a drunk
 woman
 better
 put it on
 wet like this
 master
 it's better
 because
 you don't stain
 in any way
 your dignity
 while this way
 what a disgrace
 a wet
 shirt
 on the wire
 what a human
 decadence
 it hangs and
 dries
 how degrading
 (Dumitru Crudu, *in front of the window*)*

Despite the apparently free association of lexemes there is a conceptual coherence in both poems. We can approach the first lines in terms of syntax by providing a thematic role grid in order to describe the interface between its semantic and syntax or at the level of cognition trying to describe the processes involved in understanding and interpreting these literary structures. The former way of approaching the poems will offer an action-chain pattern which seems not to take account of writer or reader's cognitive processes in reading/writing the poems.

Mutatis mutandis the above mentioned schematized way of writing poems has been described in M. Riffaterre's book *Semiotics of poetry* (1978). We can profit from re-reading this study in the light of cognitive results. His **semiotics of poetry** (1978) is conceived as an account of the way readers process or make sense of a text. To Riffaterre the poem results from the transformation of a **matrix** —that may be epitomized in one word— into a longer, complex and nonliteral periphrasis. A poet creates a poem by taking a word and expanding it into a text by using a series of **hypograms** (clishés, quotation, colloquial phrases, etc.). The expansion of a matrix into a text is mediated by a **descriptive system** associated with that matrix. The **matrix** may be easily replaced by a conceptual category while the **descriptive system** may be considered a conceptual chain in order to reconcile semiotics and cognition.

Another manner in which the postmodern writers develop their poems is to start from lexical expressions with the same conceptual basis as the theme they write about and extend a poem around these expressions. Poets of the **Generation 2000** use plenty of collocations, idioms, lexical expressions to generate their lines or poetic metaphors in a Lego-type-structure which uses blocks of words given by everyday language. A literal reading of this type of poetry might conduct to paradoxical meaning. However, lexical expressions are more than ready-to-use linguistic blocks they are ways of representing the world and they share underlying conceptual structures. Sources for such conceptual metaphors tend to be grounded in everyday experiences. This type of poetry is written for native speakers of Romanian. A person reading or hearing it has to be familiar with the Romanian system of expressions and Romanian semantics and have an amount of practical and social experience:

*I am so full of myself that at night at each quivering of the shins/I overflow/little
/by little /out of the margins /of this body (Komartin, 2005: 50).*

*A slump wakes up at noon kisses the icon /drinks her coffee, her vodka, hangs her earrings /in
the ears /she takes her leave and life from the beginning (Bogdan, 2007: 23).*

*During the day we were walking on roofs with red tiles, laughing/ we had the whole world at our
feet (Bogdan, 2007: 33).*

I get off here, I've decided / if it's the end of the world so much the better (Bogdan, 2007: 38).

We disappear sometimes round the world corner (Bogdan, 2007: 52).

I have no gate to get out through / in order to turn my back (Cadinoiu, 2008: 44).

The literal meaning of the cited lines might be considered as a **situational script** of routine actions. We do not read these lines as objective lines resuming the enumeration of routine activities due to certain linguistic expressions like *to be full of oneself*, *to take one's leave*, *to turn one's back* that represent the access key to the meaning of the texts and to their right configuration. These expressions have been integrated in the textual structures by means of a conceptual mechanism (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, Lakoff & Turner, 1989). *We disappear sometimes round the world corner* is understood on the basis of a conceptual metaphor DEATH IS DISAPPEARING. Disappearing from one's visual field —round the corner— has been extended to physical disappearing as death. *During the day we were walking on roofs with red tiles, laughing/ we had the whole world at our feet* might be read non-metaphorically as a description of a walk on roofs however odd it might seem still it can be considered as a sort of walking. Nothing from the syntactic structure of these lines triggers a metaphoric interpretation. Reader finds the right interpretation with the help of certain lexical expressions that are in use in Romanian/ English. The feeling of happiness and joy is expressed in Romanian/English by lexical expressions as *to be in the seventh/ninth heaven/sky*, which is based on the conceptual metaphor HAPPINESS IS UP. On the same conceptual metaphor relies the expression *to have the world on one's feet*. The right interpretation of the lines results as during the day we were happy and felt like we were in heaven because we were together.

The above cited lines either open or close the poems and are conceptually linked to the themes of the poems rendered usually in the titles. The act of writing starts here from a theme too but it is followed by a process of selection of lexical expressions that rely on the conceptual category that governs the theme and not by an addition of categories belonging to a conceptual chain. A poem with the title *Anything multiplied by zero* will use lexical expressions relied even indirectly on the category of EMPTINESS/VOID such as *to turn one's back* as in: *I have no gate to get out through / in order to turn my back* (Cadinoiu, 2008: 44). *Poem for the twilight of a wedding* will use lexical expressions relied on the category of END as in *to get off at the end of the world*, and so on.

Both types of writing poetry, i.e. illustrating a theme by means of a conceptual category or by using lexical expressions relied on the dominant conceptual category of a theme, assume the selection from a pre-existing inventory of categories —limited and predictable— that explains the negative reactions of literary critique toward postmodern poetry. On the other hand, it emphasizes the awareness that literature and life are inextricably bound together and that a postmodern poem is an artifact used for sharing meanings between writers and readers by means of the dynamic process of semiosis.

Generally, semiotic literary studies have been criticized for being heterogeneous and subjective. Adding a cognitive dimension to them might appear as a vague approach since cognitive processes are not yet fully understood and cognitive studies seem rather incompatible with semiotics.

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