130

Călin Teutişan

Parabolic Narrative Mechanisms and Fictional Structures in Petru Cimpoeşu's Novels

ABSTRACT
The fictional worlds of Petru Cimpoeşu's novels evince a type of plausibility that is solely revealed in relation to themselves and to their own structural and functional laws. His narrative entities can be interpreted through the lens of comprehensive concepts such as those of *possible* worlds, *narrative domains* (Toma Pavel), or "heterotopian" zones (Brian McHale). Cimpoeşu's Roland Island and Abraxa are such "zones" in which the text simultaneously constructs and deconstructs a space of ontological strangeness. The apocalyptic parables in Cimpoeşu's prose are populated by characters who apparently guide themselves by Manichaean ethical tenet, of the melodramatic type. The strangeness of the characters and the imaginary zones that they inhabit also makes it apparent that these narratives pertain to a poetics of the posthuman.

KEYWORDS
Contemporary Romanian Literature; Petru Cimpoeşu; Fictional Worlds; Heterotopia; Posthumanism.

CĂLIN TEUTIŞAN
Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
cteutisan@yahoo.com

The vortical novel

There is little doubt that Petru Cimpoeşu's novel *Christina Domestica şi Vânătorii de suflete* (*Christina Domestica and the Soul Hunters*)[1] outlines a deceptive vortex of occurrences, in which the reader is constantly faced with the necessity to choose between two or more possible interpretations of reality. This is the case as reality *is always* or *may never be* what it seems. Here is an illustrative parable the novel dramatises: one may either spin a bucket of water so quickly around the water that the latter remains motionless and inert, or spin the water inside it so fast that it overspills, leaving a void in its midst, yet overflowing its brims. It is within such a paradox that Petru Cimpoeşu's novel – as a narrative edifice – articulates itself. Underlying this paradox is *movement*, a sort of narrative, "mechanical work," complying with, yet also defying the physical principles of thermodynamics. It is a game of combined elements (that is, the energy invested in this "mechanical work," the resulting entropy and its vectors of movement) that a fictional world emerges from. A world that is both verisimilar (realistically objective) and improbable (oneiric or surreal), plausible and fantastic at one and the same time. To exemplify, in *Povestea Marelui Brigand* (*The Story of the Great Brigand*)[2], the realistic identity of the fictional

world is constantly challenged, sometimes to the point of its dissolution, by its paralogical *otherness*. The result is a system of "compossible entities," in Lubomir Doležel's terms. In other words, these are fictional units "that can coexist in one and the same possible world,"[3] with all their contradictory and exclusive nature. Their definition is straightforward: in the novel *The Number of the Beast*, Robert Anson Heinlein calls them *fictons*: these are indivisible units of the imagination. What is really complicated, however, is their *function,* since they become part of a system that should prevent them from coexisting simultaneously.

Heinlein's static description needs complementing, I think, by a dynamic definition, one expressed in terms of *function*, whereby we could associate *fictons* with the concept of *holons*, launched by Arthur Koestler. A *holon* designates "something that is simultaneously" and *relationally* "a whole and a part."[4] Under these circumstances, what remains to be seen is where the identity of the novel itself lies, as a narrative genre and achievement.

Zones and heterotopias

The narrative structure of *Christina Domestica* is rather hazardous. The novel dramatizes a series of short episodes, which merge into several main narrative threads. These essentially amount to a sum of spectacular, "rumoured" events (which are nonetheless impossible to confirm), taking place on Roland Island in the South Pacific – a Romanian dominion, hosting a U.S. military base. Scientific experiments are carried out in great secrecy on this island. It remains unclear who could attest the nature and legitimacy of these experiments (the Romanian or the American secret services) and who is behind them. This posits Roland as a navel of the earth, the place of origin of the "Armageddon experiment" and of cloning, about to engender a new world order. After this, the novel explores the destinies of several individual characters that dwell on the island, which resembles, in urban terms, a working-class neighbourhood of the communist age.

In *The Story of the Great Brigand*, the port city of Abraxa is the capital of a province of an unspecified Empire. Here a criminal investigation of the same corpse is conducted, one lacking civil identity and which appears five times in five different places, only to then miraculously disappear shortly afterwards. The coroner, who has freshly arrived in the city, Commissioner Petrache, Registrar Luca, lawyer Caroteanu, the medical examiner Marcu, and the prosecutor duly represent the "legal apparatus" that investigates, albeit with a somewhat suspect and exasperating slowness, the Case file. The file becomes, as it were, a sort of legitimizing meta-narrative of the present, just like the Story of the Great Brigand is the legitimizing meta-narrative of the past. It is a story that no one knows any longer and that is reinvented every time someone is called to tell it. As a narrative in the making in the fictional present, as a work-in-progress, the founding myth induces the unsettling and destabilizing signs of an incongruity in the logical structure of the world. The overlap between myth (as a fiction of the eternal present) and history (a fiction of death) seriously disturbs the logical model of thinking based on dyads of mutually contradictory concepts, necessary for an intelligible structuring of the real. Eventually, the city falls prey to a civil war between three philosophical sects (the "realists," the "furious" and the "lemonards"), which futilely await and project their salvation onto the eternally postponed arrival of the troops commanded by the Great "U" – the imperial troops, in all likelihood.

But how plausible is Roland Island, whose invisibility devices ensure its rather convenient absence from the world's maps? Or Abraxa, for that matter, which is part of a fictional empire that does not fully assume its own political geography? The plausibility factor of these fictional worlds is calculated solely in relation to themselves and to their own structural and functional laws. The narrative entities that are subsumed to the more comprehensive concept of *possible* worlds are either worlds and subworlds, in Umberto Eco's view,[5] or *narrative domains,* according to Toma Pavel,[6] as they rely on the law of the excluded middle, in which a sentence can only be either true or false. On the other hand, Michel Foucault's *heterotopia*[7] or Lubomir Doležel's *heterocosm*[8] designate impossible worlds, which violate the law of the excluded middle and in which a sentence can be simultaneously true and false. For Eco, "the proper effect of such narrative constructions […] is just that of producing a sense of logical uneasiness and of narrative discomfort. So they arouse a sense of suspicion in respect to our common beliefs and affect our disposition to trust the most credited laws of the world of our encyclopedia."[9] Doležel calls them "semiotic worlds suspended between existence and nonexistence."[10] In his turn, Brian McHale[11] opts for the term of "zone" or "heterotopian zone," in which space is *deconstructed* by the text, better still constructed and deconstructed at the same time." Cimpoeşu's Roland Island and his Abraxa are such "zones."

To manifest itself as such, the heterotopian effect derives, among other things, from the arsenal of the fantastic. Mention should be made here that Cimpoeşu's novels lie at the crossroad between classical theories of the fantastic and theories that define the fantastic in postmodernity, each of these assuming their own degree of exclusiveness. The (more or less imprecise) forensic explanations regarding the appearance and disappearance of the corpse in *The Story of the Great Brigand* are narratively correlated with the mythologizing model of the descriptions of the same cadaver-character, engendered by the enchanted, alchemical thinking characteristic of a pre-rationalist imaginary. The futurist technological projections, causing the "concrete" isolation of Roland Island, encapsulate a paradoxical relationship of complementarity with mythologies of the "energetic" surreality of the world, leading to collective rituals performed in order to change the Earth's magnetic poles. It thus follows that the "epistemological uncertainty"[12] of the *characters* in Todorov's theory intersects with the epistemological uncertainty of the *reader*, as in the case of the postmodern fantastic. The latter implies the absence of awe on the part of the narrative heroes in the face of the paranormal.[13]

Petru Cimpoeşu's novels freely and comfortably inhabit this third, border territory. It is a territory, perhaps, of the *fantastic of interpretation*, if we are to take into account the concept set forth by Matei Călinescu in *Despre Ioan P. Culianu şi Mircea Eliade. Amintiri, lecturi, reflecţii*. In any case, this is a formula that goes somewhat beyond the typical postmodern assumptions of the kind.

"Reality is a conditioning effect," we are repeatedly told in *Christina Domestica.* Moreover, the narrator confesses at one point, towards the end, about experiencing the feeling that "I was surrounded, on all sides, by *unreality.*" The sum of all these would of course lead to the establishment of a proximal type of the imaginary in the novel. This is perhaps similar to that of the Blecherian *Întâmplări din irealitatea imediată* (*Adventures in Immediate Unreality)*, combined (updated) with the narrative-political schemes from conspiracy theories, as

well as with the commercial ingredients of the new "mystery stories" of the *X-Files* type. Alternatively, a closer typology could be the central-European expressionism of Bruno Schulz, with its reflex in the autochthonous creation of writers like Horia Bonciu (*Bagaj. Strania dublă existenţă a unui om în patru labe* [*Baggage. The Strange Dual Existence of a Man on All Fours*] and *Pensiunea doamnei Pipersberg* [*Mrs. Pipersberg's Boarding House*]). I do believe, however, that the "holometry" explicitly invoked in Cimpoeşu's text, sometimes through formulas like "the world as a hologram," conceals a more complicated theory of the novel. It is not only the ectoplasmic, "hologrammed" form of the world that defines it as "uncertain" and impossible to capture in fixed patterns. Beyond the actual form, the very *essence* of the world in these novels is fluctuating, its kernel of meaning perpetually changing its polarity, as if there were actually several cores of several worlds, outgrowing one from another and so on. "It is all holons unfurled/ Interweaving oblate worlds/ Made thus into balloon worlds," as Mircea Cărtărescu writes in *The Levant. Christina Domestica* and *The Story of the Great* appear to me to be "holono-metric" rather than "holometric": here Cimpoeşu approaches such a natural model and sets it into play, evincing narrative nimbleness and complexity.

Petru Cimpoeşu's intention to build a dynamic prose of vast amplitude is clear and, in fact, quite legitimate. In the short episodes, what is at stake is a fractal type of atomization. Organized in keeping with a cinematic formula of montage cuts, the narrative "cartridges" sometimes remain independent of the narrative as a whole. In *Christina Domestica*, one example might be the series of fragments from the fictional diary of Nicolae Ceauşescu, written by the patient of a psychiatric clinic (Pablo). The pages thereof do not lack an intrinsic

humour, as they contain repetitions of many speech (and thought) clichés typifying Ceauşescu's discourse, i.e. that of the historical character, as well as of numerous clichés from the official discourse of the time. At first glance, the episodes represent a narrative artifice, a sample of unquestionable narrative craftsmanship, which nonetheless amounts to a mere annex in relation to the overall novel.[14] The status of a realistic parody might be, in this case, the most appropriate label for the novel.

Other examples can also be cited (Christina's occasional philosophical-moral adages, rather implausible for the heroine's status as a mediocre "housewife" or the speculative philosophical and fabulating scientific discourses belonging to some characters like Madame Soprosina, Mr. Sarl or Agent Xava from *The Story of the Great Brigand*; Dr. Thomas, Nut and his companion in *Christina Domestica*). Such static and mannerist loops in the narrative fabric generate lengths that may seem, at first glance, less useful for the functioning of the narrative machinery. They do not provide additional information about the world described, do not change the nature or character of the protagonists, and do not alter the meaning of the events. Their explanation, their operative function resides elsewhere. These are inserts of a philosophical-moral nature or of the kind found in futurological theories, whereby the structure of the novel discursively "unravels" itself. Fictional form therefore follows and serves the structure of fiction. Incidentally, these coincidences between fictional substance and its formal representations usually signify the optimum condition for the birth of a "masterpiece," in the terms of the modernist aesthetic epistemology. At any rate, they stand in evidence of what might be termed the narrative/ discursive-narrative *otherness* of Petru Cimpoeşu's novel. In other words, they represent

the places in which the novel is not retrievable as a coherent whole, in the teleological sense. This issue has implications for the literary species, for such inserts no longer function as *parts* of a *novel*, but rather as *nodes in the fabric of fictional relationships*, as fictons of a meta-world of ideas, as *holons* of the discursive spiral that serves as a backbone (albeit a fractal one) for the textual corpus.

The melodramatic epic strand: between the apocalyptic vision and the parabolic narrative

A series of intricate narrative threads are woven in Cimpoeşu's work, laying bare all the conventions – ridiculous as they may be at times – that the world described in the novel complies with. The events unfold at dizzying speed, evincing multiple strange connections between the characters: these connections most often take on the appearance of forced coincidences. There is just one predictable thing in this multifaceted novel: the fact – clearly highlighted from the very first chapter – that however conflicting the data referring to the people who inhabit Petru Cimpoeşu's world and however great the distance between them in terms of place, time, action and character, they will become enmeshed, sooner or later, in a *relationship of dependence* on each other. Regarding the *movement* invoked above, we may infer that, in fact, the *events* are the main characters of the book, the fundamental pillars on which the narrative edifice rests. We may understand thus why many creatures in the novel are either implausible or "unfinished" as regards their narrative destiny. By contrast, , the "events" remain embedded in the memory, albeit hallucinatory and enormously dilated in number, in the greatest of details. In Cimpoeşu's

works, events are a powerful form of narrative expression, as far as the representation of *relationships* is concerned.

For the theorist Robert Heilman, what distinguishes the tragic from the melodramatic is the fact that in "the structure of melodrama, man is essentially 'whole'," which implies that there is "an absence of the basic inner conflict that, if it is present, must inevitably claim our primary attention."[15] Therefore, unlike the tragic character, the melodramatic character is undivided. In tragedy, Heilman claims, part of the conflict is to be found within the characters, whereas in melodrama "the conflict is not within them but between them and various forces outside themselves (persons, groups, events, nature."[16] We may infer from Heilman's theses – in the sense of a convention pertaining to form – that what is at stake is not the wholeness of the character seen as a narrative destiny or even as a narrative construction, but the character's wholeness as *nature*. Thus, without representing a realistic, monolithic *type,* the characters of melodrama are *consistent* with themselves and with their own humanity.

On the other hand, in *The Melodramatic Imagination,* Peter Brooks contends that the excessive and theatrical character of melodrama becomes a mode of imagining and representing, "the principal mode for uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era."[17] It should be noted that from this perspective, as well as from the vantage point of the historical assessment of its imaginative function, melodrama accedes, as the author maintains, to the theoretical status (or "state," if we may call it thus) of "an eternal type of the theatre"[18], a constant in imaginative literature. The status of a "semantic pool," I might add, as G. Durand once contended with reference to the Baroque.

So, if we consider that the *events* themselves function as characters, their

consistent wholeness occasions, at least as much as in the case of characters with a civil identity, an interrogation of the moral universe of fictional worlds, conducted from inside these worlds, as it were. In fact, one other law that is characteristic of the melodramatic is the imperative of uttering "moral judgments of the world."[19] In Petru Cimpoeşu's work, specificity derives from the fact that whether they are individual or collective, several such stories that are told actually collide, leading to the formation of ethical canvases stacked up like overlapping photographic clichés. *The Story of the Great Brigand*, which is forgotten and always told differently each and every time, *relativizes* – more than it confirms – the mythical foundation of Abraxa. The result is a certain crisis of legitimacy, transferred onto the real, which causes the thinning of the boundaries of logic and causality, rendering as plausible (of course, within a strange order) the appearances and disappearances of the infamous corpse. Allied with the ethical Manichaeism that melodrama enforces, the discursive heterotopia suddenly provides the sign under which the Abraxa "zone" should be read – a negative sign. A retrospective reading of the novel will *recognize* then the signs of "evil" in the world, which are scattered everywhere in the text but need this key to be read correctly. In *Christina Domestica*, the alleged alien invasion on Roland Island – a situation imposed from outside and perceived as "bad" – or the news about the catastrophic change of the Earth's poles, causing more than a hundred people to futilely perform the ritual of the Great Cosmic Spiral, amount to a "drama of disaster,"[20] to which many victims succumb, with the same lack of awe that I mentioned elsewhere. For the sake of a monographic demonstration, we might also invoke one other, no less famous novel written by Cimpoeşu: *Simion liftnicul*[21] (*Simion the Liftnik*). The final sequence presents the fictional testament left by Simion, the strange character, to the tenants in the building. The hero disappears almost as miraculously as the corpse in Abraxa, and the story left behind imagines the hypothetical (moral!, then merely physical) collapse of the building – yet another drama designed for moral purposes.

All these heterotopian zones in Cimpoeşu's work prove to be *bad*, like all the stories about them are parables of the fall and all these worlds collapse into apocalypse. And yet, the *state of reading* in relation to the author's fiction is somehow, paradoxically, liberated from "catastrophism." Whence may the relief from the sentiment of unbearable ontological strangeness be coming in his apocalyptic parables? The answer lies, I think, in the very melodramatic rhetoric, allied with the heterotopian function of these worlds. Images beyond images, fictional "organs" beyond fictional "organs" gather to form the stability of a fractal system, enhanced by its implacable multiplicity. The system itself represents its own transcendence. Here is a possible common identity of the multiple instances of otherness that Petru Cimpoeşu's fiction coalesces. Another resides, I think, in the fact that this narrative pertains to the epic poetics of the posthuman. While the "epistemological dominant" was characteristic of the modernist poetics and the "ontological dominant" is characteristic of the postmodern poetics,[22] the poetics of Cimpoeşu's work has a *posthuman* dominant. It is nonetheless also the case that in his fictional zones there are staged imaginary negotiations,[23] envisaged to compensate for the loss of the centrality of the human species.

Translated into English by
Carmen-Veronica Borbély

Bibliography

A. Literary texts

Cimpoeşu, Petru, *Christina Domestica şi Vânătorii de suflete,* Bucharest, Ed. Humanitas, 2006.

Cimpoeşu, Petru, *Povestea Marelui Brigand*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Dacia, 2000; second edition, Iaşi, Ed. Polirom, 2007.

Cimpoeşu, Petru, *Simion liftnicul. Roman cu îngeri şi moldoveni*, Iaşi, Ed. Polirom, 2011.

B. Critical references

Brooks, Peter, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1976.

Călinescu, Matei, *Despre Ioan P. Culianu şi Mircea Eliade. Amintiri, lecturi, reflecţii*, Iaşi, Ed. Polirom, 2001.

Doležel, Lubomir, "Truth and authenticity in narrative," *Poetics Today*, 1, 3, Spring 1980.

Doležel, Lubomir, *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Eco, Umberto, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, London, Indiana University Press, 1979.

Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* Translation of *Les Mots et les Choses.* Translated into English and published by Pantheon Books in 1970. New York, Vintage Books. A Division of Random House, Inc., 1994.

Heilman, Robert, *Tragedy and Melodrama. Versions of Experience*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1968.

Koestler, Arthur, *The Ghost in the Machine*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1967

McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist Fiction*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997.

Pavel, Toma, "Narrative Domains," *Poetics Today*, 1, 4, Summer 1980.

Pepperell, Robert, *The Posthuman Condition. Consciousness beyond the Brain*, Bristol, UK, Portland, Oregon, USA, Intellect Books, 2003.

Todorov, Tzvetan, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. from the French by Richard Howard, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975.

Notes

[1] Petru Cimpoeşu, *Christina Domestica şi Vânătorii de suflete,* Bucharest, Ed. Humanitas, 2006.

[2] Petru Cimpoeşu, *Povestea Marelui Brigand*, Cluj-Napoca, Ed. Dacia, 2000; second edition, Iaşi, Ed. Polirom, 2007.

[3] In *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, p. 277.

[4] Arthur Koestler, *The Ghost in the Machine*, London, Hutchinson & Co., 1967, p. 48.

[5] Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, London, Indiana University Press, 1979, passim.

[6] Toma Pavel, "Narrative Domains," in *Poetics Today*, 1, 4, Summer 1980, passim.

[7] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences.* Translation of *Les Mots et les Choses.* Translated into English and published by Pantheon Books in 1970. New York, Vintage Books. A Division of Random House, Inc., 1994.

[8] In "Truth and authenticity in narrative," *Poetics Today*, 1, 3, Spring 1980, p. 23.

9 Umberto Eco, "Lector in Fabula: Pragmatic strategy in a metanarrative text," in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington, London, Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 234.

10 Lubomir Doležel, *op. cit.*

11 In *Postmodernist Fiction*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997, pp. 43, 45-46.

12 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Trans. from the French by Richard Howard, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 30.

13 *Ibidem*, p. 75.

14 This convention is, in turn, overemphasized, as the dictator's speech appears to be the "emanation" of his specialized counsellors, who have either willingly or involuntarily allowed themselves to become contaminated by the well-known communist rhetoric.

15 Robert Heilman, *Tragedy and Melodrama. Versions of Experience*, Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1968, p. 79.

16 *Ibidem*, pp. 79-82.

17 Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1976, pp. 11-15.

18 *Ibidem*, p. xi.

19 *Ibidem*, p. 36.

20 Robert Heilman, *op. cit.,* pp. 32-74. The so-called "drama of disaster" pertains, according to the author, to the domain of the non-tragic and represents a form of melodrama.

21 Petru Cimpoeşu, *Simion liftnicul. Roman cu îngeri şi moldoveni*, Iaşi, Ed. Polirom, 2011.

22 See Brian McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

23 While it is not exactly synonymous with posthumanism (analysed by theorists such as Robert Pepperell, Katherine N. Hales, Donna Haraway), transhumanism – as an ideology of technology – goes beyond the boundaries of traditional Western thought (based on concepts of binary opposition), in terms of both its sources and its attributes. In Cimpoeşu's novels, there is a (paradoxical!) recourse to *transhumanism*, a destabilizing category, which would be difficult to classify as either modernist or postmodernist, a "politically" uncontrollable and an almost unqualifiable variable. In any case, Petru Cimpoeşu's fictions are and remain *aesthetically* controllable.