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Autopoiesis. Textual procedures as User Guide to reading.

Two paradigmatic cases:

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and André Breton's *Nadja*

Abstract: *The present paper deals with the binomial **to read / to imagine** and its taxonomic definitions in various aesthetic paradigms. The point of departure is the discrimination between mimetic and non-mimetic texts and the ways they are (semantically) tributary (or not) to the reference world. The focus is on the idea that the conversion of signifiers and the negotiation of meaning are guided by textual procedures. They act as operational instructions for the reader or, as I put it, **a User's Guide to reading**. The more elaborated they are, the more intense is the autotelism, the narcissistic nature of a given text. The parameters of fictionalization are discussed contrastively using two aesthetic paradigms (Realism and Surrealism) and their epitomic examples (Flaubert's **Madame Bovary** and, respectively, Breton's **Nadja**). At the superficial narrative level, these texts actualize the theme of love (licit or illicit, euphoric or deluded, real or specious etc.); in the profound semiotic layers, these two entities are self-referenced. But, if the Realist work dissimulates its specularity, the Surrealist text is ostentatiously self-reflexive; the Realist art creates **possible possible worlds**, while the Surrealist doctrine is the recipe for the **impossible possible worlds**.*

Key words: *autopoiesis ; specularity;textual procedures ; User's guide to reading; Realism; Surrealism*

My present study revolves around the binomial *to read / to imagine* and its circumstantial definitions in various cultural and aesthetic paradigms. Many theorists – logicians, linguists, semioticians - have examined the ways we read and imagine. They have taught us that reading / imagining is an inextricable process of conversion: here, *to read* means *to attach* object, beings, states of affairs to words, *to convert* the textual signifiers into mental images, *to materialize and populate* possible worlds; on the other hand, *to imagine* means *to design a state of affairs and endow individuals with attributes and propositional attitudes* (Eco 75). The world of our habitual, ordinary perceptions – what we call the *real* world or the *reference* world – is always *an interface* between the reader and the imagined world. Fiction is self-referenced, but not self-sufficient.

Very generally, literature comprises two types of texts: *mimetic* or *non-mimetic*; some texts *realize the world*, some *derealize it*. If the semantics of a possible world were mediated by the mimetic conventions, the reader's task would be simpler: the reference

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word and the fictional world would overlap and the first would infuse meaning in the “parasitic” world. Of particular concern is the way we read a non-mimetic text. How do readers react when a text refuses the constraints of verisimilitude? How do people create possible worlds when a non-mimetic text asks its readers to repudiate the actual world’s repertory of images and meanings? How do we read a text that undermines and even excludes the automatic perceptions and the ready-made ideas? Again, how far should our imagination go? Could a non-mimetic text aggregate a global meaning unless the actual world is cited and indexed?

The present paper is interested in comparing the functions of textual procedures in narratives and closely examining how they create, maintain or disrupt illusion. Using a conceptual frame derived from (post)structuralism and semiotics (Jean Ricardou, Umberto Eco, Toma Pavel, Jean Fontanille *et al.*), reception theory and text linguistics (Wolfgang Iser) and displaying excerpts from two canonical narratives (*Madame Bovary* and *Nadja*), my paper will try to gloss upon these hypothetical interrogations.

Let us say again: when imagining / reading a text, we – fictitious *designatio personae* – trigger a complex process of cultural codification and decodification. As the author operates with cultural representations tributary to the codes in use, the reader deciphers a text through his pragmasemantic encyclopædia. Fictional worlds, understood as intrinsically incomplete structures, call the Model Reader (also a textual strategy) to fill in the gaps; the reader superposes the fictional worlds on what we commonly designate as the “actual” (or “real”) world and gives a verdict: true or false. Semantic and pragmatic saturation is, after all, a matter of perspective: each text *must* be placed in the context of its cultural identity, aesthetic mentality, politics of representation, etc. Assuming the premise that a possible world is part of the conceptual system of a given person, Hintikka roughly differentiates between two models of possible worlds: the ones that confirm our propositional attitudes and the ones that frustrate them. In the same spirit, Eco discriminates between *possible possible worlds* and *impossible possible worlds*; the canonical examples for these two categories are the Realist and the Surrealist narratives.

Three subsidiary remarks are relevant:

- 1) All worlds (whether actual or possible) are reduced to conceptual schemata. Eco gives a wonderful explanation: we drink water, but when we want to define water or compare water with other chemical constituents, we reduce it to a formula.
- 2) The “truth” or the pragmasemantic consistency of a possible world has to do with the way the reader fills in gaps. Meaning is always a *decision* of meaning – in one’s terms. But how do readers cover the text’s white spaces, what is their response to indeterminacy? We could imagine a test: readers coming from different historical moments or cultural backgrounds will be asked some questions (e.g. Do witches exist?) and required to tick questions *yes /no*. If one lives in a reference world where the belief in witches is acceptable, the answer is *yes*. For the medieval reader this is a standard assumption. For the contemporary mind, the idea is exotic, if not false.
- 3) The conversion of signifiers and the negotiation of meaning are guided by textual procedures. They act as operational instructions for the reader or, as I put it, *a*

User's Guide to reading. The more elaborated they are the more intense is the autotelism, the narcissistic nature of a given text.

Following the same idea, we can think of two interpretive approaches. On one hand, we have the mediocre reader, the one who glides over text's surfaces and deals only with the denoted meaning. For him, the text is a mere sum of contents. On the other hand, we can design an emancipated reader, a (hyper)critical instance able to: 1) detect *intentio auctoris*; 2) retrace the in-built algorithm; 3) reach the most profound semiotic level, where the story of the textual becoming lies. The emancipated reader, the concrete depiction of the Model Reader, is aware of the procedures, methods and techniques that organise the contents; in other words, he is able to reveal the autopoietic nature and function of each and every text. This idea has been recently explored by many theorists. Here is the way Wolfgang Iser puts it:

Fictional language represents such an arrangement of symbols, for in Ingarden's terms it is not anchored in reality, and in Austin's terms it has no situational context. The symbols of literary language do not 'represent' any empirical reality, but they do have a representative function. As this does not relate to an existing object, what is represented must be language itself. This means that literary speech represents ordinary speech, for it uses the same symbolic mode, but as it is without any of the empirical references, it must increase the density of instructions to be imparted by the symbolic arrangement. As a representation of speech, it can only represent that which speech is or accomplishes. In simple terms, we may say that fictional language provides instructions for the building of a situation and so for the production of an imaginary object. [...] If iconic signs do denote anything at all, it is certainly not the qualities of a given object, for there is no given object except for a sign itself. What is designated is the condition of conception and perception which enable the observer to construct the object intended by the signs. (136-137)

Procedures constitute a User's Guide to reading. But it is the reader's job to find the instructional markers in the text. Procedures (whether narrative, descriptive, dialogical, or argumentative) occur in syntagmatic combinations, forming a patchwork. So, aiming to (fully) understand the text, one should discriminate the procedures and strategies and rearrange them in paradigms. This interpretative precaution is an imperative for the emancipated reader: the repertory does not exist *per se*. The procedures are the *mise en scene* of the textual contents, they set and communicate them. To what extent the textual procedures and strategies are vital can be seen when these are eliminated; for instance, when we retell a novel or paraphrase a poem we substitute the original strategies with our own formula of textual organization. The result is a denoted content with a major flaw: it is too familiar. The task of the procedures is to defamiliarize the familiar.

The parameters of fictionalization will be discussed contrastively using two aesthetic paradigms (Realism and Surrealism) and their epitomic examples (Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and, respectively, Breton's *Nadja*). At the superficial narrative level, these texts actualize the theme of love (licit or illicit, euphoric or deluded, real or specious etc.); in the profound semiotic layers, these two entities are self-referenced. But, if the Realist work dissimulates its specularity, the Surrealist text is ostentatiously self-reflexive. As we have already said, the Realist art creates *possible possible worlds*, while the Surrealist doctrine is the recipe for the *impossible possible worlds* – here, fiction is *pharmakon*, remedy or

poison, depending on the dose. We may ask whether or not the verisimilitude is used as warning and a life buoy for the reader – to save his soul from drowning in fiction.

In *Madame Bovary's* incipit, we have the classical case of embedding the heterodiegesis in a homodiegetic frame. The narrative strategy of the witness narrator is the auctorial apostille on the fictional world in order to certify its “reality”; the narrator – disguised as a college student - “drags” Charles Bovary *in medias res*.

Nous étions à l'étude, quand le Proviseur entra suivi d'un nouveau habillé en bourgeois et d'un garçon de classe qui portait un grand pupitre. Ceux qui dormaient se réveillèrent, et chacun se leva comme surpris dans son travail.

Le Proviseur nous fit signe de nous rasseoir; puis, se tournait vers le maître d'études:

Monsieur Roger, lui dit à demi-voix, voici un élève que je vous recommande, il entre en cinquième. Si son travail et sa conduite sont méritoire, il passera dans les grands, où l'appelle son âge. [...] (Flaubert 15)

“Le *nouveau*, prenant alors une résolution extrême, ouvrit une bouche démesurée et lança à pleins poumons, comme pour appeler quelqu'un, ce mot: *Charbovari*.” (Flaubert 16)

Then the narration slips into heterodiegesis as the narrator takes his omniscience seriously and supplies biographic data.

Son père, M. Charles-Denis-Bartholomé Bovary, ancien aide-chirurgien-major (...) avait alors profité de ses avantages personnels pour saisir au passage une dot de soixante mille francs, qui s'offrait en la fille d'un marchand bonnetier, devenue amoureuse de sa tournure. [...] Une fois marié, il vécut deux ou trois ans dans la fortune de sa femme, dînant bien, se levant tard, fumant dans de grandes pipes en porcelaine, ne rentrant le soir, qu'après le spectacle et fréquentant les cafés. [...] Sa femme avait été folle de lui autrefois (...). Quand elle eut un enfant, il ne fallut mettre en nourrice. [...] Sa mère le nourrissait de confitures; son père le laissait courir sans souliers (...).” (Flaubert 18)

The narrator (gradually effacing) does all the (narrative) tricks to turn his character into a husband. Charles's first marriage is a failure, but the first wife, Héloïse, providentially dies, leaving room for Emma. After their marriage, they change roles: she becomes the vector of the story and Charles is preserved as a mere justification of the title and a representative of the reality principle. The substitution of characters is an autopoietic clue: “Le lendemain, en revanche, il semblait un autre homme. C'est lui plutôt que l'on eût pris pour la vierge de la vieille, tandis que la mariée ne laissait rien découvrir où l'on pût deviner quelque chose.” (Flaubert 42)

Underneath the textual surface, the autopoietic cipher is hidden. The narrator convokes his reader in the story (*à l'étude*). *Nous (étions à l'étude)* means *I and my colleagues* form the College in Rouen, but also *I and you, my conjectural reader*. *Le Proviseur* (the narrator's delegate) introduces a new student, whose textual label (*nouveau*) is homophonous to *nous + veau*. *Veau* is the French word for *veal*, so it belongs to the same lexical field that governs the name *Bovary* (Latin: *bos, bovis*). This argument (Ricardou) shows us – *ad litteram?* – that we are all – enunciative instances, characters – in the captivity of fiction.

Emma's textual itinerary is a series of isomorphous erotic investments. The algorithm can be reduced to some actantial moves: idealistic projection/ the discursive contract / erotic compliance / exasperation / disengagement. But one does not need a man (or a woman) to experience this: the practice of fiction is a good substitute. Fiction devours Emma.

“Elle avait lu Paul et Virginie et elle avait rêvé la maisonnette de bambus, le nègre Domingo, le chien Fidèle (...).” (Flaubert 46)

“Avec Walter Scott, plus tard, elle s'éprit de chose historique, rêva bahuts, salle de gardes et ménestrels. Elle aurait voulu vivre dans quelque vieux manoir, comme de châtelaines au long corsage (...).” (Flaubert 49)

“À la classe de musique, dans le romance qu'elle chantait, il n'était question que de petits anges aux ailes d'or, de madones, de lagunes, de gondoliers, pacifiques compositions qui lui laissaient entrevoir (...) l'attrante fantasmagorie des réalités sentimentales.” (Flaubert 49)

Further on, let us examine the case of a Surrealist narrative. As to its genesis, the Surrealist narrative is based on a new communication scheme delivered by Claude Ollier, a writer and theorist of *Nouveau Roman*. Claude Ollier rewrites the famous Jakobson's equation in order to fit the new forms of literariness in the XX-th century (the envisaged cases being Surrealism and *Nouveau Roman*). For Ollier, the poetic function (central in Jakobson's theory) becomes *the fictional function*. The focus is on *the operatory function* (synonymous to conative function) and the *representative function* (the referential function with Jakobson). The label *representative function* is adequate if we consider the autopoietic quality of such texts, their opacity to the actual world and the focus on aesthetic dimension. The most substantial modification is the split of the metalinguistic function into *the metalinguistic function* and *metafictional function*, and the recombination of the two into the *interfictional function*. For Ollier (as well for Iser, Luhmann *al.*), the story is eclipsed by the textual display of rules and procedures.

A Surrealist text refuses the mimetic condition and the preeminence of the empirical world and claims to be understood as an autarchic, autonomous world. The *(im)possible world* thus created is impossible only in terms of common perception, as the Surrealists claimed that their automatic writing is contiguous to a super-nature, a superior, transcendent reality. Using this affiliation, the text radicalizes its autotelism and calls for a poetic logic.

When reading the incipit of Breton's *Nadja* for the first time, one may try to aggregate a story. But the atonality of the scenario and the recurrent events would become completely irrelevant unless they were raised to a symbolic power.

Qui suis-je ? Si par exception je m'en rapportais à un adage en effet pourquoi tout ne reviendrait-il pas à savoir qui je <<hante>> ? Je dois avouer que ce dernier mot m'égare, tendant à établir entre certains êtres et moi des rapport plus singuliers, moins évitable, plus troublants que je pensais. Il dit beaucoup plus qu'il ne veut dire, il me fait jouer de mon vivant le rôle d'un fantôme, évidemment il fait allusion à ce qu'il a fallu que je cessasse d'être, pour être *qui* je suis. Pris d'un manière à peine abusive dans cette

acceptation, il me donne à entendre que ce que je tiens pour les manifestations objectives de mon existence, manifestations plus ou moins délibérées, n'est que ce qui passe, dans les limites de cette vie, d'une activité dont le champ véritable m'est tout à fait inconnu. La représentation que j'ai du <<fantôme>> avec ce qu'il offre de conventionnel aussi bien dans son aspect que dans son aveugle soumission à certaines contingences d'heure et de lieu, vaut avant tout, pour moi, comme image finie d'un tourment qui peut être éternel. [...] L'important est que les aptitudes particulières que je me découvre lentement ici-bas ne me distraient en rien de la recherche d'une aptitude générale, qui me serait propre et ne m'est pas donnée. Par-delà toutes sortes de goûts que je me connais, d'affinités que je me sens, d'attirance que je subis, d'événements qui m'arrivent et n'arrivent qu'à moi, par-delà quantité de mouvements que je me vois faire, d'émotions que je suis seul à éprouver, je m'efforce, par rapport aux autres hommes, de savoir en quoi consiste, sinon, à quoi tient, ma différenciation. (Breton 9)

Nadja - as well as other Surrealist narratives - induces a strong sense of derealization by using poetic procedures: the composition is polygraphic, dialectic, circular, discontinuous, the spatial deixis is drawn as a vector of fiction, temporality turns into duration, the events become metaphors (in the literal sense of „carrying over”), the non-reality effect is set as the contextual norm. The ”plot” is freed by the tyranny of causality and chronology. As we have already stated, the text displays a narrative syntagmatic structure, but its global meaning is controlled by poetic mechanisms.

Qu'on n'attende pas de moi le compte global de ce qu'il m'a été donné d'éprouver dans ce domaine. Je me bornerai ici à me souvenir sans effort de ce qui, ne répondant à aucune démarche de ma part, m'est quelquefois advenu, de ce qui me donne, m'arrivant par des voies insoupçonnables, la mesure de la grâce et de la disgrâce particulières dont je suis l'objet ; j'en parlerai sans ordre préétabli, et selon le caprice de l'heure qui laisse surnager ce qui surnage. (Breton 24)

All events are epiphanies, in the complex definition coined by D. Lodge; the reputed theorist preserves the idea of revelation, but overwrites another meaning: a textual epiphany is an evidently common event that asks for a superior decoding. *Nadja* is such an epiphany, a *configural metabole* (Groupe µ 15). In the specific dynamics of the poetic narrative, the events „erase” their referential content and convert to discursive events. The narrative progression is fake, as the events mirror the same configuration of meaning.

If the catalytic “event” is “meeting *Nadja*”, the ulterior events are replicas: “leaving *Nadja*”, “seeking *Nadja*”, “finding *Nadja*”. The fortuitous, chancy encounters are a promise of miracle: “Elle me dit son nom, celui qu'elle s'est choisi : << *Nadja*, parce qu'en russe c'est le commencement du mor espérance, et parce que ce n'en est que le commencement.>>” (Breton 75)

The *myse en abyme* effect confirms the poetic logic and incites the reader to find a gnomic interpretation. In the symbolic order, *to walk when people sleep* is an occult sentence meaning *to seek the other side of things*; sleepwalking could be understood as chimerical experience of death, the awaited lift off from the profane, but also the dissipation into nothingness. The Surrealist paradigm exploited the homology dream / travel / writing. Wandering is a form of dreaming, a progressive renunciation to the reality

Autopoiesis. Textual procedures as User Guide to Reading.

principle (in French, *reueur* means *dreamer*, but also *wanderer*). Furthermore, wandering (**content form**, as Hjelmslev put it) is isomorphous to the most relevant narrative procedure (**expression form**): the free association of sequences. The mechanisms of dreaming - condensation, secondary elaboration etc. - are used as rhetorical strategies. A travel at the end of the language is the absolute dream.

Instead of conclusion

To sum up, we note that *autopoiesis* may be validated as an epistemic key-term, able to put the interpretive scenarios in a novel perspective. The intrinsic specularity of the fictional texts demands and authorizes interpretations based on the hidden cipher; this idea is undeniably true. The density of the autopoietic procedures, or the visibility of what we have called a *User's guide to reading* may be a reliable parameter of the aesthetic value.

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