
**“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
DOMAIN: PHILOLOGY**

NARRATOLOGY IN THE WORK OF D. R. POPESCU

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**CONSTANȚA
2021**

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ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESIS

NARRATOLOGY IN THE WORK OF D. R. POPESCU

KEY-WORDS: Narratology, neo-modernism, narrative discourse, myth as a literary technique, the mythical-fantastic novel, neo-modernist prose, D.R. Popescu, the myth of the journey, the historical novel, the character's anatomy, focus, temporal relationship, narrator și narratee.

This thesis focuses on the writer Dumitru Radu Popescu 's prose universe and aims at the placement and study of the prose writer from the perspective of neomodernism through his novels, which go through this process of renewal both in terms of the goal (topic), as well as the final message (transmitted and received by the reader).

The thesis starts from the assumption that neomodernist prose is enlivened by the ideal of expressive novelty, changes in vision and attitude, thus rendering freshness, vigor and depth lost by subversive literature. The narratologic theories approached will be applied to the work of a single writer, D. R. Popescu. The endurance of the books from the obsessive decade of the 1960s troubled and affected D. R. Popescu too. The fiction of the communist period, identifiable in his Romanian-written prose, can be well understood, if laid against the psycho-historical context which it pertains to. The characters of power, illustrated by executioners and victims are showcased in the novels keeping in mind the scenarios of the era which had taken on messianic utopia. To this effect, the novelist has created a multitude of narrative techniques of ambiguity, transforming them into veiled and unfathomable traps so as to avoid clarity of meaning which he feared in the not so distant past. His novels are testimonies of the violence of social, political, moral transformations, their cause and, at the same time, they constitute skillful references to the atrocities of the system. The fear that his writing could be easily seen through and the symbols decoded made the novelist identify new narrative techniques which are the very foundation for the renewal of the prose of D. R. Popescu and, implicitly, the Romanian literature. His novels demonstrate the impressive creative power in shedding light on the depth of the human universe, the singularity of the author among contemporary prose writers.

The study urges the literary world of our country to particularly praise D. R. Popescu's novels and we believe that they can satisfy the literary demands of those whose aim is to research and assess the current Romanian literature from other points of view. The importance

of this study relies on the narrative construct of the fantastic realm of the author, comparable to that of the great South American novelists. Moreover, this fantastic dimension gains parabolic or allegorical value that target distortions and bitter truths about the condition of man under communism. Endowed with a special symbolism, mystery, glamor, these parables arouse the imagination of the reader, proving its aesthetic relevance. The events are set against fabulous and implausible backgrounds, abundant in symbols and parables, with unimaginable inventiveness. The rupture from the realistic perspective is complete, the staging and conventionalization are both means and elements of atmosphere, ways of achieving the eccentric and traits of the fantastic world. The mythological tension can be seen in the novels *F* (1969), *The Two at the Gates of Tebea* (1973), *The Royal Hunt* (1973), *A Beer for My Horse* (1974), *Rains Beyond Time* (1976), *The Emperor of the Clouds* (1976), which proves that the author is an original writer, difficult to label, being also an important representative of the mythical-fantastic novel.

The choice of the corpus of texts of D. R. Popescu for my demonstration is motivated by the fact that the prose writer was perceived as an exponential figure in the effort to move away from the literature banned by politics and due to the topicality that his novels and their subject matters bring to the table.

The structure of the work contains in 5 chapters, each chapter in turn embracing several points of view, as follows.

The first chapter, *The 60s in the Romanian Literature*, aims to tackle the political and cultural climate, the realistic-socialist literature and the resurgence of the art as true adjustment and self-adjustment mechanisms ensuring literature's evolution while artistic trends enforce standards. Of course, one can also point out a general paradigmatic model and an individual one, beyond the specific coordinates of a particular artistic movement, intertwined with variable coordinates, specific to each individual author. The generation of the 60s itself showcases such examples underlying the possibility of an author challenging the preexisting and unanimously accepted paradigm in order to impose their own. Even more so, since this generation is the one bridging two great paradigms: the modernist and the postmodernist.

The second chapter, *The Architecture of a Concept – Neo-modernism*, encompassed the fundamental elements that contributed to the creation of neo-modernism as *a new cult*. In order to understand the nature of this dialectical element (for the deconstructivist criticism), we must consider the central issue, what we can call the "paradoxical paradox" of thought. Paradoxes are spans of thought, which, according to skeptics, mark the limit of what can be

thought. Moreover, skeptics believe that there is a fundamental central paradox of thought that makes thinking impossible. But while it's possible, it's actually the thought that leads us to the paradox. Therefore, the paradox at the center of thought is in itself a paradox. Thus, formalistic modernism, by opening up reasoning (iconographic meaning) outside the self (i.e. the realm of meanings), reveals the false belief in the paradox that exists only to disguise the fact that anything can exist outside of thought. This is the difference between a dream in which someone says to themselves that they "are only dreaming" even though they keep on dreaming, (neo-modernism and deconstructivism) and a situation in which someone is awakened by the intervention of someone from the real world outside the dream. The significance of neo-modernism lies in the search for the fundamental principles of formalist modernism.

Neo-modernism, as a literary movement, can be pinned down chronologically in the Romanian literature, especially in poetry, (approximately) in the 1960s-1980s. This periodization was maintained under the magnifying glass of observation, by the way the aesthetic develops, following the general traits of the literature of the time.

According to Iulian Boldea, the main features of neo modernist poetry are turning to the authentic lyrical tradition, the autonomy of aesthetics (hence the return to the poetic stance), anthropocentrism, the resurrection of emotion and expression with ethical, dogmatic implications, subject to political directives.

Nicolae Manolescu, in *Critical History*, redefines the poetry of the 60s generation picking up the term *modernist remake* from Mircea Cartarescu, using it with reference to a period of about 20 years, followed by the generation of the 80s.

The third chapter, *Elements of Narratology*, led to the conclusion that after the dark period of the proletkult, the generation of the 1960s has to fulfill a great desire: to bring aesthetics back to the center of literature. Following a parched period from a thematic perspective, neo-modernism offers a new direction in literature, by rejecting stern forms and by rendering them in a playful manner disguising the tragic beneath. Nothing harder than to live up to the expectations around this new literary movement, and D. R. Popescu becomes a main literary authority in this new post-war direction.

Due to his neo-modernist vision, D. R. Popescu, challenges the reader through a game of contrasts between dispersion and unification, between a micro and a macrocosm, also resorting to reason and intuition, to a connection between body and spirit, between the despicable and the sublime, instating the paradox as a fundamental landmark in the relationship between reality and fiction, a neo-modernist onirism.

The aim of this research was to try to understand the meanings of this neo-modernist literature not only from the perspective of a literary experiment or its aesthetic side, but from a much broader, epistemological representation, which helps us highlight the worldview of this type of literature, in relation to the new models of knowledge.

In this respect, the objectives of the research were primarily to identify the characteristics of a neo-modernist discourse, referring to two axes, namely, the present epistemological and the aesthetic ones. Another objective was to try to capitalize on the proposed theories of modernism and postmodernism in order to build a paradigmatic model of specific discourse. I have pursued the articulation of this discourse on three dimensions that will yield the structure of the peculiarity of a vision of the world, revealed by this type of discourse, namely, the paradigm of pluralism, the paradigm of relationship and the paradigm of process. Thirdly, we sought to produce an analysis of important categories of the neo-modernist narrative such as temporality and perspective, focusing their relevance to this type of worldview.

D. R. Popescu's neo-modernist prose also relies on the cooperation between author and reader, which is why we can bring up the defined narratee. And this function of the narratee is given by the authority of the author which depends to a large extent on the reader's involvement as an accomplice in the shared process of building the fictional space and the narrative universe.

In the fourth chapter, entitled *The Mythical-Fantastic and Allegorical Range in D. R. Popescu's work*, I captured the myth as a literary method and the mythical-fantastic novel. The myth, created by ancient folk cultures, can be considered an organizing agent, able to give meaning to the relationship between man and the world. In the research of the myth we followed two different but complementary paths: one of them aims to refer to the documents kept in the archives, in order to bring out facts and events that marked its destiny whereas the other involves direct observation of the realities of a traditional, ethnographic culture, aimed at establishing the place of the myth in relation to other cultural forms.

The characters contained in myths are not human unholy beings, limited in time and space, but gods, heroes who, by their sacredness overshadow man and belong to a higher sacred realm. A mystery is revealed through the myth because the characters are gods and their gestures are like sacraments which man would not have known if they had not been revealed to him. The myth tells the story of what the gods or divine beings did at the beginning of Time. It is deemed the account of a creation because it illustrates the appearance of a new cosmic situation or a primordial event.

The aspects referred to by the myth are sacred. The profane is not a part of the Creation because the profane was not ontologically instituted by the myth. Everything that the myths say about the creation of the gods pertains to the sacred. Instead, what people do on their own initiative, without complying with the mythical pattern, belongs to the profane. Eliade wrote that the myth becomes the prototype of all human activities (...). The most important function of the myth is therefore to "pin" the prototypes of all rites and all significant human activities.

The myth, as a literary method, puts forward a different kind of reality, one which is denied by the proletarian writing and now recovered by the redeeming force of literature, which, through camouflaged images, regenerates a time of suffering (censorship). At the same time, it is the creator of a counter-speech about the world it illustrates through art. In this context, the experiences projected by the myths of D. R. Popescu's novels proclaimed that history had died. Myth revokes history, rejects history and regenerates time. And literature, as a mythical story, has the role of reinventing faith in a world that, although unreal, was possible and acts as the redeemer in a fictional realm. The novel that used myth as a literary method functioned as a ritual which made up for the greatest deprivation of all, that of freedom of speech, which the hero of history rebalances in his journey of initiation, and now is the time when the word finally heals of confinement through the myth technique. Thus myths oppose the desolation that had subdued people. The rupture from the realistic perspective is complete, the staging and conventionalization are both means and elements of atmosphere, ways of achieving the eccentric and traits of the fantastic world.

The myth, as a literary method, is therefore a constant operator in D. R. Popescu's novels, establishing the realistic symbolic novel which is willfully indecipherable. The narrative is filled with symbolic signs, myths, forcing the text to undergo a process of symbolization, whereby a signified uses its signifier to refer to another signified belonging to a level that transcends immediate reality downplaying signification by which a signifier relates to a signified. The artistically represented world was under scrutiny in the novel, which adopts the mythical method via symbols. They refer to another metaphysical reality, the denotation of which must be surreal, the world which is the one actually targeted by the parable novel. Symbols are complex but concealed through clumping, and the reality hinted at is hard to define. Symbols act as signs referring to a secondary signified: history as farce, a repository affected by sham, which the myth exposes. The mechanism of conversion into the fantastic, the mythical in the novels of D. R. Popescu: *F* and *The Royal Hunt* is noticeable in the composition through the disrupted narrative divided into several stories. At the same time,

the investigation formula, induced retrospectively, complicates the text, because the variety of perspectives on the same event turns into excess; the fragmentariness of the narrative reflects the ontological dissolution of the individual held captive in a world that is unrecognizable to him.

The fifth chapter, *D. R. Popescu's Neo-modernist Prose*, is the case study which tackled the following novels: *F* (1969), *The Two at the Gates of Tebea* (1973), *The Royal Hunt* (1973), *A Beer for My Horse* (1974), *Rains Beyond Time* (1976), *The Emperor of the Clouds* (1976).

Modern fantastic literature takes its inspiration from ordinary life, bypassing the miraculous, the enchanting or the supernatural, and D. R. Popescu thus applies a long-established technique and gives the three "short stories" of the novel *F* a normal frame of life. A chain of ordinary events makes it possible (and realistic) to insert the fantastic element into the narrative. In *Snowing in Jerusalem*, other features come into play to enhance the narrative's ambiguity: a doctor, a friend of the coach, had gone through a similar incident except that the old lady had not disappeared, but had been buried by the doctor in the garden of the house, to be discovered by the police; similarly, the old lady in question was a notorious transvestite assassin. The night, the bad weather, the dream (nightmare), the diabolical cat, the old woman (hag) (the devil's transformation in all folk literature and symbol of the evil witch) are the instruments of fantastic aggression, "against the symmetry of reality" in D. R. Popescu's prose. The story has no ending, nor can it have one, because any extra precision would destroy the sense of uncertainty feeding the fantastic. In *The Ox and the Cow*, the story begins with the account of an agony and ends with the suggestion of the flood. The space between the two is filled with a long chain of murders, investigations, true and false confessions, denunciations that go on and are clarified, in part, in the next story, *The Seven Windows of the Maze*, which also ends with a murder. This time, the prosecutor is killed, the one who wanted to get to the bottom of a complicated case and had saved an innocent who had confessed to a murder. The innocent kills his savior, thus committing a symbolic act: the prosecutor had become guilty of trying to unveil the mystery that rules over a world full of irretrievable tragedies. Yet this can be a fanciful justification. That which gives this narrative charm is, apart from the writer's creative power, the skill to create an atmosphere where the tragic and the grotesque, the murder and the holiness coexist.

The novel *The Two at the Gates of Tebea* or *Face to the Forest* (1973) are particularly shocking due to the funeral opening, a fragment continued with a wake where discussions take place about certain events explained much later. This narrative technique ultimately

wants to provide a merger of several seemingly incomprehensible events. The motif of the ill-fated love between two young people is also reflected in this novel, emphasizing the young people's belonging to rival communities. Thus, the trivial is dominant, as in any work by D. R. Popescu, alternating with the ethereal just like cruelty and innocence, the grotesque and the tragic. The discontinuity of the style aims to provide an idea of the discontinuity of life and the rather absurd nature of situations.

The Royal Hunt (1973), regarded as a novel, is actually made up of several epic chunks, arranged in the form of a cluster. One chunk or the other could be taken out without affecting the total unity. Likewise, many of the sections of the novel can stand alone, revolving around their own axis. Therefore, the novel can be approached as a sieve of optional fragments. While very unstable in terms of time, all the stories share a propensity for a certain period. The ending is open that grants the reader a plethora of possibilities and rhetorical questions: "Gentlemen and ladies... ladies and gentlemen". This is because the defeats are both ethical and relevant in terms of social behavior, since all these stories, though plunging into fantasy and legend, take their inspiration from socially and historically determined realities. It is a peasant world of the first decade after the war, a world removed from the old routine by the action of social laws and directed towards other routes, with different norms, ideals and spirit. As a result, the time of the novel *Royal Hunt* is turbulent, dramatic, bringing about a swirl of radical changes.

The author's fantastic takes on parabolic or allegorical values that target distortions and bitter truths about the condition of man under communism. Endowed with a special symbolism, mystery, glamor, these parables arouse the imagination of the reader, proving its aesthetic relevance.

Thus, the events are set against fabulous and implausible backgrounds, abundant in symbols and parables, with unimaginable inventiveness. The rupture from the realistic perspective is complete, the staging and conventionalization are both means and elements of atmosphere, ways of achieving the eccentric and traits of the fantastic world.

Therefore, the propensity for parables produces a mythological tension both in *A Beer for My Horse* (1974) and in *The Rains Beyond Time* (1976). Due to his originality, the author cannot be easily contained by established patterns and is an important representative of the mythical-fantastic novel. In D. R. Popescu's writing the myth, as a literary method, proposes a different kind of reality, a reality denied by the proletarian writing and now recovered by the redeemable force of literature, which, through camouflaged images, regenerates a time of censorship.

Through the dominant characteristic of his prose, ambiguity, the author insures the openness of the semantic dimension of the narrative style, capitalizing on the multiple meanings of a word or a phrase or of the entire text. Ambiguity presents readers and especially literary critics with the opportunity to suggest competitive interpretations based on each issue.

Thus, we came to realize that ambiguity is a trademark of D. R. Popescu's, practiced in all the seven steps of text structuring, that of the aesthetic option of the writer, that of his artistic vision, outlining the epic fiction, the lexis, the epic syntax, the morphology and finally the style. Considering the aesthetic option ambiguity is achieved by symbolism and intertextuality. In D. R. Popescu's novels reality becomes inseparable from symbolism so that the former suffers from inconsistency due to the simultaneous use of the latter, which causes a divergent twofold decoding.

To capture the disoriented village that has lost its age-old structure, having had its old values replaced, with social and moral disorder, the author invented a form of his own renewing and combining the symbolic logic and the meticulous realistic description. Consequently, in *A Beer for My Horse* but also in *The Rains Beyond Time*, the theme of justice stands out, but justice enters a vicious circle, because unless the killer is found, the punishment cannot be enforced and moral judgment has no echo. The novelist describes the labyrinth of good intentions, justice, murder, punishment without being able to make any decisions.

Ambiguity also stems from the portrayal of the characters, of the ambiguous man. Characters travel an itinerary from one medium to another, from one confession to another. Narration is ambiguous because it builds up as a sum of contributions from narrators who also tell stories of what some characters foretell. The visions of old Sevastita in the *A Beer for My Horse* are delightfully hilarious reminding us of the epic *Tiganiada (Gipsy saga)* by I. Budai Delanu, with the author leaning towards clowning entertainment. The village of Patarlagele becomes the space of a show, with the tavern as the stage where all people drink beer all night, including the talking horse Misu whose master is none other than Moses, the evil character of all D. R. Popescu's work. The author thus introduces the motif of the world as a theatre into the rural space, just as Eminescu did in his poems.

The ambiguous man and the uncertain truth of his actions are closely related to that quality of historical time which it springs from because every era shapes its specific human type. The individual-history relationship has to do with the cause and effect and vice versa, but also with adversity. This relationship of man with time becomes apparent in various

stances such as time as the "shield" for people in *A Beer for My Horse* and time as an individual representation in *The Rains Beyond Time*.

In the novel *The Rains Beyond Time*, the action is organized in independent narratives, the topic is willfully chaotic. The author deliberately relies on variations of temporal dimensions, playing on the relativity of time. We as readers can never be sure of the timeline of events, which is why I can say that the novelist invents a way of his own of capturing the collapse, the overthrow of the old values, the social and moral disorder consistent with the advent of a brutal form of power during the communist period.

A recurrent motif is the relationship between man and dog. Although the human-dog metaphor is used obsessively especially in the novel *The Royal Hunt*, the dog is often used by the author to deliver black humor, irony and contempt, as well as to portray man's faithful friend. In the novel *The Rains Beyond Time*, Moses discusses dogs in Japan. We can even say that through their behavior and the role that the author assigns to them, dogs become moral symbols.

The ambiguity in *The Emperor of the Clouds* not only describes the events, the epic substance, but leaves an indelible mark on the text itself; and the text is ambiguous because it builds up as a cluster of contributions by narrators who tell the story of what certain characters foretell: just like the entire epic structure, the story, as the expression of the facts, is ambiguous, diffused among the other characters, challenging them, instating insecurity and inscrutable murkiness, thus shaping the maze of the world and the text as the representation of it. In *The Emperor of the Clouds*, it is not the facts that are of interest, but the opinion and "utterances" of the characters, while their traits are decidedly depicted as "negative", by the denouncer, (Logofet, Branzas), one of the many types of narrators in the novels of D. R. Popescu. The ambiguous man and the uncertain truth of his actions are connected with a certain quality of the historical time which produced them: the era shapes its human type. Don Iliuta, the "paradoxical man", is, precisely because of this, evocative of a "paradoxical time, when all values are overturned and replaced" since the ambiguous individual the creation of an equally ambiguous time and he, in his turn, crafts, a time of uncertainty: the two temporal coordinates, the external, historical, objective one and the inner, subjective one, are the parallel mirrors whose joint breeding ground gives shape to the character and lends him its trait. The individual-history relationship is more complex because it has to do with the cause and effect in a seemingly mutual genesis but also with adversity. This relationship of man with time is very volatile and takes various shapes in the work of D. R. Popescu such as time

as the duration of an obsession in *The Emperor of the Clouds*. This is a different guise of the same relationship that sets up one of the thematic axes of our contemporary prose.

We have noticed, therefore, that the writer uses literary techniques and devices specific to the dramatic genre such as transvestite, incognito, cases of mistaken identities, name change, mistaking twins, memory loss, aliasing, overthrow of the hierarchy and collapse of a false authority. We have made it clear that the author constantly uses a mechanism of contrasts in the construction of the characters who are executioners and victims at the same time, martyrs and clowns, witnesses and rumormongers, denouncers and g-getters, lunatics, buffoons and wise men, an ambiguous situation with heroes permanently dangling between tragic and comic.

D. R. Popescu is not interested in the time in which the events take place but their connection. Epic time is individual, historical or cosmic-universal. Among these temporal forms, there are interferences that lead to either discontinuity, fragmentation, or time dilation, generating ambiguity. Individual and historical time are perceived differently from one narrative unit to another as memories, interpretations of characters are added and there is no temporal order of actions, which makes the reception difficult and ambiguous. In addition, there are sequences in which present tense and past tense verbs alternate often in the same statement. Combining verb tenses suggests simultaneity of present moments and sliding into a grotesque dimension.

Regarding space, we, just like literary critics Mircea Iorgulescu, Mirela Roznoveanu, considered that the space is confusing, disrupted, impersonal, sometimes illusory, just like in Faulkner's writing to a certain extent.

We identified several epic spaces: the epic space of the narrator, of the witness, the imaginary space of the voices and a physical, geographical space. Considering how space has affected the personality of those who inhabited it, we have acknowledged a space of seclusion, solitude, atrocity; an evil space of punishment; a maze-like -itinerant space; a sacred space of initiation and a heavenly space.

Hence, temporary dimensions are confounded and overlapped and space is generally imaginary, which causes ambiguity and requires increased attention from the reader.

Interfering with the narrative devices and techniques means that the story line is repeatedly interrupted by the introduction of monologues of characters who try to explain their actions. Sometimes, through soliloquy, the characters highlight their inner drama. Dialogue is much more used than the narrating, often turning into rapid exchanges of lines in order to support opposing ideas. The dialogue is fragmented which is marked graphically by

ellipsis, quotation, question and exclamation marks which makes the character involved in the conversation barely able to perceive snippets, echoes from the speaker's lines. When the tension increases, the lines become sarcastic, labyrinthine, so that the boundary between reality and fiction fades. The description used to complete images is characterized by a rhetorical style, in hyperbolic images, with enumerations and repetitions leading to obscurity in which literary and trivial language interlaced.

Incoherence, fragmentation, elliptical statements are also produced by the use of punctuation marks such as parentheses, ellipsis, quotation, question and exclamation marks. The written word very similar to spoken language inside the parentheses often contrasts with the essayistic or philosophical lines. Trivial language, vulgar terms, the combination of regionalisms, folk words and phrases slip into derision and are meant to suggest ignorance, unrestrained violence as the manifestation of power. The mockery of language also consists in the ability to achieve lexical innovations, puns both by internal means of enriching vocabulary such as word formation, composition, but also by breaking up, spelling, repeating syllables, tripling some sounds, rhythmic words with enchanting effects.

Interference of narrative devices and techniques, of styles, lexical innovations, punctuation marks used to underscore the attitude of the speakers ranging from emphasis of a word to the expression of irony, indignation, increase ambiguity while obviously innovative. The author thus proves that emulating the forerunners is no longer acceptable since there are new devices, techniques and new resources by which prose can catch up with the other branches of art.

The essential conclusion that can be drawn about the work of D. R. Popescu is that the prose becomes, from one end to the other, one of ideas, aiming for generalization. In our opinion, the concept must also be sought behind the situations described in the novels, which at first glance could be regarded as mainstream didactic, but which, upon careful analysis, are abundant in numerous elements that break with the political-ideological guidelines of the time.

D. R. Popescu's literary recipe comprises three important ingredients, namely, the taste for mystery and spectacular, a rich plot and, at the core of the realistic feel, the poetic, manifested in the partiality to symbols. In the end, histories are just as murky and conflicting, forcing the readers to look for meaning and solution on their own, implicitly involving them in the unfolding of the plot.

All these considered, we can say that Dumitru Radu Popescu is an original writer, permanently open to novelty. In the approach to and drafting of this research and analysis, we

accessed the theory of the imaginary, a multitude of narratology and critical studies, various dictionaries, monographies and literary histories which led to the methodical demonstration throughout the five chapters of the paper that the main feature of D. R. Popescu's work , ambiguity, not only triggers competitive interpretations, but also constitutes an essential contribution to the regeneration of Romanian prose. The complexity of the writer's epic creation, lending itself to multiple interpretation accounts for the growing interest in the work of the writer. It is this which enables us to assert that Dumitru Radu Popescu is a landmark for the generation of the 60s.