

## THE POETICS OF THE SHORT STORY'S PROSE LANGUAGE

(E. A. Poe: *The Oval Portrait*)

Every endeavour which tries to elaborate a consistent poetics on the basis of a writer's critical essays and attempts to adapt it to the works of that writer or to any literary work is compelled to confront with contrary arguments. Textual philologist would ask: "upon what grounds do you read a writer's essays as theoretical and not as literary texts?", or "why do you think that a writer have to be consequent in his theorems all life long?". The specialist of literary history would say: "it's always problematic to extend a concept which is ruled by the aesthetic ideology of a special era to a non-temporal ideal dimension". And a theorist or a critic would argue like this: "poetic language has only one rule namely that it sets itself free from linguistic semantic order, and the one who tries to create poetic semantic models must be a structuralist with no historical horizons".

However, there is no interpretation without the presupposition of a principle which can be conceived as "authorial" meaning. "Authorial" poetics is a figure of reading – thus, this is an inevitable presupposition of any act of understanding. It is essential that Ricœur says: "it is impossible to cancel out this main characteristic [viz. the author] of discourse without reducing texts to natural objects, i.e., to things which are not man-made, but which, like pebbles, are found in the sand".<sup>1</sup> During reading the process of interpretation must follow – on a declared or on a hidden way – a real or a hypothetical "authorial" meaning.<sup>2</sup> The presupposition of a poetics can not be eliminated when a text is read as a literary work. Thus, it is essential for interpretation to face its own mode of reading or poetic principles – on this way explanation and understanding becomes philologically, historically and theoretically verifiable in some degree. And the most efficient way of facing our poetical preconception is to confront it with another preconception that can be conceived as "authorial" poetics. The most important advantage of the reading of a writer's critical essays is that on this way interpretation must conceive author not as a psychological fact nor as an intention, but as a meaning effect, as a result of literary devices, as a figure constituted in and by poetic discourse. May be that is the most adequate method of preventing philological, historical and theoretical misunderstandings...

The subject of E. A. Poe's short story titled *The Oval Portrait* is the birth of a work of art.<sup>3</sup> Because of the autopoietic aspect of *The Oval Portrait* interpretation must take into account that the explanation of this unique text will also produce a poetic characterization of short story as such and a brief phenomenology of art in general. Thus, although I will read *a single* short story on the basis of *only one* poetic approach – and the reconsiderations of Poe's poetics – I will keep on trying to give a general theory of short story.

Speaking about Poe's poetics a well-known essay always have to be taken into account: *The Philosophy of Composition*. The validity and the seriousness of this interpretation of the poem *Raven* has always been questioned by literary critics because there is an anecdote about a so-called confession of Poe in which he declared that *The Philosophy of Composition* is a deception and a parody of critics. However that may have been, now there is no sense in guessing whether *The Philosophy of Composition* is a considerable theoretical work or a huge trick because other famous poets and writers recognized their own literary devices in it. The poem and the essay influenced deeply the French poets of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and some famous poets of 20<sup>th</sup> century. And maybe it's not accidental that one of the greatest theorician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roman Jakobson

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<sup>1</sup> RICŒUR, Paul, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth, The Texas Christian University Press, 1976, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> HIRSCH, E. D.: «In the Defense of the Author», *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven–London, Yale University Press, 1967, p. 245–264.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted edition: *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, Vintage Books, 1975, p. 290–292.

managed to elaborate a decisive poetics of verse language and paronomasia in his well-known essay titled *Language in Operation* which actually is an interpretation of *Raven* and *The Philosophy of Composition*.<sup>4</sup> But we don't have to go that far. The coherence and the truth of *The Philosophy of Composition* – which was published in 1846 – can be verified in a new manner if we take into consideration one of the reviews written by Poe, the *Howthorne's Twice-Told Tales* which was published in 1842.<sup>5</sup> In the review Poe writes about the same poetic principles as in *The Philosophy of Composition* but applied to the devices of short story.

In Poe's poetics short stories are based upon the principle of *the unity of effect*. Just as the poem and all of its devices are extended from one basic effect and one central word (in *Raven* this word is *nevermore*), the short story and its narrative discourse is also governed by a single semantic effect which has already been preconceived:

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain **unique or single effect** to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents; he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this **preconceived effect**. If his very initial sentence tends not to the out-bringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one **pre-established design**. And by such means, with such care and skill, a picture is at length painted which leaves in the mind of him who contemplates it with a kindred art, a sense of the fullest satisfaction. The idea of the tale has been presented unblemished, because undisturbed; and this is an end unattainable by the novel. Undue brevity is just as exceptionable here as in the poem; but undue length is yet more to be avoided.

Thus, it's not the narrative act that a short story starts with. A literary work will become a whole and a genuine unity only if all of its poetic devices are extended from a certain fundamental element – in Poe's terminology it is the "effect" – which has already been found and preconceived. And there is only one heuristic element to be extended by the verbal articulation. The extension of the unifier component is achieved by the selection of matching events and words, by the combination of events into plots and words into sentences, and by the narrative configuration of plots and sentences. And there is not even a thought before the discovery and the extension of the fundamental element – the poetic wisdom (Poe says: "picture") doesn't precede the text, it is the result of the extension of the preconceived semantic effect achieved by poetic devices.

The purport of this brief summary of Poe's poetics is that there is an equivalence between the minimal fundamental element and the whole literary work. In short story all the literary devices of narrative discourse have only one aim: to work out this equivalence of the minimal component and the whole text. Discursive poetics conceives this specific correlation as the semantic equivalence of poetic word and poetic work. In this regard it's essential (again) that Ricoeur asks: "Can we treat metaphor as a *work in miniature*? [...] Can a work, say a poem, be considered as a sustained or extended metaphor?"<sup>6</sup> The twofold question contains the answer: every literary work presupposes the unbreakable unity of the creating act of a word's poetic semantics (metaphor) and the constituting act of the literary text-world.

It's not difficult to find the special "effect" which takes place in the center of *The Oval Portrait* and determines all the literary devices of narrative discourse. In the end of the text there are two sentences: "This is indeed *Life* itself!" turned suddenly to regard his beloved: – *She was dead!*". The dominant effect of the text arises from a delirious eyesight which confuses the attributes of life

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<sup>4</sup> JAKOBSON, Roman, «Language in Operation», *Language in Literature*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 50–61.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted edition: POE, E. A., *Essays and Reviews*, New York, Literary Classics of the U.S., 1984. («The Philosophy of Composition» p. 13–25.; «Howthorne's Twice-Told Tales» p. 568–588.)

<sup>6</sup> RICŒUR, Paul, «Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics», edited and translated by John B. Thompson, *Hermeneutics & the Human Sciences*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, (p. 165–181.) p. 167.

and death. The dizzy vision that abolishes the boundaries of fancy and reality is established in the initial sentence: "The chateau into which my valet had ventured to make forcible entrance, rather than permit me, in my desperately wounded condition, to pass a night in the open air, was one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur which have so long frowned among the Apennines, **not less in fact than in the fancy** of Mrs. Radcliffe". But the confusion of reality and fancy, existent and absent, life and death produces an effect that can not mediate itself. This dominant effect is only a result of the special semantic order of words; the short story as a verbal design may produce artistic effect only through the mediation of the semantics of poetic language.<sup>7</sup> The effect is a *semantic* effect in a literary work. Thus, the dominant effect of the work arises from the semantics of a special verbal expression which is becoming dominant in the order of the poetic text. And just as the dominant effect, so the literary devices of the narrative discourse can be reduced to this expression.

The special characteristic of *The Oval Portrait* is that it connects two scenes and configures two plots into one narrative. The two plots reflect each other. The personal narration of the first scene is about a man who analyzes himself in his delirium: he contemplates on how the reception of a portrait can be so strange in delirium. The second scene narrates the production of the oval portrait with the words of a book which is read by the main character of the first scene. Thus, *The Oval Portrait* is a literary work that narrates the birth and the reception of a work of art. The effect that arises from the confusion of the attributes of life and death becomes dominant in the frame of a narration that presents the production and the reception of a portrait.

*The Oval Portrait* as a twofold narrative has another specific discursive aspect. And this aspect is characterized much more by prose language rather than narrative devices. There is a twofold plot that is not only the result of narrative discourse but also of the metaphorical processes of prose language. Not only the duality of the production and the reception of the portrait becomes important. The twofold plot is placed into the frame of a spatial context which is presented by the descriptive and detailing devices of prose language. The description of the space is empowered by the metaphorical processes of prose language to create a plot. A multiplied repetition puts an emphasis on a single detail and converts it into a dominant element. Then prose language introduces the dominant detail as the main character of a special plot. The dominant detail is the *light-ray*, and the movement of light-ray results in a complex plot. The story of light-ray runs parallel with the story of painting and contemplating. Eventually the synchronization of the two plots results in a narrative parallelism that interprets the act of painting and the act of reception through the metaphor of light-ray and the narration of the movement of light-ray. Let's follow the narrative parallelism and the subsequent semantic parallelism!

The reception of the portrait has an unbreakable relation with the changes of light. In the dark chateau the objects can be seen only if the light-ray focuses on them; and this function of light-ray is introduced in the very beginning of the short story:

In these paintings, which depended from the walls not only in their main surfaces, but in very many nooks which the bizarre architecture of the chateau rendered necessary – in these paintings my incipient delirium, perhaps, had caused me to take deep interest; so that I bade Pedro to close the heavy shutters of the room – since it was already night, – **to light the tongues of a tall candelabrum which stood by the head of my bed**, and to throw open far and wide the fringed curtain of black velvet which enveloped the bed itself. I wished all this done that I might resign myself, if not to sleep, at least alternately to the contemplation of these pictures, and the perusal of a small volume which had been found upon the pillow, and which purported to criticise and describe them.

The correlation of eyesight, light and contemplation becomes so close that the movement of light-ray begins to displace sight and reception:

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<sup>7</sup> See BEARDSLEY, Monroe C., «The Literary Work», *Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1981, p. 114–164.

The position of the candelabrum displeased me, and outreaching my head with difficulty, rather than disturb my slumbering valet, I placed it so as **to throw its rays more fully upon the book**.

But the action produced an effect altogether unanticipated. **The rays of the numerous candles (for there were many) now fell within a niche of the room** which had hitherto been thrown into deep shade by one of the bedposts. **I thus saw in vivid light a picture** all unnoticed before. It was the portrait of a young girl just ripening into womanhood.

Only the rays of the candles are able to awake eyesight and make possible reading and watching. These light-rays are filled with life. The “vivid light” is one of the main expressions of the short story as the portrait is able to come alive only if there is the *vivid* (*vivere*) metaphoric attribute beside the word *light*: “My fancy, shaken from its half slumber, had mistaken the head for that of a **living person**”. Due to the metaphorical process light (not surprisingly) transforms into the symbol of life. In this text-world only those objects are able to come alive that are lightened by the rays of the candles; all the others in the shadow are dead and are waiting for awakening: “the flashing of the candles upon that canvas had seemed to dissipate the dreamy stupor which was stealing over my senses, and to startle me at once into **waking life**”. That is the reason why the reception of the portrait can not be finished until a new movement of light-ray occurs: “With deep and reverent awe I replaced the candelabrum in its former position”. The movement of light-ray indicates the beginning and the end of reception; actually it is the light that transfers the portrait into the sphere of life.

The story of the reception can be related to the story of the movement of light-ray only if the work of art is also connected to the relation of the act of painting and the movement of light. The second scene of the short story is a compact fiction which is based upon the correlation of vivid light and life. The metaphorical processes of prose language connects the movement of light-ray and the act of painting in order to realize the confusion of the attributes of life and death. In this text-world the act of painting is not just an activity that applies colors onto the canvas; it has a special correlation with the movement of light-ray. The death of the lady is related to the lack of light: she “sat meekly for many weeks in the **dark**, high turret-chamber where the light dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead”. The metaphoric devices of prose language connect the lady’s agony to the changes of light explicitly: “the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret **withered** the health and the spirits of his bride”. Finally, the text identifies life with light and the act of painting with the movement of light:

the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him. And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, **the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp**. And then the brush was given, and the tint was placed.

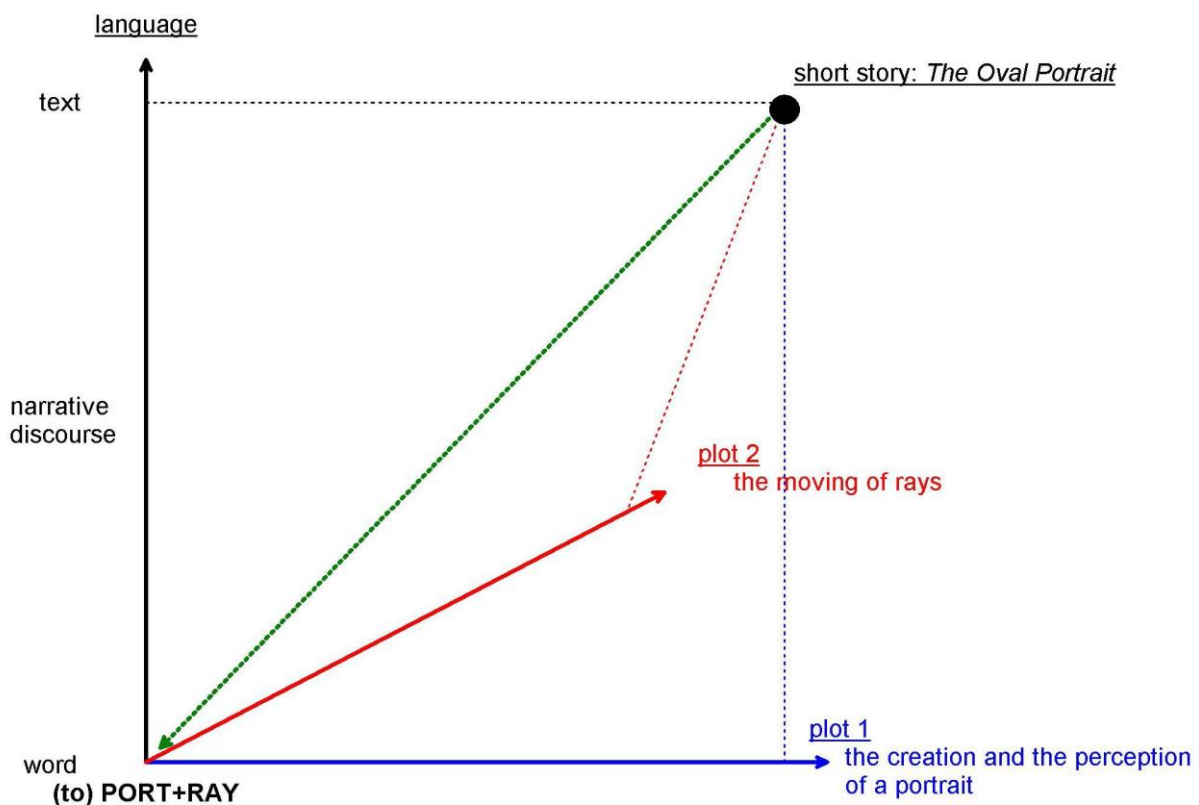
The metaphorical process of prose language introduces the act of painting as the confusion of the attributes of life and death. The act of painting applies the vivid light of the lady’s face (“she a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee; **all light** and smiles”) onto the canvas – consequently the lady dies and the portrait comes alive. In this text-world art is nothing else than the elimination of “reality” and the resurrection of the work of art in one act. Art is the ultimate way of confusing the attributes of life and death.

The light-ray has a successful carrier in the short story. First, light appears as a partial detail of the circumstances and the context of action. But the multiplied repetition introduces the rays of candles as a motif. The metaphoric devices enrich the light-motif with special semantic fields. Due to this semantic innovation light transforms into an anthropomorphic character. Then narrative discourse connects the story of light-ray to the story of painting and – by the way – creates a narrative parallelism in which the act of painting is interpreted through the metaphor of light. And finally the narrative parallelism introduces light as the symbol of art that creates a new reality and a new vision of life. That’s how works the complex semantic correlation in the poetic

discursive order of literary work. There is no dominant effect to be mediated without the various ways of semantic innovation; the existence of the effect that arises from the confusion of the attributes of life and death depends on the poetic semantic innovation.

Although we have analyzed several levels of the text so far, there is still a problem we have not solved. We couldn't have pointed out exactly the minimal fundamental element that vitalizes the fiction of the whole short story. Where does that heuristic fiction come from which offers the possibility of the narrative parallelism? There is a unique expression in the text. In English, there is a special word to name the act of painting a portrait – this verb is: *portray*. The short story invokes this word in this sentence: "It was thus a terrible thing for this lady to hear the painter speak of his desire **to portray** even his young bride". The verb *portray* is the most important word-subject of the text. The poetic etymology of the word extends into a plot. Poetic semantics divides the word into two parts: *port* + *ray*. The meaning of the word *ray* is realized in the text by the expressions "the rays of the numerous candles" and "the flame within the socket of the lamp". The word *port* invokes the Latin verb *portare* which is represented in English by the word *portable* – it means 'to bring, to make move'. Poetic etymology invents a special metaphorical semantics inside the word which is covered by its literal sense. Thus, the word *portray* means two things in this text: it means 'to paint a portrait' and 'to move light-ray'. The fiction of the short story realizes these two semantic aspects at the same time: the text introduces the act of painting as the movement of light-ray. Actually, the heuristic fiction that organizes the mechanism of the whole text is concentrated in only one word: *portray*.

On the basis of the semantic construction of *The Oval Portrait*, a three-dimensional concept of short story can be worked out:



The three-dimensional model has two longitudinal or horizontal axes and one lateral or vertical axis. The two longitudinal axes consist of the two main plots of the short story. Every short story tells two stories at least. One of them is placed in the foreground, the other is pushed into the background. The former is always about human actions. The latter creates a story about a detail,

about an object that seems to be unimportant. In the end of the short story the two discordant plots are suddenly integrated into an unity. And this unanticipated textevent rehabilitates the significance of the plot in background. That's how such a narrative parallelism is constituted in which the story of a man is metaphorically interpreted by the story of a detail. But the two plots that conclude in one in the end of the short story have already been rooted to the very same field from the beginning of the text. And this field is not a narrative but a textual and semantic one. The common root is a metaphor created by prose language: the two plots have already been connected to each other by a metaphoric expression long before the evolvement of narrative. It is the metaphor that rules poetic narrative discourse and provides the concordance of narrative parallelism; and the conclusion in the end of the story always points back to this metaphoric origin of the text. The lateral or vertical axis of the model of short story – that demonstrates the horizon of language – leads us through the metaphorical process of the text: it starts with the internal metaphor of word and leads through narrative parallelism and the special poetic narrative discourse to the whole poetic text. The text-world of short story originates and arises from the heuristic fiction of a metaphor; each and every process of narrative discourse points back to this metaphor. Actually it is the metaphorical semantic correlation of word and text that provides for the wholeness, totality, reducibility and economy of short story.