NARRATIVE, FICTIONALITY AND THE IMAGINARY

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***Abstract**: While the differentiation between factual and fictional narratives and, perhaps more interestingly, the blurred areas between them, such as autofiction, are also considered, the primary focus of this article is the conceptualization of the relation between the fictional and the imaginary. It begins by sketching Wolfgang Iser's concept of the imaginary as part of his real – fictive – imaginary triad: characterized by 'featurelessness', it requires a medium for its manifestation, which is provided by the fictive; thus it can only be apprehended in its functions and not as substance. The advantage provided by the elimination of thinking in binary terms, i.e. real – fictional (the extent of his successfulness can be debated, cf. Zipfel) makes it possible to better view both the interplay between fictive and imaginary and their interaction with the surrounding context. By applying this to narrative, the text type that also represents a mode of knowledge, it becomes possible to better grasp the degree of fictionality that, as Hayden White and Paul Ricouer suggest, constitutes a part of any story. The relation between literary narrative and the imaginary is explored by looking at two first-person narrator works linked by theme of childhood, an entirely fictional one (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) and one belonging to the memoir genre (*Amintiri din copilărie / Memories of My Boyhood*).*

***Keywords**: literary narrative, fictional narrative, imaginary (Iser).*

Introduction

The goal of this article is to draw together three different strands of human knowledge by relating Wolfgang Iser's triadic model of the real, the fictive and the imaginary to literary narrative. The focus, then, is on narratives and on acknowledging the tenuous relationship between factuality and fictionality. In doing so, it is necessary to emphasize the role of narrative as a mode of knowledge and its link to the imaginary.

Iser's triadic model

German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser, best known for his role in reader-response theory, also set out to devise a heuristics of literary anthropology. To this end, he proposes a triad, namely the real, the fictive and the imaginary, to replace the classic dichotomy of real and fictive, an opposition which he felt to be reducive and even misleading (Iser 1993: 2). "The real" stands for elements belonging to the referential reality, i.e. this is a traditional definition, while "the fictive" is seen as "an operational mode of consciousness that makes inroads into existing versions of the world" (*ibidem* xiv). In fact, Iser focuses on what he calls "fictionalizing acts", comprised of certain actions such as selection, combination and self-disclosure. The mechanism is as follows: through these actions, identifiable items from social and other extra-textual realities are imported into the text and, through this reproduction, the text is endowed with purposes, attitudes and experiences that are not part of the reality which is being reproduced. In brief, "the fictionalizing act converts the reality reproduced into a sign, simultaneously casting the imaginary as a form that allows us to conceive what it is toward which the sign points" (Iser, *op. cit.*: 2). The third and last element of the series, "the imaginary", is defined or rather aproximated as "a featureless and inactive potential" (*ibidem* xvii), having no intentionality of its own and being dependent on

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outside intervention in order to be activated, be it "by the subject (Coleridge), by consciousness (Sartre), or by the psyche or sociohistorical (Castoriadis), a list that by no means exhausts the stimulants" (*ibidem*).

The fundamental idea which underpins this view is that of interplay between real and fictive; the crossing of boundaries, which allows the imaginary to emerge. In Iser's own words,

> the act of fictionalizing is of paramount importance: it crosses the boundaries both of what it organizes (external reality) and of what it converts into a gestalt (the diffusiveness of the imagnary). It leads the real to the imaginary and the imaginary to the real, and it thus conditions the extent to which a given world is to be transcoded, a nongiven world is to be conceived, and the reshuffled worlds are to be made accesible to the reader's experience. (*ibidem* 4)

In this manner, then, the fictive represents the medium in which the imaginary manifests itself.

The model proposed by Iser, which does not enjoy extensive use, can be criticised for its vagueness and a lack of scientific precision. Franz Zipfel also objects that it is production-oriented; however, while the focus is on the interplay in the text, the interaction between real and fictive cannot, in my view, be possible without the recipient of the text. Furthermore, when considering the imaginary at the societal level, its emergence is not possible unless the individuals perform their role as recipients as well.

It has also been argued that the model does not truly succeed in eliminating the dichotomy of real – fictional, as it sets out to achieve (Zipfel 2001: 16), a piece of criticism that appears to be the best-founded one, as evidenced by the prevalence of the above-mentioned binary pair.

The problematic of fictional narrative

While narratology is defined as the study of narrative in general, the problem some two decades ago was, as Gérard Genette emphasized, that narratology, despite its broad definition, had only dealt with fictional narratives. Consequently, Genette proposed enlarging the actual area of research covered by narratology to include factual narratives such as history, biography, police reports, newspaper accounts, etc.

Nevertheless, at present the undifferentiated study of fictional and factual narratives is not an idea meeting with great support among literary narratologists (Martínez, Scheffel 2003: 221). The explanation for this state of things lies in the yet unsolved controversial question of whether fictionality possesses any traits that are not context-dependent. Traditionally, the two opposite stances belong to Käte Hamburger and John R. Searle, respectively. While Hamburger sees fictional speech as a phenomenon unique to itself, displaying traits peculiar to itself, such as free indirect discourse and anomalies in the use of deictics (e.g., "Tomorrow was Christmas"), Searle holds that "[t]here is no textual property, syntactical or semantic, that will identify a text as a work of fiction" (Searle 1975: 325).

In weighing Hamburger's and Searle's arguments, Genette considers the answer to lie somewhere in between and finds a middle ground. He considers that Hamburger is right to identify indexes of fictionality in fiction, but wrong to believe that they are obligatory and constant (Genette 1993: 83). What is more, the borderline between fiction and nonfiction is readily crossed by various narrative forms (*ibidem* 84).

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Present-day research, such as that of German narratologists Matías Martínez and Michael Scheffel, contends that "contrary to some trendy commonplaces in recent cultural criticism, the distinction remains basically valid also with regard to such borderliners" (Martínez, Scheffel, *op. cit.*: 234). They argue very determinately in favour of separate narratologies, given that, in their view, "[f]ictional narratives possess specific features which separate them from factual narratives" (*ibidem* 234) and refer to borderline cases such as literary forgeries, urban legends, borderline journalism, the borderline being in fact "a bundle of different aspects each of which can be foregrounded in a specific manner by narrative texts" (*ibidem*), related to a narrative's author/narrative, discourse, content, reference, provableness. Their main argument is Félix Martínez-Bonati's model of fiction.

While the idea of viewing the borderline as involving a plurality of features appears both functional and beneficial, to my mind the possibility of a clear deliniation remains uncertain. My arguments are as follows: the problem of factual/fictional narrative is still a current topic, suggesting that it remains yet unsolved; furthermore, given that there is a dose of factual in the fictional and a dose of fictional in the factual (for instance, counterfactual statements, hypotheses), is it truly viable to argue that the two form disting and unintersecting categories? A third argument would be genre classification – while memoirs and autobiographies are placed under the heading of factual narration (however, factual – fictional does not overlap with the literary – non-literary distinction and, as such, both memoirs and autobiography are in the realm of the elusive literariness), the more recent genre of autofiction, most famously associated with Serge Doubrovsky, is still viewed as a gray area: fictional assertions applied to an existing person (Schaeffer 2013: §24).

The deliniation between factual and fictional narrative leads back to the question of the fictional character of narrative itself. Hayden White, who coined the term "emplotment" and maintained that "all stories are fiction", emphasizing the manner in which the story is constructed. Paul Ricouer, who conducted seminal research on narrative, also shared that view to an extent, writing that "stories are told, but also lived in the imaginary mode" (Ricoeur 1991: 432); his assertion focuses on the recipient of the narrative and on the act of reading. This radical view has fallen out of favour, as a return has been made to a common sense take on the matter. To formulate this in more scientific terms, it is the pragmatic aspect which makes the difference.

To illustrate the common and divergent aspects of factual and fictional narratives in the realm of literary works, let us take the example of two pieces of writing on the topic of childhood, well-known in the Romanian cultural space. While different in terms of tone, as well as structure, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Amintiri din copilărie / Memories of My Boyhood* both make use of a marked oral style, direct manner of addressing the reader, and, as is only logical, verbs in the past tense to report already concluded happenings. Therefore, as far as form is concerned, they are very similar. However, it is unlikely to find that the former is taken an authentic account and the latter as a piece of fiction. The reason lies not least in the name on the cover – in other words, in distinguishing or equating the author with the narrator. Moreover, the reader possesses general background knowledge regarding the fictionality status of the two.

What would happen, however, if the background knowledge were not available? The aspect to be taken into consideration is the effect on the reader. First of all, without our background knowledge, the text itself offers no clues, consequently *Huckleberry Finn* may appear be just as authentic as *Memories of My Boyhood* and be

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viewed as a factual narrative; secondly and more relevantly, the phenomenon of narrative immersion comes into play. Defined as the manner in which the reader imagines the world depicted, narrative immersion can also be viewed as the activation of the imaginary (cf. Ricoeur, above). It is particulary important to note that research has shown that narrative immersion is not limited to fiction (Schaeffer, *op. cit.*: §44), meaning that the mind constructs a narrative in the same way, regardless of whether it is factual or fictional. Consequently, it could be affirmed that fictionality is not a built-in characteristic of fictional narrative, but stems from a different location of the human mind.

The question, then, is what the actual criteria are for differentiating fact and fiction. An answer to this question is provided by Jean-Marie Schaeffer, who identifies three (or four, depending on perspective) competing differences, namely semantic, syntactic, pragmatic and – as a consequence of the last – narratological (Schaeffer, *ibidem* §2).

None of them is unproblematic: the proposed criterion for the semantic definition of the factual/fictional opposition, namely referentiality to the real world, is too weak, faling to provide a deliniation from lies. The logico-linguistic syntax, in turn, is too strong and excludes texts generally accepted as fiction. The third option proves to be more useful in Schaeffer's view, as it relies on intentionality as a criterion and succeeds in showing that the question of referentiality does not apply in the case of fictional narrative (cf. *ibidem* §31, §36).

With regard to the narratological distinction (as proposed by Genette, the author and the narrator are understood as two different entities), I do not agree to Schaeffer's opinion that this is a consequence of the pragmatic aspect. While the two are closely related, the relationship may be viewed as being one of coordination.

Conclusions

Despite the reduced (but not inexistent) use made of Iser's model of the real, the fictive, and the imaginary, its underlying premise of interplay between real and fictive is well worth considering. The different approach it proposes, the eschewing of the classic dichotomy of real and fictive may be applied to the question of fictional narrative, in order to achieve a different conceptualization of it. The act of placing the problematic in a larger framework, which does not foreground the question of fictional narrative in itself, or in strict opposition with factual writing, allows it to emerge and be viewed as a part of human thinking as a whole. The fact that a narrative in itself is not inherently related to fictionality constitutes a further argument in favour of it. As such, I consider that Iser's triadic model has the major advantage of eliminating the risk of thinking in binary oppositions, such as the factual – fictional one, namely the risk of losing sight of their interplay and of their interaction the context surrounding them, a context which is represented by the imaginary.

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