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Poetic Mimesis in Kristeva

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the figure of the break in the framework of the early Kristeva's conceptualization of the mimetic faculty in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), treating it as closely related to poetic language and the dreamwork. Kristeva supplements the psychoanalytic terms *displacement* and *condensation* with a third mode of transformation in language, namely *transposition*. Transposition always operates between two levels of the semiotic process, the *genotext* and the *phenotext*. I will examine the mechanism of *the dream within a dream* in Freud and *poetic mimesis* in Kristeva. In order to subvert the contemporary logic of authenticity, they use break and doubling in a way similar to the operation of the text-within-a-text device. Poetic enjambment is seen as material discontinuity in language. The key point of this article is that one should not forget about poetry.

My starting point is a poem. I will use it as an illustration, following Aristotle's advice that all we need is a shining example because "witnesses from a distance are very trustworthy" even if it is only a single one (Aristotle 1959, 1.15.17). An example is not merely a supplementary element, but gives rise to an unpredictable principle. It establishes a new law; the exceptional example can legitimate a whole paradigm. In order to follow the logic of the example, in Giorgio Agamben's terms, it is necessary to distinguish generalization from paradigmatization – the two procedures operate on completely opposite principles. In contrast to generalization's aim of clarity, the method of the paradigm relies on the riddle. The latter contains the potential for contingency, complementarity, and singularity (Agamben 2009). As a particular case, the example can be "whatever": we know

from Agamben that "[w]hatever being has an original relation to desire."[1] In brief, the example is the object of desire.

1. The enjambment at the end of the poem

Take this kiss upon the brow!
And, in parting from you now,
Thus much let me avow —
You are not wrong, who deem
That my days have been a dream; [....]
Is all that we see or seem
But a dream within a dream?

Edgar Allan Poe,
"A Dream within a Dream"

Poe's "A Dream within a Dream" (1849) poses the ancient Platonic question: "is all that we see or seem…" The end of the line announces a break; then the next line continues: "[b]ut a dream within a dream." The enjambment splits the question into two lines and opens a rhythmic pause.[2] My purpose in this paper is to reflect on the figure of the break in the framework of the early Kristeva's conceptualization of the mimetic faculty, treating it as closely related to poetic language and the dreamwork.

If we go back and reread the whole poem by Poe, we see that the same line already appears in the poem as an affirmative sentence at the end of the first stanza: "*All* that we see or seem/Is but a dream within a dream." Thus, at the end of the poem, we have a near-repetition of the two lines, but inflected into a question. The poem's melancholy voice laments the impossibility of holding on to an object (even if the object is a grain of sand) in the ambiguous perspective between *seeing* and *seeming*. In Plato's terms, the technique of *the dream within a dream*

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[1]   Agamben 1993, 5. Agamben describes the structure of the example as neither particular nor universal, instead occupying the middle zone between the two: "These pure singularities communicate only in the empty space of example, without being tied by any common property, by any identity" (Agamben 1993, 10–11).

[2]   Agamben's definition of poetry relies on the enjambment and the discoordination of sound and meaning: "*Enjambement* reveals a mismatch, a disconnection between the metrical and syntactic elements, between sounding rhythm and meaning, such that (contrary to the received opinion that sees in poetry the locus of an accomplished and perfect fit between sound and meaning) poetry lives, instead, only in their inner disagreement" (Agamben 1995, 40).

is similar to the illusion of an illusion or the imitation of an imitation. Common to all these double structures is that they lack the prototype of distance and remove us from the truth. In accordance with Kristeva's perspective, I will defend the opposite view: the double structure of a dream within a dream reveals the truth.

I will neither analyze the mourning and melancholy in Poe's poem, unleashed by separation from the object of desire (although such an approach is certainly possible and would be fruitful), nor will I dwell on "the enigmatic realm of *affects*" and "*the psychic representation of energy displacements* caused by external or internal traumas" (Kristeva 1992, 21; emphasis in original). Rather, I will emphasize the *semiotic device (the text-within-a-text)* and the double levels developed by Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*. The shift from linguistics to psychoanalysis in her theory may prove less insurmountable if one follows Freud's investigation of the dreamwork and the philosophy of language.

2. Transposition as another term for intertextuality

Kristeva's perspective on the concept of *mimesis* amplifies its negative aspects. The novelty of her approach is that she considers the mimetic activity as similar to the dreamwork. Poetic mimesis undertakes the process of working-through (*durcharbeiten*). Just as the dream has its own logic and language, *mimesis* is an operator that does not reflect a given reality, but transforms it. It operates via three modes: displacement, condensation, and transposition.

Kristeva's point in her long discussion of different mimetic theories is a simple and brilliant one. Mimesis is neither a matter of *representation*, nor a reflection of *reality*, but a creative process of transformation. She elaborates this idea not only through a deep exegesis of Plato, but first and foremost on the basis of her profound reading of poems by prominent symbolists and surrealists, from Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé to Lautréamont, Artaud, and Bataille. Miglena Nikolchina explores the tangle of presuppositions eventuating in such a mimetic conception, and argues for the connection between Kristeva's philosophy and avant-garde poetry. The novelty in Kristeva's concept of mimesis is that it goes beyond realistic theories. Instead, it combines the fragmented logic of poetry with the mimetic faculty:

In its capacity to undermine symbolic structures, mimesis is conceived by Kristeva as complicit with poetic language. It thus partakes in the avant-garde brand of realism as she elaborates it: not a reflection or reconstruction of reality, not showing, not imitating, not envisioning reality, but a practice within, with, against, and criss-crossing it; a material process in the very texture of the social, disturbing it, eroding it, decaying it, pulverizing it, shattering it. (Nikolchina 2020, 272)

Kristeva inverts Plato's position: poetry is definitely not excluded from the state. On the contrary, by introducing poetry into her reconceptualization of mimesis it becomes evident how close the operations of mimesis are to the operations of the dream. In the light of contemporary realistic literature (*Realliteratur*) with its insistence on authenticity and rigid identities, it is important to revisit Kristeva's method, which relies more on poetic experiment and less on the logic of authenticity.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974), Kristeva approaches *poetic mimesis* either through Freud's terms of displacement (*Verschiebung*) and condensation (*Verdichtung*), or through Jakobson's metonymy and metaphor. However, Kristeva adds a third mode of mimetic transformation, a notion she borrows from Bakhtin – *transposition*, an alternative term for intertextuality, which, like the latter, operates according to the logic of heterogeneity and polysemy.

In this perspective, I will examine the mechanism of *the dream within a dream* in Freud, the *semiotic device* in Kristeva, and the place of the interruption as three different variants of the subversion of the logic of authenticity, the demand that literature be realistic, all too realistic.

3. The dream within a dream: breaking and doubling

Freud solves the riddle of the dream within a dream (*Traumes im Traume*) in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900). He compares its effect to the distraction produced in the awakened person with the statement: "After all, it's only a dream." Freud explores the language of dreams and discovers several mechanisms whereby dreams mask and distort their content. Other than representation, symbolism and

secondary revision, the most important mechanisms are *condensation* and *displacement*.[3]

Another dreamwork technique of transformation is *interruption* itself. The dream works according to a principle of discontinuity, producing a kind of montage by a series of cuts, creating an effect similar to the enjambment or break at the end of a line. The interruption of the dream culminates in awakening at the most unbearable moment in an effort to mask and avoid trauma.

Another kind of break, which also opens up a gap, comes from the *dream within a dream*. Instead of coming awake in the empirical world, the dreamer awakens to a different sublevel of the dream. It is only in retrospect (*Nachträglichkeit*), or retroactively, that the subject will have experienced the double awakening from the inner dream and the outer dream. Freud treats this structure as confirmation of the truth of the unconscious. A key passage in *The Interpretation of Dreams* binds the dream within a dream to the real:

> To include something in a "dream within a dream" is thus equivalent to wishing that the thing described as a dream had never happened. In other words, if a particular event is inserted into a dream as a dream by the dream-work itself, this implies the most decided confirmation of the reality of the event—the strongest affirmation of it. (Freud 1953, 338)

This reveals that the dream within a dream has the power to represent the truth literally beyond displacement and condensation. But it is not an immediate articulation of the truth. The dream within a dream employs transposition in Kristeva's sense of transitioning from one sign system to another, "the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one" (Kristeva 1984, 59) – passing from a dream to a fake awakening.

My hypothesis is that in this case there is a *masked transposition* unveiling the truth. The interruption marks the precise attainment of the inner point of epiphany, but also its immediate obliteration.

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3   In this perspective, Mahon suggests "a *formal* re-textualization of the unfolding semiotic of a dream must be in response to the emergence in the dream state of affect that cannot be disguised with the *usual* primary processes (condensation, displacement, symbolism) but requires a fundamental relocation of the drama to resolve or at least manage the conflict and keep the dreamer asleep" (Mahon 2002, 119).

The double negation[4] of reality in the dream within a dream is an unmistakable affirmation of its connection to the real.[5] The most mediated element is also the most literal. Despite the double distancing, it provides access to truth beyond the logic of identity.

4. Poetic Mimesis: the split between genotext and phenotext

Poetic mimesis is not governed by the logic of identification, sameness, or authenticity, but a creative heterogeneous process under the mastery of polysemy. In "Breaching the Thetic: Mimesis," a chapter of *Revolution in Poetic Language,* Kristeva defines it with profound lucidity: "Mimesis, in our view, is a transgression of the thetic when truth is no longer a reference to an object that is identifiable outside of language; it refers instead to an object that can be constructed through the semiotic network but is nevertheless posited in the symbolic" (Kristeva 1984, 58). In Kristeva's conception, truth is not object-related, but rather part of the semiotic network: it is the truth of creation, not the truth of denotation. In order to understand her concept of poetic mimesis, one should follow the dynamic synergy between the symbolic and the semiotic levels in the signifying process. "Poetic mimesis maintains and transgresses thetic unicity by making it undergo a kind of anamnesis, by introducing into the thetic position the stream of semiotic drives and making it signify" (Kristeva 1984, 60). Poetic mimesis not only constructs the symbolic order, but subverts and undermines meaning; it operates through sounds, gestures, enjambments.

In such a perspective, the axis of *metaphor* (condensation) and the axis of *metonymy* (displacement) are seen as two operators transforming and pluralizing denotation. The third operation is *transposition*. This is a passage from one system to another; it negates and deconstructs a prior scene and produces a new one. In transposition, the signified object is never identical to itself, but transforms itself:

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[4]   On the figures of negativity in Kristeva, see Tenev's paper in this volume. Negation, internally divided, is the process that undermines identity: "Negativity is without identity. The doubling of negativity implies that negativity is its own doubling (therefore being at least triple from the moment there is doubling)" (Tenev 2024, 107).

[5]   Lacan addresses it in the register of the real, or trauma: "a dream within a dream points to a closer relationship to the real" (Lacan 2006, 648).

> If one grants that every signifying practice is a field of transpositions of various signifying systems (an inter-textuality), one then understands that its "place" of enunciation and its denotes "object" are never single, complete, and identical to themselves, but always plural, shattered, capable of being tabulated (Kristeva 1984, 60).

Kristeva borrows the term *transposition* from Bakhtin's idea of different signifying materials as well as of the mediation between medieval carnival and the novel of Rabelais. In this way, Bakhtin's concept of the novelistic polyphony is charged by Kristeva with semiotic polyvalence. In her own conception, poetic mimesis is always plural and fragmented – a montage of cuts deriving from different signifying systems. It is therefore a creative process, operating in an in-between space. The nature of mimesis is heterogenous, with no relation to identity.

Kristeva's description of creative poetic mimesis is very similar to Yury Lotman's understanding of semiosis and the exchange between semiospheres. Lotman conceive the process of semiosis as always involving a transfer of information from the periphery to the core of a semiosphere, or across the boundary between different semiospheres.[6] Kristeva reconsidered her theoretical link to Lotman, between her notion of intertextuality and his idea of a secondary modeling system (Kristeva 1994).

According to both Lotman and Kristeva, the mimetic object is a product of a semiotic process – "the plural, heterogeneous, and contradictory process of signification encompassing the flow of drives, material discontinuity, political struggle, and the pulverization of language" (Kristeva 1984, 88). More importantly, it seems to me, this view emphasizes the gap's material aspect, although the gap exists outside of symbolic representation. The enjambment is material either in the intonation of the voice or in the graphic expression of the written poem.

Kristeva's own theory elaborates two types of sign systems (genotext and phenotext) and two types of processes (semiotic and symbolic).[7]

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[6] I have further developed the semiotic relation between Lotman and Kristeva in Spassova 2018.

[7] Paskaleva's paper in this collection traces the linguistic genealogy of the genotext-phenotext couple in Kristeva's theoretical framework: "The formula would thus be located on the level of the appearance of the genotext within (or even in between) the phenotext" (Paskaleva 2024, 11–25). Therefore, the genotext can be grasped as an enjambment, a syntactic disturbance in the poem. Its place is in between the words, redoubling the symbolic in a text-within-a-text structure.

The phenotext is the symbolic level of language; it includes subject-object relations and has a communicative function. On the other hand, there is a level beneath the symbolic – namely, the semiotic level, or the genotext. The latter includes the semiotic creative process, pre-Oedipal relations, creative drive energy, the underlying foundation of language, and the repetition of drive charges. "The phenotext is constantly split up and divided, and is irreducible to the semiotic process that works through the genotext" (Kristeva 1984, 87). Here, what matters for my reflection is that the genotext operates like enjambment in poems – it fragments symbolic language, charging it with polysemy. The function of material discontinuity is to fractalize language and thus prevent (ideological) totality.

The genotext is always a kind of *a text within a text*. It opens up gaps within the structure of the phenotext that reveal the semiotic device of creativity – the hidden creative process, or the underlying foundation of language. Kristeva defines the semiotic device and its poetic function as a mobile *chora*: "In any case, it can transform ideation into an 'artistic game,' corrupt the symbolic through the return of drives, and make it a semiotic device, a mobile *chora*" (Kristeva 1984: 149). So the genotext is a generator that disturbs syntax and produces cuts as well as new sequences. Kristeva is very lucid on this point: mimesis always contests denotation. The evidence she offers to support her discovery is the disturbance of sentence completion and syntactic ellipsis: "the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic disturbance visible in the *semiotic device* in the text" (Kristeva 1984, 56; emphasis in original). The genotext works with material discontinuity in the signifying process; it is a kind of semiotic device that shatters syntax. It is an interruption, a pause, a caesura.

5. The gap: zero point of representation

The topos to which the dream within a dream gravitates is the zero point of representation, or the unrepresentable. Is this not the space of the semiotic *chora* as the primary, maternal language (Nikolchina 2004) of sound, gesture and rhythm? It is not difficult to place this moment of zero-point representation alongside the gravitation of poetic mimesis around an invisible field, in which it seeks to grasp and put into language the unexemplified.

With this in mind, we should go back to the beginning and reread Poe's poem – by reading not just the words and their meanings, but also the alliterations and assonances, the repetitions and the flows of their rhythm, we will come nearer to that zero point of representation, even if we do not attain it. "Is *all* that we see or seem, but a dream within a dream?" The truth lies inside the subject, inside the text, in the space in between. Cut. Another dream sequence commences.

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