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# Factuality, Fictionality, and Self-Referentiality in the Context of Intertextual Poetics

J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* reading  
F. M. Dostoevsky's work and life

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**Abstract:** The paper approaches the aspects of factuality and fictionality first in the context of intertextuality. Intertextuality is conceived, on the one hand, as a poetic device for the accentuation and the semantic evaluation of the factual within a “fictional” world (plot) created by literary discourse engendering an entire semantic universe. On the other hand, intertextuality is regarded as a tool for the semantic transposition of referentiality in the literary text into a self-reflexive mode of discourse evolution, integrating the text's self-definition from a cultural historical point of view. In a wider sense, self-referentiality links the domains of the intratextual and the intertextual, explaining the phenomenon of historicity through poetic discourse, in a way which can be interpreted from a semiotic point of view. When in a process of semiotic reading, the literary text is conceptualised as a complex semiotic system revealing itself in its dynamic development, it is possible to differentiate various theoretical and methodological approaches to the correlation of the key concepts of factuality, fictionality, and self-referentiality ([self-]reflexivity).

**Keywords:** Coetzee, *The Master of Petersburg*, Dostoevsky, factuality–fictionality, self-reflexiveness / self-referentiality, intertextuality

## Introduction

In this paper, the problem of literary factuality, fictionality, and self-referentiality ([self-]reflexivity) is first posed in the context of intertextual poetics. The literary source text for this theoretical research will be supplied by J. M. Coetzee's novel *The Master of Petersburg*, a famous work with well-known Dostoevskian implications from the field of both the writer's biography and poetic oeuvre (for instance, *The Devils / The Possessed*). In the first part of the paper, I will examine why Coetzee's novel seems to be important to the critic in raising this complex of interlinked theoretical questions. In the second part, an attempt will be made to widen the scope of the theoretical formulations in the direction of semiotics, and link this, finally, to a very brief case study through the analysis of some semantic patterns in the novel. The interpretation of the intertextuality based on Dostoevsky's biographical and artistic texts proves methodologically functional for the whole process of arguing. The example of a concrete literary work, Coetzee's novel with

its Russian intertextual ramifications, will help to develop the theoretical issues under scrutiny towards a working methodology of text analysis which reveals the joint functionality of the poetics of factuality, fictionality, and self-reflexivity in the literary work within the framework of its intertextual practice. The final aim of this mode of posing the problem is to give a more extensive and subtle understanding of self-referentiality, taking into account its many-sided interconnectedness with the poetic interpretation of the relationship between the factual and the fictional. I propose to explain the latter concepts from the point of view of the problematics of *truth-telling*, paying attention to the various structural and semantic text-layers on which the correlation of the factual, fictional, and reflexive components with their specific referential implications appear. This enables us and leads us to think of various interpretational frameworks for referentiality, including poetics and semiotics.

## 1. Intertextuality within poetics

**1.1.** *The Master of Petersburg* in some critical essays is clearly classified as a postmodern piece of writing, however with significant qualifications (to quote one: “But Coetzee shares little of the often alleged playfulness of the deconstructive view” – SCANLAN 1997: 476). This deconstructive view may be interpreted in another way. For example, Heikki Kujansivu, the author of an important essay on the novel, aiming at differentiating the so-called weak and strong intertextual practice, interprets the Coetzee type of deconstruction in terms of “perversion”. Thus, he calls attention to “the principles of the mix, the interweaving of the multiplicity (of texts and sources), of real and fictional events in a fictional text that always *perverts*... them to a degree and that always remains *provisional*” [italics in original – K. K.] (KUJANSIVU 2004: 27). This implies that there is no fixed choice of a specific element in this mix since it might be difficult to distinguish clearly the textual sources and their role, and this might entail there being no pivotal semantic component in the whole. However, some critical interpretations putting accent on the postmodernist deconstructive mode of Coetzee’s poetics in *The Master of Petersburg* agree on finding central texts drawn into the metatextual space of re-writing (see, for example, FRANK 1995, 2010; cf. the accent put on a Turgenevian intertext based on *Fathers and Sons* in KUJANSIVU 2004). The presupposition of a special mode of postmodern deconstruction is given strong support in such valuable and convincing interpretations as, for example, Angelika Reichmann’s reading of the novel (see REICHMANN 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2016). This explanation of Coetzee’s intertextual poetics is closely linked to the problems of the relativisation of authorship and the crisis of the subject, both of the heroes and the narrator, and also the malleable textual borders which result in blurred meanings. The consequence is the questioning of the possibility of attributing ultimate truth-value to text and story variants, the intertextual “amalgam” of characters and the mixture of fictitious and historical-biographical elements. What is important for the main

theme of my presentation here is not simply the dependence of the moving frontiers of (and between) the historical-biographical facts and the purely fictitious elements on the framework of intertextuality, showing postmodernist traits. Hence also significant semantic consequences follow which can be grasped in terms of truth-value – semantically speaking, the *authenticity of meaning*. It is worth quoting Coetzee himself on the idea of the undermining of any kind of fixed final truth: “Nothing he says is true, nothing he says is false, nothing is to be trusted, nothing to be dismissed. There is nothing to hold to, nothing to do but fall” (COETZEE 2004: 235). From here, again, what is essential for the present argumentation is not a kind of relativism of truth in terms of which the problematic of factuality and fictionality is elevated into the philosophical domain. It proves much more important to state that the idea of the admitted unreliability of the ultimate truth is embedded in a more general *semantic logic*, namely, the unsuitability of thinking in dichotomic pairs (cf. REICHMANN 2014: 131). On the other hand, “truth” is supposed to reveal itself in an additive logic of variants and meanings, and also in more nuanced semantic processes that escape binaries.

**1.2.** The additive logic of approaching “truth” (in the poetic sense, additive semantisation) is linked to another peculiarity of the intertextual practice in Coetzee’s novel, namely, the emergence of conspicuous and well-defined intertextual paradigms. This refutes the postmodernist teleological maintenance of the uncertainty in “truth” identification connected to the lack of firm (inter)textual borders. Instead of the mutually excluding variants conveying the negation of a fixable factual reality (within the poetic “conditionality” of fiction), in this way, another kind of reading is offered. It consists of parallel fact and story variants formulated through a series of intertexts leading to a more complex mode of meaning creation.

Intertextual paradigms emerge in processes by which the poetic function of intertextual fragments, allusions, or larger intertextual patterns are *semantically systematised*. This kind of systematisation of elements, which at first sight seem sporadic, and also that of entire intertexts within the framework of a poetic whole, is characteristic of the intertextual poetics of nineteenth-century “classical” literature, a cultural space from which Coetzee himself takes the majority of the intertextual components of his novel. Dostoevsky in particular is a key reference. It is often stated in critical works that the bulk of nineteenth-century intertextuality in Coetzee’s work with Dostoevsky’s protagonist figure in its plot can be traced back to the Dostoevskian oeuvre (for example, Joseph Frank looks at the novel as belonging to the “genre of pastiche” – FRANK 2010: 196; cf. FRANK 1995). This is reinforced with ancient (mythical and biblical) intertextual patterns which show semantic systematicity. Otilia Veres examines, for instance, the theme of mourning and the trope of looking backwards, discovering the systemic nature of mythical intertexts “that offer versions of the father–son relationship, including references to Chronos (Saturn), Daedalus–Icarus from Greek mythology, and the dyad God and Jesus from Christian mythology; and, on the other hand, myths involving the process of mourning and attempts to retrieve the lost person: the myth of Penelope and Orpheus’s descent to the underworld” (VERES 2008: 234).

Thus, *The Master of Petersburg* may be regarded as a text which, within the plane of its (self-)reflexivity linked to its intertextual practice, projects the nineteenth-century “classical” onto the postmodern intertextual discourse and vice versa. Both are present, not only side by side but integrated in a specific mode of intertextual poetics. This kind of intertextuality may be evaluated at a metapoetic level as the artistic inquiry into the paradigm shift from the nineteenth-century classical to postmodern intertextual poetics, with a conscious reconciliation of the two modes of intertextual discursivity. Reflexivity in this direction relates to the history of literary storytelling, so the problem of factuality/reality in this dimension arises as the question of the *historical nature* (development through cultural periods) of literary discourse culture. Angelika Reichmann draws this question into the context of the history of critical discourse, saying that “Coetzee seems to deconstruct the central trope of Dostoevsky’s English modernist assessment through the author’s own novelistic technique as perceived in post-Bakhtinian critical discourse” (REICHMANN 2016: 149), and also clarifying that “what Coetzee does in *The Master of Petersburg* is restoring the multiplicity of the Dostoevskian original’s meaning and its infinite complexity” (REICHMANN 2014: 132). It indeed gives a sound insight into the interpretation of Coetzee’s intertextual practice if we discover the kind of poetic strategy which is inherent in Dostoevsky’s works themselves (this is the case, for example, when different clues are given in *The Devils* for Stavrogin’s peculiar behaviour towards Marya Lebyadkina, who regards him as a real suitor, and these clues are partly reconstructed in Coetzee’s novel – this proves to be a crucial point of analysis to which I will return later in more detail, cf. REICHMANN 2016: 148). However, if in a post-Bakhtinian critical discursive context Coetzee’s modernist–postmodernist intertextuality is traced back primarily and directly to the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony (in itself regarded as a germ and inspiration for postmodernist strategies and in its poetic manifestations considered by later critics as a real source for future postmodernist rewriting of Dostoevsky), but without any qualifications concerning the evaluation of this theory of polyphony, then some points may be missed both in our reading of Dostoevsky and also our understanding of the way Coetzee’s intertextual rewriting proceeds, in a spirit deeply rooted in the “classical” and not the (post)modernist poetics represented by Dostoevsky, or to put it more gently, the (post)modernist potentials of this poetics. The qualifications should treat an important feature of Dostoevsky’s poetics: in spite of the lack of the direct authorial voice as “final truth” expressed through the heroes’ ideas representing independent points of view (or variants of certain invariants) and entering various dialogical correlations (with the right to be voiced until the very end of the novel, in this way constituting a polyphonic composition), Dostoevsky’s works never remain unfinished or open in their poetic shape. They are completed and closed not within the framework of an ideological voice pertaining to authentic authorship but within the domain of poetics involving all the components of the novelistic universe in its entire literary textuality. This includes elements of the modelled world – fiction (plot with events and heroes) and the artistic modelling language – and the overall discourse semantics. Discourse semantics

coming from narration and all kinds of character discourse implies all the poetic components which are validated in terms of meaning constructs, semantic patterns, and fully developed paradigms evolving in complicated processes of semantic interaction (“dialogue”) between diverse elements belonging to a single or hierarchically different text-layers.

## 2. From poetics towards semiotics

**2.1.** So far, the poetic approach to intertextuality has led to the statement that its function lies in projecting, each onto the other, two kinds of intertextual poetics, establishing a kind of literary historical discourse. The contours of this discourse outline the reflexive evaluation of Coetzee’s novel by forming a close link between the classical and the postmodern periods. This way of intertextual self-definition given by the novel assigns as referent literature itself as a cultural textual continuum, i.e. accentuates cultural dynamics (period shifts) as a cultural historical process, a *historical reality* in transformation. The *intertextual (self-)reflexive* poetic mode within the framework of *fiction*, in this way, refers to a well-defined cultural *historical factuality*. To ensure this, it has to take as a minimum two cultural historical points of reference and activate them in the form of a *dialogue of two sign systems*. This harmonises well with the metatextualisation of Dostoevsky’s poetics, which, as seen above, can be related to Bakhtin’s theory of the polyphonic novel. If we take this critical inspiration stemming from interpreting Dostoevsky’s novelistic thinking not simply in terms of the dialogical poetical nature of the text but in the broader and more general sense of the *maximalisation of semantic dialogicity* as a universal principle of text-formation, we again arrive at a *semiotic* approach. With this, the interpretation of the literary work as a complex sign system may be put in focus. Dialogisation then is meant metaphorically as the poetic operation of establishing *relational semantics*, from which complex processes of meaning-generation emerge. Taking a look at the problem complex of factuality, fictionality, and (self-)reflexivity from this perspective, we arrive at other criteria for definition rather than staying within the scope of the fictional universe in terms of modelled “possible worlds” (for example, DOLEŽEL 1998).

When viewing the whole textual world as a poetic semantic universe, the question of factuality drops out in the semiotic sense. Each real dialogical component constituting correlational meaning is factually present in the text with its meaning-engendering function. The issue of factuality within this epistemological framework, consequently, transforms itself into the problem of *poetic truth* (cf. DOLEŽEL 1982: 285, with reference to M. H. Abrams, W. Kayser, and R. Ingarden). Poetic truth reveals itself through *poetic semantics*.

Examining the problem complex of ‘factuality, fictionality, and reflexivity’ in relation to literary texts, consequently, it is necessary to make a distinction between at least three interpretative frameworks.

a) One is supplied through the perspective of storytelling, having two domains of manifestation: narration and fiction. Both are linked to the constitution of the

plot, representing two aspects of the narrated story, the narrating discourse and the narrated fiction. In the first case, the relationship between factuality and fictionality is closely linked to the evaluation of the narrator's reliability (the way he states facts or gives unreliable information, i.e. supplies the reader or any character of the novelistic world with fictitious facts lacking truth-value in the plot universe). The poetic manifestation of this kind of reliability is the object of research into narratology, which in this regard may also presuppose a fictitious reality semantically describable as a "possible world", within the scope of which fixed criteria for finding the true propositions and the truth-value of the stated facts for that plot reality can be set. Factuality and fictionality within this narratological approach can be related to reflexivity in the sense of the plot universe's formation of an enclosed space for events. The truth-value of their interpretation suggested by the heroes or the narrator can be verified in relation to the event world as a whole, representing a self-contained and internally reflexive system.

b) The second interpretative framework establishing another constellation for the manifestation forms of factuality, fictionality, and reflexivity can be grasped within a broader *semantic* approach going beyond the mapping of the meanings which are furnished by the sphere of the plot as the complex universe of events, or by the narrating discourse which establishes the given plot world. This approach goes beyond the narrowest narratological field, looking for semantics in the poetics of the whole discursive system of the literary work, which can be divided into various levels according to textual stratification. In this sphere of investigation, amongst others, there is the examination of the *intertextual self-reflexive* poetic mode of a novel within the framework of *fiction*, which, as we can see above, in this way, conspicuously refers to a well-defined cultural *historical factuality*. Factuality, fictionality, and reflexivity within such an interpretative framework are conceptualised in a significantly different way than within a poetically isolationist insight into plot semantics taken with its self-contained internal reflexivity. As opposed to that, intertextual metatextuality as a well-defined semantic layer of a literary work goes beyond the plot for the characterisation of extratextual historical facts being recreated in the text through its metapoetic interpretative operations. These operations bring about cultural historical information characterising the given work in its self-reflexive discursive mode.

c) The third interpretative framework, semiotic reading, offers a new approach, converting the problem of factuality and fictionality from the question of truth-value to that of *referentiality*. The referential acts in a literary work constitute a dynamic system and it is their constant movement in correlative transformations that contributes to articulating *poetic* truth.

**2.2.** I would like to return to the second interpretative framework, leading up to semiotic reading, as it treats text as divisible into layers with their individual semantics, ultimately to be synthesised into an overall poetic meaning pertaining to the textual whole as a semiotic system. Coetzee's literary experiment in the domain of the novel's self-reflexivity is indeed inseparable from his technique of treating, in his poetics, factuality and fictionality on different but correlated text-layers,

which all have their reflexive metatexts. How does it look in the plot, ensuring one particular semiotic subsystem in the text? Dostoevsky, arriving in Petersburg to come to terms with his stepson's unexpected death (apparently, a suicide), tries to close Pavel's affairs and understand the real circumstances of his death. We are given one variant of the quest-plot, in which the protagonist is searching for some kind of epistemological knowledge of the world, to be conceived by the reader as *reality* interpretable in terms of *facts* which may be considered as *truth* in the sense of *fidelity to the fictitious reality* represented by the plot events in the novel. The constant search for truth as an invariant appears in several variants. The quest for the true story of Pavel's death, for example, offers at least three possible conclusions: he has committed suicide; the police have killed him as a radical terrorist, a member of Nechaev's circle; Nechaev himself has killed him. We will never learn what the real story of Pavel's death is. Instead, the search is interpreted in various thematic metatexts: What is death? What is the story of death? What is truth? What is reality in terms of factuality and truth? ("What shall we say of the story, a work of fiction? Is the story a private matter, would you say?" – COETZEE 2004: 39; "So many seeking justice, each with a story to tell!" – COETZEE 2004: 48; "We make up stories against ourselves. We work up our own feelings, we frighten ourselves" – COETZEE 2004: 64). These segments revealing the text's self-reflexive mode of thinking on factuality/reality/truth, on the one hand, and fictionality and the various sorts of subjective and collective imagination, etc., on the other, emerge as being linked to different situations and themes pertaining to the plot. These metatextual variants of the inquiries into the nature of the relationship between factuality and fictionality, however, all show a common feature. They serve as thematisations accentuating the problem of textuality projected onto the definition of the content of the plot. According to this, the quest plot can be interpreted only in text and story variants, in the same way as truth or falseness. What indeed evolves and is pointed to in the thematic metatextual parts is a set of various textual forms revealing themselves in a hierarchical system of modelling and modelled factual and virtual texts. The biographical story of Dostoevsky's quest for the true story of Pavel's death includes the reading of parts of the story about an escaped convict which Pavel as a writer created before his death. It has been convincingly demonstrated in critical literature (REICHMANN 2015a) that the master trope of writing and reading is intensively developed in the novel. All of the various kinds of papers and texts are, in one way or another, directly linked or associated with finding or manipulating the truth, facts, and history. Last but not least, Dostoevsky, as the protagonist, is obsessed by the problem of his ability or inability to write his next work. The semantic construction of a hierarchical system of correlations of stories and texts, written and to be written and already read and to be read in the future, provides different models for the possible interpretation of the relationship between factuality and fictionality, with the semantic ramifications of *authenticity vs. falseness*, and in a broader sense, *being vs. non-being*. These models serve as potential explanations for the difficulty in finding *the* truth amidst equivalent patterns of juxtaposing the factual and the fictional as fictionalised and

textualised in Coetzee's novel in a set of variants. The fact that the protagonist Dostoevsky is also drawn into parallelism with Dostoevsky's biographical figure emerging for the reader's memory and associative thinking from well-known biographical information based on texts lying outside Coetzee's novel may be considered as a further part of the multiplying patterns. The metaleptic play with the real and fictitious figure of Dostoevsky as showing himself within the reality of fiction created in the novel leads at the same time to the doubling of the poetic conceptualisation of self-reflexivity. If self-reflexivity from the perspective of intertextuality concerns the consciousness of the development of story-telling as a textual reality, through an implied *dynamic cultural historical context* (the paradigm shift), then the second perspective of self-reflexivity evolves in establishing multiple correlative forms of factuality and fictionality placed in the context of *textual culture which is historicised through biographical motifs* transmitted into the protagonist Dostoevsky's and the other characters' figures. Since the literary characters are emphatically linked to intertexts, among them quite a few arising from Dostoevsky's oeuvre, with characteristic features of significant episodes and scenes, the biographical connotations of Dostoevsky's heroes in Coetzee's characters are again semantically validated in terms of literary history. The idea is, consequently, reinforced that *historical reality* (also in the sense of the *biography* of real people) undoubtedly gains priority in Coetzee's fiction in terms of the *history of culture*. As we have already seen, the *factuality of cultural history* as a rich range of poetic meaning is constructed in its complexity through various semiotic subsystems within the textual whole stratified into textual layers. Plot elements and their metatexts, projecting the idea of textuality onto the possible interpretation of the fictional modelling of the world through events, play a crucial part. At the same time, textualised (metaleptic) biographical components arising from the extratextual (Dostoevsky's biography) and the intertextual (Dostoevsky's recognisable works with their heroes' lives) domains have a significant role in developing the more abstract (even implicitly metaphorised) semantic pattern of *textualised history* in the context of clearly defined aspects of *cultural historical reality*. Thirdly, the intertextual practice of the novel, as it has been elucidated from several points of view, accentuates further the factuality of cultural history within the fictitious universe. What is more, it supplies it with the mode of reflexive poetic autoidentification. In these processes where (cultural) historical factuality is linked more and more to the problem of the most diverse forms of textualisation at different compositional levels (textual layers) of Coetzee's novel (plot; semantic abstraction, i.e. metaphorisation; metatextual and intertextual levels), the whole problem complex of factuality and fictionality is ever more drawn into a self-reflexive inquiry into the nature of Coetzee's novelistic world through posing the problem of how textual forms themselves, i.e. discourse constructs, evolve in the poetic text. The problem of textualisation (including cultural historical textualisation) in Coetzee's semantic universe boils down to the problem of discourse constitution.

Characterising the narratological approach to the interpretation of factuality and fictionality through the examination of the (un)reliable narrator, we have seen



how two narratological ramifications emerge, concerning the definition of *narration* (*narrative discourse*) vs. *fiction*. Within another interpretative framework, I have aimed to reveal *discursive semantics in a wider scope*, searching not for the plot but all kinds of dynamic semantic pattern and paradigm. Now, we have to add one more aspect of the interpretation of discourse. It concerns the integration of extratextual (historical or cultural historical, among them intertextual) material with its transfiguration into intratextual factual reality given in a historical dimension. What does this historical dimension mean within the literary text? Historicity, as we have seen in regard to the paradigm shift between the modern and the post-modern, covers the poetic presentation of change, transformation, i.e. dynamic movement, which in a literary semantic universe manifests itself in terms of *semantic change*. Discourse as a process reveals itself and can receive clarification only in the explanation of its evolution and development covering the conversion of semantic patterns to new patterns in a multiple set of semantic correlations the text as a complex semiotic system ensures through its hierarchical structure. What cannot be ignored in this respect is the basic feature of all semiotic constructions as hierarchical systems, namely, that their formation and internal evolution is based on relational semantics.

### 3. Literary historical factuality from a semiotic point of view

**3.1.** The relationality of the phenomena of factuality and fictionality – as linked to textual self-reflexivity through a set of thematic metatexts on the one hand, and implied biographical and other cultural texts on the other (including extratextual historical facts such as, for example, Nechaev's path of life and his radical historical-political action known to the reader through the mediation of cultural texts) – is all the more interesting since Coetzee, as a literary critic, consciously poses the given problematic in his papers. It is worth paying special attention to his essay entitled *The Novel Today* (COETZEE 1988), where he raises, on theoretical grounds, the question of the relationship between fiction and history. The most telling explanation in this direction can be traced back to what Rachel Lawlan puts as an epigraph at the head of her famous article: "In times of intense ideological pressure... when the space in which the novel and history normally coexist like two cows on the same pasture, each minding its own business, is squeezed to almost nothing, the novel... has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry" (LAWLAN 1998: 131). Rivalry, or as Coetzee then puts it: "enmity" (COETZEE 1988: 3), assumes that "a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths" in the process may go "so far as to show up the mythic status of history – in other words, demythologize history" (COETZEE 1988: 3). In Lawlan's opinion, Coetzee applies the word "history" not as corresponding to "the usual sense accorded to it, that of lived reality and experience, of accepted facts about the date of an election, or a battle, or a strike, or the contents of a certain piece of legislation. Instead, he uses the word to refer to historical *discourse*, thus adopting the position that, even if we know history to have happened, to have been the 'Real' or lived reality, our only access to it now

is textual, via discourse, and therefore through interpretation” [italics – K. K.] (LAWLAN 1998: 132). David Attwell also calls attention to Coetzee’s emphasis on the discursiveness of history (which eliminates the idea of the lack of mediation between historical facts and their interpretation), though we must also remember Coetzee’s double definition, according to which “history is not reality; ... history is a kind of discourse, too” and “history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other” (COETZEE 1988: 4; quoted and interpreted also by ATTWELL 1990: 587). All this means that we are with the definition of history as fiction and discourse in the true sense of storytelling. Attwell draws a significant parallel between history and fiction with its narrativity, alluding to Ricœur, putting side by side the concepts of “split reference”/ “cleft” reference in fiction (“the suspension of the referential claim of ordinary language” – RICŒUR 1981: 293; quoted by ATTWELL 1990: 589) and the “indirect reference” of history (“indirect because its reference is through traces, documents and archives” – ATTWELL 1990: 591). Before coming back to the mediating nature of discourse in the poetic language of split referentiality, a semiotic phenomenon to be submitted to examination relying on the context of the whole discursive language of the literary work as a complex semiotic system, I am taking a glance anew at the question of biography.

**3.2.** Well in line with the language of metatexts projecting the idea of story / history and textuality to the plot, and as well as the richly developed equivalences strengthening discourse semantics and integrating the message coming from story and (cultural) history into an overall semantic system, in Coetzee’s novel, the link between historical events and individual history conceived as biography is very conspicuous, though it seems to be little thematised. The historical logic of the events is embedded in the Russian political (philosophical and, generally speaking, cultural historical) topic of nihilism (in its primary manifestation represented by the Nechaev affair), and this topic gains significance at the plot level, developing Pavel’s story as belonging to his biography. The motif then is transposed onto the protagonist Dostoevsky’s life-story with all the implications of biographical information about the writer known outside Coetzee’s novel, and also with the rich and nuanced metaphorisation of the topic of nihilism in the direction of the ontology of *being* vs. *non-being*, at various levels of the text construction.

The relevance of the question of (auto)biography makes it very important that Lawlan in her previously discussed interpretation of *The Master of Petersburg* (1998) links the problem of referentiality to that of self-reflexivity, reminding the reader also of Coetzee’s other critical essay, the famous piece entitled *Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky*, in which Coetzee differentiates between two diametrically opposing types of self-confession: the secular (pointing to Stavrogin’s confession before Tikhon in Dostoevsky’s *The Devils*) and the religious sacred confession through grace – both types being grounded on “the basic movement of self-reflexiveness” which is a “doubting and a questioning movement, it is in the nature of the truth that the reflecting self tells itself not to be final” (COETZEE 1985: 204). However, the first confessional mode necessarily entails self-deceit (with double and triple thoughts, when there is also a counter-

will to confess, or the desire to receive praise). It is important to recall this opposition because, as Lawlan points to this (LAWLAN 1998: 140–141), in a later interview, Coetzee himself interprets his earlier formulation as the critical metatext clarifying autobiographical writing (i.e. autobiography taken as a confession): “What was going on in the essay? In the present retrospect, I see in it a submerged dialogue between two persons. [...] The field of their debate is *truth in autobiography*” (COETZEE 1992: 392). The question raised here concerns the possibility of uttering the ultimate truth about ourselves (a metapoetic question of autobiography conceived as a literary variant of self-confession). Coetzee states: “all autobiography is storytelling, all writing is autobiography” (COETZEE 1992: 392, quoted also by LAWLAN 1998: 141). Hence Lawlan’s argument with its implicit suggestion that we should read Coetzee’s novel as fictionalised autobiography. This autobiography (the text and its author) takes a self-reflexive stance in relation to history (where history is defined in terms of factuality, “life lived out in history” and “history-as-the-Real” – the last two being David Attwell’s expressions, see also LAWLAN 1998: 134–135; cf. ATWELL 1990: 588). Here we can already witness a process, where the interpretation of the relationship between factuality and fictionality contains a wide range of metatextual utterances in the larger cultural space provided by a sequence of critical texts (by Coetzee and other scholars), which in the final phase can be integrated into the critical reading of Coetzee’s novel *The Master of Petersburg*. The overall message in these texts and metatexts speaks of self-reflexiveness essentially supplying fictional models, though all of this contains the theoretical implication that fictionality itself represents a mode of discourse, which, consequently (we can infer), must be interpreted according to a linguistic code.

#### 4. The linguistic code from a semiotic point of view

4.1. The conclusions made within the previously defined interpretative frameworks treating the concept of factuality (factual reality / truth, etc.) and fictionality in their relation to reflexivity permit us to think of the conceptualisation of *history* meaning *real life lived out/lived reality/factuality (biography and autobiography)* interpreted as storytelling seen in a double perspective, in terms of story (modelled worlds as signifieds based on fictionalising structures) and discourse (language models as signifiers). The poetic characteristics (the discursive mode, the genre, etc.) of a literary text to a significant extent depend on the expectation of a certain rule regulating the relationship between the systems of the signifiers and the signifieds. Jury Lotman and Boris Uspensky developed the concept of *poetic language conditionality* for creating a modelled world (which is meant more broadly than just telling a story), called *uslovnost’* in Russian (see LOTMAN–USPENSKY 1993). *Uslovnost’* offers a natural and neutral poetic conditionality for cultural (poetic) discourse, which establishes a neutral and natural correspondence between a particular signifying system and the system of the signifieds, i.e. sets the neutral poetic language for cultural discourse. What we regard as neutral depends on cultural conventionality, which can also take shape within normative aesthetic regulation rules.

*Uslovnost'*, in the processes of reception, activates itself as the reader's expectation of detecting certain signifying systems related to certain systems of the signified. When deviation from the expected semiotic relationship occurs, the reader might feel the modelled world as not natural or peculiar /strange. This means that Lotman and Uspensky's definition of poetic conditionality relates the sense of natural reality (the neutral natural) and unnatural reality (the deviation from the neutral natural) to *internal, intratextual semiotic conditions*, ignoring the unmediated fidelity principle as an expected correspondence between the internal world model created in the literary text, on the one hand, and extratextual reality, on the other. Correspondence, instead, here is searched for in the semiotic consistency of the signifiers and signifieds taken as entire systems. How this semiotic conditionality is conceived depends, of course, on cultural tradition, i.e. on cultural texts and, more precisely, on the semiotic tradition embodied by cultural tradition conveyed by cultural texts.

It is possible to interpret the semiotic formulation of the idea of the historical in Coetzee's novel from this perspective. The plot with the protagonist, the events of his "fate" have quite a few seemingly authentic components, conspicuously related to "real life", i.e. the extratextual/historical facts taken from Dostoevsky's biography. However, the conspicuous transformation which these elements undergo turn factual similarities from the extratextual "biographical figure" of Dostoevsky into elements of fiction, more precisely, a poetic language conditionality for telling the story, according to Lotman–Uspensky's terminology: *uslovnost'*. Dostoevsky's biographical figure involved in the novel, consequently, strengthens not the directness, i.e. the unmediated nature of the historical, but rather the fictional character of this historical. This fictionality, at the same time, speaks of himself self-reflexively, as a kind of poetic discourse with its poetic conditionality.

The way in which fictionality turns into a code of language (semiotic *uslovnost'*) is supported by the other strong orientation to historic extratextuality, which works in Coetzee's novel in a similar fashion. This reveals itself in the intensive intertextuality presented above, which refers to various works of Dostoevsky taken as texts from the extratextual cultural historical world. The specific metaleptic realisation by which characters and plot elements are constantly developing into vital parts of Coetzee's story through a well-defined transformational intertextual process can be interpreted as a semantic force strengthening the fictionality of the characters and plot elements which embody various overlapping and conflicting components of well-known life and textual materials. The more intensively extratextual (historical) references (to textual and biographical facts) enter into *The Master of Petersburg*, from two combined realms, in the metaleptic practice of the novel representing two dynamically intertwined spheres of extratextuality, the further we are distanced from extratextual historicity. Finally, we arrive at an understanding of that kind of cleft /split referentiality in the Ricœurian sense, which directs our attention to fictionality as a modelling language.

Returning to the aspects of Coetzee's intertextual poetics characterised by the constantly changing flow of (inter)textuality which nevertheless form discernable semantic patterns, we can state that this poetics is consonant with the dynamism

of the interactions of biographical historical life facts and artistic textual facts as (re)textualised realities heightening the degree of fictionalisation. At the same time, the combination of the two intertextual paradigms intensifies textual self-referentiality, motivating the reader to think of the historicity of the texts. This historicity reveals itself partly through cultural sources and partly according to the logic of how various discourse conditionalities (as semiotic *uslovnost'*) are modelled in the novel. They form a hierarchical system of various stories and texts which are spoken, written, or read (cf. again the variants of the explanation of Pavel's death; the story embodied in his writing; the protagonist Dostoevsky's effort to create his new work, and so on...). In Coetzee's novel, we move in a kind of storytelling where the enumerated poetic strategies (the intensive extratextual references to biographies and texts, and their metaleptic dynamics within the framework of the mutual projection, one onto the other, of classical and postmodern intertextual poetics) all lead in the direction of the strengthening of fictionalisation. Similarly, they contribute to the development of discourse models in a process where previous models become referents, and both the nature of their story and the nature of their language are thematised. (It is not only the *story* which systematically becomes a theme but also the character and the adequacy of *words*, *word genres*, and the possible reading strategies.) As this is the process by which external "historical" life and textual realities are ever more distanced from both, fiction modelling reality and constructing possible worlds, and the poetic textual (language) reality, all this has the consequence that on the plane of poetic semantics, abstract meanings appear and develop. The abstract reveals itself in metaphorisation processes (to mention just one chain: *bone–breast–air–water*, conveying the message of creation: writing and reading). The metaphorisations are in a way the endpoints of "split" or "cleft" references on the issue of which I have cited Ricœur's position.

4.2. Let us go back to the question of *referentiality* to define the semiotic approach to the problem of *textual factuality*. Ljubomír Doležel in his paper *Mukařovský and the Idea of Poetic Truth* (1982) gives an important overview of the conceptualisation of *poetic truth* within the context of referentiality, throughout the history of philosophical and aesthetic thinking. He begins mapping the treatment of referentiality on this basis from romantic aesthetics, making a distinction between cognitive (science) and poetic (poetry) discourse, whereby the differentiation of the "immediate" and "final truth" arises. What comes emphatically into the picture from Doležel's article from the perspective of the semiotic methodology of the interpretation of referentiality is Frege's postulation of the difference between the referents of a sentence, which is its truth-value, linked to *Bedeutung*, and the referents of signs and entire discourses in the field of representation where poetry belongs. These signs and discourses are characterised by their total exemption from "truth valuation" as they have no referents but their meaning is constituted as *Sinn* (DOLEŽEL 1982: 287). Frege also suggests the possibility of the various ways of presenting referents leading to the production of *Sinn* (DOLEŽEL 1982: 285–286). Doležel gives a significant corollary to Frege's theory on "the postulation of two distinct domains of general semantics: a) a semantics of referential language where

the concepts of truth-conditions and reference relations will be essential; b) a semantics of sense language (a semantics of ‘representations’) concerned with the regularities and patterns of sense organisation. Literary semantics is sense-language semantics and its prime task is the examination of the patterns of sense organisation which are the carriers of ‘images’ and ‘feelings’...” (DOLEŽEL 1982: 287). Doležel then directs his attention to Mukařovský’s referential semantics when clarifying that, according to Mukařovský’s theory, the question of truth arises in the case of “communicative (informative) texts” as opposed to poetic texts (DOLEŽEL 1982: 288). Even when “considering further the case of literary texts where narrated events are based on events that had actually happened, Mukařovský emphasizes that the distinction of ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ events in literature is relevant only insofar as it becomes ‘an important component of the structure of the poetic work’...” (DOLEŽEL 1982: 289).<sup>1</sup> Doležel interprets Mukařovský’s theory of poetic truth in terms of referential semantics, with his attention, in the first place, on the idea that “the literary text ‘means’ not that reality which comprises its immediate theme but the set of all realities, the universe as a whole, or – more precisely – the entire existential experience of the author or of the perceiver...” (DOLEŽEL 1982: 289). According to Doležel, the Prague School came relatively late to the problem of fictionality (DOLEŽEL 1982: 291), “the idea of the work of art as a model of the ‘world’... was not a part of the ‘classical’ system of Prague School poetics” (DOLEŽEL 1982: 294). What he sets as a task to tackle within structural poetics is the integration of “Mukařovský’s aesthetic theory with Frege’s poetic semantics”. Precisely, in this synthetising effort, Doležel can see an opportunity of “casting away the last residues of formalism” in structural poetics (DOLEŽEL 1982: 292).

Without making any attempt to give a relatively complete overview of the conceptualisation of referentiality, at the end of this paper, I would nevertheless like to stop for some words on a significant interpretation of “autoreferentiality”/ self-referentiality, emerging from Jerzy Faryno’s work. With this, we will leave the theoretical approach, having ultimately reached the field of literary semiotics.

Faryno builds up his theory and methodology of reading autoreferentiality, problematising Jakobson’s definition of poetic function, which, according to one description, is a focus “on the message for its own sake” (JAKOBSON 1964: 356). According to another definition, “the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination” (JAKOBSON 1964: 358), consequently, the poetic function embodies “an equivalentizing factor or operation” (FARYNO 1989: 291). Hence, Faryno states that the message should appear in a double function: “in the position of the message as such and in the position of its own referent, i.e. the referent of itself”, where on both levels – those of its referential meaning and the language means (of its sign system) – it must undergo a significant transformation, defining a new sign–object relationship in the literary text. The object “as a sign of itself, being in the position of the sign, must lose its objectiveness, while its name (the word which introduces this object into

<sup>1</sup> Doležel at this point quotes the following works: MUKAŘOVSKÝ 1966: 45, WINNER 1978.

the text) must lose its referential meaning and take up an ancillary position (i.e. remain in the inner-language meaning only)” (FARYNO 1989: 293). However, we can also say that the object with its name in its first position through its referentiality “constitutes some sort of world within the text, a world that could be localised outside of the given text, in non-linguistic reality. The second position not only keeps this world within the frame of the text but also shifts it to the rank of the language, transforms it into the text about itself”. Hence the obligatory non-referential repetition at the level of “the text creative operations” of the “name of the given object (or at least of its synonym) in the position of the predicative word, qualification, apposition, ...in the position of analytical (tautological) epithet” (FARYNO 1989: 293). Referential meanings, at the same time, “do not disappear in the text, on the contrary” they generate synonymic sequences, within which they lose “their own referential functions” with a “shift to the level of innerlingual relations (systematics)”. They are transformed “into a sign without reference, while the objects introduced into the text by the synonyms are transformed into the counterpart of the lingual unit and into carriers of meaning”.

This is why the objects “are able to actualize their own semiotic properties (i.e. their cultural conceptualizations, symbolic meanings, and so on)” (FARYNO 1989: 296). Without presenting further significant components of Faryno’s interpretation of poetic referentiality, I would conclude by underlying that this explanation remains within referential semantics, suggesting that de-referentialisation is doubly regulated within poetic re-referentialisation, which implies a *permanent semiotic dynamics*. This dynamics consists of the reconstruction of signs at both levels, within the system of the signifier (language) and the signified (reference). In this process, the extratextual object becomes an intratextual sign (language) which assumes a new reference through the mediation of the *semantic* operation of self-referentiality (this implies *semiotic* shifts when the sign turns into a referent), and also through internal linguistic referentialisation in those equivalentising processes which stood at the focus of Jakobson’s attention.

It is very important to note that the semiotic approach is different from the search for poetic reference and truth in terms of mimetic representation (realism, historical truth, factuality, etc.) not in that it creates the idea of factuality within the domain of a kind of non-referential poetic semantics but that it is able to give the *semiotic descriptive model* for the conversion of the extratextual reference into poetic reference through self-referential (cf. Faryno’s term: “autoreferential”) literary language being the *semiotic poetic* operator of *semantic* mediation.

### **5. Instead of conclusion – A piece of autoreferential text speaking in terms of poetic historicity**

Returning to Coetzee’s novel, the end of *The Master of Petersburg*, and reading the last pages of this work, the final question in this semiotic poetic interpretation can be sharpened up. What is the result of Coetzee’s forming a rich range of extratextual and intertextual realities, and why is it important that, at the same time, the

novel establishes a firm poetic pattern of textual self-reflexivity even through the metatexts of the modelled discourses? All of this speaks about the shift by which extratextual historicity changes into the intratextual semantic model of the historicity of culture. Accordingly, the questioning of the adequacy and value of the text-internal text realities constituting a hierarchical axiological system, does not speak about the annihilation of cultural texts and models. On the contrary, the emphasis is put on the idea of the creative process by which these texts and models are generated. The ultimate word in Coetzee's novel, with its intertextual poetics lying in the combination of the classical and the postmodern traditions, conveys the idea of creation. This is the metaphoric message at the end of the novel. However, this metaphorisation, which could also be interpreted in the spirit of Faryno (cf. the cultural conceptualisation of objects and their symbolic meanings reveal how they "actualize their own semiotic properties in the literary text" – FARYNO 1989: 296), is the result of that kind of intratextual poetic referentiality, making the literary text a complex autoreferential system, which should be viewed semi-otically. The internal historicity of sign and meaning evolution in the literary text and its systematic intertextual poetic reflection, also functioning as an important part of self-reflexivity, jointly define the literary interpretation of cultural history.

The closure can be traced back to a passage from the chapter *Matryona*, where the narrator describes how the protagonist Dostoevsky interprets Pavel's white suit which Matryona notices he has put on: "... 'Why are you wearing that suit?' 'If I don't, who will?' A flicker of impatience crosses her face. '*Do you know the story of Pavel's suit he says?*' She shakes her head" [italics – K. K.] (COETZEE 2004: 72). Dostoevsky then tells the story of the white suit to Matryona. The story concerns Maria Timofeyevna, a character with a name from Dostoevsky's *The Devils* (Maria Timofeyevna Lebyadkina, here: Lebyatkina). Coetzee's Dostoevsky presents many elements of the story of Lebyadkina, who develops an imaginative, wishful, and false story about her fiancé from the district, identified with Pavel, who is in fact not her real fiancé. Nevertheless, he behaves like a "complete gentleman", regularly visiting Maria, and thus "giving a lesson" to everyone "in chivalry". What is important here is the multiplicity of storytelling when Dostoevsky tells a story about Maria, whose characteristic feature is her invention of a story about a phantom suitor ("You can imagine what fun Tver society had with the story of Maria and her phantom suitor" – COETZEE 2004: 74). It is emphasised that Maria's story is not true. "Wasn't it true then?", asks Matryona, and then, "No, it wasn't true at all, except in her own mind", answers Coetzee's Dostoevsky (COETZEE 2004: 74), who himself tells a story; what is more, the narrator transmits information on his awareness of the act of his storytelling: "He notices how quickly he has fallen into the rhythms of storytelling" (COETZEE 2004: 72). The story, nevertheless, ends with these words: "That is the kind of boy Pavel was. And that is the *history* of the white suit" [italics – K. K.] (COETZEE 2004: 74). Here we see the metatextual evaluation of Pavel's story. It is a *story* which turns into *history*, in the sense that the story has a history in the novel. A history within the framework of fiction and also, the semiotics of poetic language – here the question is: What happens to the



white suit, or rather: What happens to Pavel, whose figure is semantically defined through the synecdochic motif, the *white suit*?; and a further question: What happens to the *discourse* on Pavel? Its continuation may be found at the end of the novel, where we are given two variants of the rewriting of Matryosha's disgracing from Dostoevsky's *The Devils*. Coetzee's Dostoevsky morally kills his Matryona, meanwhile changing the essence of the story of the white suit. In the new version, Pavel is no longer chivalrous but he is simply a morally corrupt joker who has a white suit made so that he can look gallant enough for the part he will play as he is bored. That is why he makes love to Maria Lebyatkina: "Why did I do it? For a joke. Summer in the country is so boring – you have no idea how boring" (COETZEE 2004: 149). What really counts here does not lie in the phenomenon of having versions as story variants emerging from Dostoevsky's *The Devils*. Even it is not the remaining uncertainty regarding the truth-value of these variants that assumes crucial meaning.

It proves much more significant that the final words of the novel arise from the poetic *uslovnost'* of the discursive pronouncement in Coetzee's novel, namely, that the real or imaginative change of motivation for Pavel's behaviour is given in the form of the protagonist Dostoevsky's *writing*. Dostoevsky at last begins to write his new novel. It is a page of this new creation he leaves on the table for Matryona. "It is an assault upon the innocence of a child" – the narrator (Dostoevsky's inner speech) makes a comment on his own writing, which is said not to be the full version of the future text. An assault on which child? Matryona or Matryosha disgraced by Stavrogin in *The Devils*? Or the disgraced Maria? Or rather, as Coetzee also suggests, "Maria disgraced her brother Captain Lebyatkin" (COETZEE 2004: 247). Are we in fiction-within-fiction (in one of the possible stories) or in the primary text reality of Coetzee's novel, endowed with a great capacity for constituting semantic models through metaphors?

We are in the *complex semantic model* itself, which speaks of the creation of a new work of art by Dostoevsky (and the narrator of Coetzee, and Coetzee). Is it *The Devils*? Or *Crime and Punishment*, with which the first text is contaminated? Or both? Or all of Dostoevsky's works? Written by whom? Dostoevsky or Coetzee? All this within *The Master of Petersburg*. The semantic model assumes completion and complexity not in terms of stories unambiguously arranging themselves into a pattern of narrative history.

The semantic model is established by poetic discourse. It is finally the system of motifs and their metaphorisation processes (the internal discursive history, cf. the motif of *fall*: NASHEF 2014: 109–110) which articulate the question: What is the price? The price is no less than to give the creator's soul to creation. The explanation within the framework of the interpretation of the story seems to suggest that it is to give *up* the soul, which is equal to betrayal (cf. SUTHIPINITTHARM 2014: 104–105) and moral annihilation. However, Dostoevsky has another name for Matryona, which represents the same *Soul*: "...I have another name for you. Dusha [Soul]'. He writes the name at the head of the page, and shows it to her" (COETZEE 2004: 246; for further explanation, see KROÓ 2016).

Coetzee's novel is the story and history of this *creative soul*. In this sense, he actually turns a story into discursive history, and with that the questioning of text realities is answered by poetically arguing for these text realities as cultural historical facts of fiction. They are all witnesses to the self-reflexivity of the novel in the semiotic poetic mode of self-/autoreferentiality.

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