

„LA IZVOARELE IMAGINAȚIEI CREATOARE”

**Studii și evocări în onoarea
profesorului Mircea Borcilă**

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FLAVIA TEOC¹

THE THEORY OF DISCOURSE POIESIS IN *PERPETUA'S PASSION*

In my research I propose a linguistic approach to an early Christian text different than other theories operative by now in the field of Early Christian Studies. The martyr Perpetua's unique autobiographical account of her time in prison prior to her martyrdom, an account forming a major part of the *The Martyrdom of Ss. Perpetua and Felicitas*, will be the centre of my investigation.

The present analysis allows a comparison between two visions currently operating separately in early Christian studies: the field of Greco-Roman heritage and the field of Biblical knowledge recently achieved by the Christian catechumens. The clash between these two fields inside of the same linguistic system, which is the Latin language, plays a substantial role in early Christian self-definition. My research is concerned with the way in which the human body is proved to become a locus of God's grace in Perpetua's account, in an attempt to unravel what theological use was made by Perpetua of her knowledge of both the Greco-Roman tradition and the Biblical tradition.

The analysis then introduces a distinction between the first and the second semiotic articulation of the textual sense of Perpetua's account, which not only provides consistency through the activation of the evocative functions, but also provides a sharper focus for discerning the early Christians' belief regarding the fate of the body. Analyzing this early Christian text in light of the second semiotic articulation allows for a more effective approach to an early Christian discourse, especially where the coagulation of new meanings is concerned.

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1. MATERIAL. THE LATIN TEXT OF *PERPETUA'S PASSION*

To modern understanding Perpetua's account may sound peculiar and even implausible. Living under the early persecution of Christians in Africa, Perpetua wrote the record of her days in prison, prior to her martyrdom. Known as *The Passion of Perpetua, Felicitas and their Companions*, the account provides details about Perpetua herself, her slave Felicitas, her teacher Saturus, and other catechumens, Revocatus, Saturninus and Secundulus. Her account is framed by an anonymous editor who is also describing her martyrdom. From his words, we know that although Perpetua's own account is neither a literary text, nor a treatise of theology, but a written testimony of God's grace and His continued involvement in the world (Musurillo 2000: 107).

Perpetua's account combines several genres: it goes from a diary form to religious writing through biblical quotes, and it culminates in a full fledged hagiography written by the saint herself. From this perspective, what I am interested in pointing out is the way in which Perpetua's account encapsulates a clash between two visions inside of the same linguistic system, a tension which becomes evident mainly in those terms which are invested in a Christian linguistic community with new meanings.

Like all texts, Perpetua's account is oriented to an audience and regulated by a purpose, therefore our primary task as readers is to make sense of it. What goal does Perpetua set herself while writing her account? In the following, I propose to analyse Perpetua's narrative from an integral linguistic perspective, aiming to uncover what in this approach is termed the textual sense of her account. To reconstruct the textual sense we must follow the strategies of the inner articulation of the textual sense, a process in which linguistic, theological and philosophical intuition are reunited.

The hypothesis of this research is that the textual sense of Perpetua's account, according to which *the human body is prone to become a vessel of the holy grace* is shaped through a linguistic articulation, which I am going to pursue and explain in the framework of Integral Linguistics. In testing this hypothesis, I will investigate a set of repeated speeches from Scriptures, alluded to or quoted by Perpetua in her account. Considering that these sequences of repeated speech revolved around the concept of evil, the question I am asking is to what extent the idiocultural class of evil, already employed in some biblical circumstances, suggests a cultural model engaged in a semantic tension with the new context, namely the pagan Roman cultural background, in which Perpetua repeats or reemploys these quotations and allusions.

In this study will identify and discuss the sequences of repeated speech and will clarify these tensions. Taking the theory of repeated speech as a point of departure, the discussion of these issues will be structured around four hypostases of the evil that I have identified in the *Perpetua's Passion*: (1) the evil is in the weakness of the flesh, (2) the evil is a dragon, (3) the evil is a human figure fighting Perpetua, and (4) the evil is in the devilish arguments.

2. THE REPEATED SPEECH, THE TEXTUAL SENSE AND THE PROCESS OF THE SECOND SEMIOTIC ARTICULATION

According to Eugeniu Coseriu, all languages are historical techniques of discourse and they belong to the tradition of each distinctive culture (Coseriu 2013: 120). Tradition includes not only the mechanics of speech, but also language already spoken fragments of ready-made discourse that can be re-used, often as idioms distinct from the formal usage of the language. Considering that my aim is to analyse the repeated speech which belongs both to Graeco-Latin and biblical tradition in Perpetua's account, this chapter indicates that the semantic approach is fundamental in achieving the textual sense of a text.

The repeated speech concerns all that is communicated as phraseologies (recurrent lexical idioms such as sayings, proverbs, and catch phrases) within the linguistic community and is a form of communication appealing to previous contexts (Coseriu 2013: 121; Teoc 2013: 147).² Proverbial words are small fragments from literary or non-literary texts that are extremely familiar within the linguistic community and can even be reproduced by heart.

Within repeated speech certain forms do not belong to the idiomatic technique in any way, for these are forms corresponding to complete texts, such as quotations and proverbs. The reason for choosing the repeated speech

² The units of the repeated speech have been classified by Eugeniu Coşeriu, in order to render the possibilities of their varied combinations in accordance with the structural level at which they combine with one another, and according to the levels where they are commutable: equivalence of words (which can be combined at the level of the discourse but they can also be replaced by more appropriate words); equivalence of syntagma, which can be combined during acts of speech. They are commutable with other expressions, for example, 'early starts make easy stages' which is equivalent to 'the early bird catches the worm'); and the third category, equivalence of discourse which contains metaphorical expressions and proverbs, units of the repeated discourse which are compatible with other discourses or whole texts only at the level of the discourse or text (Coşeriu 2013: 122).

as the object of the present study is that these units constitute one of the most challenging approach mostly when we deal with the analysis of the textemes (the units of repeated speech) from a semantic point of view.

By approaching the repeated speech from a semantic perspective, I intend to explore the creative potential of these units, as well as the procedures and functions on the basis of which these units contribute to the creation of meaning in *Perpetua's Passion*. As I underlined above, due to the reinsertion and reconfiguration processes which can be applied to them, the units of repeated speech make possible the creation of meaning materialized through the gain of new semantic relations, despite their repeated nature.

According to the methodological frame proposed by M. Borcilă, (see also Faur 2012), one can distinguish different semantic units, which coagulate a progressive articulation of the textual sense. In my research, the minimal semantic units of the texts are considered to be the units of repeated speech considering that “on a superior level of the articulation of the textual sense, these units are organized in referential fields, created in and by the imagistic connectedness” of different units of repeated speech (Faur 2012: 111).

Since the repeated speech will not exactly match the new situation, the new meaning will have to be revised and semantically expanded. Concerning this aim I will adopt the conceptual apparatus of the theory of *discourse poiesis* elaborated by Mircea Borcilă, according to whom the literary text is seen as an expanded metaphor in which two heterogeneous fields are situated in a semantic tension. The clash, the incompatibility or the tension is solved within a newly created referential field that introduces a shift in the textual perspective and its significance.

3. THE LINGUISTIC FIELD OF HUMAN AND THE LINGUISTIC FIELD OF SUPERNATURAL

In the transparency of the text written by Perpetua, we read the cultural significances deposited in the text due to her pre-Christian cultural background as a potential to create knowledge, which is not dismissed but examined and sometimes exhibited in the fragmentary form of the repeated speech. Many levels of a text refer to the plurality of possible (sub)meanings, governed by evocation.

In Perpetua's account the Human-Supernatural opposition is articulated on the dimension of the human being in its struggle with the limitation of the carnal matter, and is described especially by a series of corporal symbols. Even without any knowledge of biblical text, one might

consider as key symbols the following episodes described by Perpetua in her account:

- the taste of milk in the first vision:

"And I saw an enormous garden and a white-haired man sitting in the middle of it dressed in shepherd's clothes, a big man, milking sheep. And standing around were many thousands dressed in white. And he raised his head, looked at me, and said 'You are welcome here, child.' And he called me, and from the cheese that he had milked he gave me as it were a mouthful. And I received it in my cupped hands and ate it. And all those standing around said: 'Amen'. And I woke up at the sound of their voice, still eating some unknown sweet" (Heffernan 201: 127).

- the relief after her father's departure:

"Then for a few days freed from my father, I gave thanks to the Lord and was refreshed by my father's absence" (Heffernan 2012: 126).

- the healing of Dinocrates's body:

"On the day on which we were kept on the stocks, this vision was shown to me. I saw the place which I had seen before, but now there was Dinocrates, his body clean, well dressed and refreshed, and where the wound was, I saw a scar. (...) And I woke up. I knew then that he was freed from his suffering" (Heffernan 2012: 129).

As mentioned above, the following two distinctions between two hypostases of evil in Perpetua's account are assigned to the semantic field of Human:

- a) the evil is in the weakness of the flesh
- b) the evil is in devilish arguments

There is a connection between the semantic field of Human's imagery and the semantic field of Supernatural disclosed by the hypostasis of evil. What is always striking regarding the evil and evilness in a Christian context is the consciousness of the force driven by evil. The other two distinctions lie at the heart of evil, and by overcoming them, the catechumen overcomes a symbolic level of tension:

a) evil is a dragon: the biblical serpent is seen as *an essence* because it has only the evil put by God in him:

"And there was a serpent of great size lying at the foot of the ladder, which would lie in wait for those who climbed and deterred them from climbing" (Heffernan 2012: 127).

b) evil is a human figure, which represents another mirror of the devilish essence:

“And a certain Egyptian, foul in appearance and intending to fight with me, came out against me, surrounded by his helpers. (...) And I knew that I was going to fight with the devil and not with the beasts; but I knew that the victory was to be mine” (Heffernan 2012: 130).

3.1. *The evil is in the weakness of the flesh*

The first hypostatis of devil assigned to the semantic field of Human demonstrates how a concrete encounter with a person, Perpetua’s father, can turn into a formulation of evilness.

To begin with, Perpetua’s vision over her own body is built upon two convergent perspectives: the first is derived from her previous conception based on Greek and Latin philosophy and religion, while the second one is achieved through her biblical readings once that she became a catechumen. Out of these two conceptions will arise the third vision through the epiphoric reading of Perpetua’s account, a new conception from which the Christian view will nurture its future theology.

There is an assumption that the coordinates of Perpetua’s text has to be set in a historical context despite of the fact that Perpetua’s account can be considered as an antihistorical performance. To determine the meaning of her text beyond the historical context and even beyond the syntax and the possibilities of stylistic variation, we have to engage in a cultural and a theological reconstruction of the context of the Passion.

Previous to any coagulation of a cultural model, the semantic field of a new metaphorical association is the tip of the iceberg called to make way to a new vision over a concept. There are several passages in Perpetua’s account that prepared the articulation of the new concept *the human body is prone to become a vessel of the holy grace*. This new semantic field is articulated in three stages: firstly, the term *refrigero* designates the peace of the soul and the body; secondly, *the will of God* which alludes to Jesus’s sacrifice in human body in the expressions *Deus uoluit* and thirdly the state of *extasis* while Perpetua is being hit and wounded by the beast, deserted by evil and filled with grace, the Perpetua’s body withdrew from the logic of the terrestrial world, a very common situation for a martyr whose body has turn into a *locus of grace*.

REFRIGERO

According to Sara Parvis, “Perpetua’s doctrine of God is spelled out in a conversation with her father” (Parvis 2009: 369). In chapter 3, after a violent verbal confrontation with her father, Perpetua felt relieved and at peace because of his absence. The narrative is actually caught in the frame of the devilish argument when Perpetua’s father is trying to hit her. His gesture is very well mapped by the entire semantic field of the term *diabolicum*.

The etymology of the Late Latin term *diabolus* is rooted in the Ecclesiastical Greek *diabolos* that unifies two words: *dia-* “across, separate, split or getting through” + *ballein* “to throw” (Watts 2000: 37). These two pillars established its deeper meaning as the one who divide and hit the undefended. This meaning is introduced rather in a Christian contexts, however, one of the most known occurrences in a pagan context has been found in a catchy phrase that belongs to Seneca the Younger, *Errare humanum est, perseverare autem diabolicum, et tertia non datur* (To err is human; to persist [in committing such errors] is of the devil, and the third possibility is not given.), idea borrowed by Augustine in his *Sermons* three centuries later.

Some references to Seneca’s life indicate that he was close to the Christian community of Nero’s time (Tertullian writes about him as “our Seneca”) and his brother, Gallio, is mentioned in the *Book of Acts* (18) because he disregarded the charge brought by Jews against the Apostle Paul. These are details which might explain how a rather Christian understanding of *diabolicum* was introduced in the writing of a pagan stoic philosopher. Regarding Perpetua, the way she deals with the evil made her one of the first Christians who adopted the idea of fighting the devil in a Christian ascend to God.

In her first vision, often associated to Jacob’s ladder, Perpetua describes a dragon whose head she steps on:

“I see a bronze ladder of great length, reaching up to heaven, but so narrow that people could only climb one at a time. And on the sides of the ladder, iron implements of every kind were attached. There were swords, lamces, hooks, knives, and daggers, so that if anyone climbed up carelessly, or not looking upwards, he was torn to pieces and his flesh clung to the iron weapons. And there was a serpent of great size lying at the foot of the ladder, which would lie in wait for those who climbed and deterred them from climbing. (...) and I stepped on its head and climbed up as if it were the first step” (Heffernan 2012: 127).

It might be that because of her vision, the whole Christian iconography represents the Jacob's ladder stuffed with angels and demons fighting for a Christian soul as long as there are now such beings in Jacob's dream from *Genesis*.

Moreover, the term *refrigero* would designate the peace detached by any torments that might bring heat and agitation. In an earlier translation, *refrigero* is compared to *requiescite* from *Genesis* 18:4, when God is asked to rest under a tree. However, in order to designate the peace found by Perpetua, I would rather compare the term *refrigero* to the breeze, the stillness and peace of the air through which God was walking in heaven looking for Adam and Eve in *Genesis* 3:18: "And they heard the voice of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day". Both episodes are actually talking about the presence of God.

In Perpetua's account, her father's absence made the immediate use for her of this verb when Perpetua is relieved of his presence and of his devilish arguments, hence refreshed and free from anxiety. In my opinion, this reading is equally theological and analogous to Cicero's understanding of the word, considering that in Christian Latin *refrigerium* will signify both the sense of rest, of peaceful relaxation, and of a place where there is no worry, and a gathering place for good souls on their last journey to heaven.

EXTASIS

According to John Chrysostom, the martyrs often viewed the sufferance of their bodies with great joy, and sometimes they experienced the pain in great happiness and grace. Living his life between 349-407, John Chrysostom is already accustomed to the acts of early martyrs, including *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*. He also refers in his *De sanctis martyribus sermo* to the fever experienced by martyrs only like "little kids" even when they are placed in the midst of real flames. This extatic condition could have been also rooted in Perpetua's account, for like many other late martyrs *expergita* (she awakened) because *adeo in spiritu et in extasi fuerat* (she was deep in the spirit and in ecstasy). In Heffernan's opinion, "The *Passio's* use of the word *extasis* is the earliest in Christian Latin" (Heffernan 2012: 349). According to him, Tertullian employs this term in his works, but none of them is dated earlier than 210.

Deserted by evil and filled with grace, the martyr's body withdrew from the logic of the terrestrial world. Even the etymological root of *ekstasis*, in Ancient Greek, refers to *a remove, a departure, from a place* (Watts 2000: 75). As long as the expression does not belong to Perpetua, we will not qualify it as her own depiction of her condition. However, the context allows us to assume

that the meaning of the term and the nature of the experience was not unknown to Perpetua, while Augustine underlined in Sermon 282, the martyrs triumphed in their suffering:

“As regards the women themselves, whose names these are, as we heard when their Passion was read, as we know from what we have committed to memory, these two of such strength of character and merit were not only women, they were wives as well. And one of them was a mother, so that to the weakness of her sex might be added feelings less capable of endurance” (Augustine, Sermon 282).

Perpetua’s account was remembered in African churches and used as the basis for yearly sermons by Augustine two hundred years after Perpetua’s martyrdom: According to Augustine, the martyrs keep telling us their stories through the silent words spoken out by relics, and furthermore Elena Martin is pointing out to a homily on Protasius and Gervasius where Augustine “claimed that the martyrs have asserted Christ’s cause more effectively when dead than when they were alive” (Martin 2006: 31).³

3.2. *The evil is in devilish arguments*

Perpetua’s reference to devilish arguments follows a traditional pattern derived both from her Graeco-Latin culture and her biblical culture. The common idea that *devil uses people to deceive us*, as expressed in Matt. 10:17 “Beware of men” it includes also a reference to devilish arguments as proved in 2 Timothy 2:23, Eph. 6:11, and Col. 2:4.

In Perpetua’s account, the expression *devilish arguments* is ascribed to present an encounter between her and her father, a still pagan Roman nobleman:

“Father,’ said I, ‘do you see this vase here, for example, or water-pot or whatever?’
 ‘Yes, I do’, said he.
 And I told him: ‘Could it be called by any other name than what it is?’
 And he said: ‘No.’
 ‘Well, so too I cannot be called anything other than what I am, a Christian” (Heffernan 2012: 126).

This dialogue enraged Perpetua's father, who left, “vanquished along with his diabolical arguments” (Heffernan 2012: 126). The disparity between

³ “What, after all, is God doing, when he performs miracles in connection with the bodies of the departed saints but bearing witness to the truth that what dies does not perish” (Augustine, Sermon, 286).

Perpetua and her father shows more clearly that Perpetua herself saw her father⁴ as aligned, at least in some measure, with the authority of the state (Cooper 2011: 688), and therefore she steps on his will. This opposition yields a double gain: expressive association to the Empire's power and reinforcement of the conflict between the young catechumen and the repressive force. The idea of a devilish argument could lie in the habit of reading allegorically, a perspective which underlies the presupposition that things can come to stand for something else.

By Perpetua's time a rethorical language can be already identified that was common to both pagan and Christian texts. The positive side of rethorics set to reveal and to address to universal values of Christianity is active in the stylistic devices of Christian expression such as the hymn, phraseology and even in biblical argumentation. According to Laurent Pernot "rhetoric itself possesses a religious dimension in the power of words, the effectiveness of speech, and the magic of persuasion" (Pernot 2006: 235), and when for instance Mary exalts the Lord because He has made her the mother of Jesus, her words of praise are nothing else than the means of giving thanks, "a function defined by Greek rhetoric with the creation of the specific category, 'hymn of thanks' (*kharisterios hymnos*)" (Pernot 2006: 244).⁵ The only common ground between the negative and

⁴ As we pass from "the evil is in the weakness of the flesh" category to "evil is in devilish arguments", the relation between Perpetua and her family, especially her father, threatens to sharpen into disharmony. Her father has a limited use for the arguments of his discourse, despite of the fact that he acts less through deeds than his words. Alike the ultimate outcome of their disagreement, the expression *devilish arguments* appears in an episode that implies Perpetua's father presence, "even if in the case of her non-Christian father, painful though their relationship has become, it is clear that at least in the past they have been very dear to one another" (Parvis 2009: 367).

⁵ In his study *The Rhetoric of religion* (2006), Laurent Pernot clearly states that there was, in the first centuries of the Roman Empire, a rhetorical language of religious discourse coagulated in the form and structure of the pagan hymns (Pernot 2006: 243). Therefore, the Romans were not surprised by Christian practices involving hymn because they recalled a habit that had always existed in the Greco-Roman world. Furthermore, he refers to Pliny the Younger, who in his letter to the Emperor Trajan about the Christians of Bithynia (*Epistles* 10.96.7), he notes that they sing hymns: "They are accustomed... to reciting alternately amongst themselves a song in honor of Christ as in honor of a god." Pernot underlines that without going into the contents of Christian songs, Pliny "only questions the divinity to whom they are addressed. What he does not understand is the Christian God; he understands their praising their God perfectly well. If Pliny had discovered the contents of Christian hymns, he would have come across many similarities to the hymns he knew" (Pernot 2006: 243).

the positive side of rethoric is the stylistic device while the most basic distinction operates in the codified intention of the speaker: having introduced the intention to manipulate brings into play the suspicion within the circle of faith.

3.3. *The evil is a dragon*

The myth of the devil is related to the myth of the dragon, the serpent, and to the symbolism of the closure (Chevalier 1993: 444), relations which do not only elaborate but also parallel the episode in Perpetua's Passion when she steps upon the dragon's head in her first vision, symbols that work backward and forward in the textual structure.

According to the *Greek-English Lexicon 9th edition*, the Latin term *draco* is a loan-word from the Greek *δράκων*, the aorist participle from *δέρκομαι* meaning "to see clearly" or "a flashing of the eyes". Following the attestation of the dragon as early as Homer's *Illiad* (Louden 2006: 246), and the enhanced visibility of the monster in both Greek and Latin mythology, the impact of this image-word in late antiquity, as a fundamental religious and cultural factor is evident. Knowing that the dragon's tongue symbolizes wisdom or knowledge, often a devilish wisdom as in the Biblical episode, the ability of the dragon to completely change shape after eating somebody makes them an ideal symbol of metamorphosis: "when this fluidity of shape is combined with the fact that they devour their prey whole, the idea that they can change and incorporate others becomes more evident" (Cutrer 2012: 14).

As we remember, in Perpetua's first vision, the dragon is afraid of her, and Perpetua step on his head. Unlike other narrators, Perpetua does not have the privilege of the narrator's omniscience of the outcome of her fight but she relays on biblical passages in which, for instance, Paul is warning: "We have to fight against the evil spiritual forces in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12), emphasizing that each of us has to fight the evil.

If read literally - Perpetua strikes the head of the Egyptian with her feet in her last vision - there is a strong parallel between Perpetua and Christ who smashed the head of the snake in the Jordan River during his baptism, as described in Psalm 73: "Thou by thy strength didst make the sea firm: thou didst crush the heads of the dragons in the waters". In Romans 16:20 is the prophecy: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you". Perpetua's opponent is not only a snake, or a man, or an Egyptian, but in the deepest symbolic value it has to be that opponent to worth to be defeated in order to achieve the crown of the martyrs.

3.4. *The evil is an Egyptian human figure*

In chapter 10 of her account, Perpetua had a vision in which she became a man. Perpetua's words *facta sum masculus* could be translated simply as "I became male", or, "I was made a man". Afterwards she saw a man of great stature announcing the fight between Perpetua and the Egyptian (Heffernan 2012: 130). Anchored in a human condition, the devil who is fighting Perpetua is not meant to start a human self-reflexive exploration bordered by perceptual and epistemological limits. In line with the devilish view over humanity, his goal is to deprive Perpetua of the grace of God by taking a shape similar to his adversary. In the combat, Perpetua is striking the Egyptian man's face with her feet, rising in the air, sending him to the ground, and stamping upon his head. As a sign of her victory, she receives a green branch with golden apples. After this last vision Perpetua knows that she is going to fight the devil during her martyrdom (Heffernan 2012: 130).

The Italian writer Giovanni Papini observed in his book *Il Diavolo* (1954) that the oldest devil of the world comes from the southern valley of the Nile Valley. Seth, the god of evil who came from the wilderness, who represents in Egyptian mythology the drought and the storm, became the god of darkness or destructive storm, being in constant confrontation with Amon - Ra, the Sun god. The story goes on to explain the notion of the Egyptian god set in a temporary goal – to destroy – without a final resolution in his own mythology (Papini 1954: 133). What we can infer from this story is that there is an implication of the assumption that the idea of "those who feed on the devil or Dragon" (obey the devil's teaching) in the biblical text may be called Ethiopian (dark skinned) is elaborated not only in accordance with Psalm 73, which says that the dragon is the food of the Ethiopians by feeding on the Devil, but can also be elaborated as a textual fragment from a recursive mythology encountered by Jews in their ancient Egypt slavery.

The textual world in Perpetua's account is thus based on the matrix of mythological cultural vision intertwined with biblical episodes as forms inhabited by her visions. The number of hypothetical situations is however limited to biblical imagery in her writing, provided that in the final battle she has to fight the devil in the name of her humanity raised by Jesus, who himself became a man. However linearly is the narrative, the reader is taken now from the condition of prisoner, which means nothing in a Roman context, to the condition of martyr, which means everything in Christian context.

4. THE PROCESS OF POIESIS AND THE ARTICULATION OF THE TEXTUAL SENSE IN PERPETUA'S ACCOUNT

From the perspective of our methodological background, Perpetua's account articulates two heterogeneous referential semantic fields: the field of Human and the field of Supernatural. In order to analyze the three operations (diaphoric, endophoric, epiphoric) involved in the final process of poiesis, I will pursue the anthropological approach to poetics, as presented by M. Borcilă (1997) in his article *The metaphoric model in poetic texts*. Based on the *semantic* structure provided by E. Coseriu's integral linguistics, this approach is aiming to explain both the process of meaning creation and the emergence of the third referential field as the textual sense in texts. While the reader takes an active part in the process of emerging of the textual sense, there are different semantic layers raised by the texts, which contribute to the articulation of the third referential field. The dynamic of the semantic layers can be studied through the lens of the following semantic strategies which are steps in achieving the textual sense of the text:

1) the diaphoric strategy – two incompatible *referential fields* (Human and Supernatural) are selected and brought together, and thus an unavoidable tension is being created;

2) the endophoric strategy – there is an attempt to mediate the tension by the retreat in one of the referential fields;

3) the epiphoric strategy – the initial tension is re-considered and re-assumed and eventually solved through the creation of the new referential field, respectively *the body is locus of God's grace* with the aim of reconciliation between essentially irreconcilable facts from our background knowledge point of view.

4.1. The process of poiesis

4.1.1. *The diaphoric strategy*

As underlined in the introduction of my research, in Perpetua's account, the Human-Supernatural opposition articulates itself on the dimension of man's struggle with his own body, and is created especially by a series of corporal symbols.

In her first vision, Saturus went up first on the ladder, and when he attained the top of the ladder, he turned towards Perpetua saying:

“Perpetua, I am waiting for you; but be careful that the dragon do not bite you.’ And I said, ‘In the name of the Jesus Christ, he shall not hurt me.’ And

from under the ladder itself, as if in fear of me, he slowly lifted up his head; and as I trod upon the first step, I trod upon his head. And I went up, and I saw an immense extent of garden, and in the midst of the garden a white-haired man sitting in the dress of a shepherd, of a large stature, milking sheep; and standing around were many thousand white-robed ones. And he raised his head, and looked upon me, and said to me, 'You are welcome, daughter.' And he called me, and from the cheese as he was milking he gave it to me, and I received it with folded hands; and I ate it, and all who stood around said Amen. And at the sound of their voices I was awakened, still tasting a sweetness which I cannot describe. And I immediately related this to my brother, and we understood that it was to be a passion, and we ceased henceforth to have any hope in this world" (Heffernan 2012: 127).

Analyzed as an Eucharistic symbol, the cup of milk offered by the Shepherd had in Joyce Salisbury's interpretation "a local precedent for this image" (Salisbury 1997: 103), for Christians from Carthage ate milk and cheese along with the bread and wine of Holy Communion. According to her, "this dream experience collapsed together the ritual community experiences that made Christians part of a new society" (Salisbury 1997: 103). Moreover, at their first Holy Communion the newly baptized were given a cup of milk and honey to taste the heaven as they will encounter in their afterlife. It is also noteworthy to remember Cristina Mazzone's book, *The women in God's kitchen* (2005), in which she underlines that cheese, as a feminine symbol, is "frequently understood in history to be akin to the bodily secrets of growth and generation and to the reproductive body of women: a body that also puffs up even as, within it, bodily fluids thicken into a child", and that there is a history of food that unites women and God because "holy women were fed, personally, by God" (Mazzone 2005: 4). Perpetua's own understanding of this dream is that she realizes that the catechumens would have to suffer and there was no hope for them in this life.

There is in Perpetua's account an insistence on nuance, based on recurrent internal contradictions. Representative for a world in crisis, her writing cleverly translates the oppositions of the two perspectives on the body, from a human substance to the locus of holy grace. Provided that in Pre-Christian philosophy what usually characterized the Human-Supernatural relationship is failure, and this horizontal proliferation of failure was the expression of perverting the model by falling into the multiplicity of the universal idea, Christianity allows for a positive appreciation of the unity between body and soul in the human person.

Moreover, the creation of human by God's hands is establishing an ontological link between man and his Creator in an act of intimacy that exceeds the relationship between God and the other beings. As we have

seen, the ancient Greek philosophy did not believe in the resurrection of the body, and it was based on the distinction between the immortal soul and the mortal body. In Christian teaching the bodies will be raised by the power of God, and the souls will enter their bodies, and the men will live forever with the body and soul in union, as explained by Athenagoras of Athens in his exposition of the doctrine:

“For whatever has been created for the sake of something else, when that has ceased to be for the sake of which it was created, will itself also fitly cease to be, and will not continue to exist in vain, since, among the works of God, that which is useless can have no place; but that which was created for the very purpose of existing and living a life naturally suited to it, since the cause itself is bound up with its nature, and is recognised only in connection with existence itself, can never admit of any cause which shall utterly annihilate its existence. But since this cause is seen to lie in perpetual existence, the being so created must be preserved for ever, doing and experiencing what is suitable to its nature, each of the two parts of which it consists contributing what belongs to it, so that the soul may exist and remain without change in the nature in which it was made, and discharge its appropriate functions (such as presiding over the impulses of the body, and judging of and measuring that which occurs from time to time by the proper standards and measures), and the body be moved according to its nature towards its appropriate objects, and undergo the changes allotted to it, and, among the rest (relating to age, or appearance, or size), the resurrection. For the resurrection is a species of change, and the last of all, and a change for the better of what still remains in existence at that time” (Athenagoras, *De Resurrectione*, chapter XII).⁶

As resurrection enables the constitution of the body to live forever, and the human being is mirrored in its body, this process enables the human being to express a positive behavior regarding the body, including the performance of the martyrdom, which creates the self-generation of the carnal matter as subject of God’s grace.

As soon as one correlates Perpetua’s image of her body with the image usually associated to the carnal matter, subject of different torments in her daily life, the semantic tension becomes perceptible. Hence, though the Human is seen as a combination of both body and soul, as we usually conceive it, the emphasis lies on the drama of her human condition very limited in front of the Supernatural.

⁶ <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/athenagoras-resurrection.html> (accessed: 6.05.2022).

The Human and Supernatural collision is not maximal, provided that Perpetua realizes that she cannot recognize the worldly power over her. From this perspective, Perpetua is a double-faced entity. On the one hand, her humanity understood as limited being, is presented as impossible to overcome due to the fact that the physical pains are real and evident. In this case the emphasized aspects are related to the limitation concerning her humanity, and the understanding of her death as the finality of her earthly life. On the other hand, the future martyrdom comes with the promise of immortality and everlasting life in heaven. This second face is meant to emphasise that the death of the carnal matter does not represent the end of her life, since her existence in heaven will continue forever.

The personification of Perpetua's body is not supposed to emphasize her sufferings but to contradict our ordinary conception over the body. The end and the purpose of martyrdom are not physical sufferings but the achievement of God's grace. Firstly, she is given Holy Communion in heaven, therefore her body cannot be at the same time assigned to her human condition on earth prior to death, provided that there is a bodily afterlife in heaven. In Perpetua's second and third visions, she sees her brother Dinocrates, who had died of cancer, and while in his bodily afterlife Perpetua's intercession has cured his illness as described in her vision:

"On the day on which we were kept in stocks, this vision was shown to me. I saw that place which I had seen before, but now there was Dinocrates, his body clean, well dressed and refreshed, and where the wound was, I saw a scar. And that pool which I had seen earlier, I now saw with its rim lowered to the boy's navel, and he drew water from it without ceasing" (Heffernan 2012: 129).

If we look at biblical references, in Luke 24:42 the resurrected Jesus ate fish with his apostles: "While they were still in disbelief because of their joy and amazement, He asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' and He took it and ate it in front of them." The claim I want to make is that one of the chief characteristics of the diaphoric strategy is the reduction of the contradiction to a minimum until the antagonism is created between essences.

In Perpetua's account there is a contradiction which the reader has to agree upon during the process of achieving the textual sense at the macro-textual level, otherwise the logic of the narrative schema would crash. In my opinion, this contradiction might be considered as a diaphoric strategy through which two incompatible fields are brought into collision in order to trigger the process of the articulation of the textual sense.

4.1.2. The endophoric strategy

The second moment of the articulation of the textual sense represents an attempt to mediate the tension established in the diaphoric strategy. The suspension of the tensional context translates from the initial context of the clash between man and supernatural to another context, that of the divine insertion into the human.

The generosity of the text allows us to illuminate the following semantic routes through which the meaning is projected at the macro textual level. If in Christianity, God creates the world out of nothing and this world is not identical to Him, conception that allows a positive appreciation of the unity between body and soul in the human person, the insertion of God in His own creation mediates the contradictions arising from Human/ Supernatural clash of meanings in *Perpetua's Passion*.

The image of the shepherd from Perpetua's first vision represents the sacred insertion into the Human field through the sweet taste in Perpetua's mouth about she is certain that is from her vision. In this way, the tension of the encounter with God despite of the fact that she is still in the temporal world is suspended. Consequently, she knows that she will triumph in dying for Christ and that the eternal life in heaven will follow. The martyrdom is now conceived as unavoidable because the separation between the Human and the Supernatural is no longer present in her account.

We could also assume that the referential context of the earthly life is suspended and the imagistic sequence of her first vision should be interpreted as preparing the articulation of the third referential field during the epiphoric strategy. The new element which mediates the clash between Human and Supernatural is love which interferes with Perpetua's earthly life. The idea of God loving the mankind, and the believers loving their God is unknown to Roman religiosity, in which the gods were not to be loved, but pleased: "It would be absurd if someone were to say that he loves Zeus" (Bremmer 2002: 62). Therefore, the gradual transition from the more concrete aspects (the torments of the breast fever or the frustration of her father's devilish arguments) toward the reality of God's love, evokes the oncoming grace and the transformation of her human body into the vessel of God's grace.

4.1.3. The epiphoric strategy

The pursuit of the process of the second articulation of the textual sense is a dynamic-constructive process, focused on the emergence of the additional meaning, ontologically distinct from the first understanding of the text. In Perpetua's account, the last act of her transfiguration is created

by investing Perpetua with supernatural qualities. As underlined above, in the chapter focused on the status of evil as an Egyptian fighting Perpetua, “et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus” represents the Godlikeness status achieved by Perpetua. Moreover, the repetition of the verb *I understood* (Heffernan 2012: 127) throughout Perpetua’s account leads to the construction of a converging image of the one who is called to face new situations and meanings, which require her sense of understanding. It is also meant to show afterward the conflict between her worldly status and the heavenly life achieved through martyrdom.

The unification of the contradictions is realized in the mystical horizon in the form of the vision in which Perpetua is invested with divine qualities, which will not desert her during the martyrdom. In this interpretation, the image of Perpetua fighting and defeating the devil is the natural consequence of achieving the grace of God described in her first vision. Perpetua gradually develops herself while writing her account, despite of the fact that she does not introduce any substantial change in relation to herself and the others. The calm beginning of her diary, the account of her daily activities may be understood as exploiting the earthly life resources in order to reveal the sequence of her visions. We can observe however that there is a disruption of temporality during the visions, while a sort of a circular image of the sacred is introduced in the alchemy of her earthly life. I would call this image as the third referential field, the field of the God’s grace. At the same time, the other characters engaged by Perpetua in her account are projected outside the circular image of sacred, the narrative becoming more and more personal despite of the fact that we, as readers, might assume that the other martyrs are also subjects to the grace of God.

In Perpetua’s last vision, the semantic role of God’s grace becomes the ground zero of the textual global sense. By defeating the Egyptian, and through him the devil, Perpetua challenges the ordinary understanding of woman’s power and even the ordinary understanding of the power of mankind always subject to devil’s evilness.

What is implied here is that Perpetua is facing the martyrdom not in a vision but as a human being. There is thus no “I” but “us” in terms of her victory. There is only non-nuanced victory at the end of a narrative nurtured by contradictions. After the last vision there is no further development of the account, only the depiction of the martyrdom by the anonymous editor. The grace of God which lifted Perpetua in the last vision and which provided her strength at the moment when she helped the gladiator to kill her, defy the usual understanding of human:

“And so the martyrs got up and went to the spot of their own accord as the people wanted them to, and kissing one another they sealed their martyrdom with the ritual kiss of peace. The others took the sword in silence and without moving, especially Saturus, who being the first to climb the stairway was the first to die. For once again he was waiting for Perpetua, who however, had yet to taste more pain. She screamed as she was struck on the bone; then she took the trembling hand of the young gladiator and guided it to her throat. It was as though so great a woman, feared as she was by the unclean spirit, could not be dispatched unless she herself were willing.”

The superimposition of the visions on the real facts also becomes possible because all that has been predicted is fulfilled. The onset of her death plays a double function in the dynamics of Perpetua's account. The image of the trembling hand of the gladiator has undoubtedly the role of evoking the strong impression made by Perpetua's courage, but the image is used in the textual structure with a specific function, namely to announce that a body filled with grace it's impossible to be killed by a human hand. The episode is providing a different way of understanding a martyr's death. Thus, the episode claims it is the natural consequence to the events described by Perpetua's own account, and this simple break taken by the editor confirms the fluidity of the entire narrative.

5. CONCLUSIONS

My study has proposed a link between the actual domain of textual semantics and a text written in early Christianity, Perpetua's account, text which reveals one of the first attestations of the idea that the human body is locus of God's grace. A confirmation of this value is provided by Augustine's sermons, in which the martyred body was seen as an *imago Dei* (Cotter-Lynch 2016: 64), by proclaiming Christ's power and grace. Acquiring and making use of the biblical knowledge, Perpetua communicates in her narrative powerful theological values, situated on the deeper level of the textual world.

Provided that the objective of my research was to unravel the full significance sedimented in the units of repeated speech quoted or alluded to by Perpetua, the main contribution of this research concerns the articulation of the textual sense on the comprehensive basis of integral linguistics.

In my research, the adequate understanding of the idea that human body is locus of God's grace is based on the dual manifestation of the two semantic fields, Human and Supernatural. Both are identifiable in

the space of the articulation of the textual sense, within the domain of textual semantics. As concerns the specific nature of these fields, I have applied the linguistic modalities of description and analysis, which revealed that the purpose of martyrdom are not the physical sufferings but the achievement of God's grace.

The analysis of several individual units of repeated speech – *refrigero, devilish arguments* etc. – within the limits of my theoretical framework, following their manifestation in both the Greco-Roman context and in the Biblical context, imposed a particular interpretation on text elements on the level of the articulation of the textual sense of Perpetua's account, by translating the initial tension between Human and Supernatural to another context, that of the divine insertion into the human world.

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**THE THEORY OF DISCOURSE POIESIS IN *PERPETUA'S PASSION*
(Abstract)**

My research develops an interdisciplinary dialogue between linguistics and theology through the textual investigation of *Perpetua's Passion*, a text written around 203. The analysis introduces a distinction between the first and the second semiotic articulation of the textual sense of Perpetua's account, which provides consistency through the activation of the evocative functions, and a sharper focus for discerning the early Christians' belief regarding the fate of the body. Concerning this aim I will adopt the conceptual apparatus of the theory of *discourse poiesis* elaborated by Mircea Borcilă, according to whom the literary text is seen as an expanded metaphor in which two heterogeneous fields are situated in a semantic tension. The steps I will follow in my analysis are: (1) the identification and interpretation of sequences of repeated speech; (2) the identification and interpretation of the referential semantic fields; (3) the description of the contribution of textemes to the creation of the two referential semantic fields (Human and Supernatural) and, more generally, to the global meaning of the text, through the operation of *poiesis*, a technique elaborated by Mircea Borcilă on the *semantic* basis provided by Eugeniu Coseriu's integral conception.

Key words: textual sense, evocative functions, discourse poiesis, repeated speech, textemes.