

THE COHERENCE OF *METAI* BY KRISTIJonas DONELAITIS

SUMMARY

The present monograph analyses the coherence and composition of *Metai* by Kristijonas Donelaitis, and seeks to find answers to a series of questions. Do the four parts of *Metai* compose a coherent whole? Does each separate part of the poem have inner coherence? What creates the impression of the coherence or incoherence of *Metai*? Does the narrative have a strict composition, or is it organised without a clear plan?

The research is based on three methodological presumptions:

(1) In the analysis of *Metai*, we separately discuss macro-composition and micro-composition. In the first case, we are interested in the interrelationship of the four parts of *Metai* and the systemic features of the whole that they constitute. In the second case, the inner structure of each part of *Metai* and issues of coherence in small episodes is addressed.

(2) In the analysis of *Metai* we oppose the syntagmatics and the paradigmatics of the narrative. In the discussion of the syntagmatic relations we ask how an episode is attached to another episode, why it is attached in a particular way, and what semantic effect this specific order of attachment produces. While analysing the paradigmatic relations we inquire if an episode has systemic equivalents in other parts of *Metai*, and explore the thematics of the narrative and the semantic structure of separate episodes.

(3) *Metai* is a work meant for reading aloud and listening. Therefore, we consider *Metai* an oral narrative, and call its recipient a listener.

The criterion that signals the coherence of the narrative is the isotopy of discourse (the concept is adopted from the structural semantics of

Algirdas Julius Greimas). Isotopy is an even recurrence of semic categories in the syntagmatic dispersion of a statement, which creates an impression of continuity and cohesion of the meaning of the discourse. Our ability to identify one or several isotopies of discourse in a narrative becomes a criterion of coherence. And, on the contrary, reliable identification of textual isotopies in a text lacking coherence is not possible.

The types of the isotopies of discourse and the classification of semes have been adopted from the theory of interpretative semantics of François Rastier¹. We distinguish three types of classification semes (*sèmes génériques*): (1) microgeneric semes (*sèmes microgénériques*), (2) mesogeneric semes (*sèmes mésogénériques*), and (3) macrogeneric semes (*sèmes macrogénériques*). The semes of the first type allow us to identify the elementary isotopies of discourse, e.g., a nightingale, a stork, a sparrow and an owl belong to the isotopy of birds in *Metai*. The semes of the second type form isotopies of a higher order: e.g., a nightingale, a stork, Krizas, Pričkus and Lauras belong to the isotopy of measure – they are all related by the seme of moderate nourishment. The semes of the third type produce the isotopies of the highest order, e.g., the isotopies of virtue and vice, which encompass the entire work, are distinguished in *Metai*. Thus, while analysing the narrative, we receive different results depending on the analytical distance of looking at the semantic structure of the narrative.

Very important is the postulate of interpretive semantics, according to which the whole determines the definition and parameters of its constituent parts, and not vice versa. A text is not a sum of isotopies – its coherence cannot be realised by mechanically adding one isotopy to another. It is only having become acquainted with the text in its entirety that we can adequately identify the isotopies supporting its coherence. If we apply this principle to *Metai*, it follows that we cannot expect positive results while trying to perceive the parameters of the entirety of *Metai* as a sum of interpretations of the separate seasons. In order to formulate objective conclusions about the coherence of the poem, we must know *a priori* the basic features of its entirety: the genre, the size of the text, the succession of its parts, i.e. everything that we cannot be sure of in the case of *Metai*. Thus, a researcher set to analyse the

¹ François Rastier, *Sémantique interprétative*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987.

coherence of this work has no other choice but to model different entiretys of *Metai* and see how the repertory of the identified isotopies changes in their context. The analysis of the coherence of *Metai* is a constant contemplation of this mysterious narrative in an attempt to relate its constituent parts each time in a different way, depending on the entirety to which they belong.

Metai can be perceived in three ways: a) as a single work or four independent works; b) as a strictly organised whole or as an improvisation; c) as a fixed syntagmatic chain with a clear beginning and end or as a cyclic structure without a fixed beginning and end.

Dalia Dilytė's conclusions about the genre of *Metai* occupy an important place in this context². She proved that *Metai* is a unique type of epic poem invented by Donelaitis, which combines the features of a classical heroic epic and a didactic epic. This researcher also noticed an important principle of the dialogues of *Metai* – the language of one character is “superimposed” on the language of another character, thus producing a specific overlapping of two segments of a narrative, which Dilytė aptly compares with the construction of scale armour. In our analysis we adopt this principle of syntagmatic connectivity by introducing the concept of a *syntagmatic seam*.

The structural principles of *Metai* formulated by Saulius Žukas, Tomas Venclova and Rimvydas Šilbajoris have great importance for the analysis of the paradigmatic level of the work. In Šilbajoris's opinion, the semantics of *Metai* is strictly organised according to the principle of binary oppositions³. Žukas explained the nature of this binarism by introducing the systemic opposition of ideality and reality to the interpretation of *Metai*⁴. Venclova revealed the great potential of a mytho-poetic interpretation of *Metai*⁵.

² Dalia Dilytė, *Kristijonas Donelaitis ir Antika*, Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla, 2005, p. 205–215.

³ Rimvydas Šilbajoris, „Teksto plotmių santykiai Donelaičio *Metuose*“, in: *Egzodo Donelaitis: Lietuvių išeivių tekstai apie Kristijoną Donelaitį*, sudarė ir parengė Mikas Vaicekauskas, Vilnius: Aidai, 2001, p. 403–425.

⁴ Saulius Žukas, „Idealusis Kristijono Donelaičio *Metų* poliuis“, in: Saulius Žukas, *Žmogaus vaizdavimas lietuvių literatūroje*, Vilnius: Baltos lankos, 1995, p. 73–91.

⁵ Tomas Venclova, „Erdvė ir laikas Donelaičio *Metuose*“, in: Tomas Venclova, *Vilties formos: Eseiistika ir publicistika*, Vilnius: Lietuvos rašytojų sąjungos leidykla, 1991, p. 261–266.

In our analysis we received the following results. On the *macro-compositional* level *Metai* is a coherent whole rather than four independent works. The key features of the coherence of this whole are: (i) the genre, (ii) the uniform structure of the poetic world, and (iii) the relations of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic planes.

(i) *Metai* is a specific “Donelaitian” epic – four descriptions of the seasons of the year are parts of a larger epic picture rather than independent poems or idylls, as the Nesselmannians are inclined to think.

(ii) All the four parts of *Metai* have the same structure of the poetic world. It is based on the vertical tension between virtue and vice.

(iii) On the paradigmatic level of the narrative, *Metai* is related by the basic isotopies – piety, modesty, industriousness, moderation, and righteousness. They appear in different combinations and different intensity in certain places of the narrative, but never disappear from the narrative score. On the syntagmatic level of the narrative, the uniformity of *Metai* considered as a whole is signalled by the connections among the seasons: each part is finished with an incitement to prepare for the next season. Thus, the end of a part begins the narrative of another part. It is important to emphasise that this process also takes place at the end of “Winter Cares”, which does not end the narrative of the entire poem, but invites the beginning of a new cycle.

We regard *Metai* as a poetic cycle without a fixed beginning and end. We propose this approach having taken into account the arguments of textual scholarship and the specific features of the narrative of *Metai* that we have described.

From the viewpoint of textual scholarship, Donelaitis did not leave any references as to which part of *Metai* is the first and which is the last. Martin Ludwig Rhesa and Georg Heinrich Ferdinand Nesselmann gave diametrically opposed interpretations of *Metai*: Rhesa arranged the parts of the poem in the traditional order, while Nesselmann thought that Donelaitis began the poem with autumn. Our analysis does not confirm either of these hypotheses. Donelaitis did not indicate the beginning or the end of his work, and neither are these parameters implied in the text itself. Therefore, we should consider *Metai* a closed cycle without a beginning and an end. It is not important from which part we start reading the poem; the important thing is that we complete the entire cycle of the four seasons. This cyclic

reading (which theoretically never ends) reveals the essence and specific dynamics of the narrative of *Metai*.

The text of the work itself also suggests the cyclic understanding of *Metai*. Our analysis showed that the narrative of *Metai* cannot be fit into a single calendar year – Donelaitis’s spring, summer, autumn and winter do not follow each other in chronological succession. These are literary, generalised images of the seasons, related by the categories of mythological time (some time in the past, some time in the present, and some time in the future), and thus, it is impossible to identify the beginning and the end of the narrative plot. Another argument implying the cyclic character of *Metai* is the ending of “Winter Cares” (Selmas’s speech). It has the same functions as the endings of other seasons. Therefore, there is no ground to think that the ending of “Winter Cares” is special and compositionally completes the narrative of not only the winter part, but also the entire poem. *Metai* does not end with winter – having read this part, one has to turn to the spring part, and so forth.

One of the main conclusions that we have reached while analysing the *micro-composition* of the poem is the principle of a spiral vector, according to which the narrative of *Metai* is developed. A relatively small number of classemic semes is repeated on the surface of the text in different combinations. This creates the typical impression of *Metai* – the work appears to be motley and heterogeneous and at the same time paradoxically uniform and coherent.

As another result of our analysis, in each part of *Metai* (hereinafter referred to as “Spring Joys” – SJ, “Summer Toils” – ST, “Autumn Wealth” – AW, “Winter Cares” – WC) several narrative blocks of larger scale have been identified. In SJ we can distinguish an allegoric narrative about birds (SJ 1–244), a narrative about social class and virtue (SJ 80–335), a narrative about hardship and work (SJ 336–533), and a narrative about moderation (SJ 534–660). In ST we can identify a narrative about health (ST 1–95), a narrative about people swearing (ST 96–135), two narratives about the relations between the social classes (ST 136–433, 649–714), a narrative about Plaučiūnas (ST 434–542), and a narrative about unfinished works (ST 543–648). In AW we can distinguish an introductory landscape (AW 1–81), a narrative about a wedding (AW 82–650), a narrative about Dočys

(AW 651–772), and a narrative about the end of the world (AW 773–912). In WC we can discern an introductory landscape (WC 1–107), a narrative about peasant deceits (WC 108–207), a narrative about fire (WC 182–378), a narrative about (in)justice (WC 357–527), and Selmas’s closing speech (WC 468–682).

The syntagmatic and paradigmatic planes of these narrative blocks are often slightly moved with regard to one another: upon the start of a new cluster of isotopies on the paradigmatic plane, it is only somewhat later that the syntagmatic narrative plane reacts with a change of a communicative situation, or, on the contrary, when the communicative situation changes, the paradigmatic plane responds with a delay. Therefore, the micro-compositional analysis of the parts of *Metai* reveals that not only the characters’ speeches (as was shown by Dalia Dilytė), but also the larger narrative blocks overlap in the poem.

Taking into account the fact that the larger narrative blocks themselves are complex narrative structures consisting of smaller narrative units, two independent aspects should be distinguished in the micro-composition of *Metai*: (a) the inner composition of separate narrative blocks, and (b) the mutual arrangement of these blocks within the limits of separate parts of *Metai*.

(a) Donelaitis very strictly composes the narrative within separate blocks. Our analysis showed that, for example, the perfectly composed episode with a nightingale in SJ has already been introduced in the preceding stanzas. Among Donelaitis’s other compositional solutions, two classical dialogical syntagmas in SJ can be mentioned: Pričkus → Slunkius → Pričkus, and Pričkus → Blėkuis → Pričkus. The composition of the scene of the pitching of manure is very well planned (ST 259–304). The narrative about autumn riches and measure has a nice compositional balance (AW 339–437). We can also recognise a well-thought-out composition in the narrative about fire in WC (WC 208–317).

(b) It is often thought that the large narrative blocks of *Metai* are arranged in an order that imitates the processes of nature and the work of peasants. It is said that Donelaitis described the nature of Lithuania and peasant toils in all seasons of the year. This concept of the composition of *Metai* was introduced by Rhesa and adopted by Lithuanian Donelaitis

scholars of the 20th century (Leonas Gineitis, Albinas Jovaišas, Rimvydas Šilbajoris). However, the micro-compositional analysis of *Metai* shows that this interpretation is not precise. The threads of nature and work are only a secondary phenomenon in *Metai*. They do not explain either the succession of the large narrative blocks or the logic of their cohesion. There are almost no direct images of the labor of peasants in *Metai*, and in those places where the works are mentioned indirectly (when peasants are urged to perform them, they are remembered, etc.), they only serve as a cover for developing a narrative of another level (e.g. about measure, piety, or virtues).

The narrative of *Metai* is moved forward by the ethical aims of the narrative and the tension on the axiological level of the narrative rather than parallels with nature and work. It is not the description of spring that presents an opportunity to talk about piety, modesty and measure – instead, the poet searches for a compositional form for these three virtues and finds it in the spring joy of birds. Donelaitis did not plan to describe scenes of manure pitching, in which, as a kind of secondary effect, a good watchman was “involved”. On the contrary, he sought to verbalise social (in)justice, and used the allegoric potential of manure pitching to express it. In ST Donelaitis did not plan to represent hay harvesting and insert the drunkard Plaučiūnas in the background. It is Plaučiūnas’s vices that are at the centre of attention, and hay harvesting is merely the backdrop for their discussion. It would be absurd to think that the narrative about Dočys included in AW is a description of threshing. The works performed by Dočys are mere props creating a background for the narrative about this scoundrel. We can explain the sequence of the large narrative blocks in WC by the mechanism of overlapping narrative and the associative logic of oral discourse ($A \rightarrow B \parallel B \rightarrow C$), but it would be vain efforts to look for syntagmatics dictated by the processes of nature and work.

Therefore, the micro-compositional analysis offers us a new interpretation. Nature and works do not constitute the composition of the seasons, but form its pragmatic background. Each season has a potential variety of phenomena of nature and work, but it is only those elements of nature and work that are necessary for Donelaitis to talk about the moral problems of people that find their way into the narrative of *Metai*. It is only then that the actual composition begins – it can be recognised in the specific selection of

the processes of nature and work. Accordingly, each part of *Metai* consists of a series of moral problems, which are enacted by the narrative through the use of scenes of nature or work.

We can recognise a narrative model typical of the oral discourse in Donelaitis's poetics: the text related by the principles of contrast and associative cohesion does not have a strict composition, and on the syntagmatic level it acquires natural asymmetry and unevenness. *Metai* is an organic whole which developed of its own accord rather than was precisely composed by Donelaitis. However, while images develop "of their own accord" on the syntagmatic plane, the paradigmatic structure of the poetic world remains surprisingly stable.

We can notice the following tendency: as the narrative elements of *Metai* become smaller, the author's control grows stronger. It reaches its peak on the phonetic level of the narrative. The metrics and micro-semantics of Donelaitis's poetry are amazing (for example, in AW, or the beginning of WC). However, the author's control becomes weaker on each higher compositional level: one might doubt if the arrangement of large narrative blocks in each part of *Metai* was strictly calculated.

The key results of our analysis can be summarised in the following way: *Metai* is a coherent whole, and Donelaitis did not strictly plan its macro-compositional parameters. The coherence of this work is based on the stability of the paradigmatic plane. The syntagmatic coherence of the narrative is relatively weak. Donelaitis precisely composes the narrative on the minimal compositional scale (micro-semantics, the inner composition of narrative blocks), but this control grows weaker on higher compositional levels (the interrelations of narrative blocks and the macro-composition of *Metai*). The basic feature of the narrative of *Metai* is its cyclic dynamics. *Metai* is a repetition of the basic issues in different versions, a never-ending story about the things that Donelaitis considered the most important.